



MOST
OF YOU

E.M. LINDSEY

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Content warnings and information: mentions of past narcissistic abuse by a partner, mentions of past childhood abuse and neglect, mentions of parent with factitious disorder (formerly known as Munchausen's by Proxy), abuse recovery, alcohol addiction recovery, ableism and ableist language.

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THANK you to my amazing beta and sensitivity readers for your help with Emil's experience growing up with a parent with factitious disorder, and for a sibling with Williams syndrome. Please note these experiences are not once-size-fits all. Williams syndrome exists on a spectrum. For more information, please click [HERE](#).

MOST OF YOU

There he was...

Shirtless.

Wearing glasses.

Chopping wood like some kind of fantasy lumberjack.

And Emil was officially helpless.

Moving to the East Coast, Emil was there for two things exactly: to become a better person, and to face the part of his past he'd spent his entire life avoiding.

He most certainly hadn't planned on falling in love.

It was one thing to sleep with his absurdly hot neighbor for a single, steamy one-night-stand, but it was quite another to become friends. And the longer Emil knows Renzo, the harder it is to walk away.

However, Emil has no faith in his ability to change, no matter how hard he tries, and he just wishes Renzo would believe him. He just wishes the man would stop giving him hope that behind those soft kisses was everything he'd ever wanted, and more.

CHAPTER ONE

“I SUPPOSE, SIR,” the woman said in her nasal voice, which, oddly, seemed to match the impossibly tight bun she wore, “the silver lining is that you have enough money to cover the demolition of the house.”

Emil blinked at her. Sandy Smith was her name, and he was fairly sure she’d been birthed exactly as she was right then—a tall, lanky, emotionless adult woman in a pantsuit. “Are you telling me the silver lining of my mother’s death is that I’m rich and I can afford to bulldoze what’s left of her life?”

“Most people have difficulty marketing a home that was condemned for hoarding,” she answered in the same voice, completely unaffected by Emil’s statement. “Unless you were planning on living here, of course. And if that’s the case, I’d be happy to forward you my list of contractors to begin the renovation process. I must warn you, however, it will be extensive, and the permits can be difficult to obtain.”

Living there had been the last thing on Emil’s mind when he got the news that his mother had been found dead in her home. According to the coroner’s reports, the neighbor had filed a well check on her after seeing some suspicious wildlife on the property, and she’d been deceased over a month before they showed up to retrieve the body.

Emil had gotten sick directly after that call. He was still living on the East Coast, mitigating an office crisis created by one of his business partners having an affair with the other one’s fiancée. He didn’t think it could get worse than his

company in turmoil, but he supposed it was his own fault for putting that thought into the universe.

It took him a week to process the fact that his mother was not only gone, but he was the only one left to deal with whatever affairs she'd left behind. The state of Rhode Island had covered her cremation and sent the ashes to the house. Presumably, they'd sat on the porch for however long it took Emil to get someone to go over there and check on them. The last report he'd been given before he packed up his things and abandoned the West Coast with his best friend and their fractured relationship was that her bag of ashes was sitting on the kitchen table.

And that was that.

Emil knew he should be reacting differently—more human, maybe? But the truth was, he had little left in him to grieve. There was a reason she'd died alone. A reason he didn't cry, knowing he'd never speak to her again. His only regret was that she'd gone before he found the courage to confront her for everything she'd put him through as a child.

He hadn't seen or spoken to his mother since he was sixteen. The last time he laid eyes on her, a woman from CPS was holding his arm, forcibly removing him from her house. He had no idea who made the call. It was probably his school counselor. He was dirty, tired, and severely malnourished. He'd been dragged in to see her, and he didn't even remember what he'd said.

He just remembered being tired and wondering if it was ever going to end. He didn't totally understand what was wrong either. As a child, he'd believed her when she told him he was sick. He saw the inside of hospitals and doctors' offices more than he saw his own classrooms. As he got older, he understood it wasn't him. It was her.

She needed him to be unwell. She only thrived when he was struggling to get by, day to day. She lived for the sympathy cards and the money people would send in the mail because she was a broke single mom, abandoned by her rich ex to take care of their son all by herself. Her sick and dying

son without a father to give a shit. And it didn't help that Emil's father didn't fight for him. Not once. She stopped his visitation, and he went to Barbados with his new wife to console himself.

And that was that.

People ate her story up, and Emil was given no choice other than to accept that as his entire identity for most of his childhood. By the time he was thirteen, he'd lost his entire sense of self. He had no idea what was happening was wrong. And dangerous. He just knew that he was both tired and terrified he'd never get away.

She got meaner after that—when she realized he wasn't going to stay a child forever. Eighteen was creeping up, and the louder that clock ticked down, the more reckless she got. His science teacher noticed his bruising and sent him to the office. Emil didn't even remember what he told the man—only that he wasn't sent back to class that day. Instead, he was given a ride to a shelter in a cop car, where he was interrogated by two detectives and some woman in a salmon-colored suit with a badge around her neck.

Emil never saw the inside of his mother's house again. He was put in a group home for two weeks before his caseworker told him that his father had finally returned their messages and was sending for him. It was the first time since he was younger that he felt a spark of hope.

It was dashed a week later when a man with dark hair and pasty skin showed up in a very expensive suit, driving a Jag. He tossed Emil a wallet full of cash and a set of keys to a car and an apartment. He was given a timetable for a posh private school and shown to the front doors when they arrived in California.

“Where's my father?” he'd asked only once.

The man—Sebastian—just laughed at him. “He'll see you when he gets into the country.” And that was that.

Emil didn't see him until the following summer when he was brought to Oslo—and that had been for a passing moment.

His father had been tall, imposing, a young woman on his arm and a cigar clenched between his teeth. He did little more than offer Emil a wink and pat on the shoulder before he was gone, and once again, Emil was left to his own devices.

And that became his life. He lived between the West Coast of the United States and the capital city in Norway—switching whenever he felt like it or when he needed an escape from his own head. He was fed, clothed, had no restrictions and more friends than he knew what to do with...once they all learned he came from money.

He didn't have to work hard because he was promised a CEO position at his father's company, and there wasn't a single problem he couldn't solve by throwing cash at it.

It was the dream.

And it was a nightmare.

The path had led him to meeting Victor—and, by association, Charlie. They'd been like the Three Musketeers, except they had no need or want to help anyone except themselves. Emil knew then he'd never be the best of men, but he'd never go back to living a life like the one he'd lived when his mother had her claws in him, and he told himself that had to be enough.

It was easy for Emil to tuck any semblance of feelings deep behind his ribs and pretend like they didn't exist because surface pleasures were so much nicer than dealing with all the pain he'd been ignoring since before he could remember.

And years later, he didn't speak about his mom. Not ever. His dad came around every once in a while, when he was on a business trip in the States. He'd give Emil a cigar and a pat on the shoulder and tell him he was grateful that he'd managed to get out of the mess his mother made without suffering too much damage.

He always smiled and said, "Yeah. I'm just fine." Whatever that meant.

Never mind Emil wanted to grab the old man by his designer lapels and scream in his face until the fucker passed

out and he no longer had a voice. But he knew he'd never have that courage. Instead, he'd smile, smoke the damn cigar, then drink himself into oblivion so he didn't have to remember it the next day.

And life might have continued on like that until he died of liver failure, except shit hit the fan. Victor's fiancée cheated, and Charlie became a pariah. And Emil suffered his first attack of conscience he'd had in years and years. Hell, maybe ever.

It was the first time he felt pain that wasn't his own, and it was goddamn unbearable. He knew then he'd do anything to make it up to Victor, and even if his mother hadn't died and left her house to rot, he still would have offered Victor the chance to leave and start over far away from that ugly world they'd been part of.

And once Emil's cracks appeared, they all started falling apart. His drinking got worse, and all the walls he'd built up over the years were tumbling down.

Before that phone call, he hadn't given his mother a passing thought unless he was wasted and close to passing out. Those were the nights he couldn't shut off old memories of everything she'd done. Of the nightmare he'd lived that had somehow become his normal.

He'd cry into his pillow and rarely remembered it come morning.

But now she was gone. For good.

It was over.

According to the report he'd gotten, she'd died alone in her home, surrounded by years and years of literal and metaphorical garbage. He wouldn't think about her. He hadn't gone to see the body. He waited for too long—weeks that turned into months, until Victor and now Oliver were ready to set sail across the country, and Emil could pretend like he was just heading that way to look for a new start.

It wasn't entirely a lie. It just wasn't the full truth, and he wasn't sure if he'd ever tell his friends.

“...Mr. Nilsson?”

Emil blinked back to the present, realizing Sandy Smith was speaking to him. He cleared his throat. “Can you please repeat that? I was a little lost in my thoughts.”

For the first time, her face showed an expression: annoyance. “I’ll have all the paperwork and a copy of the deed sent to your hotel.”

He did his best not to wince. He knew she wasn’t calling him out on his inability to settle down, considering he’d been in Rhode Island for almost a full year. It wasn’t like Sandy knew or cared how Emil lived his life. But the shame was ever present, and he was running out of excuses every time Victor asked why he still hadn’t picked a condo.

The truth was, he didn’t really know why he couldn’t take that first step. He’d given up everything he’d known for the last several decades, and he was bound and determined to never look back on the man he was.

But something kept him rooted to a place of impermanence, and he had no idea how to change it. He watched Victor and Oliver fall deeper in love—watched them get jobs and buy a home and make something of themselves. Envy raced through him, molten hot and vibrant green, but he couldn’t seem to make himself change.

Maybe he was doomed to be the fuckup he was in the past. Maybe that was his future.

“I’m still at the hotel,” he finally said, realizing he’d been quiet for too long again. He dragged his fingers through his hair, then glanced up at the front door of his mother’s old house, which was sitting crooked on its hinges.

It was a strange little property. There were a few homes that had clearly been built within the last decade. They were modern and beautiful. And then there were places like this: old family properties damaged beyond repair. It almost felt like a metaphor for his life, and he fought back a laugh.

“Do you happen to have the number to a service that might clean this place out?” he asked, glancing to the house on his right. It was one of the newer ones—a thin layer of snow over

dead grass and a perfectly stacked pile of wood a few feet away from a chopping block.

Sally blinked at him and, without missing a beat, stuck out her hand. “Not my area. Have a good weekend, Mr. Nilsson.”

And that was that. He was dismissed.

He watched her walk away, his gaze fixated on a run in her peach-skin-colored pantyhose and the way the hemline of her pants was slightly crooked. The crunch of gravel under her heels was oddly soothing, and he felt strangely bereft when she got into her car and left him to the silence of his mother’s yard.

He turned back to his current burden and looked up at the attic window. It was fogged over with dust and God only knew what else. He pictured the face of a poor, trapped soul looking out of that window.

Hers maybe? Or his.

This wasn’t the home he’d grown up in, so it saved him from the pressing weight of reliving his childhood trauma. But inside, there would be evidence of everything he’d gone through. Remnants of her life, and her disorder, and how she died.

The only thing the mess wouldn’t contain was answers. Why had she been like that? Why hadn’t she ever gotten help? Why hadn’t she loved him enough to stop?

Why was he the one chosen to be born into that chaos?

Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he scrolled through his contacts, but he didn’t know anyone who could help with messes like the one she’d left behind, so he turned to Google instead. “Company that cleans up after hoarders,” he said aloud as he swiped his thumb over the keyboard.

Several places populated.

He adjusted the location, then wandered over to the steps and sat. The wood beneath him bowed and groaned like one wrong move would send the whole thing into collapse. He started across the sad, unkempt lawn to the street and then to

the bend in the road, which led far away from here, and he desperately wished he was on it.

But what else could he do? He was an adult, and these were responsibilities he'd been running from for far too long.

This was his life now. He had money but no job. People around but no friends. And an ache in his chest but no idea how to even begin soothing himself. Was he a monster, or was there hope for him that he could be better than the creature his mother had set out into the world?

He wondered if that was a question he'd ever get an answer to.

CHAPTER TWO

“OKAY, MR. NELSON...”

“Nilsson,” he corrected absently, then realized the contractor probably didn’t give a single rat’s ass how to say his last name.

The guy grimaced and pulled off his baseball cap, ruffling his hair before shoving it back on. “If you don’t have any questions about the quote or how this works, then please sign in the three highlighted spots on the form.”

Emil had been half listening to the terms of the contract, but he really didn’t give a shit what needed to be done or how much it was going to cost. He’d pay any amount of money so long as he didn’t have to think about what was happening. If they damaged something, it wouldn’t be worse than what she’d done to the house in her years there alone, and if there was anything worth saving, he didn’t want to know.

The cheap plastic ballpoint pen felt too light between his fingers as he scratched his signature, then handed the clipboard back off to the man, who pulled the white copy away and offered Emil the yellow imprinted one.

“We should be finished by Friday, then you’ll do a walk-through provided that it’s not declared a hazard after the city inspection. Once that’s done, I can give you the names of a couple reno companies in the area that have pretty decent reputations, or if you’d prefer to have it demolished, I know a couple guys in that field.”

Emil nodded, feeling vaguely numb as he shoved his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. He felt odd and out of place in his polished shoes amongst a sea of work boots. He'd never worn them before. He'd never had a callus on his hands. He'd never done a day's manual labor in his life—not even when he lived with his mother.

“You need anything else from me?” he asked.

The guy looked over at him with an expression of vague surprise, like he'd forgotten Emil was there. “We'll call if we need anything, Mr. Nilsson.”

And just like that, he was dismissed.

The last place Emil wanted to be was his hotel, so he found himself walking toward a little seafood bistro that overlooked the water, not too far from where he was staying. The area was familiar, but in the way that he often felt as a tourist when he stood in one place for too long. The city was preparing for Christmas, fairy lights everywhere, fresh pine garlands hanging from every old-school-style gas lamp post, and big red bows that almost seemed mocking.

It gave him a strange sensation of nostalgia that took him a long time to figure out where it was coming from. After all, he didn't do holidays with his mom. They did them just enough for photos so his mom could lament about what it was like to have a solitary, lonely Christmas with a dying child.

But there were never presents. He didn't have a Christmas morning with hot breakfast and warm hugs and mugs of cocoa waiting. Santa didn't visit. No one ever gave a shit about him.

But there was one year when he was seven, the first and only time his mom let him out of her care. He didn't remember how or why his dad had managed to get him, but he showed up in a big black car and put Emil on a private jet. The flight took hours, and he slept most of the way, terrified because he had no idea what was coming or what to expect.

His dad didn't treat him like he was sick—like he had weeks to live—and he wasn't quite sure how to process it.

They landed in Oslo, then drove for hours and hours along snowy roads to Trondheim. He was half-asleep when they reached the city, but when he opened his eyes, it felt like a page from his fairy-tale book had come to life. There were lights everywhere, and food, and shops that all smelled like gingerbread and cinnamon. There was a giant Ferris wheel brightly lit against the dark night sky, and for a single moment, Emil wished the world would stop turning and time would freeze.

At the market, his father hadn't looked twice at him, but his current wife had taken him by the gloved hand and bought him a hat with reindeer knitted along the brim. He had food with names he couldn't pronounce, and he felt like the entire world would be okay if everything stayed exactly the way it was.

He cried himself sick on the plane when he went home, and he didn't see his dad in person for another ten years. By the time Emil went back to Norway, his father was on his sixth marriage, and when Emil asked about the woman at the Christmas market, his father just laughed and told him she got what she'd come for: his money.

And that was the moment Emil understood the world he was now part of, and there was no escaping his fate.

Victor had faith in him that he could become something else, but it was only after the fiasco with Charlie and Victor's fiancée that Emil was willing to allow Victor's hope in his life. He didn't have any himself, of course, but maybe Victor's would be enough.

“Just one today, sir?”

Emil blinked up at the young woman behind the desk, then nodded. “Thank you. Something by the window if you have it.” He stopped, then added, “Please.”

He was used to barking orders and getting his way, and manners were most definitely a new concept.

She didn't seem very fazed though, offering him that same friendly smile as she walked him to a long bench that stretched

along the window overlooking the river. Every few feet were tables barely big enough for one, let alone two, and only a couple of those were occupied.

There was no one close on either side of him, so he stretched his legs out and stared at the menu for a while. The idea of eating made his stomach twist in on itself, which he knew wasn't a bad sign, considering he was running solely on coffee and a prayer.

But what he wanted was a drink. A big, stiff, strong drink.

"Can I—" he started, but he realized the hostess had walked off.

"They do that here," came a voice to his right, and he turned to find the woman who had been three tables over had shifted herself, her drink, and her plate over. "Also, I'm not hitting on you."

Emil blinked, then burst into nervous laughter. "Oh... okay?"

"Men seem to think I'm hitting on them when I talk to them, and usually I ignore everyone, but you look really sad, so I figured some friendly conversation couldn't hurt."

Emil took her in. She was short, curvy, long hair cascading down her back, gorgeous, large hazel eyes. He understood why men would definitely want to think she was hitting on them. Luckily, the last thing he had room in his life for was a relationship, complicated or not.

"I'm Emil."

"Cool name." Her face lit up with her smile as she offered her hand. "I'm Dahlia. Like the Black Dahlia, only I'm totally not a serial killer. My mom was really into horticulture when she was pregnant with me."

Emil's smile widened, and it made his cheeks ache because he wasn't sure he'd held a grin for that long in years. Her hand was soft and strangely comforting, and it felt bad to let it go. "Thanks for joining me," he told her.

She winked at him as she grabbed the edge of her table and pushed it a little closer. “So. Why so glum, sugar plum?”

The strange little nickname made him chuckle. “Do I really look that bad?” He felt the urge to rush to the bathroom and check his reflection, but he didn’t want to come across like a whacko.

Dahlia tilted her head to the side as she regarded him. “Better than the guy I ran into this morning when I was coming out of my office but worse than my receptionist, who’s in the middle of a messy divorce.”

Emil sighed and shrugged, going for the easy answer, even if it was partially a lie. “My mom died.”

“Oh my God,” Dahlia said. “When? Please don’t say today.”

Emil had to laugh as he shook his head. “About eight months ago. I—” He was cut off by the server who appeared to take his order, and he quickly glanced at Dahlia’s plate before saying, “I’ll have what she’s got. And a Maker’s Mark. Rocks. Dahlia, can I get you a drink?”

“Two years sober,” she said proudly.

Emil’s cheeks burned. “Oh. Cancel mine.”

“Hey, no. It’s fine,” she started, but Emil nodded at the server sternly.

“Sparkling water with lime.” The server hesitated, then hurried off, and Dahlia sighed loudly as Emil sat back against the bench and gave her a careful look. “I think you might be my sign.”

Dahlia raised one of her very lovely shaped brows. “Your what now?”

“I’m probably an alcoholic. Or close to it. Drinking is definitely my coping mechanism with, you know, life.”

She hummed softly and picked up her drink, swirling some of the ice around in it. “That’s how it started for me. Then suddenly, I was divorced, and I lost custody of my daughter, and my mom will only talk to me every other Thursday for

half an hour until she's certain I'm not going to fall off the wagon. Which will probably be never."

He winced. "I'm so sorry."

Dahlia waved him off. "Please don't be. I had a complicated childhood—something you look like you understand."

Emil fought back a bitter laugh. "You could say that."

"Thought so. Like recognizes like, you know?" She drummed her fingers on the desk. "I didn't realize how bad it was getting until the ground fell out from under me. I hurt people, and I felt like a monster, but usually when that happens, people go one of two ways. Or that's what my therapist says."

"And you went...?"

Her grin went a little lopsided. "I wanted to make it up to my daughter and my ex. So I chose that road. It's better now. I have a good job, and I happily pay a fuckload of child support, and I get to see her almost whenever I want. My mom's the only person who decided she was never going to trust me again, and considering her hating me was one of the reasons I started drinking..." She trailed off and shrugged, then laughed. "Sorry. I sometimes have a bad habit of trauma dumping on total strangers."

"I'm not complaining. It's kind of nice to know that there are other people with a past as twisted as my own." He stared down at his fingers. "How did you, you know...start? To get better, I mean. I tell myself to stop all the time, but it just never works."

"Honestly?"

"The most brutal honesty," Emil said, bracing himself.

Dahlia grabbed her bag and rummaged around before pulling out a card. "I got a therapist." She slapped it on the table. "You can tell her you know me, but she won't gossip about either of us. She's actually good at what she does."

Emil bit his lip and stared down at the name embossed on the soft cream-colored paper. “Will she make me go to AA?”

Dahlia shook her head. “Only if you want to. I’m not in AA. Not everyone does well with that sort of treatment. She’ll help you figure out what you need. It might not be what you want, but believe me when I say trust the process.” She took a long sip of her drink, then cleared her throat. “Sorry about your mom, by the way.”

Emil sighed. “I’m not. She’s why I wanted whiskey.” Emil looked at Dahlia properly and found himself smiling. “I think I just found something better than booze.” His grin widened. “And just so you know, I’m not hitting on you. I’d rather stick a fork in my eyeball than get involved with anyone right now. Or ever again.”

Dahlia threw her head back and laughed. “Good to know. And it’s really nice to meet you, Emil. I have a feeling we’re going to become very good friends.”

His chest felt warm in a very good way. Something that had never happened before.

And he kept smiling.

CHAPTER THREE

KNOCK KNOCK!

If he didn't breathe, if he didn't move, then he didn't exist. Right? That old "if a tree falls in the woods" adage could easily apply to professors in their offices who don't answer the door. Couldn't it?

Renzo wasn't even supposed to be there, but the last email he'd gotten from Oliver had begged him for a favor, and Renzo had always been a goddamn pushover. He'd just finished uploading the last of Oliver's grades, saying a quick prayer that no one audited their system logins, and someone must have seen the light on under his door.

He wanted to sit back, but Oliver's chair was all creaky and loud.

There was a third knock before the person gave up, and he waited an extra minute and thirty seconds before finally letting out a slow breath and easing himself into a more reclined position. God, his back was hurting.

He blamed all the wood chopping, but once upon a time, he'd been able to take care of all his household crap without feeling like his spine was trying to crawl out through his tailbone. It was exactly enough wood to take care of the week's fire though, which would make his brother happy since Matty had to have his fire at exactly five fifteen every single day—even when it was summer and sweltering.

He blamed his parents for that one and his sister for continuing that part of the routine after their parents died and

she took over the house. And he blamed himself for giving in every time Matty threw a hissy fit when someone was even a minute late getting the fire started.

And since his sister was out of the country for the next month and a half, all of Matty's routines and responsibilities were now his. Not that Renzo had a leg to stand on when it came to complaints. Camilla had offered to become their brother's full-time caregiver since Renzo was a professor, and that didn't allow a lot of room for him to be home with his brother. The very least he could do was use his free time in between semesters to take some of the load off and let his sister get away for a few weeks.

And it gave him extra time to spend with Matty, which was one of the only bright spots in Renzo's life. Matty was so much younger than him, but he was probably Renzo's absolute best friend, and he wouldn't change that for the world. Camilla was cold and stingy with her affection, but Matty was always ready to soften some of the sharp edges when Renzo's days were bad.

And there were a lot of bad days since Renzo and his ex split up. He wasn't exactly sure what he would have done if Matty hadn't been there, and the more space Renzo was getting from John, the more he realized a relationship with his remaining family wasn't just a want.

It was a need. And he wouldn't trade either of his siblings for the world.

Camilla was older by three years, and for so long, it had just been the two of them. He remembered his mom saying she was going through menopause for a while, but then she came back from the doctor one afternoon, looking stunned. It was menopause. But it was also a pregnancy, and it was complicated.

Their parents told them they weren't sure how it was going to go and if a baby would even be born, but nine months stretched out like an eternity, and his mom got bigger and short-tempered, and she was tired all the time and in bed most of the day.

Then one night, there was screaming and his dad peeling out of the driveway and, ten hours later, a phone call that his brother was born, and everyone was fine.

Mostly. At least, it was fine for a while.

But then things with Matty started to be less fine. He had heart surgery when he was a month old, and he wasn't meeting his milestones. He never cried, but he didn't sit up when he was supposed to or walk when he was supposed to, and he was so, so incredibly tiny.

He remembered the feeling of confusion and a little fear after a long series of medical tests had come back with more information than Renzo could have even started processing back then with his young, teenage brain. Their parents had sat them down with somber faces and eventually explained what Matty had: Williams syndrome.

They kept it simple—that he was born without certain genes, and that would make life a little different for him. They wouldn't know how different until he got a little older, but he was probably going to need some help being independent for the rest of his life. He would probably have learning and intellectual disabilities, and he would always struggle with his heart. His health wouldn't be the worst, but it also wouldn't be the best.

He'd need to be carefully monitored all the time and on meds for his entire life. And even then, it might not be enough.

But Renzo and Camilla hadn't really considered what that would mean. They were still at the age where everyone and everything seemed so...immortal. And Matty always seemed so alive.

Renzo didn't really face the idea of mortality until he was thirty-three and woke up to the phone ringing at two in the morning. It was the one call he'd never wanted to get. His dad had been rushed into the hospital after a fall, but there was nothing they could do.

He was gone an hour later.

And then their mom followed twenty-six months later, and Renzo was convinced it was from a broken heart.

Now, nine years later, and there were gaping holes in his life where his parents had once existed, but life felt a bit more normal. Matty had stopped crying at night, and Camilla had settled, and Renzo was on the outside of an abusive marriage to a narcissist that had finally ended.

Life could be better, but it could have been a whole lot worse.

Knock knock!

“Fuck,” he whispered into his hand. The student was back.

He fought back the urge to duck under his desk and hide there in case they were desperate enough to have found a lockpicking device. It might have sounded wild to someone who didn’t work on a college campus, but the end-of-semester panic was far too real, and he’d seen students hit that finals madness and not find a way back to sanity.

Renzo: I’m literally trapped in your office hiding from a student who wants to talk with you, and I think they might break down the door. You’re so lucky I like you.

Oliver: I’m literally in the Bahamas right now watching my fiancé swim with a stingray so I’m having a hard time feeling too bad.

Oliver: [pic]

Renzo: Victor is so adorable like that it makes it hard to hate you. But I still do.

Oliver: I know. I love you forever, babes. Thank you for getting that done.

When the door stayed silent for ten minutes, Renzo finally breathed a sigh of relief, shut down Oliver’s computer, then grabbed his things. He pulled his coat on, then jammed his hat over his curls, hurrying through the darkened hallway and bursting out the staff office doors. There was no one hanging

around—which made sense, considering it was heading toward the teens and the sun was setting—and he jammed his finger on the elevator button over and over until it opened.

Luckily, the staff parking was close enough he only had to dodge a couple of ice patches and hop a small snowbank before he was sitting behind his heater, which was working hard, and driving over slush toward the dying mall.

The parking lot was a sad ghost of what the holidays had been like as a kid. He knew it was happening everywhere, but when he was younger, all the light poles had been decorated with garlands and twinkle lights strung like a massive net over everyone's heads.

They still had the Christmas tree all lit up next to Santa, but it was dim and sad, and half the baubles were busted, and they couldn't be assed to replace any of them. It made Renzo feel old and depressed. Even for a family that never really bothered with the holidays except to make Matty happy, the magic was going, and he felt powerless to stop it.

On top of that, Renzo was trying to escape the depression nipping at his heels because almost exactly three years ago, his marriage fell apart. He walked into their apartment to find his husband with the neighbor, and, well... That was that, he supposed. John had, of course, made him feel like it was his fault, but Renzo was so done losing sleep and peace on the man who had treated him and his family like garbage for their entire marriage that he'd just laughed and told him he'd be by for his stuff that week.

John hadn't fought him over it, and Renzo's mourning period had been short and a little strange. He had work to do, making it up to both Matty and Camilla for bringing a man like John around, but the rest of his life would fall back together in the shape it was meant to be. Not the shape John had been trying to create.

He was happy now—content as he was, if not a little lonely. But there were far worse things than being alone. And he'd already lived them.

Pulling his scarf tighter, he told himself he wasn't allowed to be depressed until Christmas and the New Year were over. Yes, he still had to see John on campus once the spring semester started. He'd have to deal with his smug smile and simpering hellos like he felt sorry for Renzo being all alone—like he wasn't the one who ruined everything.

But one more semester meant more time passing. It meant more healing and forgetting, and that was the best gift Renzo could give to himself for any holiday ever.

Pushing past the doors, Renzo felt a small pulse of disappointment when he smelled Wok'n'Roll instead of pine and cinnamon. But the candle store had closed, and mall staff hadn't bothered trying to do anything more than the bare minimum for festivities. Even the holiday music was at a low drone, barely audible over the echo of the small shopping crowds.

He turned the corner and spotted the ceramics shop and then his brother leaning against the window with his nose buried in his phone. Renzo walked over and gently kicked Matty's shoe with the tip of his own.

"That's going to rot your brain."

"You're going to rot *your* brain," Matty fired back.

"Ooh, burn," Renzo said, then opened his arms, and Matty dove in for a hug. His brother was thirteen years younger than him and almost a foot shorter, thanks to his disorder. Renzo could easily pick him up but never did since it was the one thing in the world Matty hated most. "How was work today?"

Matty pulled back and shrugged, shoving one hand into the pocket of his paint-stained jeans. "Chrissy from CinnaRoll gave me free frosting today."

"You're going to rot your teeth out of your head if you keep eating that garbage for lunch every day," Renzo said.

"Broken record. You're a broken record," Matty chimed. That was echoes of his sister, and Renzo sighed, clapping him on the shoulder before offering his hand.

"Yeah, yeah. Did you find anything good for me to paint?"

“I saved you...” Matty’s brow furrowed, and his lower lip stuck out a little, making him look exactly the way he did when he was a little kid. Renzo’s heart did a weird sort of throb when he realized just how fast the years were going by.

And how much their parents had missed.

“We have old Halloween stuff,” Matty finally said.

Renzo tugged on his hand, leading him toward the exit. “Good. I’m gonna need some stuff for my apartment. Last time you slept over, you complained the whole time that my walls were boring.”

“You have no style,” Matty said with a sniff.

“Thank you, Picasso,” Renzo said with a laugh. “You should paint me something.”

Matty shook his head. “Nuh-uh. I keep my own stuff. It goes in my room.”

“Fine,” Renzo groaned, tugging Matty harder and making him laugh. “I guess I’ll have to do it myself.”

Their hands swung between them, and Renzo felt content for the moment. At least until they passed by the giant tree and the Santa Village, which seemed to get smaller and smaller every year. He felt Matty’s shoes starting to drag, and he let him pause.

“I’m too old,” Matty parroted.

“For what?” Renzo asked.

Matty jerked his chin over at the giant tree where Santa was sitting at the base. Renzo frowned for a beat, then realized what Matty was saying. “Who said that? Tell me Camilla didn’t say that shit to you.”

“Don’t say s-h-i-t,” Matty scolded.

Renzo wasn’t going to let up. “Who said it, Mattia.” Full-naming him almost always worked, but this time, Matty lifted his chin in defiance. Renzo sighed again, pulling Matty toward the doors. “Don’t let anyone tell you that, okay?”

“I know Santa’s not real,” Matty told him in a stage whisper. “I knew when I was ten. He’s just a story.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you can’t like Santa. That doesn’t mean there’s no such thing as Christmas magic,” Renzo argued. “People don’t need to take away things that make you happy just because they’re miserable.”

Matty said nothing, and Renzo wasn’t sure if the concept was beyond his brother or if he was just tired of the argument. They’d been through it before—too damn many times. Like when Matty’s dickish coworkers made fun of him for watching *Bluey* or for wearing light-up shoes, which had taken Renzo and Camilla months to find in his size.

Sometimes, Matty would be rebellious and do the things that made him happy. Other times, he made a big show of giving them up, and whenever they caught him trying to sneak episodes of old TV shows or sitting on the closet floor watching the walls light up purple and blue, he just curled into himself and refused to talk about it.

But Renzo would be *goddamned* if he let someone take the holidays away from his brother.

There was so little joy left in the world as it was.

“What would you ask Santa for if you could?” Renzo asked as they reached his car.

Matty sighed. “I can’t tell you. It’s a secret.”

“That’s not exactly helpful when I want to go shopping,” Renzo pointed out as he hit the button on his fob and opened the car door.

Matty just smiled at him, and Renzo knew that night was a losing battle. He was too damn tired to fight though, so instead, he took them through the Taco Bell drive-thru and spent the rest of the night watching *Star Wars* and telling himself that six tacos was not too many.

CHAPTER FOUR

“...EIGHT, NINE...AH, *FUCK.*” Renzo stood up, his back twinging with phantom aches as he stared at the remaining logs that needed to be split. Either an animal or the wind had come along and ripped the tarp off the woodpile in the middle of the night, and what he had prepared for the week was now soaking wet with no hope of drying before the afternoon.

He hadn't anticipated breaking his back twice in forty-eight hours, but that was just his luck lately.

As he walked toward the chopping block, his gaze cut across the yard to the neighbor's house. Renzo hadn't ever paid it much mind over the years, and his sister only rarely complained about an occasional garbage smell when there was an updraft. They knew a woman lived there. They'd seen her a handful of times answering the door when someone delivered food or groceries, but she never said hi.

Then one day, the deliveries stopped.

And then Camilla spotted animals running in and out of a couple of busted windows, and she knew there was a reason the house had gone quiet.

She had been the one to call the cops since none of the other neighbors seemed to give a shit, and Renzo was there the night paramedics showed up to haul the woman's body out of the door though. When she was gone, he and Camilla had taken bets on whether or not anyone was going to show up and handle the mess she'd left behind.

Renzo had gotten brave once, on half a bottle of wine, and had crept over to peer through the window. They were filthy and fogged, but he got a glimpse of trash piles and enough bugs to give him the heebie-jeebies for weeks.

The house sat silent for eight months though, and he was about ready to pay up on the bet he clearly lost.

Then, two weeks after Camilla left for her vacation, a company had shown up with massive dumpsters and gutted the place. Renzo had watched from the porch, and for eight straight days, they hauled out trash, bathroom fixtures, toilets, three fridges, two stoves, and a fucking partridge in a pear tree.

Now, there was a car parked out front. A very expensive car. A fucking Bugatti, if his eyes weren't deceiving him. The only other person he knew who was rich enough to breathe near a car like that was Oliver's boyfriend, Victor, but he had chosen a sensible Range Rover for him and Oliver to drive around in.

He definitely wanted to know how Bugatti Man had gotten involved with the piece-of-shit house and the worthless land it was built on, but he most definitely wasn't going to walk over there and ask.

Rolling his shoulders several times, Renzo curled his gloved fingers around the ax and felt an immediate tug in his tendons when he hoisted it up onto his shoulder. The air was frigid but felt oddly nice now that he was building up a nice sweat. He was going to pay for it later, of course. It was probably his sign he should spend more time on his upper body in the gym, but when he did sneak in sessions at the one on campus, he couldn't bring himself to do more than plop his ass on the stationary bike and ride to the sound of an audiobook.

Which reminded him...

He dug into his pocket and pulled out his earbuds, slipping one into his right ear before hitting Play. The dulcet sounds of the narrator hit his brain in all the right ways, and he found it

was a lot easier to ignore the impending need for an Epsom salt bath as he got lost in romance.

Everyone always assumed he spent his free time in his labs or concocting experiments in his kitchen—which he had done once upon a time when he was younger and fancied himself some sort of alchemist. But while Renzo was passionate about his job—and about teaching students that chemistry was more than just dry old nerds with nothing better to do than toy around with explosive liquids—he was more complicated than that.

Or, at least, he wanted to be.

He kept to himself a little more often now—after his ex. After John had used all his pop psychology and therapy speak to strip Renzo down until he was a mess of raw, exposed nerves. It might have been easier to deal with the fallout of his split if his ex had been bad at his job, but he wasn't.

John had a way of being able to cut to the quick after a ten-minute conversation. Renzo used to admire that about him. There was something dangerous about a man who could read someone like a driver's manual with just a few sentences and subconscious twitches, and that had been hot.

Until it wasn't.

Until Renzo was on the receiving end, and the one thing John hadn't taught him to do was how to fix himself once he'd been broken into a thousand tiny pieces.

There had been a long while Renzo wasn't sure he'd ever recover from the marriage. In fact, it wasn't until Matty and Camilla showed up at his place and forced him to shower and eat something other than takeout that he realized John wasn't worth losing himself over.

So he read romances now, knowing full well he probably wouldn't ever be able to trust anyone the way he once had—and knowing full well he'd be damn lucky if he found a man willing to put up with the fact that he was now weird and neurotic and afraid of intimacy and vulnerability of any kind.

But he would rather die alone than give someone the ability to ruin him like John had, ever again.

Renzo's gaze cut to the small pile of split wood, and he counted pieces. Just a few more would get Matty through the week, and he could give his shoulders a rest before he had to start all over again. Swiping the back of his glove over his forehead, he contemplated giving up and starting again later when his gaze cut across the field. He did a quick double take when he realized someone was standing on the porch watching him, and he didn't know how to feel.

From that far off, and without his decent glasses on, all Renzo could make out was a tall man with dark hair wearing a light suit jacket that was in no way suitable for their winter. The man's posture gave the impression of someone totally unbothered, and he must have seen Renzo watching, but he didn't look away.

Not that Renzo could bring himself to give a shit. Let the man stare. He was probably going through something, considering the tragedy that had happened inside that house. Maybe she was a family member. He doubted she had kids, considering no one had ever come to visit her, but maybe she was a quirky aunt or much, much older sister?

Either way, grief was grief, and Renzo wasn't going to impose himself upon a man dealing with that mess.

He felt a bead of sweat drip down his temple, and suddenly, the sun was too hot, and the heat from his coat was unbearable. Renzo set his ax down and unzipped it, and the cool air immediately felt good against his overworked upper half. He took a breath, then pulled his sweater off his head too. There was a stain on his white T-shirt, but he couldn't really bring himself to care. Not when his pits were all dark with sweat. He lifted the hem of his shirt and swiped it over his face.

Across the distance, he heard a dull thud and looked up to see the man fumbling with a coffee cup Renzo hadn't noticed before. It was at his feet now, and the light wood showed off a dark stain.

Renzo smirked.

He sure as shit wasn't going to walk over and say hi now, but he preened a little that someone was appreciating the abs he'd carefully built on those stationary bikes. Biting his lip, he turned back to the wood, and by the time he finished what was left of his small pile, the strange Bugatti driver had gone back into the creepy, condemned house.

“Wakey wakey,” Renzo called as he plated Matty’s breakfast—french toast, two sausage links, one slice of bacon, and half a banana.

One of the things he appreciated about his brother was that he was a creature of habit. His routine was simple and didn't test Renzo's limited cooking skills.

Baking was one thing. Baking was chemistry, and he could create a cake with the perfect acidity and moisture while still feeling as light as a cloud. But put a steak in front of him, and there was at least a seventy-percent chance it would turn into a hockey puck by the time he was done with it.

His french toast looked edible though, and his sister always had microwaved meats readily available. Renzo could at least follow timing directions on a package, even if he had once burned a pot of water.

He set everything up on the breakfast bar, then snagged one of the jars of peaches his sister had preserved and cracked the top.

He was just adding cinnamon to his little pile of syrupy goodness when Matty appeared, looking ruffled and slightly annoyed. He didn't say anything, just grunting his hello as he slid onto his stool and picked up his fork.

“Juice or water?”

“Milk,” Matty said.

Renzo sighed. “We’re out. Unless you and Milla bought a cow I don’t know about.”

Matty’s lips twitched into the ghost of a grin as he shook his head. “Cows are expensive.”

“Is that what Milla told you?”

“My friend at work showed me a cow auction,” Matty said, then cut his French toast into perfectly precise triangles like he’d been doing since he was old enough to cut up his own food. It gave Renzo another wave of nostalgia that was just shy of painful. “Maybe I can earn fifteen thousand dollars for a cow.”

“Too much work,” Renzo said. “You’d have to quit your job to feed it and brush it. And shovel shit.”

Matty rolled his eyes and tapped his finger in the air in the direction of the swear jar.

Renzo made a huge show of patting his pockets. “Fresh out. Spot me five bucks?”

“No. Get a job,” Matty said, then laughed at his own joke before turning his attention to his breakfast.

Renzo knew better than to get between Matty and his mealtime, so he turned his back, resting his backside against the counter as he picked at the peaches and scrolled through his emails. There were several from students he was going to steadfastly ignore until the start of the semester, considering almost all of them were—no doubt—begging him to reconsider their final grades.

Renzo was a good teacher—he was a fun teacher. He made class lively and exciting for people who were both in the STEM field and ones that were just trying to fill a requirement. But when it came to marks, he was a hard-ass. He’d earned a reputation, and if he started going soft now, there’d be no recovering from it.

Trying to set his phone down and eat at the same time, he missed his mouth and smeared peach syrup all over his chin. “God damn it.”

“Mm,” Matty hummed behind him.

Renzo looked over to see his finger pointing again. “Seriously, bud. I’m broke. I’m going to have to take out a loan.”

Matty just sighed, knowing he was lying, and went in to finish his sausage link as Renzo walked to the sink and turned on the water. It ran freezing, and Renzo waited until he could stand to hold his fingers under it for longer than a second, then wet a kitchen towel and mopped up his mess.

His gaze fixed out the window, and before he turned away, the Bugatti man reappeared. He was even more shadowy and vague from the kitchen, but even without details, Renzo liked the way he moved. He strode with a sort of purpose Renzo didn’t see often—a confidence that came only with a man who lived a life without the same worries as Renzo did.

And there was something both horrifying and beautiful about it.

“Have you met the new neighbor?”

“She’s not new. She was old. And she died,” Matty said.

Renzo shook his head. “No. Someone’s been over there cleaning out that house.”

Matty just shrugged as he wiped his mouth with his napkin. “I’m going to go play Roblox.”

Renzo sighed. “Fine. Abandon me.”

Matty walked over and kissed Renzo’s cheek. “You have to take me to work. We have to leave at eleven fifteen.”

“On the dot,” Renzo promised. “So don’t take too long in the shower.”

Matty made a face at him, then disappeared back up the stairs, and Renzo turned toward the window again. He could only just make out the man behind the wheel of his car, and he watched tendrils of white coming from the exhaust, visible in the frigid morning.

He wondered if the guy had a proper winter coat.

Which was an absurd thought. Of course he did. If he didn't, it was by choice, not by need. But...if Renzo saw him out there in his flimsy jacket one more time, he might have to go over and offer one of his own. He wouldn't be able to live with himself if his delicate, rich fingers got frostbite all because Renzo didn't think he needed help.

Yeah. He'd just keep an eye on things.

No harm ever came in doing that.

Right?

CHAPTER FIVE

“So, step one, gut the house and see what’s salvageable,” Dahlia said, ticking off her fingers.

Emil stared at her across the table as he ran a touch around the rim of his cappuccino mug. “Yep.”

“Step two, get it inspected.”

Emil shrugged and waved at her to go on.

“Step three...” She trailed off, then held up her hand with her thumb tucked against her palm. “Step four, profit.”

Emil snorted and rolled his eyes. “There’s nothing to profit off that place. It’s a hole, and the land is basically worthless. It was farmland once, but the previous owners ruined the soil with corn. And I’m stuck with the mess to clean up.”

“Peanuts,” Dahlia said.

Emil blinked at her. “Sorry?”

“Plant peanuts. I swear to God, I read somewhere that peanuts return nutrients to soil. But I might be talking out of my ass. I’m definitely not, like, a gardener or whatever.”

Emil hid his laugh in the last swallow of his drink, closing his eyes, and for a split second, he saw abs. And not just any abs but the chiseled, pale abs of his mother’s neighbor. Emil hadn’t seen anyone coming or going from the house, but he was assured people lived there.

Emil had been peeking from time to time, every chance he got when he found himself wandering around the gutted

property now that it was safe to breathe the air inside. He didn't know why he was curious, though part of him wanted to know if they'd ever spoken to his mother.

According to the information he'd gotten after her death, no one even realized she was in there until there was a smell. And animals.

That thought threatened to turn his stomach inside out, so he quickly shoved it to the back of his mind.

“Earth to Emil.”

He turned his gaze back to Dahlia. “I'll sell the place to you for whatever you have in your pocket.”

Dahlia scoffed. “I'm wearing women's clothing. I don't have pockets.”

“Your shoes?”

“Louboutins. Worth way more than salted earth.”

Emil set his mug down and rubbed at his temples. “I wonder if the state would take it off my hands. The inspector said that even if I tore it down to nothing, no one would buy it.”

“And you don't want it?”

Emil grimaced. He still didn't have a home, and while he did have plenty of money to bulldoze any trace of where the house and his mother had once been and start something of his own, he didn't want to live with her ghost.

“Maybe I can turn it into a neighborhood park.” He felt foolish saying that, considering he hadn't seen a single child within twenty miles of that long stretch of road.

“Maybe donate it to charity,” she said. “Or see if the neighbor wants to build, like, a massive, fuck-off-sized pool and train for the Olympics in the summer.”

Emil rolled his eyes but smiled as he reached into his pocket for a few bills and left them under the sugar dish for the tip. He rose and offered his hand, and Dahlia took it with her right, pressing her left one to her sternum.

“Oh *my*. I do declare...”

“Stop,” Emil growled, though he wasn’t annoyed with her at all. She was absolutely nothing like anyone he’d ever met, and he felt a sudden and profound fear she’d figure out that he was a worthless, sorry excuse for a man and ghost him.

She hadn’t pried about his past at all. She knew vague bits and pieces about his mom and his nonrelationship with his father, but nothing more. And he would have given anything to keep it that way.

“I need to get back to work,” she said when they stepped outside into the bitter cold. “What are you doing for dinner?”

“Hotel food.”

“You’re going to get scurvy and die if you keep eating room service. Promise me you’re going to look for an actual house soon. I mean, seriously, I don’t even want to think about the cash you’re dropping.”

Neither did he, but only because it didn’t matter, which made him feel worse. Dahlia obviously lived a comfortable life, but she still had to worry about her bills. She still had to work to keep up on her child support payments, and her lights on, and her mortgage paid.

And she probably had some idea of his situation, considering the car he drove, but it wasn’t the first time she’d dropped a comment like that.

“I’m going to be fine,” he told her as the valet pulled up.

She laughed. “I have no doubt. Now, get my door for me, Prince Charming. People at work think I bagged myself a sugar daddy, and I want to keep up the rumors for a while.”

He laughed to himself as he helped her in and then let her ramble as he headed toward her office.

Pulling one sleeve of his sweater over his hand, Emil used his other to answer Victor’s call. He wasn’t expecting to hear from

him, so there was a small bubble of fear that something was wrong.

“Everything okay?”

“Oliver has sunburned ass cheeks, and he’s so annoyed with me he kicked me out of the room,” Victor said.

Emil sagged forward a little bit. Okay. No one was dead, no one was maimed, and no one had found their fiancé in bed with their best friend.

This time.

“Ouch?”

Victor snorted. “Yeah. His bad attitude when he’s in pain doesn’t make it better, so I’m having a scotch by the pool.”

Emil felt the ghost of want in the back of his throat as he ached for the familiar burn of alcohol. It had been exactly three weeks since he’d touched a drop. He had an appointment for Dahlia’s therapist on his books, and he was white-knuckling it through his cravings.

But he was doing better than he expected, which was something, though he wasn’t ready to tell Victor about his decision just yet. He wasn’t ready to tell anyone. He didn’t think he could face the world if they all believed in him and he failed them.

“Where are you right now?” Victor asked.

Emil glanced around the nearly empty room, then at the three boxes of clothes, photos, and old letters that were left from when the house had been cleaned out. “I, uh...nowhere.”

Victor huffed a small sigh. “Is there a reason you’re lying to me?”

“Yes,” Emil answered. “But can it wait until you get back? This is a lot.”

“Are you in trouble? Are you hurt?”

His heart was hurting, but that was the childhood-full-of-issues sort of pain his friend couldn’t fix. And he sure as shit

wasn't going to burden Victor with anything, considering what a terrible person Emil had been over the last several years.

So, the answer was easy. "No. Not in trouble and not hurt. Just taking care of a few things."

"Would any of those things be buying a house?"

"Not you too," Emil groaned. "I made a friend here, and she's been on my case for the last two weeks about living in the hotel."

Victor gave a curious hum. "*Friend* friend, or..."

"No. Nothing like that," Emil said in a rush. He couldn't imagine wanting anything like that with Dahlia now. "She's just...nice. It's weird."

"Being around actual nice people takes some getting used to. Trust me, I'm still not over the way Oliver is with me," Victor said softly, and Emil could hear the smile in his voice. It was something Emil wanted to protect with his whole body and whole soul because if anyone deserved that kind of happiness, it was Victor. "I hope we can meet her when we get back."

"For sure," Emil said. He eyed the pile he needed to take care of. "Anyway, I need to get going. Call later?"

"I'll try. We're heading off to Bermuda, and Oliver's convinced we're going to get lost in the triangle. So if he's right..."

"I'll be sure to spare no expense in your search party," Emil said.

Victor laughed, and it was the last sound Emil heard before the line went dead. Stuffing his phone back into his pocket, he walked over and grabbed the first box before stepping outside. He was entirely underdressed for the weather, but the plan he had in mind would warm him up shortly.

He'd dug a pit earlier, and the only thing he needed to do now was fill it with wood and then pray that he remembered how much lighter fluid to use without causing an explosion. He made his way over the stiff, dead lawn, then tipped

everything against the dark, damp soil. He wasn't sure how much of his mom's things would actually burn, but whatever didn't would hopefully decompose when he buried the pit.

It felt oddly cathartic to take care of it, and a small part of him hoped that it would dispel whatever was left of her ghost when the flames finally died out.

None of the things she'd left behind had anything to do with him. He'd gone through as much of her stuff as they could salvage, and it was almost like the moment he'd been taken out of her care, she'd forgotten he existed.

It was absurd. All he'd wanted was for her to forget him. And then she did.

So why did it hurt? Why was there an ache in his stomach?

His jaw tensed, making his temples ache, and he glanced over at the neighbor's house. There was a light on in one of the bottom-floor windows, but he hadn't seen movement in a long, long while. Maybe no one was home. Maybe they were asleep early.

Under the cover of darkness, he crept over the icy grass and caught his breath as he came to a stop beside the house. The woodpile the neighbor had been chopping before was arranged on the porch, but there was a huge stack of uncut logs under a blue tarp.

Two would do it, he figured. Two would burn long enough to char what was left of his mother in a sort of fucked-up effigy that he could only hope would let her go. He flexed his fingers against the cold, then carefully grabbed two of the smallest ones he could manage on his own.

Emil wasn't used to this kind of workout, so on the way back—as his luck would have it—he tripped and fell. Twice. He let out a soft cry the second time as his foot caught in some sort of burrow, and he froze, glancing behind him, but the house remained completely still.

When he was sure no one was going to come out with shotguns blazing, Emil picked himself up and finally reached the little pit. Kneeling down, he set the logs in the dirt, then

did his best to arrange all of the papers and bits of clothing around them.

He was feeling exhausted by the time he went for the second box, but he wasn't about to stop now. It was late, and it was cold. The sky was clear, and there was a hazy ring around the moon, and soon enough, tendrils of smoke would reach the heavens.

His own personal goodbye, in a way.

Emil rose onto his knees, then pulled the top off the lighter fluid and drenched everything as best he could. The scent was acrid and unpleasant, and he pressed the sleeve of his sweater to his nose while he fumbled with the lighter. It took several tries before it caught, and then he brushed the flame over one of the fluid-soaked sweaters.

There was a pop and a hiss, and then suddenly, the blaze took over. Heat rushed across his face, and Emil scrambled backward, feeling around his eyebrows until he was certain they were still there. He smelled a little whiff of burnt hair, but he was pretty sure he was mostly unscathed.

The rest of the pit caught after a bit, though he could see the bigger logs weren't burning. Feeling somewhat defeated, he dropped his ass to the cold dirt and hugged his legs close to his chest. Just like everything else, he'd gotten it wrong. He had no real idea what he was doing because no one had ever taught him these basic life skills, and he wondered how the hell he was going to survive any of this. At least not without escaping to the city and going back to the things he knew.

But...maybe that wouldn't be the worst idea. Maybe that was just his destiny. What was the worst that would happen if he gave all of this up, lived, and died young?

“Did you know that stealing wood here is a misdemeanor crime?”

Emil jumped half a foot, then spun, his heart thundering in his chest when he caught a glimpse of the bespectacled would-be lumberjack standing a few feet away from him. The guy was staring at him with absolutely no expression, and in the

firelight, he was even more beautiful than Emil had seen earlier that day.

“Er. I’m happy to pay for it,” Emil offered.

The guy lifted his eyebrows, then took a step closer. “You do know that’s never going to catch, right? You can’t just throw half a tree in a fire pit, cover it with lighter fluid, and get a bonfire going.”

“I wasn’t aware, thank you,” Emil said with a small sniff.

The guy sighed, then dropped to his knees, and it was then Emil realized he had a handful of split wood. When the stranger reached into the flames, Emil cried out, but he was promptly ignored as the guy used his bare hands to rearrange everything, making a sort of grate shape with the smaller pieces of wood.

“Is this an ex-wife thing?”

Emil blinked. “Sorry?”

“Burning dresses and sweaters,” the guy said.

“Oh. Oh, uh.” He swallowed heavily. There was every chance this man knew his mother. There was a chance he liked her, which would make him the villain. But he supposed now wasn’t the time to care. “These are my mother’s old things.”

“The lady who died?” the guy asked.

Emil shrugged and glanced behind him at the house. A small part of him wished that was ablaze too. It would solve at least half his problems. “Yeah. The lady who died. Did you know her?” He held his breath, not sure what he wanted the answer to be.

The guy shook his head, shooting him an apologetic look. “No. I only saw her a couple of times. She, uh...she didn’t leave her house much. I didn’t know she had kids.”

“Kid,” Emil said absently. “Just me. I didn’t come visit. I had my reasons.” He was well aware his voice was low and defensive, but he wasn’t sure he could handle explaining to a total stranger why his mother had died alone.

“Hmm” was the only noise he made, and then he fell quiet before folding himself down to sit beside Emil. Their knees were almost touching, and Emil noticed he was at least two inches shorter than him. “I’m Renzo.”

It was a gorgeous name—so fitting, even if he didn’t know where it was from. Emil bowed his head and stared at his feet. “Emil.”

“What is that? Like, Swedish?”

“Norwegian. My father lives there.”

“And you grew up here,” Renzo said, not quite a question but not quite a statement.

Emil shook his head. “No. Not here. My mother didn’t live here when I was with her. This is where they found her, and some guy told me to come because there was no one else who could clean up after she...after they took her out.” His voice threatened to crack, and he cleared his throat.

“Hey, Emil...”

“No,” he said, feeling a sudden panic threaten to take over. “Please don’t say sorry.”

Renzo didn’t answer him apart from a very soft noise of assent, and then he knocked his knee against Emil’s. “You’re not staying in that house, are you?”

Emil couldn’t help a small laugh, shaking his head as he focused on the single point where they were still touching. It was...strange. A good strange, but he had no real idea what to do with the flutter in his chest. “God, no. I’m staying elsewhere.”

“A good elsewhere?”

“Are you looking for an invite?”

Renzo shrugged. “More like you seem like you could use the company.”

“Do I?” It was meant to be a little mean, but Emil’s words sounded soft and wounded. Fuck.

“I wasn’t trying to insult you. I saw you earlier, and...I don’t know. I kind of wanted to come say hi, but it didn’t seem like the right time.”

Emil forced his shoulders to relax, and he looked over at Renzo. He really was so goddamn beautiful. “And now does?” He cracked a smile so Renzo wouldn’t think he was still on the defense.

Renzo laughed very softly, the sound barely audible over the crackling flames. “Maybe not? People don’t burn effigies unless they’re trying to erase some part of their past. Ask me how I know.”

“How do you know?” When Emil looked over, the man was wearing the softest smile.

“My ex didn’t leave a lot behind, but he left enough for a tiny little fire pit in the backyard. Our divorce was the best kind though, so I can’t complain.”

“What kind of divorce is *that*?”

Renzo’s grin widened, though Emil could see something darker flickering in his eyes. “Quick and dirty. He was glad to be rid of the marriage, and so was I. I think he’s now holding hope I’ll quit my job so we don’t have to risk running into each other.”

Emil sucked in air through his teeth. “Oh, shit. You have to work together?”

“Different departments,” Renzo said. “We don’t see each other a lot, but he’s...charming. He’s very charming. People like him. And when he says I was the one who caused all of our issues, people believe him.”

“I don’t. He sounds like a complete and utter piece of shit.”

Renzo made a choking noise, then turned and lifted a brow. “I could be a liar, you know. I could be one of those narcissists that tells everyone their ex was some monster.”

“You could be, but narcissists don’t usually tell on themselves like that,” Emil pointed out.

“Sounds like you’ve known a few.”

“They’re common where I’m from.” It was the most Emil was willing to offer. Renzo was a stranger and would likely remain a stranger. It was Emil’s one and only chance to be someone else, undefined by the man he’d turned into after leaving his mother’s care. “You don’t seem like you fit the bill.”

“I could be clever,” Renzo pointed out.

Emil laughed and shrugged. “You could be.”

Silence settled over them, and Renzo stretched out his legs, breaking the soft contact between them, and Emil hated it. “I’d like to ask you a question, but I don’t want you to hate me.”

Emil lifted his brows and turned to face him a little better. In the light of the fire, he was almost overwhelmed with the way it struck Renzo, the way it highlighted his form. He was thin, his sharp cheekbones almost gaunt in the flickering orange glow, and he had dimples. His hair was dark and cut short, and he looked like he could be very young except for the tiny wrinkles just at the edge of his hairline.

“I’d prefer you tell me to fuck off instead of giving me the silent treatment,” Renzo said.

Emil flushed. “Sorry. I’m not used to people waiting for permission. You can ask me anything. I doubt I’d hate you.”

Renzo hummed uncertainly, then took a breath. “Why the fuck don’t you have a proper winter coat?”

It was the last question in the world he was expecting Renzo to ask, and for whatever reason, he burst into laughter. But it didn’t last long. Something in him snapped—like a coiled rope snapping, and the next thing he knew, he was sobbing into his hands. He was desperate to stop, but he couldn’t remember the last time he’d cracked.

Decades of repressed pain, joy, sadness, grief, and malcontent came pouring forward, and he was helpless to do anything except curl into himself and hope that in the waves of shame he was feeling, Renzo would leave. Being abandoned would be better than facing his gaze when the moment passed.

But, of course, Emil had never been particularly lucky. A warm hand touched his back, hesitant at first, then more firm when it was clear Emil wasn't going to shake him off. Renzo rubbed up and down his spine, then eventually curled fingers around the back of his neck and tugged until Emil was resting his forehead against Renzo's side.

"Been there too," Renzo whispered when Emil had quieted to hiccups.

"The divorce?" Emil asked. His voice was thick, and it almost hurt to speak, but he couldn't handle silence.

"Yep. Also when my parents died."

"Did they die at the same time?" Emil asked. He wanted to lift his head, but he couldn't. Not yet. He tried to surreptitiously wipe his face, but the way Renzo moved to give him room told him he was crap at being subtle.

"No. But it was close enough that I had barely stopped crying for my dad before my mom went. It's been years, but yeah. I remember it. I'm pretty sure I did the same thing you were doing—minus burning their clothes. But there was a bonfire, and I was about two hundred yards from where we're sitting."

"Was it as humiliating as all this?" Emil asked.

Renzo laughed very softly and rubbed a gentle touch over the back of Emil's neck, making warmth shoot through his limbs. "Yeah, but I was with my sister and my brother, and they've already seen me at my worst. For what it's worth though, I don't think less of you."

Emil nodded, then finally lifted his face. "I probably look a mess."

"I know at least half a dozen guys who'd sell their soul for their good days to be your messy ones." Renzo smiled and lifted his hand, brushing his thumb over Emil's cheeks. The touch was painfully tender and far too unexpected.

Emil flinched.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Renzo told him, and for whatever reason—foolish as it was—Emil believed him.

Emil’s breath trembled on his exhale. “What is a person supposed to say after they’ve broken down in front of a stranger and thoroughly embarrassed themselves?”

“Well, embarrassment usually calls for wine,” Renzo said. “And better conversation than this one.”

The temptation was powerful, but he didn’t want to give in. He wanted to prove to himself he could be stronger than all this. “I’m a few weeks sober.” He didn’t fully meet Renzo’s gaze when he admitted that.

Renzo rolled his eyes up toward the stars. “Shit. I’m so sorry.”

Emil laughed and nudged him gently, the gesture braver than he thought he could be. “I’m not offended. It’s not like I was wearing a sign.”

Their gazes connected again. “I have tea. Chamomile since it’s late and caffeine is probably the worst idea for you. I also think I have a mint somewhere. Also, my house is warm, and you’re clearly not. You *seriously* need a better jacket.”

“Why are you so worried about me being cold?” Emil asked as he shifted back.

Renzo stood, offering his hand, and when Renzo took it, he was hoisted to his feet. He let out a surprised sound when Renzo didn’t let him go but instead brushed the tips of his fingers against Emil’s palm. “You have very pretty skin. I’d hate to see frostbite ruin it.”

Before Emil could respond, Renzo let go and turned, jerking his head toward the house before striding off. For a moment, Emil considered running. It was a good time to go. The one thing he hadn’t wanted when he moved was to complicate his life by getting involved with someone. He wasn’t a good person yet, and he couldn’t impose the shards of the man he wanted to be on some poor, unsuspecting person who deserved better.

He could leave it at the bizarre interaction and never, ever see this man again.

But the words all died on his tongue, tasting of ash. He tried to shake his head, but he found himself putting one foot in front of the other, breaking all his rules to follow Renzo inside.

CHAPTER SIX

WHAT ARE YOU DOING? What are you doing, Renzo thought to himself on repeat as he listened to Emil follow behind him. They lived in the middle of nowhere. This was *literally* how people made it onto serial killer websites. But there was something about Emil that Renzo couldn't shake.

Something more than just his vulnerability that had triggered Renzo's need to take care of him. Emil was clearly lost and definitely in pain, but he was also searching, and Renzo understood that in ways most people probably couldn't.

Reaching for the door, Renzo looked over his shoulder, waiting for Emil to climb the steps. He really was a beautiful man. Not usually Renzo's type, if he was being honest. His hair was a rich brown, and his skin was the sort of pasty that came from genetics that stretched back to European people who sprung to life from ice and snow.

But there was something about him that Renzo couldn't stop staring at, though he couldn't put his finger on it.

"So. This is your place," Emil said awkwardly, shoving his hands in his pockets. The walk from the fire pit to his place was short—relatively—but he knew Emil had to be chilled down to his bones.

"It's actually my sister's. I'm kind of house-and-brother sitting while she's away. She takes a vacation every year right before Christmas," Renzo explained. Which was also probably not a smart thing to do—telling a stranger when his sister wasn't going to be around.

Matty was strong, and he was actually very well skilled in self-defense, but he also froze when things got scary. And Renzo was hardly a fighter. His abs were deceptively cut and had no bearing on whether or not he could throw a punch.

Which he couldn't.

“Uh. Don't commit crimes over here while she's away,” Renzo said.

Emil laughed quietly as Renzo shut the door, and he gave a little shudder before wrapping his arms around his waist. “Do I seem the type?”

“I don't actually know what type you are. Yet.” Renzo had avoided profiling people like the plague. He'd learned far too much from his ex, and it made him sick to his stomach to do it. “I'll figure you out eventually, but for now...?”

“Honor amongst thieves. So to speak,” Emil said, and there was a little twinkle in his eye that made Renzo's heart thunder.

“I feel super secure now,” Renzo said, then winked in spite of his nerves, then led Emil into the kitchen and gestured to the breakfast bar. “Sit. My sister has a very fancy Japanese water heater that's always full and always hot.”

“I used to have something like that in my office,” Emil mused.

Renzo could feel the man tracking him, and he was suddenly too aware of how clunky his body moved. “That's cool. Where do you work?”

“Nowhere at the moment. I had a midlife crisis and burned everything to the ground.”

“Hm.” Renzo grinned over his shoulder. “Arsonist.”

“Just emotionally,” Emil defended. “You saw how bad I was with actual fire.”

“Fair.” Renzo plopped two bags of mint in two mugs since the chamomile box was empty. “Am I sorry to hear it? Are you going to try to tell me you're in financial distress, because you drive a *Bugatti*, man.”

“Car fan?”

“No, but even a peasant like me can see how sexy it is.” He shoved the first mug under the spout and filled it, then did the second before turning around. He caught a glimpse of something on Emil’s face—something like pain—before it was gone. Christ, he was being rude. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I have a terrible case of foot-in-mouth syndrome, and it flares up at the worst times.”

Emil laughed very softly—the sound almost a whisper—and he took the mug from Renzo. “I have a friend like that. Well, acquaintance. He’s dating my friend. It’s not important.”

Renzo would have bet everything he owned that wasn’t true. Something told him Emil’s friends were the only important things in his life. “Well, anyway, am I sorry about the job?”

“God, no.” Emil sipped his tea, then held the mug between his hands like he was warming those long, long fingers with it. “My job was terrible. It was like all the worst parts of me rolled into one corporate title.”

“Then I’m glad it burned down.”

Emil hummed in agreement, staring down into his cup. “It’s the strangest feeling—loving and hating big change. It’s terrifying.”

“I get that. When my parents died, my whole world shifted. They were kind of the center, you know? My sister and I went off to do our thing, and then we’d just sort of orbit this place. Then suddenly, they’re gone, and all this super-grown-up responsibility became ours.”

Emil tilted his head to the side. “You’re not a child, are you?”

Renzo almost choked on his tea. “What? Do I look like a child?”

“I’ve been fooled before,” Emil told him with a small sniff. “You have a couple wrinkles by your forehead, but that’s it. I couldn’t tell.”

With a faint flush, Renzo met his gaze. “I guess I can take that as a compliment. I’m in my forties.”

Emil blinked in surprise. “Your language is...you sound... young,” he finished weakly.

“That’s because I’m surrounded by teenagers all day,” Renzo said with a faint blush. “Their slang creeps into my vocabulary. But as someone who has crossed the threshold of forty, I feel pretty qualified to say I’m not a child.”

Emil laughed again, and Renzo realized he was quickly becoming addicted to the sound. “I’ll forgive you. And I know I shouldn’t be complaining about adult responsibility at this age. I mean, I was married, so that was a damn big grown-up thing to do. I just...never wanted all of this.” He waved his hand around the room. “I wanted to be a tourist in their lives.”

Renzo felt immediately guilty after those words slipped out. Hell, he wasn’t even sure why he said them. They were things from the darkest parts of him that he never wanted to say aloud because he loved his family. He loved that he could be there for the people who were left behind.

But there were moments it felt like too much.

“Renzo?”

He looked up and smiled. “I really like the way you say my name. You sort of...there’s a little accent, isn’t there?”

Emil glanced away, his eyes a little shifty. “Would it be okay if we didn’t talk about it?”

“One hundred percent.” Renzo picked up his tea and took a sip. It was still boiling hot, but it had cooled just enough to keep from searing the roof of his mouth. “I don’t know how people drink this all the time.”

“Leaf water?” Emil asked with the smallest grin.

Renzo laughed. “I’ll take my hot, soggy bean water any day. It’s how I survive at work.”

“It was that way for me too. I had a lot of vices, and none of them were good. But I’m trying new things.”

Renzo leaned on the counter and watched Emil's fingers play with his mug, trying and failing not to imagine what they'd feel like on his body. "Like what?"

Emil hummed. "Going to lunch with a friend instead of sitting around drinking all day. I know that sounds ridiculous, but..."

"No," Renzo said quickly. "It doesn't. I've always been kind of a loner, so I get it."

"You?" Emil blurted.

Renzo waved his hand up and down his body. "I know, right?" he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Imagine people thinking all of this was awkward and weird." He dropped his hand to the counter and grinned. "Seriously, I'm a huge dweeb, and I always have been. I had this weird glow-up that makes zero sense, but trust me when I say the moment people get to know me, they're not interested in hanging out for very long."

Emil sized him up, then dragged his tongue over his lower lip, and Renzo didn't need to be socially aware to know what he was doing. "We've been talking for a while, and the longer I know you, the more I like what I see."

If Matty had been home, Renzo would have backed off. He would have shut it down sweetly and politely, but this felt almost like kismet. Matty was on his once-a-month sleepover with friends from his summer camp, and Renzo had the entire night and most of the next day to himself.

He could think of far worse ways to spend his time than seeing if the absurdly hot, tragic mess of a man burning his mother's old things wanted to spend the night.

"I like you too," he finally said.

Emil's smile turned a little sharp, and he waved his hand up and down his body like Renzo had done. "All of this?"

Renzo laughed. "Yeah. All of that. And I have a really, really nice bed here if you want to come test it out."

It was the first time he'd seen Emil really hesitate, except for when he'd asked him to come over for tea, but it didn't last long. Emil lifted his chin, then pushed away from the counter and walked around it. He seemed even taller as he placed a hand on either side of Renzo's body, pinning him to the counter.

"Are you certain?"

"Are you a serial killer who's going to sex me up and then bury me in the yard?" Renzo asked.

Emil huffed a laugh through his nose, shaking his head as he tipped his head down. "No. I'm just...lonely."

Jesus *Christ*, this guy. Renzo carefully lifted his hands and placed them against Emil's waist, squeezing gently. Emil's eyes fluttered closed in the way people did when they had been starved of touch for far too long.

God, Renzo wanted to spoil this man.

He pushed up onto his toes, moving one hand to Emil's jaw, cupping his cheek. "I know we didn't really have the queer talk, but have you been with a guy before?"

Emil nodded. "Mm. I have. It's been quite some time, but it's like riding a bike, right?"

"I hope riding my dick is going to be a lot more fun than riding a bike," Renzo said.

Emil blinked, then laughed, but the sound was cut short as he ducked his head and took Renzo in a kiss. It was awkward and sloppy with mismatched rhythm and a little too much desperation, but Renzo didn't care. Emil tasted like mint and something a little sweet, and his chin trembled when their lips touched, which made Renzo never want to stop.

He gentled Emil's ferocity, petting his hands over the man's larger chest, then curling fingers into his hair to guide him in an easier rhythm. Emil was a fast learner, and it didn't take him long to calm down. His trembling breaths turned into soft sighs, and Renzo knew he was going to lose himself if he wasn't careful.

“Bed,” Renzo whispered. “Head up the stairs, second door on the right. I’m going to grab my stuff from the bathroom down here.”

“Stuff,” Emil echoed, nipping at his lips like he didn’t want to stop kissing.

Renzo pulled Emil’s head to the side by his hair and sank his teeth lightly into the spot where his pulse was hammering against his skin. “Lube. Condoms. Maybe a toy if you’re lucky.”

Emil groaned, the sound delicious and low, rumbling between them. Renzo kissed him one last time before pushing Emil back, and they both took a minute to collect themselves. Renzo’s dick was rock-hard and pressing against the zipper of his jeans, and he could see Emil’s thick cock tenting his pants.

Yes, tonight was going to be a very, very good night.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Renzo: Have a sort of stranger over tonight for a one-night stand thing. Tell them to look into the son of my dead neighbor if my body turns up in the river.

HE HIT SEND, firing the text off to Oliver because the only other person he might have texted was his sister, and Camilla would eviscerate him if she knew he'd brought a stranger into the house. Guilt would have eaten at him if he wasn't so goddamn horny for the tall Norse god undressing in his bedroom, and it was easy to ignore the few tendrils of shame that escaped the little prison he tried to shove them into.

He had his toiletries bag in the downstairs bathroom, and it took him less than thirty seconds to have condoms, lube, and a small bullet vibe in his hand. He forced himself to take a beat, then a piss, before he finally headed for the stairs. He listened carefully, but Emil wasn't making a sound.

Shit, he really hoped he wasn't a crazed killer.

Hitting the landing, Renzo found his feet dragging, so he forced himself forward, then came to a stop in his open doorway. Emil had clearly found the ancient floor lamp that his mother had bought him from a random trip to Walmart back in the late nineties, and he'd turned the dial. The room was flooded with a soft yellow glow, and it made Emil look almost ethereal.

He hadn't undressed completely, but he'd lost the suit jacket, and his white button-up was hanging open, his pants

unbuckled and the fly down. Renzo's gaze traced a trail of thick, very blond hair from his chest to his groin, and his dick got even harder.

"I'm hoping that means you like what you see," Emil said, far too shy and uncertain for a man who looked that good.

Renzo nodded slowly, closing the door behind him with deliberate purpose. He watched Emil watch him, mesmerized by the starved look in Emil's brightly colored eyes. He felt like he could get drunk on the way Emil tracked him as his hand lifted to his shirt and gently brushed the back against the hem.

"And you like all of this?" Renzo shot back, laying his palm on his own stomach.

"Yes. Yes, I do." Emil said, his words trembling as Renzo exposed his chest. He lifted a hand like he wanted to touch, but he was still too far away, so Renzo began to close the distance between them as he finally tossed everything in his hands onto the bed, then took off his shirt and threw it into the corner of the room. When his torso was exposed, he went for the button on his jeans.

He dragged the zipper down and spread the fly open in a wide v just as Emil was close enough to lay a hand on him, and he watched as the other man traced a touch around the line in his hips.

"Beautiful," Emil whispered.

Renzo flushed from head to toe. He was not used to being looked at like this, and he couldn't remember the last time anyone had called him beautiful without the word dripping in sarcasm. His ex liked to use it as a weapon—anytime Renzo thought he looked good, John would make sure the feeling was short-lived.

But Emil's breathing was hitched, and he was touching him with an actual reverence that was just short of terrifying. Renzo carefully cupped his jaw and tipped his gaze up. "I really like your body." His other hand traced over his chest hair—something Renzo had never been able to grow. It came in sparse and patchy, so he always waxed it.

“Thank you,” Emil said, then bit his lip like he was unsure how to take the compliment.

Renzo was so helpless against his strange charm he couldn't do anything other than kiss that answer from his lips. Emil kissed him differently this time—better. He kissed like a man who had done this more than once and had prided himself on his skill. His tongue danced perfectly along Renzo's, his teeth nipping gently as he broke into a series of soft pecks, and just when Renzo thought it was over, Emil deepened it again.

His head started to spin with need, all the blood rushing to his dick as he rocked forward. Emil grunted when Renzo brushed his erection against the cut of his hip, and he wrenched back, looking down between them.

“Are you okay? If this is too much for you...”

“I just haven't done this in a while,” Emil admitted. “And this feels a little...” He trailed off, then laughed and shook his head. “It feels like a lot.”

“How long has it been?” Renzo asked.

Emil swallowed heavily. “Well, life got very complicated last year, and...yeah. I just couldn't bring myself to sleep with anyone.” He stopped and shook his head. “But even before that, it never felt like this.”

Renzo was afraid to read too much into what that meant, but only because he felt it too. He hadn't had more than a few random hookups off Grindr since his divorce. Dating was difficult because his schedule was a pain in the ass, and he wasn't sure he was ever going to be ready to bring anyone else around his family.

John had been charming with them, until he wasn't. Until Renzo had a ring on his finger and a legal commitment. Then, he'd turned into a complete asshole and had done everything in his power to keep Renzo away from Matty and Camilla.

When that didn't work, John changed tactics and spent his time torturing Matty, and the moment Renzo started putting his foot down, that's when John stepped out and Renzo left.

No one was sorry to see him go, and Renzo knew on some level his sister blamed him for being naïve enough to get himself involved with a man like that. And she felt like he was too weak to break it off before people were hurt.

Hell, he blamed himself, even if his therapist had finally gotten through to him that even the smartest people in the world still found themselves vulnerable to men like his ex.

But he'd shut himself off after John, so he never expected to feel like this.

Ever.

With anyone.

And he hadn't wanted to.

"Are you okay?" Emil asked softly.

Renzo looked up at the question and saw concern dancing in Emil's eyes. It was startling because it was genuine, and he wasn't used to that. "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine. You're shaking."

Renzo swallowed thickly, realizing that Emil was telling the truth. There was a fine tremor running through his body, ending in his fingertips. He shook them out, then grabbed Emil by the waist to keep himself steady. He ignored the way that made him feel safe.

"I haven't done this much since my divorce," he admitted, "and the two other guys I hooked up with..." He trailed off and bit his lip. "I didn't bring them home. And I didn't know their names."

Emil reached up and ghosted the lightest touch over his cheeks before cradling his face. "You deserved better than that."

"Trust me when I say it was on purpose. I don't do this."

"So why me?"

"That's the question of the hour," Renzo admitted in a shattered whisper.

Emil didn't let go, but he did take a step back. "Do you want me to leave?"

"I think I might die if you do," Renzo told him. His voice felt thick, and he knew that if they didn't get on to business, he was going to lose his nerve. Or he'd end up doing something absurd like asking Emil to stay the night and just hold him. "Kiss me again. And touch me."

Emil snapped into action. He kissed Renzo harder, deeper, backing him up toward the bed as his hand slipped down the front of his boxers. Renzo's dick jumped and spurted precome from the tip as warm, long fingers curled around him and gave him an almost vicious stroke—just shy of too hard.

"Like that?" Emil asked through clenched teeth like he was forcing himself to hold back.

"Mm. More," Renzo begged. He didn't want it to be soft. He couldn't handle soft. "Please, please..."

"Your voice is so damn pretty," Emil said, and he traced a line from Renzo's chin down the front of his throat.

Renzo let out a soft whine as Emil began to jack him, but as his desire ramped up almost to the point of no return, Emil's hand was suddenly gone. Renzo let out a gasp, his hips fucking forward, and Emil caught him by the waist to steady him.

"What the fuck?" Renzo demanded.

Emil smiled down at him. "You promised I was going to get to ride your dick like a cowboy."

Renzo blinked, then burst into laughter even as he grabbed Emil by the elbows, spun him, then threw him on the bed. "You really want to ride my dick?"

"Did I not seem interested?" Emil asked with big eyes as he pushed up on his elbows and spread his legs.

Renzo swallowed hungrily as he gave in to the urge to cup Emil's massive erection. It was hot against his palm, even through the fabric of his slacks. "You did, but I assumed..."

"That I'd be a strict top?"

Renzo shrugged. "I've met a few. Most of them looked a lot like you."

"I like it both ways. And from what I had in my hand, I'd really like to feel that inside me," Emil told him without a hint of hesitation or shame.

Fuck, Renzo had misjudged him. In the back of his mind, he really had assumed Emil was a very rich, very closeted man who only indulged in his desires when it was safe and secret. But it was obvious he was wrong.

Emil tugged and pulled until Renzo was straddling his thighs, then dragged the tips of his fingers over Renzo's hips, along the waistband of his jeans. "I can't get over how hot you are. When you were out there chopping wood, I thought I was going to lose my mind."

Renzo groaned and leaned in, taking his mouth in a kiss. "Yeah? Like that lumberjack look?"

"On you," Emil said.

Renzo closed his eyes and took a long, steadying breath. "I'm gonna suck your dick, okay?"

Emil inhaled sharply, then nodded, almost frantic and wild. "Yes."

"I'm gonna make you come, then I'm going to fuck your ass so hard you see stars."

"Christ, C-Christ," Emil stuttered. "I need it. Please, gorgeous. Don't make me beg."

Renzo was losing his mind with the power Emil had put in his hands. Dragging his palm down his face, Renzo shifted off and dropped his jeans and boxers, kicking them to the side and holding his dick. Emil's gaze was on him, intense and unrelenting, and Renzo stroked himself as he watched a ruddy flush creep from Emil's chest to his neck.

"Get naked for me," Renzo murmured.

Emil did. His limbs were loose and fluid, his movement like a dance as he peeled away the fabric of his slacks and silky boxers. He tucked them neatly against the edge of the

bed, then swung his legs over when Renzo crooked a finger at him.

“You obey orders really well,” Renzo said.

Emil’s flush deepened. “Didn’t realize I could.”

“Not used to it?” Renzo asked with a grin. He stalked forward, then tipped Emil’s chin up and kissed him. “Prefer being bossy?”

“I’m usually the boss,” Emil said. He sucked in another breath when Renzo dropped to his knees and used the heels of his hands to press Emil’s knees wider. His dick was uncut, long and thinner than his own, and darkly flushed. It bobbed gently, curved upward, and Renzo’s mouth watered. “Like what you see?” Emil asked, sounding more shy than bold.

Renzo grinned and leaned forward, dragging his nose up the length of it. He smelled musky, the skin searing hot, and he wanted to taste so badly. “Grab me a condom.”

Emil’s hand groped behind him for all the stuff Renzo had brought from downstairs, and after a second, the sharp edges of a condom wrapper were pressed into Renzo’s hand. Emil cupped his cheek and dragged a thumb over Renzo’s lower lip. “You sure?”

“Why are you worried?” Renzo asked as he tore the wrapper with his teeth. He tasted a bit of the latex and grimaced, but luckily, they weren’t lubed.

Emil stared down at him, shrugging. “A lot of men I’ve been with didn’t like it. They found it...” He trailed off like he couldn’t find the words. “I don’t want you to do something you don’t want just to make me feel good.”

Renzo just laughed and leaned in, kissing up his thigh until he reached Emil’s balls. They were a little on the small side, but they hung low and warm. He licked a stripe up the sac, making Emil moan so loudly the sound filled the room. “God, sweetheart, you’ve been fucking all the wrong men.” He took Emil’s dick and carefully stroked him until the foreskin rolled down and the head was fully exposed. Holding him by the

base, Renzo carefully rolled the condom on and then pinched the tip.

He would have given damn near anything to be able to taste him without the barrier between them, but after three STI scares from his ex, he wasn't taking the risk. And he was pretty goddamn sure Emil was going to enjoy himself either way.

The man seemed seconds from shooting off. He was wound up so tight Renzo had a feeling Emil was going to lose control of his whole body when he let go. And God, Renzo didn't know what he'd done to deserve being there to see it.

"Touch me," Emil said, drawing Renzo out of his thoughts.

Renzo took a breath, then directed Emil's cock to his lips. He pressed a soft kiss to the tip, then opened wide and let it slide along his tongue. It had been a while since he'd done this, and the sensation was both alien and familiar all at the same time. His mouth immediately watered, making everything even more slick, and he groaned loudly when Emil's fingers found their way into Renzo's hair.

"Oh my God," Emil all but sobbed. "Oh my God."

Exactly as Renzo predicted. Emil was trembling like he was frozen, his body tense like he was trying his best to keep from fucking into Renzo's throat, and that just wouldn't do. Renzo pulled away with a soft pop, and Emil cried out in protest.

"Shh, baby. Shh," Renzo soothed, kissing his inner thigh before looking up. "I'm not stopping."

Emil looked at him with wide, watery eyes. "I want to come."

Renzo almost laughed. "I know. I want you to come. And I want you to fuck my mouth, okay?"

Emil looked a little nervous. "I don't want to hurt you."

Renzo's smile softened, and his whole chest went warm. "You're not going to hurt me. I promise. Just let go, okay? Let go."

Emil's lips tightened into a thin line, but he still nodded, then whined and gave a sharp tug on Renzo's hair. With a laugh, Renzo nodded, then leaned back in and kissed his way up Emil's shaft before opening up again.

Only this time, Renzo didn't swallow him down. He fit his lips around the head of Emil's cock and then sat there.

Waiting.

It only took Emil a few seconds to get the message, and with a very careful roll of his hips, he thrust forward.

Renzo made a noise of satisfaction as the cock hit the back of his throat. He gagged a little, his eyes filling with tears, but he breathed through his nose and relaxed his throat on the next pass. He could feel Emil's tension rising, and he groped between his legs until he was cradling his balls in the palm of his hand.

"Oh. Oh God," Emil said, broken. Shattered. "More, more. Please..."

Renzo grazed a touch between his legs to his hole, which twitched under the pads of his fingers, and Emil let out a desperate sound before he trembled once, thrust forward hard, and then came. His dick thickened, pulsing, and Renzo felt the warm spurts gathered in the tip of the latex, which was resting at the back of his tongue.

Emil collapsed backward, and Renzo carefully slid off, kissing Emil over his lower stomach, then all the way up his chest. His softening cock was pressed between them as Renzo rolled his hips, gathering his own friction against Emil's soft thigh as he pressed his thumb against the man's chin and parted his lips for a kiss.

"More," Emil whispered again.

"Kissing?"

Emil's eyes opened a fraction, and his pupils were blown so wide there was almost no color left. "Fuck me. If you still want that."

Renzo bowed his head, knocking their foreheads together. “Yeah. Yeah, I want that.” He groped to the right for the lube and finally pushed himself up to sit over Emil’s thighs. He wanted to see the man ride him, but it was obvious he wouldn’t be able to hold himself up.

Not now, and definitely not after Renzo was done prepping him.

“Pull your legs up, gorgeous,” Renzo said, easing backward off Emil’s thighs. “I wanna see you.”

Emil flushed a bright, dusky pink like someone had painted a stripe across his cheeks, but he obeyed. He hooked weak arms under his knees and pulled his legs up, exposing himself completely. Renzo moaned, unable to stop staring, brushing his fingers over the hole again.

“You’re so beautiful,” Renzo couldn’t help but say. “Seriously. I can’t believe you don’t have people lined up around the block waiting to worship you.”

Emil said nothing, his eyes closed, and Renzo could tell he was overwhelmed.

Opening the lube with his teeth, Renzo drenched two fingers, then circled them over Emil’s hole. It twitched again, so Renzo pushed inside, just to the first knuckle, then held them there as Emil began to relax.

“Have you ever used a vibrator?” Renzo asked.

Emil peered one eye open and swallowed heavily. “No. Never.”

“Can I try it on you? I won’t go inside, but it might get a little overwhelming.”

Emil looked completely uncertain, but he nodded anyway. “Alright.”

“If it’s too much, just say stop,” Renzo warned. He used his free hand to pick up the little bullet, and he rubbed his thumb over the flat end before feeling for the button. It was a simple little thing, shaped almost like a lipstick, and he loved using it when he jerked off. It had a gorgeous pulsing vibration

that got him exactly where he needed to be when he pressed it against his taint, and he wanted to see exactly how Emil would respond.

The man seemed to melt at the lightest touch, so Renzo didn't think he'd be able to stand it for long. The button clicked under the lightest touch, and the vibration started against his palm. It was a barely there little pulse, but he was pretty sure that would be enough. Not taking his eyes off Emil's face, he made his way by feel, lifting his balls and then pressing the bullet to his flush-warm skin.

Emil's entire body twitched, and his breath left his lungs like it had been stolen from him. A second later, he inhaled, and on the edge of that, he let out a heavy whine, his hips starting to move. "*Shit,*" he gasped.

"Too much?"

Emil looked at him, his eyes glazed and heavy-lidded. "I-I don't know."

Renzo fought back a laugh as he began to gently fuck his fingers in and out of Emil's slick hole. The sound was obscene and erotic, and Renzo felt his cock throbbing with the beat of his pulse, harder than he'd ever been in his life. He'd never had a man like this.

He'd never had the pleasure of spreading someone out beneath him and taking them apart with a few simple touches. Fuck, Emil must be so starved. He looked at his face again, and something struck him.

Leaning in, he pressed the softest kiss right under his left nipple and whispered, "You are so fucking beautiful."

Emil's eyes rolled back in his head, his neck arching. "Fuck. Fuuuuck." His ass spasmed around Renzo's fingers, and he looked down to see Emil's spent cock wet at the tip again.

"Holy shit, did you just—"

"I think so," Emil sobbed. He pushed up on his elbows, knocking Renzo back a little. "Too much."

Renzo immediately tossed the vibe to the edge of the bed and watched as Emil's shoulders relaxed. "I'm so sorry."

Shaking his head, Emil dropped back down again, and he brought Renzo with him. He pulled him up—up and up so he had to remove his fingers—and then Emil kissed him long, and hot, and sloppy.

"Please don't be sorry. Just fuck me. I need to feel you."

Renzo sure as shit wasn't going to make this man beg again. Not when it was obvious he'd been tragically neglected for most—if not all—of his life. Fumbling around, he found the condom box and quickly pulled out another one. He was grateful to be so well practiced because he had the thing open and rolled on his dick, the head pressing against Emil's tight hole, in seconds, and he trembled with the effort to keep himself under control.

"Am I too much?" Emil whispered.

Renzo closed his eyes, the question almost painful to hear. He shook his head, then lowered down and smudged soft, feathery kisses along Emil's jaw. "You're perfect. You're so perfect, and I want to tear apart the people who made you feel like you weren't."

Emil's laugh was half-shattered, and he grunted when Renzo thrust forward, pushing inside him an inch. "I," he managed, then cleared his throat. "I'm not perfect. Trust me. I'm—"

Renzo cut him off with another thrust, and then another, silencing him until he was sheathed completely. Emil spasmed around him, his muscles struggling against the intrusion, but Emil definitely didn't look like he minded. His face was wild with ecstasy, his eyes closed, his mouth open.

Renzo changed the angle a few times on each thrust until he found the one that made Emil groan, an almost animal sound. "Yeah. Like that, gorgeous. Just like that."

Emil sobbed again as he clenched around Renzo and began to move his hips in tandem. Renzo felt like he was losing himself in the heat of his lover. He felt a sudden wave of

panic, afraid for this to end because he knew this wasn't a forever thing.

It was just a moment—a single night where two men who seemed a little lost found each other.

And that was almost unbearable.

“Kiss me,” Emil begged.

Renzo lifted one hand from the mattress and dug it into Emil's hair, angling his head so he could take his mouth. The kiss was messy and wrong yet somehow perfect in all the ways Renzo needed it to be. They did little more than tangle tongues and breathe heavily, but it was enough.

At least, it was enough to drag Renzo over the edge. His hips slammed up, shoving his dick as deep as it could go. He took a breath, and then on the exhale, he came. A sharp cry tore from his throat, and he buried it against the side of Emil's neck, his whole body shaking as his dick pulsed and pulsed.

Emil wrapped tight arms around him, holding him like he was afraid Renzo might disappear, murmuring soft, comforting nothings as Renzo trembled apart.

There was so much sweat between them, and sour breath, but Renzo didn't want to move. Emil was petting him softly, the tips of his fingers tracing lines up and down his spine, and Renzo had never felt more wanted in his life.

“Did I hurt you?” he managed to ask once he'd regained some sense of self.

Emil laughed. “Yes. And it felt amazing.”

Renzo pulled back to study his face, and he saw nothing but cautious joy in Emil's eyes. “I didn't mean to—”

His words cut off when Emil pressed a palm to his cheek. “It felt *amazing*,” he repeated.

Renzo allowed a smile as he carefully pulled back, watching the wince on Emil's face. There was a mess of lube between them, and Renzo's stomach was covered in Emil's come. It was disgusting and glorious all at the same time.

“I’m going to get something to clean up with,” Renzo said after a long beat, then swung his legs over the bed, freezing when Emil grabbed his wrist.

“You’re not going to run out on me, are you?”

Renzo laughed. “This is my house, gorgeous. Where would I go?”

“Oh.” Emil flushed and looked away. “Right. Sorry.”

Renzo couldn’t help but lean over and lay a kiss over his blushing cheek. “Hang tight, okay? No one’s leaving right now.”

Or ever, if Renzo was reckless and maybe the world’s biggest fool. He’d already done it once—jumped in with both feet without even looking where he was going to land. And that ended in a terrible marriage and messy divorce.

He wasn’t going to do it again.

Once upon a time, he thought John felt different, so even though Emil sent a wild kaleidoscope of butterflies through his gut, he couldn’t trust it. He couldn’t trust himself. And he was in no place to date someone who was obviously still figuring out what he needed. Not when Renzo was still a complete emotional mess.

But he could do this.

He could clean him up and take care of him. He could ask him to stay the night and maybe fuck him in the morning before reality had to set in.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IN ALL HONESTY, Emil couldn't believe he'd agreed to stay. He blamed it on temporary, sex-induced insanity, though he knew that was a total cop-out and also completely unfair to the way Renzo made him feel. Because Emil had fucked before.

A lot.

His list of lovers was long, and though it wasn't exactly diverse, Renzo was far from his first man.

But Renzo was definitely the first person who had ever looked at Emil like he was worth something, and that scared the shit out of him. He sure as hell wasn't ready for that. He'd contemplated escaping while Renzo was in the bathroom just so he could deal with the strange, unnerving feelings by himself, but he couldn't seem to make his legs work.

Then, Renzo appeared with a warm washcloth covered in pearly soap, and he stared as those gorgeous hands cleaned him up. Renzo followed that up with long, slow kisses that never seemed to end but also didn't seem to want to go anywhere.

And fuck if Emil had any idea what to do with that either.

It was far too easy to let Renzo bustle him under the covers when they were fully clean and sated. It was too easy to burrow against him, lost in the scent of sweat and come as fingers combed through his hair. He got lost in the sensation of being held—of someone wanting to hold him—and before long, he was asleep.

He woke alone the next morning, knowing exactly where he was and unsurprised to find himself alone in the bed. He looked around for some note from Renzo saying that he had to leave, giving some flimsy excuse about how Emil could show himself out and that maybe they'd see each other in the future.

Instead, he just found a pile of sweats folded at the foot of the bed, and it didn't take a genius to know Renzo had left them for him. He debated about trying to sneak out again, but as he lifted the hoodie, he realized he could smell something cooking.

Christ, he had no idea when the last time someone had cooked for him was. At least someone who wasn't hired to feed him.

On autopilot, he took the clothes into the hallway bathroom, emptied his bladder, then dressed. The jogging pants were a little tight and short at the ankles, but the hoodie was oversized and so soft on the inside. Emil only ever wore clothes like that when he was visiting the gyms in resorts he was staying at, and it had been years since he'd bothered.

He stared at himself in the mirror—his red-rimmed eyes, cheeks creased from the pillow, his hair a mess—and he wanted to laugh. Renzo had called him gorgeous, which had meant everything in the moment, but now it felt like a mockery.

Objectively, he was good-looking, but there was no way Renzo hadn't seen all his flaws when he'd gotten close up. And not just the ones on his face. Emil's tongue had been too loose. He'd been too vulnerable—too pathetic.

He'd shown with his words and his body that he was starved for touch and affection like some kind of loser and...
Christ.

He needed to get out of there before he lost it. He didn't think he could take the look on Renzo's face that proved it had been one long pity fuck the night before. Not that Emil could blame him, considering the way Renzo had found him, but he was still a man with some semblance of pride, and he didn't want to sacrifice it all on a one-night stand.

He moved back into the bedroom and swiped his phone, wallet, and keys and decided to leave his suit behind. He had three dozen anyway, so what did it matter? He'd send some cash later for the wood he'd stolen and the sweats.

Tiptoeing down the stairs, Emil had the front door in sight when someone cleared their throat, and he jumped half a foot before looking over his shoulder.

“So, you accuse me of trying to sneak out and then pull this? What does being a massive hypocrite feel like?” Renzo asked.

Emil's voice felt trapped in his throat, and he had to unstick his tongue from the roof of his mouth to make a single sound. “I wasn't—”

“Yes, you were. And that's fine,” Renzo said. He looked sleepy and sweet, all ruffled from bed, wrapped in a T-shirt and very low-slung plaid pajama pants. Emil wanted to pin him to the wall and kiss him until neither of them could breathe. “But I also have food and coffee if you want to refuel before your great escape.”

Emil flushed. “I just...didn't want to be a burden.” Not a lie, just not the entire truth. He was pathetic, but not pathetic enough to tell Renzo what he was afraid of.

Renzo sighed and shook his head. “I feel like that's your motto, which sucks.” He held out his hand and made grabby fingers until Emil took it, and to his surprise, Renzo tugged him close and kissed his knuckles. “I have a lot to do today, and my brother's going to be home soon. He definitely can't find you here. But you can stay for breakfast and a blowjob if you want.”

Emil's flush deepened. “Ah. Uh. Is he gonna kick my ass?”

Renzo blinked, then burst into laughter as he tugged Emil toward the kitchen. “The only time I've ever seen Matty get violent against another person was when this asshole at a grocery store called our sister a bitch. I don't think he'd try to beat you up.”

“What would he do?” Emil asked as he sat at a barstool.

Renzo went back to the stove, then looked over his shoulder at Emil. “He’d probably ask you to stay.”

Panic rushed through Emil, and it must have shown on his face because Renzo laughed again.

“Exactly. But don’t worry, I don’t let my once-a-decade one-night stands meet the family.”

Emil almost choked on his own tongue. “Once a decade?” he asked, and he felt some measure of relief that his voice didn’t give away his jealousy. The very idea of anyone else touching Renzo made him want to put his fist through the wall.

Renzo grinned as he turned around with two mugs of steaming coffee in his hands. “Well... I haven’t had a lot of practice, but I’m considering starting a tradition.”

Emil bit his tongue so hard he tasted copper, and he swallowed back most of his honest words. “You’re going to leave men in ruin, Renzo.”

There was a heavy beat of silence, and then Renzo let out a rush of air. “You can’t just say that.”

“I want to say a lot more, but I’d sound like a creep,” Emil admitted.

Their gazes locked, and he could tell Renzo was feeling something similar to what he was. They were in the middle of a moment—standing at a crossroads—but they knew which way they were going to turn. What choice did they have?

They were star-crossed, not meant for happily ever afters.

The moment broke when Renzo turned his gaze, and Emil didn’t fight for him. He sat back and cradled his coffee between his hands as Renzo continued to cook whatever he had frying on the stove.

It turned out to be a sort of messy egg scramble—nothing like Emil would have ever put in his mouth if he was given the choice, but it smelled heavenly.

“So, I’m kind of a crap cook,” Renzo explained, flushing lightly. “I’m great at baking because it’s all, you know,

chemistry, which is my thing. But the one thing I can do is make breakfast.”

“Then I’m glad I’m here for you at your best,” Emil said.

Renzo pulled a face, then laughed as he pushed a plate over. “I also have a ton of hot sauce if it’s actually inedible.”

Staring down at the dubiously colored, scrambled mess, Emil poked his fork into it, then took a bite, and his eyes widened. It was...different, but it was good. It tasted like the only decent parts of his childhood, before his mom gave in to her anger and bitterness. Those memories were atrophied and foggy, but he felt suddenly overwhelmed by them.

He set his fork down and pushed the plate away. “I should actually go.”

Renzo walked around the counter to stop Emil before he could get up. “I know my food is disgusting—”

“No,” Emil said. His control slipped, and he cradled Renzo’s face, brushing thumbs over his stubbled cheeks. “It’s not the food.”

“Really,” Renzo said flatly.

“It’s not what you think. I’m a mess in more ways than I can begin to explain.”

Renzo let out a slow breath, then nodded, but he didn’t pull back. He leaned his cheek into Emil’s palm. “I mean, I kind of figured, considering I found you stealing my wood and lighting your dead mom’s stuff on fire.”

Emil closed his eyes, completely ashamed. “I’ll send you money for the wood.”

“No, gorgeous,” Renzo said, and Emil’s eyes opened against his will. “I don’t want money. I just want to know you’re going to be okay.”

Emil shrugged and dropped his hands to Renzo’s shoulders. “I want to be someone put together enough to take you up on breakfast and a morning blowjob, but last night was so much, and I think I need to...” He trailed off, lost.

“Process,” Renzo finished for him, and Emil nodded, sighing out a breath of relief that Renzo got it. “Trust me when I say I’m not exactly as calm and collected as I seem. I just... God help me, but I really like you. It sounds nuts, I know. I mean, we don’t even know each other, but...” He shrugged and didn’t finish his thought.

Emil wanted to hoard Renzo’s words in the empty space behind his heart. “I like you too, stranger.”

Renzo laughed sweetly. “I kind of figured.” He carefully stepped away, forcing Emil to drop his hands, but he didn’t leave his space completely. “Let’s exchange numbers.”

“Oh, I...” He was suddenly petrified. When he decided to leave his life behind, he’d told himself none of this. No relationships, no messy, complicated hookups. His job was to work on himself and become a man worthy of being loved. He wasn’t nearly there yet, but the idea of letting Renzo go was almost too much to bear.

“Please,” Renzo asked. “No promises, no strings. But I need more than this weird goodbye.”

It was in that moment Emil became profoundly aware he was helpless against anything Renzo asked. He could demand a ring and a wedding date, and Emil wasn’t sure he could say no. Luckily, a phone number wasn’t that. It was just a spark of hope for some kind of future, and maybe he needed that.

“Okay.”

Renzo sagged with relief, and when Emil pulled his phone out and opened his contacts, he snatched it from him and quickly typed in his info. “I’m going to leave this in your hands, okay?”

Emil’s brows shot up in surprise. “Why?”

“Because I think you need to take a little control right now. So text me when you’re ready. And remember, no strings, no expectations.”

Emil dropped his phone on the counter and then wrapped his arms around Renzo, kissing him helplessly and thoroughly

until neither of them could breathe. Renzo laughed against his mouth after a long beat, then pulled back to meet his gaze.

“You sure you don’t want a blowjob?”

Emil groaned and knocked their foreheads together. “I want a lot of things, but...”

“No,” Renzo interrupted, and Emil was glad he didn’t have to finish that sentence. “I get it. Just promise me you’ll take care. And buy a proper goddamn coat.”

Emil burst into laughter, then held on a little longer and a little tighter until reason told him if he didn’t let go, he never would.

Outside was freezing, but as Emil made his way past the burnt-out fire pit and his mother’s final home, he barely felt it. In fact, nothing settled in until he was miles down the road, and he realized there were tears on his cheeks.

CHAPTER NINE

“So. Do I have to talk about my childhood?”

Sarah stared at him with a small, patient smile from her comfy chair. It was nothing like the therapist offices from the movies, and Emil wasn't sure if he was disappointed or relieved to not be lying flat on his back, staring up at a ceiling while his therapist wrote on a clipboard.

“Do you think your childhood is the source of any of your problems?”

He couldn't help but laugh. “Yes, I do. But talking about it really sucks.” He was picking at his thumbnail, then gasped in pain when he dug too far into his cuticle. Glancing down, he saw a little red speck of blood, and he stared in horror.

He'd never done that before.

“Would you like a tissue?”

Emil shook his head.

“Would you like to set up another appointment so we can discuss this when you're not feeling so overwhelmed?”

Emil stared at her. “Do I seem that overwhelmed?”

“You have perfectly manicured nails, so I'm going to assume that picking there is a panic response and not a common habit,” she said. “You also seem to be answering most of my questions with your own questions. It's a deflection technique I'm very familiar with.”

Emil flushed. “God. I’m...yeah. Maybe I should go. Therapy was probably a mistake.”

“I don’t think therapy is a mistake,” Sarah told him calmly. “I think that for people who have been in survival mode most of their lives, it’s hard to sit in front of someone and pay them for the privilege of being emotionally flayed.”

“Yikes. That’s...very honest,” he told her.

“I know. That’s sort of what I do. I’m going to be as delicate as you need me to be, but there is a difference between need and want, and we’re going to learn where that line is.”

Emil felt like he was being scolded by a boss or a parent—though that wasn’t exactly something he had a lot of experience in. But hell, maybe if that had happened when he was a teenager, his adult life would have been different.

“Emil?” Sarah asked after a prolonged silence.

Emil passed a hand down his face. “Does anyone ever lie down?”

“Yes,” Sarah said. “I have disposable pillows.”

Emil frowned at her. “What? Why?”

At that, she laughed. “Because I have a two-year-old who sometimes comes to my office when I have to do paperwork.”

Emil’s frown deepened. “Okay?”

“She’s had lice six times this year,” Sarah said.

He flinched and sat forward. “Oh. Wonderful.”

“Tell me about it. Those shampoos never work, and we’ve had to rebuy a dozen Squishmallows to the point I’m going to buy stock in the damn things.” Sarah clicked her pen, then set her notebook down. “You won’t get lice from the couch, so you can lie down, but I also don’t want to spend too much time on avoidance tactics.”

Emil laughed. “Definitely the mom of a two-year-old.”

“I’m an expert, what I can I say,” she said, spreading her hands. “What were you like at three?”

Emil flinched, but it was an easier question to answer because he’d spent more time with his father then. The custody battle didn’t begin until he was in school. “I don’t remember much. My dad was rich, and my mom was happily living on his child support. I never saw him, but I think for a little while, I was happy with my mom.”

“What changed?”

“My mom got...well, no, she was always sick, but she lost her battle to it.”

“Physical?” Sarah asked.

“Mental.” His voice started to tremble because he was about to say words he hadn’t said ever. And the last time he’d heard them was when he was a teenager and his caseworker was explaining the situation to him. “It was called, uh... Munchausen something...”

Sarah’s eyes widened. “Ah. It’s called something else now. Would you like to know what it is?”

“No,” he said abruptly. “Uh. If that’s okay.”

“It’s okay,” she confirmed.

He felt almost sick with relief. “I guess I didn’t have it as bad as other kids did. She didn’t poison me. She just...made me think I was sick all the time—like I wasn’t ever going to get any better. Everyone at my school and everyone in our neighborhood thought I was dying. For a while, I thought I was dying. And she was...she was mean.” Emil took a breath and realized he couldn’t go on. “Can we stop?”

“The session?”

“Talking about her,” he said.

Sarah nodded. “Consider it tabled. What about your father?”

“Still rich. Absentee,” Emil said. “He got custody of me when CPS pulled me out of her care, but his version of

parenting was throwing me in this really expensive private school and giving me unlimited cash and a car.”

“Every teenager’s dream.”

“Not mine,” Emil said, then stopped. Had he seriously meant to say that? He looked at Sarah, whose expression hadn’t changed. “I don’t know what I wanted except to get away from my mom, so I think that was the only thing that mattered at the time.”

“But I’m guessing no one gave you the tools to help you get through the trauma.”

“Does booze count?” he asked with a laugh, but it was obvious she didn’t think that was funny.

“I know that’s why you’re here. Your alcohol dependence.”

He nodded. “I don’t think I’m an alcoholic. But I think that I’m as close as someone could be without, you know, going over the edge? Is that even a thing?”

“Maybe not in so many words,” Sarah said, smiling just a little, “but substance dependence is very complicated, and it’s not some one-size-fits-all treatment.”

“I don’t want to go to AA,” he said.

Sarah’s smile widened. “I know. You said that twice in your phone message and three times during intake.”

Emil flushed. “I just...it’s. I don’t...I’m not good with sharing stuff. Not with strangers.” Except he had shared things with one stranger—including his body. But Renzo was different. And he sure as shit wasn’t bringing him up during this session.

“That’s okay. AA isn’t for everyone,” Sarah told him. “I know they show it on TV like it’s the only way to help yourself, and for some people, it’s the only way to stay sober. But you’ve done good on your own in the last few weeks.”

Emil nodded. “Some nights are harder than others.” He thought about the night he’d burned his mom’s things. He’d chosen sex over booze, and he wasn’t sure that was better,

even if he wasn't making a habit of it. "But I don't want things to be like they were before."

"How were they before?"

Emil let out a hollow laugh. "Empty. Cold. I was mean, and I hurt people I cared about just because it was easier than being honest or kind."

Sarah nodded, and Emil almost wanted to cry at the fact that there was no judgment in her face. And granted, she was human. She'd probably go home and tell her friends about the whiny rich guy crying in her office about how he had too much money to be nice, but she was at least professional.

"May I ask you something?"

Emil nodded. "Go for it."

"Before what?"

He frowned. "Before what, what?"

She laughed. "Who's on first?" When his frown deepened, she waved him off. "Never mind. That's way before both of our times, but I lived most of my life with my grandparents. Anyway, you said you don't want to go back to the way things were before. So I wanted to know before what. There's usually a catalyst to big changes that separate your life into time periods of before and after."

Emil closed his eyes and allowed himself to feel all the guilt and shame. "My best friend's fiancée was having an affair with our business partner. I knew. Everyone knew. But we didn't say anything, and he was hurt. But that wasn't the first time I've done something like that. I just want it to be the last time."

"Ah."

"I know that makes me a monster," Emil said, his tone hard and defensive. "Trust me, you don't need to say it."

"I don't think mistakes make monsters of men," Sarah told him. "Even if you have a lifetime of them in your past. I think it matters what you do after when you're ready to atone."

“He’s forgiven me, and I hate that it was so easy for him,” Emil said. “He met someone new, and his life is amazing, and he wants me to be happy too, but I’m not sure I have the right.”

Sarah stroked a finger under her chin, almost like an absent gesture. “You feel like you deserve more punishment.” It wasn’t a question.

Emil’s cheeks burned. “Yeah. I, uh...I think so. I mean, I do, don’t I?”

“That’s not for me to decide. It’s also not for your friend to decide. But you’re not a child anymore. The point of punishment is to get people to reflect enough that they don’t make the same mistake twice, right?”

“Right,” Emil breathed out. His chest felt even tighter. God, he wasn’t sure he could do this.

“So if you’ve learned that lesson, maybe it’s time to stop seeking pain as a form of penance. And I think you’ve made a good start with giving up drinking.”

Emil licked his lips. “I think he agrees with that. Maybe that’s why he can forgive me so easily.”

“Was he like you before his fiancée cheated?”

Emil laughed. “Yes and no. Vic was never really the same as we were. He learned how to be kind, and I think he just wanted to know people gave a shit about him. He was hurt because he believed that if push came to shove, I’d have his back, and I didn’t.”

“But you do now,” she said.

Emil nodded. “Yeah. I do.”

“So, that matters. And you matter.”

Emil shuddered. Renzo had said something like that too, and it was so...confusing. And terrifying. It was so much easier the other way. “I lied to him though. Recently. I told him I had a job interview in Providence and invited him to move to the East Coast with me.”

“Which he did?”

“His fiancé got a job at the university here. It was kind of...fate, I guess? But I didn't have a job interview. My mom died, and I had to deal with her house, but he has no idea.” Emil scrubbed his hands down his face. “See? I suck at change.”

“I might say something that's a little controversial, but I want you to think about it, okay?”

Emil nodded and braced himself.

“Your friend—Vic?”

“Victor,” Emil absently corrected. He was picky about who called him that.

Sarah nodded. “Victor doesn't have a right to know about your mom. I will never, ever advocate for lying, but I will also never, ever tell you that anyone has the right to your life. That is a gift you can give people who have earned it.”

“And you don't think he's earned it for what I did to him?” Emil asked.

Sarah shook her head. He expected her to laugh at him, but instead, she just fixed him with a calm gaze. “Giving your trust to someone isn't penance, Emil. And it never should be.”

Sitting at the table, Emil stared down at his salad until Dahlia reached across and touched his hand. His gaze snapped up, and he quickly shook himself out of his thoughts.

“Yeah. It'll do that to you,” she said.

He hadn't told her a word about his therapy session, but he supposed he didn't really need to. She was further along in her journey than he was—hell, most people were—but at least she'd been in his shoes before.

“It wasn't what I expected,” he confessed, stabbing his fork into a piece of lettuce.

Dahlia tilted her head to the side. “How so? Were you expecting a whole Freudian thing where she tells you not to worry about the size of your dick?”

Emil couldn't help a small laugh. “I guess I was expecting her to make me talk about my childhood trauma, then pump me full of pills.”

“Ah,” Dahlia said, then stuffed her face with a huge piece of chicken. As she chewed, she pointed her fork at him. “Life's gonna suck for a while as you get deeper into it. I've been doing this for a while now, and therapy days usually send me right back to bed.”

Emil sighed. “I don't have a bed.”

“Yeah,” she drawled. “And my friend, I think it's time to change that.”

Emil wanted to dig his heels into the ground and shake his head. To tell her no, he wasn't ready. But the truth was, it was time. He still had no idea what to do about his mom's place, and he wasn't in a hurry, but he wanted to be happy somewhere, and this place could be it.

Granted, it meant he might run into Renzo—and he still hadn't found the balls to text him—but maybe that wasn't the worst thing. And being close to Victor and Oliver gave him a sense of...something. Not quite family, but maybe the hope for one.

He took a breath, then pushed his barely touched plate away from him. “Know any good condos on the market?”

Dahlia grinned and set her fork down too. “Actually, I do. But it's going to cost you.”

Emil shot her a dubious look. “Am I going to hate you for this?”

“Yep,” she said with a grin. “But it'll be worth it. You trust me?”

“No,” Emil said. “But let's do this anyway.”

CHAPTER TEN

“SANTA’S DRUNK.”

Renzo blinked at the wall. “Can you repeat that?”

Matty sighed into the receiver. “Santa’s drunk. And yes, Ren, I know what drunk means.”

“Ah yes, my little brother’s all grown-up,” Renzo snarked back. “But are you serious?”

“He fell over,” Matty said. “He was walking funny, and then he fell over, and Sharon said he was drunk.”

“That’s...fantastic,” Renzo said. “What a role model for all the kids.”

“Some of them were crying,” Matty told him. “It’s only seven days until Christmas. He shouldn’t make those kids cry.”

“Nope,” Renzo said, popping the *p*. “That’s the worst thing you could do for kids. Maybe tonight, we can bake some cookies, and you can pass them out to any kids who come back.”

“Okay,” Matty said. “They probably will, but Sharon said they’re going to close Santa. Which is fine, right? Because I’m too big to see Santa.”

“Buddy, I told you that you aren’t,” Renzo said patiently. “And I really wanna smack the mouth of those assholes who keep telling you that you are.”

“They also said you shouldn’t swear at me because my ears are innocent,” Matty parroted.

Nothing pissed Renzo off more than do-gooders who acted like people with disabilities were these innocent, pure little children, no matter how old they were. Matty was a grown-ass adult, and he could hear a couple of fucks. Even if he did make Renzo pay for them.

“You know how I feel about that,” Renzo said.

“Yep,” Matty replied. “Put ’em in a diaper and see how they like being treated like a baby.”

Renzo burst into laughter. “Exactly. So, you knocking off early or what?”

“No. We have one birthday party here, and I have to do my cleanup duties. I’ll see you at four.”

“Alright. Love you,” Renzo said, then hung up after Matty said it back. Rubbing his temples, he debated about googling around and seeing if there was another Santa around the area he could bring Matty to. His brother would resist a little, but Renzo also knew he wouldn’t drop it if he didn’t get to see the guy.

He obviously had some kind of Christmas wish he wasn’t going to tell Renzo about, and there was still enough time to get it. Probably.

Opening up the search on his phone, he found a little Christmas village not too far from the mall. It looked like it was in a church parking lot, which meant it could get a little... weird and religious, but it would be worth it to just stop the madness and let Matty tell the old dude what he wanted.

He checked the hours, then hoped Matty didn’t hate him for making him late for the fire. Renzo slipped his phone into his pocket, then left fifteen minutes early so he could swing through the Jollibee drive-thru for chicken. At the very least, his brother would always forgive him when he got fried chicken.

Traffic was an absolute nightmare—worse than usual, thanks to the last-minute holiday shoppers, which, of course,

would be him soon. He'd stockpiled a few gifts for Matty, but he wanted to throw as many as he could under the tree since Camilla wasn't going to be there, and he knew Matty would struggle with not having her around.

The holidays had been somber for years, and they were just starting to find joy in them, so the last thing in the world Renzo wanted was to destroy that. He braved the drive-thru line, then found a parking spot near the food court in the very last row.

The wind was high and cruel against his face, but he held the bag of dinner close to his body as he made his way along the slick asphalt and eventually through the mall doors. The crowds were a little lower, and he wondered how much of that had to do with drunk Santa and his antics.

He might have laughed his ass off picturing the old lush if it hadn't been in front of a bunch of kids. He had no idea what would possess a man to be so reckless. But then again, people did stranger things when shit got bad.

Renzo had made his fair share of mistakes when his marriage was coming to an end. His therapist told him that a lot of his actions had been a subconscious desire to sabotage the marriage. He hadn't felt safe leaving John, but if John left him, he would walk away without any sort of threat.

Of course, his subconscious had apparently underestimated his ex because John was a narcissist. He didn't actually have the ability to give a shit about logic. He ruined the marriage, then tried to make Renzo pay for it, and he was still reeling from those long, early months after the divorce was finalized.

Christ, imagine if they'd tried to have a kid.

The thought made him feel a little green, and he shoved that out of his mind as he headed down the corridor toward Matty's shop. He was a couple of minutes late, so Matty was standing outside the store with his arms folded, a look of consternation on his face.

"I know," Renzo said quickly. "I know. I'm a dick."

“I don’t use that word,” Matty said with a sniff. “But I don’t like when you’re late.”

“I have a good reason. I brought you Jollibee.”

Matty’s eyes went wide. “We only have that on the seventeenth!”

Renzo hesitated, trying to see if that upset Matty or not because sometimes he liked breaking his routine rules—especially when it came to treats like fast food. But sometimes it threw him off, and drunk Santa might have been one too many oddities for him.

He smiled a second later though, and Renzo’s shoulders sank with relief.

“I figured you needed some comfort food after all that drama today.” Renzo passed the bag over and slung his arm around Matty’s waist, pulling him in for a hug.

“You’re the best brother,” Matty said quietly under a sigh. “People have really awful brothers sometimes. Did you know that?”

“Unfortunately, yes. I’ve known some people who are really terrible brothers.”

Matty’s eyes narrowed. “Like John. He was a bad, bad brother. He was a mean brother.”

Renzo did his best not to wince, but it was difficult because he blamed himself for that one. He would never, ever forgive himself for letting that monster anywhere near Matty. And it hurt even more because Matty didn’t seem to blame him at all.

“We’re not thinking about him today,” Renzo said, tugging Matty along. “You can eat in the car, okay? I have a drink for you.”

“Dr. Pepper?” Matty said, bouncing on his toes.

Renzo shook his head and sighed. “Yes. Disgusting, but yes.”

They made it out to the parking lot, Renzo nodding along with all of Matty's very loud complaints about winter weather and his sudden decision to move down to Miami Beach, which would happen over Renzo's dead body. But he humored him and listened to Matty design his little beach house as he hit the key fob and unlocked the car doors.

"...and it'll have a deck that sits six feet over the sand. Not five because sometimes the tides go higher than five feet. Sometimes they go up to seven, but not a lot," Matty said as he buckled his belt, then immediately dug into the bag for his little rectangle box of chicken.

"Six feet. Got it. So long as you don't mind gators, and jellyfish, and hurricanes and..."

Matty sighed loudly. "I *get* it. I'm just cold."

"Me too, kid. But I have a second surprise for you, so I hope you don't mind keeping your coat and hat on a little bit longer."

Matty gave him a side-eye. "What kind of surprise?"

"I found Santa. The good one, not the drunk one."

Matty swallowed heavily. "I'm too old for Santa," he whispered.

Renzo turned in his seat and took his brother's hand. "No one is too old for Santa. You hear me? Not one person if they don't want to be."

"Not people like me," Matty said.

Renzo lifted his chin. "Not people like you. Not people like me. No one."

Matty blinked rapidly, the way he did when he processed his feelings, and then he nodded. "Okay. I need to talk to him about something."

"I thought as much," Renzo said, then grinned as he started the car and, surrounded by the smell of fried chicken and mashed potatoes, headed toward the little Christmas market.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

EMIL USED two hands to scratch at his chin, which was going to look like he did the first time he got beard burn. Only he wasn't sucking face with some hot guy. He was wearing a goddamn, belly-length white beard, which was only second to how irritated the rest of his body was under a wool and velvet Santa costume.

It was the first and last favor he was ever doing for Dahlia. Her company had rented out the Christmas market for the kids, but their Santa had canceled last minute.

Emil, who had gotten an amazing lead on the most perfect condo, became the victim.

"I've never done that before in my life," he'd argued. "I don't like children."

"You don't have to like them," she begged. "You just need to pretend. And you promised you'd do anything for that condo listing. Besides, if you do this, I'll be your best friend forever."

"I thought we had already agreed to that," Emil said, but he could feel his resolve cracking. Past Emil would have laughed in her face, then poured himself a drink to sit back and watch small children cry. But his therapist was encouraging him to do more—to do things differently.

To take risks, even ones that made him uncomfortable.

In retrospect, he didn't think Sarah had a Santa costume in mind. She probably meant being more open with people and sharing parts of his past when he felt ready to. She probably

meant asking someone out if he found them attractive and making future plans.

But in the moment, he just heard her voice reminding him that he was the one who said he wanted to be a better man than the one who'd shown up there.

Now, he could taste regret.

After the fifth small infant screamed inconsolably before shitting their diaper right on his thigh, he begged for a reprieve. They put the *back in ten minutes* sign up, and Emil pulled the beard down to survey the damage.

Not the worst he'd ever looked, but not the best.

"I got you cocoa," came Dahlia's voice as she slipped in through the little faux gingerbread door.

He glared at her. "That isn't what I want."

"Yep, but that's what you're getting. It's got cinnamon in it," she singsonged as she waved it at him.

He snatched it and took a drink, hating how good it tasted. "How much longer do I have?"

She rolled her eyes. "An hour. And I know you can do it."

Emil set the cocoa down and rubbed both hands down his face. "I'm going to get a disease from these little creatures. One of them sneezed in my eye."

Dahlia gave him a pat on the arm. "Well, I'm probably going to get a nice holiday bonus for finding you, so I'll take you out once you're not contagious."

Emil groaned, squeezing his eyes shut before he turned back toward the mirror. "I make the worst Santa."

"And yet, the little ankle-biters don't seem to care. Nut up, baby. It's showtime." She slapped his ass before slipping out of the little cottage, leaving him to his last moment alone.

The beard was even itchier than before, but Emil managed to hide his winces as he walked back out and did his best approximation of a Santa laugh. From some of the looks on the parents' faces, he'd failed, but the kids were so high on

sugar cookies, candy canes, and sweet drinks that they likely didn't know where they were.

He sat back down on the seat and stared at the queue. It was at least fifty people long.

Fuck his fucking life.

“We have a special visitor,” one of the elves whispered into his ear just as the line was nearing an end.

It wasn't the first time one of the elves had said that. He'd gotten half a dozen kids with mobility issues and two Deaf kids that allowed him to break out his old, rusty college ASL. As much as his heart was probably an atrophied lump of coal in his chest, it warmed and actually made the whole thing feel worth it.

“Who is it?”

“He's not a child,” the elf said. “He's an adult, but he's...” The elf hesitated, and Emil could tell he wasn't sure how to say what he wanted to say. “Disabled. You know?”

Emil did, and he waved him on. “Sounds great.”

The elf gave him a relieved smile, then motioned off to the left, and a short beat later, a very short young man shuffled up, looking painfully shy. He also looked oddly familiar with dark curls and an exact eye color Emil swore he'd seen before. He just couldn't put his finger on it.

Standing up, Emil gestured toward the long bench beside his Santa chair. “Why don't we sit together since you seem kind of old to be sitting on my lap.”

The guy nodded, letting out a nervous laugh, and rushed over to the bench. He sat down so hard the bench creaked under his force. Emil tried to be a bit more delicate since he didn't trust the cheap décor, and he offered his hand. “It's nice to meet you. I'm Santa.”

“Mattia,” the guy said. “It’s Italian, but everyone calls me Matty, which is more American.”

Emil laughed. “Yes, it is a little more American. I like both.”

Matty smiled. “Me too. It’s special when I get called Mattia, but only my mom did—and sometimes my brother when he’s really annoyed at me.” He paused for a long beat. “My mom died though.”

Emil’s heart sank. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Matty shrugged. “It was a long time ago. And now my brother and my sister take care of me, and we have one big happy family.” The line sounded rehearsed, and he wondered how many times Matty had been told that when dealing with his grief.

“Well, I’m glad you came to visit. Do you have a Christmas wish this year?”

Matty stared at him, silent, his head cocked to the side. “I know you’re not Santa,” he said in a very soft whisper. “But we can’t tell the kids. They don’t know.”

“I...” Emil faltered. He most definitely hadn’t been coached to respond to that.

“It’s okay. I won’t tell,” Matty said, crossing his finger over his heart. “I know Santa’s just for Christmas wishes, but Renzo says that no one is too old to make Christmas wishes. Even me.”

Emil went cold and then hot, all in a rush, so fast it made him dizzy. “Renzo?”

“That’s my brother,” Matty said. “My Christmas wish is for him, anyway.”

Emil licked his lips and tasted beard. “Oh. Um. Well...of course. I’m happy to hear his wish.”

Matty looked around, and when he was apparently satisfied, he leaned in very close to whisper, “He needs a boyfriend.”

Emil almost choked on his own tongue. “A b-boyfriend?”

“It’s bad to be homophobic,” Matty warned.

“Oh Go—gosh,” he fumbled. “I’m not homophobic.”

“Are you sure?” Matty demanded. “Gay is when boys like other boys.”

Emil’s face was flaming red, which probably worked with the whole rosy cheeks thing. “Yep. I did know that.”

“There’s also bisexual. That means you like...”

“I know what it means,” Emil interrupted in a rush. “But aren’t you supposed to be telling me about your brother’s wish?”

“It’s not Renzo’s wish. It’s my wish for him,” Matty said. “He had a husband before. But he was really, really mean. He hurt Renzo a lot, and then he hurt me, and Renzo cried so much. I think he cried more than when Mom and Dad died.”

Emil wondered if he was actually going to pass out. He had not signed up for this. “I’m so sorry to hear it. Does his husband—”

“*Ex*-husband,” Matty said sternly.

Emil cleared his throat and did his best not to emote too much. “His ex-husband. He doesn’t see him too much, does he?”

“At work. But they don’t talk anymore. But Renzo is really, really sad. All the time. And he’s the best brother anyone could ever have. He’s lonely, but he takes care of me, and he takes care of Camilla, too, when she’s working too much. He picks me up from my job, and he chops wood for my fire every day.”

Emil nodded, his heart threatening to beat straight out of his chest. “He sounds wonderful.”

Matty sighed. “I don’t know if you have any Santa magic, but if you do, maybe you could find a boyfriend for him.”

“I don’t know if I have that kind of power, but I can tell you that people like your brother usually get all the good

things they deserve. Sometimes it's just necessary to be patient."

"I'm pretty bad at that," Matty said. "Renzo tells me that every day."

Emil burst into laughter. God, was Renzo there? He wanted to look around so badly, but he wasn't brave enough. "I'm not great at it either, but maybe we can both try together this year."

"Okay. Thanks for letting me see you. I know I'm too big for Santa."

"No one's too big for Santa," Emil said with a frown. Had someone told him that? Had Renzo? He doubted it, considering what Matty had said about his brother.

Matty scoffed. "My brother says that to me too, but I know better. I'm not a little kid, even if I kind of look like one. But I'm not. I promise."

"I believe you, but you know that adults are allowed to have a little magic too, right? Even if we don't get as much as we used to."

Matty nodded, then stood up. "Have a good Christmas, Santa."

Emil waved him off, and it was only as Matty was walking away that he finally caught sight of a familiar person leaning on the faux-wood railing for the reindeer paddock. Their eyes locked, and for a moment, Emil panicked.

But seconds later, Renzo slung his arm around his brother, and the pair of them disappeared into the crowd.

CHAPTER TWELVE

EMIL STAYED in a half fog for the remaining kids, but he was happy to blame it all on exhaustion, which the staff readily accepted. The moment he was freed, he tore out of the costume and used a couple of aloe wipes on his face until the burn from the synthetic beard faded.

He was still a little pink around his jaw, but he looked like himself again, and that was more of a relief than anything.

“Knock, knock,” Dahlia called out. “Are you naked?”

“Dressed,” Emil called out.

She appeared a second later with a bottle of water, which he took happily and cracked open the top. “You were a hit. My boss is already asking about next year—”

“Fuck no,” Emil said before she could go on. He swiped the back of his hand over his mouth, then killed the rest of the water before speaking again. “I love you. I can honestly say you are one of the few people in my life I’d do almost anything for. But never again.”

She shrugged. “Not more than I expected.” She stepped forward and rose onto her toes, tugging him down so she could kiss his cheeks. “I really owe you.”

“You don’t,” Emil said. He blinked, and for a single second, he saw Renzo behind his closed eyelids. “Fucking hell.”

Dahlia lifted her brows. “What happened?”

“Remember a few weeks ago when I was a hot mess?”

“Right before you started therapy?” she guessed.

She had it in one. Leaving Renzo’s had motivated him to make his appointment with Sarah and to leave the hotel. But he had been a mess right after he’d left Renzo. He felt oddly heartbroken walking away in spite of the fact that he knew it was for the best, and he’d spent at least a dozen nights opening and closing a text thread before losing his nerve.

“So...there was this guy.”

Dahlia groaned, lips thinning. “I knew it. I called it, and you lied to my face.”

“I wasn’t ready to talk about it,” Emil defended, hugging his arms around his middle. “It happened out of nowhere.”

Dahlia’s eyes narrowed. “Did he hurt you?”

“No. I hurt myself,” Emil said. “He was so goddamn kind and sweet. I slept over, and he made me breakfast in the morning—and he can’t cook at all,” Emil said with a shattered laugh. “He gave me his number, but I never called.”

“Normally, I’d call you a dumbass,” she said, “but I think you were being smart. You’re kind of a mess, babes.”

Emil unlocked one of his arms to drag his hand down his face. “I know.”

“So what’s the deal? He show up here with a wife and kids?”

Emil smiled, shaking his head as he thought about Matty. He knew Renzo had siblings, but he hadn’t realized he was a caregiver for his brother. And he hadn’t realized just how awful Renzo’s ex had been. He’d seemed so...so put together. So capable of kindness and love in ways Emil wasn’t sure he ever would be.

“He brought his brother to see me. Really sweet guy.”

Dahlia’s eyes widened. “Oh. The short guy?”

Emil nodded. “Yeah. He told me he knows Santa isn’t real, but he wanted to make a Christmas wish for his brother.”

“Oh my God,” Dahlia groaned.

“Mhm.” Emil closed his eyes. “He wanted his brother to get a boyfriend for Christmas because his ex-husband was such a fucking terror that he’s been miserable and hurt ever since the divorce.”

“Oh. Well,” Dahlia said, flapping her arms. “Did you tell him you’d buy a ring?”

Emil shoved at her. “I’ve spent one night with this guy, and he kind of fucked my brains out, but I’m not ready for that.”

Dahlia softened. “I know. But...would it be awful to call him now?”

“I think it would be weird to call him after his brother said all that to me. I doubt he wanted me to know. He would have told me.”

“And he might have already if he’d had the chance to get to know you,” she pointed out.

“Stop being logical.”

Dahlia grinned. “I’m being logical because I love you and I want to see you happy. And maybe taking baby steps toward this guy isn’t the worst thing.”

Emil swallowed heavily. The thought was both terrifying and threatened to give him far too much hope for something he knew damn well he didn’t deserve. “What are we doing after this?”

“We?” Dahlia asked, then laughed. “Honey, I’m going home to drink a gallon of water and pray to the patron saint of lactose intolerance that I don’t have a messy stomach in the morning.” She went up onto her toes and kissed both of his cheeks. “And I’m not going to tell you what I think you need to do because you already know.”

He did. He just didn’t want to admit it. “Have a good night.”

She shot him a quick wave, then left the little Santa cottage, and after another minute, Emil followed her out. The crowd had thinned quite a bit, and Emil couldn’t hear nearly as many children as there had been before. The shops were all

still open though, so he decided to peruse and see if he could find anything that would fit his friends.

He'd never really done the holiday present thing. Hell, he'd never remembered anyone's birthdays before. He was occasionally invited to parties, but his entire adult life, he'd had a secretary who kept track of dates and bought from a list of pointless, meaningless, expensive items.

And no one ever said thank you because why would they when he never gave a shit.

That feeling was back. That heavy weight that made it hard to breathe when he realized the kind of person he'd been. Maybe not cruel—not deliberately—but he'd never been deserving of what he had now.

He was terrified to lose it but terrified to keep it because holding it close meant he had so much more to lose. When CPS swept in to take him from his mother and hand him over to his father, Emil had already been at rock bottom. The only thing lower would have been death. He didn't know how to survive a fall from such a grand height.

And hell if he would have ever thought that being cared for was so much better than money, and power, and prestige.

He came to a stop near the little outdoor skating rink and stared across at the watch shop. There was a man working in the window at a small table, and it almost made him laugh. How could someone feel fulfilled that way? Granted, Emil had no idea where his life might have gone if he'd ever been allowed to choose for himself, so maybe he was being too quick to judge.

Stillness, simplicity, it was all so new for him. It was like learning a foreign, dead language.

“Do you skate?”

Emil damn near jumped out of his skin and turned his head at the familiar voice. Renzo was bundled up in a thick coat, a scarf, and a beanie crammed over his dark curls. His eyes were crinkled with his grin and looked huge behind his thick lenses.

“Did I break you?”

Emil shook his head and took a breath. “I’m sorry.”

“For fucking and running or for not calling?”

“I...”

“I’m kidding,” Renzo said, but he didn’t sound like it. “I told you to call when you were ready. No strings.”

Emil tried to swallow, but it got caught in his throat, making his voice hoarse when he spoke. “I wanted to. I tried. Things were a mess.”

“Because of your mom?”

He laughed, dragging a hand down his face, and winced at how sore his skin was. “That was part of it. Remember how I told you that night I wasn’t really a good person?”

“And I told you that it didn’t matter who you used to be?” Renzo fired back.

Emil nodded, then turned and leaned his arms on the railing. His gaze tracked a little girl of no more than ten doing spins. “I’m still working on it. And you should also know that I’m Santa.”

Renzo made a soft choking noise. “I’m either dreaming, or I’m high. I mean, not to be a dick, but I don’t believe in Santa, and—”

“Oh my God. No,” Emil said, slapping his hand over his mouth and dragging it down his chin. “Tonight. I was Santa tonight.”

“You—oh,” Renzo said, sounding relieved, but that only lasted a second. His eyes went wide. “*Oh*. You met my brother.”

“Mattia?” Emil tried. Matty had used a slight accent when he said it, but Emil’s tongue tripped over it.

“Yeah. Matty,” Renzo answered, and then he leaned forward and grabbed Emil’s shoulder, almost like he couldn’t stop himself. “Why the fuck were you Santa?”

“A friend needed a favor. Their Santa dropped out, and I was tall enough to fit in the suit.”

Renzo blinked, then threw his head back and laughed. Fuck, he was so, so beautiful. His body sort of swayed with his laughter, moving like he was dancing, and Emil wanted to kiss him so badly that his lips tingled. “That’s amazing. That’s actually the best news I’ve gotten all week. Matty has been refusing to tell me what his secret Christmas wish is, and now you know.”

Emil’s face flamed hotly, and he glanced away. “Mm.”

Renzo’s laughter immediately died. “Please don’t tell me he asked you to bring back my parents.”

“No,” Emil gasped. He turned to face Renzo fully. “He said he knew I wasn’t Santa. I don’t think he’d ask me for something that drastic.”

“But it’s got you all twisted up,” Renzo pointed out.

It was saying something that Renzo could read him so easily, but then again, Emil didn’t think he really ever had much of a poker face. “It was about you.”

Renzo paled. “What about me?”

Taking a breath, Emil dropped his arms to his sides, feeling like a monster because he now had information about Renzo that was private. And personal. And probably some of the most painful things a stranger could know about him.

“If it was anything else, I wouldn’t tell you, but I have a feeling you didn’t want me to know this,” Emil said quietly.

Renzo’s face fell even further. “It’s about John, isn’t it?”

“John is your—”

“Ex-husband.” The words came out barely a whisper, and Emil heard the pain in his soft breath.

“He told me you were the best person in the world and had a really bad ex-husband who hurt you. He said his only wish this year was that you find someone who loves you the way you deserve to be loved,” Emil said softly.

Renzo’s eyes shot up to meet his. “He said that?”

“I might be paraphrasing a bit. He had a lot to say about you and your, uh, past situation. But yeah.”

Renzo covered his face with both hands and took a trembling inhale. “Fuuuuuck.”

“For what it’s worth, if I could magic you the perfect man, I would.”

Renzo dropped his hands and laughed. “Please don’t. The last thing I need is—”

“I found hot chocolate! There was a nice man with a beard like Santa, but it was curly, and he gave me a free cup. He—oh.” The familiar rambling voice cut Renzo off, and they both turned to see Matty hurrying up with his mittened hands around a very large paper cup.

Renzo’s distress melted away like it was never there, and he smiled as he beckoned his brother closer. Standing together, the resemblance was intense. Matty had the same eyes, and same dark curls, and the same grin.

“Matty, this is my friend Emil.”

Matty stared at him, then suddenly thrust his cup at Renzo and was immediately in Emil’s face. His gaze moved up and down, and then he reached out and poked Emil’s nose three times. “Santa.”

“He’s not—” Renzo tried.

“Santa. This Santa had pretty eyes. The other Santa at the mall didn’t have pretty eyes. Same eyes. Santa,” Matty declared.

“Jig is up,” Emil said.

Renzo sighed. “Okay, fine. You win, bud.”

Matty clapped and took two steps back before snatching his cup from Renzo, who was seconds away from taking a sip. “Get your own.”

“See all this Christmas spirit,” Renzo complained, still smiling. He eyed Emil, then said, “Can I buy you one?”

“I’ve had my fill. Apparently, Santa gets all the cocoa he can drink. But,” he added when Renzo’s smile started to falter, “I’ll walk with you if you’d like the company.”

“Come on, Matts,” Renzo started, but suddenly, there was a small group of kids who were rushing up.

The taller one, who was very clearly the little leader, looked up at Matty. “Did he say yes?”

Matty looked startled, then turned his gaze back to his brother. “Can I skate? I need twelve dollars plus tax to rent skates. But I know how. Remember I learned and then practiced last winter?”

“I remember,” Renzo said. Emil watched as he dug into his wallet and handed him a twenty. “Change back. You make more money than I do with all those tips you get.”

Matty laughed, then dropped his full hot chocolate right into a bin before hurrying off.

“I could have totally finished that,” Renzo said with a groan. “He’s such a little shit.”

“He loves you a lot,” Emil said as they started toward the hot cocoa stand, which was the only stall left with any kind of line.

Renzo snorted. “Yeah. I mean, the way siblings do, you know.”

Emil shrugged and offered a tiny smile. “I wouldn’t, actually. I was an only child. Well...that’s probably not true, but my father never really had me around his wives or mistresses, and I never asked.”

Renzo winced. “That’s bleak, man.”

“Yes,” Emil answered, because that was the kindest thing he could say about his upbringing. Before now, he might have tried to make a joke and pass it off as nothing, but it wasn’t, and he was learning it was okay to admit that.

An awkward silence fell as they approached the line, and Renzo sort of swayed into him a bit, their elbows knocking. “So. Is it weird now that you know my dirty laundry?”

Emil raised a brow at him. “Is having a shitty ex who mistreated you really dirty laundry?”

“I don’t know,” Renzo said. “People get...weird about it. I tell people I’m divorced, and they’re like, oh, why? What did you do? So I tell them a little about John, and they either think I’m lying, or they think I’m too broken to date.”

He had no idea what to say to that.

“Sorry,” Renzo said after a long pause. “God, I always make it so fucking awkward with—”

Emil moved without thinking. He snagged Renzo by the wrist and brought his knuckles to his lips, kissing them very softly. Renzo’s words died on a whisper, and Emil closed his eyes, afraid of his reaction, but Renzo didn’t pull away.

He leaned in.

“You’re not making things awkward. I don’t...I’ve never,” Emil said, then opened his eyes and rolled them up toward the sky. “There’s a lot about me you don’t know but probably should. It would explain a lot.”

“I bet,” Renzo said with a very soft chuckle. “This feels like maybe a terrible place for it, though.”

Emil nodded, then fell silent as they reached the little order window, and Renzo got a cinnamon hot chocolate. The truck already had several pre-poured, so Renzo handed cash over and got his cup, then dropped his change in the tip bucket and grabbed Emil’s hand again, tugging him to a little bench near the far side of the skating rink.

“I’d like to ask you out,” Emil said.

Renzo nodded, but Emil didn’t think that was a yes. “I kind of had a feeling.”

“Yeah. And I’m breaking the whole no-strings thing, right?”

Renzo laughed and shrugged. “Maybe? I don’t really know. I was serious when I told you I didn’t do one-night stands.”

Running his thumb over Renzo's knuckles, Emil stared down at where they were joined. It was cold out, so Renzo was paler than he'd been the night Emil had been allowed to touch him, and he was struggling to keep from kissing him again.

"Is this my answer?" Emil finally asked.

Renzo scoffed. "You didn't ask a question."

"Yes I did!" Emil pulled back and crossed his arms. "I told you I wanted to ask you out."

"That's not a question," Renzo said with an infuriating smile.

Emil threw his arms up. "Fine. Will you go out with me?"

"Yes," Renzo said simply, and Emil deflated like someone had completely drained him of all strength. "But not until after New Year."

"Is that some superstition?" Emil chanced.

Renzo laughed again and shook his head. "No. My sister will be back on the second, and I'll have free time to actually go on a date. The night you came over, Matty was at a sleepover, but he doesn't do that often."

Emil nodded, then glanced across the rink and spotted Renzo's brother, who was happily spinning a couple of the kids. "You are welcome to bring him along though." He stopped when Renzo visibly winced, and he took a step back. "Or not. I mean, I know I'm not the most put-together guy—"

"It's...well. It's not you, but it is?" Renzo said, his tone almost like he was asking a question. He rubbed the back of his neck, then took a long sip of his cocoa before he spoke again. "He probably told you my ex wasn't nice to him."

"Mm," Emil said, holding back the words he wanted to use.

"It's an understatement. Whatever Matty told you, it's an understatement." Renzo's voice was shattered. "And it was my fault. There were so fucking many red flags, and I ignored them because I just...fuck. I wanted to have someone. I was tired of being this lonely nerd who was good for a fuck and

little else. And John was..." He stopped, then shook his head. "Sorry. That's a conversation for a few more dates in."

Emil was desperate to know more, but only because he wanted to cup his hands around Renzo's pain and shield him from it, as irrational as that was. "I get it."

"My gut says I can trust you, but I don't trust *me*."

Emil held out his hand, and when Renzo's fingers brushed against his, Emil kissed his palm, then his wrist. He watched as Renzo's eyes widened and his pupils dilated, and when Emil stroked a thumb over his knuckles, his lips parted on a sigh.

"I can't promise more than a date. Or that you'll even want to talk to me once it's over. I've never dated before. I've never been good for anyone before. And I have no idea how to be romantic. But I'm trying."

Renzo nodded. "I think you should probably give yourself a little more credit. I'm feeling very wooed."

It was a bit too kind, but Emil was so starved for hope he was willing to take whatever Renzo offered. "Thank you."

Renzo stepped in close, then rose up and kissed Emil's cheek, long and lingering. "Call me. Call me over the holiday. Call me before the New Year. Let me have some of the choice too."

It was terrifying, but it was also the easiest compromise Emil had ever been asked to make.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“THIS IS...”

“Don’t say stupid,” Dahlia ordered.

Emil put up his hands in surrender. “I wasn’t going to.” Not technically a lie. He wasn’t going to use the word “stupid.” He stared around the mall—at the throngs of last-minute shoppers—and felt a little better about himself. He’d managed to get something for all the people in his life that he cared about.

It wasn’t very many, but it was something. And he’d done it himself. For the first time since he was sixteen and put under the tender loving care of his father’s money, he’d taken time out of his day and put thought into something.

He had four gifts for Victor and Oliver sitting at the end of his hotel bed, which would be carefully transported to his new place once he got the keys. He had one in shipment ready to be delivered to Dahlia’s office, and he had two gifts in a bag hanging from his wrist—one for Renzo and one for Mattia. He had no idea if it was too much or too soon, but Emil was struggling to care anymore.

And now they were standing across from one of those paint-your-own-mug shops that Dahlia was insisting they stop by.

“We can make best friend mugs,” she insisted, tugging on his arm. “Stop being a party pooper.”

Emil pulled a face, but in reality, he wasn’t going to tell her no. He was pretty sure this wasn’t a hobby he was going to

get into, but if it made her happy, it was good enough for him. “Let’s go.”

She hopped on the balls of her feet. “Yes! No one ever does this with me, and painting a mug by yourself is embarrassing.”

Emil might have agreed with her even a few weeks ago, but he was trying to do more things outside of his comfort zone—and the biggest bubble he’d lived in for a long time was always being surrounded by people. It didn’t matter if he felt seen or ignored. If there were people around, he was safe.

Except that was an illusion. It was something his therapist had been working on with him for the last few sessions, and the breakthrough was intense and painful. But he also wouldn’t want to be the nerd sitting at a table by himself, painting some happy face on a cheap mug he was never going to use either.

They stepped into the shop, where a bright-faced girl who looked no older than eighteen greeted them with a little speech. Emil tuned her out almost instantly and let Dahlia absorb all the information as he stared around at the shelves. Several of them looked professionally done, but to the right of them were obvious customer creations.

“...and you can choose either a window seat or you can sit close to the display cabinet,” the woman was saying.

Emil gave a shrug, so Dahlia chose the inner table, and they both took a seat on the raised bench. “So we just...grab a mug and figure it out?” he asked.

Dahlia rolled her eyes. “Try to be a little more creative than that, best friend.”

“I don’t know that I have a single creative bone in my body,” he admitted to her as he picked up the mug and turned it in his hands.

It was matte white and a little rough against his palms. The texture was damn near insufferable, so he set it back down and watched as Dahlia rose and grabbed two small trays, a box of loose paints, and brushes.

“It doesn’t need to look good, you know,” she told him as she sat back down. “This is supposed to be meditative or something.”

“We could go to a yoga class for that,” Emil grouched. He grabbed a thin brush, then selected a handful of paints in different shades of blue. “Or a temple. Or a park.”

Dahlia set her stuff down and gave him a flat look. “If you really don’t want to be here, then you can go. You don’t need to make me feel like shit for having fun.”

Emil immediately flushed. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m like that.”

“You’re like that because you’re a spoiled brat,” Dahlia said plainly. “And it’s easy to see you’ve been that way for your entire life. God, you must have been the worst toddler.”

He laughed, the sensation of it almost painful in his chest. He took a second to rub his sternum, then drew in a deep breath. “Until I was sixteen, I lived with my mom. She, uh... she had some issues. A disorder. When my dad left her, she started telling everyone I was sick.”

Dahlia stared at him, her brush halfway into a small puddle of lavender. “Sick like how?”

Emil shrugged. He’d blocked so much of it out he still struggled to remember how it started. “She was always keeping me home for shit. Stomachaches, headaches. She had me at all these different hospitals getting tested. She used to tell me she was pretty sure I had cancer. She said it so often I believed her.”

He shrugged and stared down at his mug, then dragged a smear of blue across the front. It looked stark and almost ugly against the white. “After a while, I figured out she was lying, but she started saying that I was delusional. Literally. That I hallucinated and that I was dangerous and could hurt other people.” Fuck, he hadn’t thought about all that in so long. “I wasn’t allowed to see my dad. I wasn’t allowed to be with the other kids in school. They kept me in this tiny classroom with

this hulking security guard who would just stand there and stare at me all day.”

“Jesus,” she whispered.

Emil let out a pained laugh and passed a hand down his face. “I don’t think I’ve ever told anyone that before. Ever.”

Dahlia licked her lips, her hand trembling like she didn’t know if she could keep painting or reach for him. She chose the former, and he was relieved for that. He didn’t want that sort of comfort. It would only make him feel more like a freak.

“She took a lot of drugs, and one night, she was out of her mind, and she...well.” He closed his eyes and breathed out. “I got hurt, and a school counselor noticed. Then CPS got called, and the next thing I knew, I was being carted to the other side of the country to live with my dad.”

“I bet he was glad to have you back,” she said softly.

Emil couldn’t help another bitter laugh. “He wasn’t actually there. His assistant picked me up from the airport and handed me three credit cards and the keys to a Porsche. I didn’t even have a license,” he added. He glanced over at Dahlia, who was focused on her mug, but he could see her eyes darting over to steal glances at him. “I didn’t see my dad for the first eight months that I was there.”

“I don’t know what to say,” she finally admitted.

Emil laughed. “Neither do I. I just...kind of blocked it all out, I guess. But I told you I was fucked-up.”

“Traumatized,” she corrected.

“Feels like the same thing.” He twisted a fan brush, creating little nonsense patterns. They were hideous, but Dahlia had a point. It was meditative, and he didn’t need to make it worthy of a gallery display. He’d shove it into one of his cupboards when it was done and never look at it again.

But not because it was worthless.

“Is this why you haven’t called Renzo,” she asked after a long beat of silence.

Emil groaned and hung his head. “Yes. Well...no and yes. I don’t know how to do this relationship thing. I don’t know how to tell him that my entire childhood went from my mom’s delusions to my dad’s neglect, and that turned me into some monster that I chose to be instead of becoming a better person than they were.”

“I mean, you’re here,” she said. “They’re not, and you’re —” The rest of her sentence was cut off when her phone began to ring, and she let out a string of curse words before picking up. “Give me a second.” She covered the mouthpiece. “I have to take this outside. It’s gonna be like thirty minutes. Finish your mug.”

And then she was gone before he could remind her that she was the one who said sitting there painting a mug alone was the worst form of social humiliation.

“Hi, Santa.”

Emil jumped in his seat, then spun around, his eyes going wide at the sight of Matty. He was dressed in the green uniform apron of the painting shop, and he was twisting his fingers in front of him like he wasn’t sure what to do with his hands.

“Matty,” he said with a grin. “You know I’m not Santa, right?”

Matty rolled his eyes. “I *know*. And it’s okay if I say that right now because there’s no kids in here.”

Emil set his brush down and stood up. “I didn’t know you worked here.”

Matty puffed his chest out proudly. “I’ve been here for five years and seven months, and I’ve been employee of the month three times.”

Emil grinned wider. “Amazing. I didn’t see you before when I came in.”

Matty shook his head. “No. Because I wasn’t on my shift. I’m not on my shift, but sometimes I’m allowed to come in one half hour early if I want to paint something. Did you see

what I painted? They put them on the shelf.” He pointed to a row by the window Emil hadn’t noticed.

“Those are way better than mine.”

Matty’s gaze cut down to Emil’s mug, and then he nodded. “Yes. But it’s okay because I’ve been doing this a lot longer than you.”

Emil hid a laugh. “Why don’t you sit with me...if you’re allowed.”

Matty’s eyes cut to Dahlia’s abandoned mug. “But...”

“Oh, she had to take a work call. She’ll be gone half an hour, and she won’t mind if she gets back early.”

Matty looked over his shoulder. “I usually sit over there.”

“Oh, I—”

“But it’s okay to be different sometimes,” he interrupted. “You can sit down and wait for me.”

“Got it, boss,” Emil said with a small laugh and resumed his work as Matty got his paints and then took Dahlia’s seat. “Do you know what you’re going to do today?”

“A dog,” Matty said. He started working on a sketch with a blunt pencil, his tongue poking between his teeth.

“Very cool. Mine’s...I don’t know what.”

“Abstract,” Matty said, glancing over. “I don’t like abstract art, but yours might be pretty when it’s done.”

Emil’s cheeks burned a little. “You don’t pull punches, do you?”

“I don’t know what that means,” Matty admitted. “But I don’t really care about that.”

Emil choked on a laugh. “Good to know. Well...I’m happy to see you. I really didn’t want to do this by myself.”

Matty looked up, narrowing his eyes. “Why didn’t you ask Renzo? I know he likes you. And he doesn’t work because school’s on vacation. Why did you ask a girl? Is she your girlfriend?”

“She’s my best friend,” Emil said, then hesitated because he wasn’t sure it was his place to explain to Matty his arrangement with Renzo. “I would have asked your brother, but I didn’t want to bother him. I’m not sure if he’s ready for a date like this.”

Matty began to paint the outline of his dog, sighing quietly to himself. He muttered a few things Emil didn’t understand, and then he looked up. “He’s sad. He’s sad a lot.”

“I can tell. But dating and getting hurt can make dating in the future really complicated,” he said.

“Did you get hurt?”

Emil shook his head. “Not like that. I’ve never had a boyfriend before.”

“Renzo’s a good boyfriend. John said he was a bad husband, but he’s a bad, bad liar.” Matty’s voice had a sharp edge to it that Emil recognized in himself. He remembered that feeling of fresh hurt. Of not being able to think about his mother without his anger burning like acid against the back of his tongue.

Emil finally nodded. “I’ve known some not-so-great people too.”

Matty stared at him for a long beat. “Are you good?”

“I’m trying,” Emil confessed.

Matty sighed. “Well. Nobody’s perfect.”

Emil blinked, then laughed. “You’re right. That’s a pretty good philosophy.”

Smiling, Matty nodded, then turned back to his mug. “Can you be quiet for a little while? I need to concentrate.”

“You got it,” Emil said, and for the first time in so long he couldn’t remember, the silence was comforting.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

RENZO PLATED THE BURGERS, then turned off the fan above the stove, waiting for the last bits of smoke from the cast iron to filter out the window. The kitchen was chilly from the last storm that had swept over them, but it felt oddly refreshing as he stood with his arms braced against the sink, staring out across the lawn at the empty house.

Emil hadn't been there since the fire, not even to clean up the ashes. Snow had blanketed the ground, so Renzo couldn't see the remnants of what he'd burned, but if he blinked, he could see Emil's face through the flames. He remembered the pain in the man's eyes and the way he trembled a little as the last vestiges of his mom burned to ashes on the stolen wood.

They hadn't spoken since the night Emil played Santa, but every evening, he crawled into bed with the ghost of Emil's skin against his lips. Somehow, when Emil kissed his hand by the skating rink with Christmas music blaring on old speakers above them, it had been more intimate than when Renzo had Emil beneath him in his bed.

Not that he didn't want a repeat of that, but the idea of having more scared the absolute shit out of him. He knew it wasn't realistic to run from every man who made him want all because his ex was a terrible man, and he also knew it wasn't fair to assume that every person who wanted him was a narcissistic monster.

But it was hard to let that go.

No one had made him want to try harder than Emil did, but the risk felt like a giant canyon that stood between him and happiness, and he had no idea how to begin crossing it.

Passing a hand down his face, he reached forward and slammed the window shut before setting the plates at the table and then walking to the base of the stairs. “Dinner!”

There was a beat, and then Matty called back, “I have to wash my hands!”

“Actually wash your hands, and no screwing around with one more game!” Renzo called back, then walked to the fridge to get drinks before sitting down. He tapped his fingers on the table, counting the seconds, and three minutes went by before he heard Matty’s feet on the stairs.

His brother was freshly showered and in gingerbread man pajama pants with a hoodie. He looked suddenly young, like the fresh-faced boy he’d been in middle school when Renzo had been taking care of him more than their parents had been able to.

It had been such a strange time—Renzo trying to picture what life was going to be like for Matty. His path would never be the same as Renzo’s, but that hadn’t mattered. He just wanted his siblings to be happy. Camille found her joy in traveling whenever she could get away, and Matty found his in his friends and in knowing that the people in his life gave him the respect and independence he’d demanded.

And that was maybe what scared Renzo the most. Emil had been kind—more than kind—when he was playing Santa. He hadn’t patronized or dismissed Matty for his Christmas wish. But that was a single moment, and Renzo had watched John woo everyone in his family before everything changed.

“Why are you frowning?”

Renzo blinked, then rubbed at his left eyebrow. “Was I?”

“Are you sad?” Matty pulled his orange juice close and started to gulp it down until Renzo cleared his throat. He offered a sheepish smile. “It’s my favorite.”

“Mhm. And you’re going to be sad if you finish it all before you’re done eating. I put Tajin on your burger. You’ll get thirsty.”

Matty lit up, and he grabbed his burger off his plate, stuffing half of it into his mouth, laughing when Renzo kicked him. “Whaa—”

“I’m so bad at the Heimlich, dude. Take small bites.”

Matty looked a little sheepish as he chewed, then swallowed, then took a delicate bite next. “I painted mugs with your friend today.”

Renzo blinked. “My friend? You know I’m a total loser with no friends.”

Matty shook his head as he took another sip of his juice. “The pretty one. Santa.”

For a second, Renzo thought he was going to swallow his tongue, and he had to force himself to take breaths. “Emil?”

“That’s a weird name. I think I spelled it right on the internet, and it said it was Norway.”

“Norwegian,” Renzo absently corrected. “I think he was born there. How, uh...how did you see him? Why did you paint mugs together?”

“He was with a pretty girl. But she wasn’t his date. He said she wasn’t his date.”

Renzo’s cheeks heated with confusion and something like jealousy. It was absurd, of course. He had no right at all since he was the one who put restrictions on Emil, but God, for some reason, it hurt. “Was she nice?”

Matty shrugged. “She had to take a business phone call. She’s a businesswoman.”

Renzo had a thousand questions he knew his brother didn’t have answers to, so he picked at his burger as he tried to refocus. “Was he nice to you?”

Matty rolled his eyes. “If he was mean, I would pour paint on his head, even if I might get fired.”

Renzo fixed him with a stare. “That doesn’t answer my question.”

Matty laughed again. “No. I didn’t pour paint on him, which means that he was really nice to me. He sat with me and reminded me that he’s not Santa because that’s what I called him. But duhhh. I knew that.”

“Mhm,” Renzo answered. The burger bite went down thick and dry like he was eating sawdust. He chased it down with water, then cleared his throat. “So. What did you talk about?”

Matty grinned wider. “It’s a secret.”

“Matty, oh my God. Tell me, or I’m going to wait ’til you’re streaming and then come sit on your lap and embarrass you in front of all your followers,” Renzo threatened.

Matty laughed harder. “I told him you have a big, big crush on him. That you like his butt.”

Renzo felt panic race through him, which was absurd considering Emil already knew that. Considering the things he’d done to Emil’s ass, anyway. But for some reason, he felt like some middle school kid being outed to the hot guy everyone had a crush on.

“Tell me you’re joking.”

Matty stared for a long time, but his brother had never really had much of a poker face, and he broke into a fit of giggles. “Fine. I didn’t tell him that. We just talked. I think he likes you. He got all funny when I was talking about you, like how you are right now.”

Renzo slapped a hand over his face. “Thanks, cupid.”

“What’s cupid?”

“A little baby angel that wears a diaper and shoots love arrows into people’s asses,” Renzo said.

Matty sucked in a breath. “Swear jar!”

“Later. I’m glad he was nice to you.”

Matty’s expression went from teasing to soft, and he nodded, picking at the roasted green beans on his plate. “He

was a lot nicer than John. John was nice, but it was really pretend. He said all those good things, but his tone was like a bad guy from the movies.”

Matty had told him that too, but Renzo just thought his brother was jealous that someone else was getting his time. Fuck, there was so much to regret. But he knew that wasn't why Matty was telling him all of this.

“Maybe I should call him.”

Matty's eyes went wide with excitement. “Can he come over? Can he have a sleepover? Milla won't mind, I promise.”

“Oh, you and I both know she will. And we both know you'll spill the beans, and she'll yell at me,” Renzo said, but he was grinning now.

“I'll zip it,” Matty said, making a closing motion over his lips. “Please pleaseeeee.”

Renzo drummed his fingers on the table, making a big show of thinking, but in all honesty, his resolve was starting to crack. Maybe he wasn't ready for big steps, but they'd already fucked. They'd already crossed lines. “We could invite him over for New Year's Eve.”

Matty jumped up, almost knocking over what was left in his cup. “I could make bibble!”

“Gross. But okay,” Renzo said. “I'm not promising anything though. He might have plans.”

“He doesn't,” Matty said.

Renzo swallowed heavily. “He told you that?”

Matty shook his head. “He looked lonely. Lonely people don't have plans.”

And hell if that didn't stab him in the heart because he'd seen Emil's eyes and knew that was absolutely true.

Renzo's heart felt like it was trying to escape his chest by crawling up his throat as he held his finger over Emil's contact. He could remember exactly what the man sounded like. His laugh, his scoff, and the sounds he made when Renzo pulled an orgasm out of him. And fuck, he wanted a repeat so badly he could taste it.

But he felt a little like a coward because before, it had been fucking the hot stranger with sad eyes. Now, he liked the guy. And that's how problems started.

He'd made a promise to Matty though, and Renzo wasn't in a habit of breaking those, so he shrugged on his thickest hoodie and bolted down the stairs, slamming the patio door and leaning over the railing.

The frigid night air would at least keep him distracted and probably stop him from getting all hard when he heard Emil's voice, which would have to be enough for now. His fingers felt half-numb as he turned his phone screen on again and finally tapped his thumb over Emil's name.

There was silence for a long time, like the phone signal was deliberately trying to fuck with him, and then finally, it connected with a hollow ring.

"Renzo?"

His breath caught in his chest, and it took him a second to speak. "Yeah. Hey. Hi."

Emil laughed, the sound kind of thick and sleepy. "Hi."

"Oh my God, did I wake you up?"

"Mm, yep," Emil said, then groaned, and Renzo assumed he was stretching his gorgeous, lithe body. "And I actually appreciate that. I was only supposed to be resting my eyes."

"That's the literal oldest excuse in the book for a nap," Renzo said.

"Mhm," Emil rumbled. "That's why I had so many detentions in school."

Renzo laughed and shook his head. It was damn near impossible to picture Emil as a student, but he had no trouble

believing he was the hot, rich jock that everyone wanted to fuck and no one got the chance to. Renzo would have quietly pined away, and Emil would have never known he existed.

“You’re quiet,” Emil said. “Is something wrong? Or are you calling to yell at me for bothering your brother at his workplace? Because I swear I didn’t know he—”

“No,” Renzo interrupted. “Matty was really excited to see you again.”

Emil let out a puff of air. “Oh, good. He was so sweet. My friend dragged me in there and then abandoned me two seconds later, so I had to sit there with my mug all by myself like some loser.”

Renzo choked on a laugh. “Mug painting doesn’t make you a loser. It makes you a nerd, and before you even say it, those are not the same thing.”

“I would never,” Emil said.

“Right. Well.” Renzo coughed, then shivered at the lungful of too-cold air. “I was calling to, uh, invite you over for the New Year.”

Emil was silent for so long Renzo started to regret speaking. “You want me to come over?”

“Yes.” It made Renzo smile how good it felt to say that one single word and mean it. “I’d love for you to come over. We’re going to cook dinner and light a bonfire, then watch the fireworks.”

“Do I get a kiss at midnight?” Emil asked very softly.

Renzo’s face went hot. “I don’t know. I want to say yes, but...”

“I don’t know either,” Emil admitted. “But I really liked kissing you.”

Renzo blew out a puff of air, watching the steam tumble from his lips. He glanced up at the window to Matty’s room and saw the soft yellow glow from his nightlight, and he knew he was fast asleep. “I’m going to head inside.”

“Do you want me to let you go?” Emil asked.

Renzo swallowed heavily. “Where are you right now?”

“My new condo. I moved in yesterday.”

“Alone?”

There was a long pause, and then Emil breathed out, “Yeah.”

Reaching for the door, Renzo slipped inside and headed up the stairs as quietly as he could. He skipped the one that always creaked, then darted into his room and shut the door with a soft click. The lock in the door handle turned easily between his fingers, and he glanced at his bed and felt hot all over.

“Renzo?”

“Still here. Sorry. I, uh...I was...thinking.”

“Yeah?” Emil asked. His voice had gone an octave lower, the sound of it a little rougher. “Talk to me.”

“I’m in my room now. Matty’s asleep. And I think I miss you,” Renzo admitted.

“*Do* you?”

Renzo laughed as he peeled away his sweatshirt and let it fall to the floor. His pants followed, and he glanced down at his tented boxers, though he wasn’t brave enough to touch himself yet. The sheets were cold as he slid beneath the covers and lay back, staring up at the motionless ceiling fan.

“I’m in my bed. There’s one pillow here that still kind of smells like you,” Renzo admitted. He’d moved it to the corner, afraid to touch it in case he lost the scent of Emil sooner.

Emil groaned. “Yeah. I remember your bed.”

“I wasn’t expecting you that night,” Renzo told him. He pulled the covers up high, then rolled to face the window. “It scared the hell out of me how badly I wanted you.”

“It scares me how badly I still want you,” Emil admitted in a soft whisper. And then, a second later, he was groaning.

“Are you touching yourself?” Renzo asked, gripping his own dick and giving it a single stroke. Renzo squeezed his eyes shut as sparks of pleasure rushed through him.

“I am,” Emil admitted.

“Do you wish it was me?”

Emil gave a small laugh. “Yeah. I do.”

“Then it is,” Renzo told him.

He swallowed heavily, scared because he’d never done anything like this before, and he didn’t want to fuck it up. He wanted Emil too much, and although they’d only slept together once and seen each other twice, Renzo knew the man was precious to him.

“Too much?” Renzo asked into the prolonged silence.

Emil cleared his throat. “No. But you need to tell me what to do.”

Renzo let out a small laugh. “Really? You had no trouble bossing me around before.” He gripped his dick a little tighter and gave it a single stroke.

“Trust me, I wasn’t,” Emil said, “I just wanted you to feel good.”

“Oh, I felt amazing, sweetheart,” Renzo told him very quietly. “You were the best I’ve ever had, and I promise I’m not just saying that.”

Emil’s voice was tight and almost suspicious when he spoke again. “You don’t need to lie. My ego isn’t that fragile.”

“Hmm.” Renzo winced and fell silent for a beat. He wasn’t surprised at all that Emil didn’t believe him. It was likely the man got very few complaints, but it wasn’t likely he got very many compliments either. And Renzo knew all too well what that was like.

“I don’t think your ego is fragile, but the rest of you might be,” he finally said. “Coming from a man who was gaslit and dicked around by his ex, trust me when I say I’d rather hurt

your feelings than lie to you. I've thought about you every goddamn night since you left."

Emil grunted softly again, his breath coming in quiet pants.

"Fuck, I can hear you." Renzo's hand sped up on his own dick, and he knew he wasn't going to last long. Being in his room—in his bed—where he'd had Emil last, Renzo couldn't help but remember what it felt like to have him pulsing around his cock. Emil grunted again, like maybe he was thinking the same thing.

"Slow down," Renzo ordered.

Emil whined, but he gave a soft "Mhm."

"Good. You're really, really fucking good for me, do you know that?"

Emil groaned. "Am I?"

"Yes, gorgeous. You are." Renzo opened his eyes and stared up at the ceiling, releasing his dick to gently cup his balls. He rolled them in his fingers, enjoying the softer, easier waves of pleasure from it. "You like that, don't you, sunshine? You like me telling you how good you are. Gets you off, doesn't it?"

"God," Emil gasped. "Please let me go faster."

"Mm, no," Renzo said. God, he wanted to see him. It took all of his self-control not to beg for FaceTime so he could watch the man fall apart. "In fact, let go of your dick."

Emil whined.

"Don't argue," Renzo said sternly. "Let your dick go now."

It was almost like he could hear Emil's hand releasing himself as he grunted with the effort to obey.

Renzo grinned. "Perfect. Fuck, you are perfect. Reach below your balls and touch your hole. Tell me how it feels."

"This is embarrassing," Emil complained, but the way his breath hitched, Renzo could tell he was doing it.

“It shouldn’t be. No one’s watching. The only thing happening right now is that I’m listening to you and getting off to how fucking hot you are.”

“Fuck,” Emil hissed. He let out a trembling breath. “I...it’s dry.”

“Lick your finger and play with yourself,” Renzo ordered. He squeezed his balls a little tighter to keep himself under better control, then gripped his dick and rubbed his thumb around the head. It was so sensitive he could barely keep back his moan.

“I...God. I’ve never,” Emil stuttered, then grunted. “It’s in. Holy fuck, it’s in.”

“It’s hot, isn’t it?” Renzo murmured. “And really fucking tight.”

Emil groaned. “Wish it was you.”

“I know. I want nothing more than to spread you open and shove my tongue deep inside that pretty hole,” Renzo told him. He closed his eyes, helpless to do anything except picture the way Emil would lie beneath him, pliant and open and ready. Renzo could see him writhing against the sheets, his whole body begging for release but willing to be patient. “Someday, I want to tie you down, torment your pretty ass, and force you to come all over yourself completely untouched.”

“Oh fuck, *fuck*,” Emil gasped.

“You’re close now, aren’t you?” Renzo asked. His voice filled with wonder as he heard how close Emil was to cracking. “Take your finger out and hold your dick.”

“Mm. Mm. Okay,” Emil managed.

Renzo followed suit, stroking himself hard and tight. “Want you to come with me, okay, baby? Can you do that?”

“M’so close,” Emil slurred. “Can’t hold it.”

“Don’t,” Renzo said, now breathless. He was seconds away from tumbling over the edge. His arm burned as his hand

flew over his thick cock, and between one breath and the next, he let go.

He released in hot spurts all over his knuckles as his eyes slammed shut and his face went hot, and he could hear Emil crying out, his voice muffled like he was gasping into his pillow. Renzo's grip loosened when he became too sensitive, and he finally let go, swiping his clean hand over his face to clear away sweat that was beaded over his brow.

“Renzo?” Emil asked, his voice a raspy whisper.

“I'm here. I'm sorry, sunshine. Got a little carried away.”

Emil laughed low and deep in his chest. “Please, for the love of God, don't be sorry. That was amazing. I don't think I've ever come that hard.”

Renzo grinned and, in spite of a little warning voice in his head, told him, “Oh, sweetness. Just you wait.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AS EMIL STOOD BACK for the deliverymen to carry the rest of his furniture into the condo, he felt a small burst of fear, like maybe they knew what he'd been up to the night before. He'd showered, but he hadn't washed his sheets, and God, what if they could smell all the come, because there had been *so* fucking much.

Of course, he also knew that was not only irrational but ridiculous. He would never see these men again, so who gave a shit if they knew he'd been talked into orgasm by his would-be lover? But Emil had never been quite able to shake that need to care what people thought about him.

Before he'd been taken from his mother, he'd been a people-pleaser. Making her happy was the only way he could get through the day, and the habit had been hard to break when he left. After that, he dulled the urge to just say yes to everything with alcohol, but even then, his coping skills left something to be desired.

Not only had he battered the fuck out of his liver, but people used him for years for what they could get out of him.

Some nights, he missed the booze, but he'd never been more grateful for a clear head than when Renzo called.

He hadn't been expecting it. At least, not so soon, and not for what Renzo wanted. The invite to spend New Year's Eve together had been enough of a shock. Then Renzo had pulled Emil apart with a few carefully timed words, which had him flayed open and spilling some of his innermost desires.

And he didn't need to be a psychotherapist to know why Emil craved praise. Anyone with basic social sense would have seen his desire to be told he was doing well from space. But he'd always worried that someone would notice and use it to their advantage.

Renzo, it seemed, only wanted to use it to make Emil feel good, and that was...a lot. Which might have been the understatement of the year.

“Where did you want the bed frame?”

Emil blinked and realized the poor fuckers who had brought his things in were waiting for him. He waved a hand toward his bedroom door, which sat half-open, and he flushed. His mattress was stripped down, but the soiled sheets were in a pile by the bathroom door.

“There's fine. Uh. Thank you.”

The delivery guy gave him an odd look before directing his team, and Emil took that as a reprieve and hurried into his kitchen. It was still almost completely bare—Dahlia had promised to shop with him, but her week had been busy, and Christmas was two days away, which meant Emil was probably going to be full paper plates and microwave dinners.

It wasn't the worst way he'd ever spent a holiday, and definitely not the most lonely, but it was close.

Opening the fridge, he snagged a glass bottle of sparkling water, then headed for the terrace. The condo was small but expensive—a little splurge he hadn't thought twice about until Dahlia had laughed in his face. It was on the second floor and had a perfect view of the river, which looked stark black against the deep grey skies promising more snow.

He looked over at his fireplace, then snapped a photo of it, and without really thinking, he sent it to Renzo.

Emil: Know where I can find a lumberjack to help?

Emil: Please know I'm kidding. Though if you do know a place where I can buy already chopped wood, that would be great.

Emil jumped half a foot when his phone rang, and he saw Renzo's name on the screen. "Uh. I can also google," he said when he answered. "I didn't mean to interrupt your day."

Renzo laughed. "I'm a professor, so I get all the good holiday time off. Did I ever tell you that?"

Emil frowned. He couldn't remember, but saying no seemed like a safe bet. "I don't think so. What do you teach?"

"Science," Renzo said. "All that annoying nerdy shit. But you're not interrupting. I was sitting here debating about whether I wanted ham or roast beef for lunch."

"Why not both?"

"Because I don't mix lunch meats, you heathen," Renzo said with a sniff. A beat of silence passed, and then he said, "Are you alone?"

Emil looked through the terrace door and caught a glimpse of one of the men walking through with a small drill. "Delivery guys are here with some furniture."

"Oh. Did you need help setting it up?"

Emil flushed. "I, uh...I paid for the setup. I wouldn't even know where to begin."

Renzo sighed, but he didn't sound cruel. "Fair enough. I had to learn the hard way. My parents got all my dorm furniture from IKEA, and they handed me the little baggie of tools, wished me luck, then left."

Emil sucked in air through his teeth. "How'd you survive it?"

"Weed," Renzo said with a laugh. "Which I'll only admit to because I'm at my sister's place and not on campus, where my students might overhear. My roommate and I got really stoned, ordered Pizza Hut wings, and we worked until three in the morning."

“I bet it felt worth it,” Emil said. He wished he had something like that. Just a single, solitary memory of happiness. Nothing complicated. Just a couple of joints and some cheap bedroom furniture.

“I didn’t appreciate it until later, but yeah. Anyway, if you really want some wood, you’re more than welcome to come steal more. I have to pick up Matty this afternoon, but I’ll be home for a while.”

Emil hesitated. It felt like a dangerous offer, mostly because he wanted to read more into it, and he had no rights. Not even after what they’d done together on the phone.

“You’re overthinking it, sunshine,” Renzo said. “It’s just wood.”

“Double entendre intended?”

“I’ll think about it,” Renzo said, and Emil somehow knew he was grinning. “Want to pop by?”

He should say no. He *needed* to say no. “I think they’re almost done, so yeah. Need me to bring you anything?”

“Just your gorgeous face. You...do know that you don’t actually need to bring people things when you go see them, right?”

“That sounds like far too much logic for a Thursday afternoon,” Emil told him, finally smiling. He saw the delivery guys starting to pack up, and his heart sped up a few beats. “See you in twenty?”

“I’ll be waiting.”

That sounded like a promise, but before Emil could ask, the line went dead, and he was forced to slip his phone into his pocket before he did something like text him and ask and ruin the entire thing. Digging his wallet out of his pocket, he passed over a cash tip to the workers, then followed them out, locking his door behind him.

The place didn’t feel like home yet. It wasn’t some dream house that he’d fallen in love with at first sight. He’d just

gotten tired of touring apartments, and it was the best listing Delilah had at her disposal.

It felt like he was coming up with a new life motto: everything is good enough, which was better than the miserable shit-show it had been before.

Emil had mostly pulled himself out of his melancholy as he headed up the driveway to Renzo's. He deliberately kept his gaze off his mom's house, which had been sitting untouched since he'd had the thing gutted, but he could feel its presence almost like a living thing.

It had taken him years to stop hearing her voice whenever things got quiet, but every now and again, there were whispers telling him what a terrible son he'd been, lurking in all the shadows in his head. Sometimes, his mental stone walls were weak, and she crept out. And now that he wasn't using booze to keep her locked away, his defenses were weaker.

The prospect of seeing Renzo took most of that edge off though, and he pulled his car around the bend of the driveway. He came to a halt when he saw Renzo standing out by the chopping block once again, in the freezing winter air, with his shirt off.

This time, Emil let himself stare. He drank in the rippling muscles over Renzo's shoulders, and the way a small lock of hair fell over his forehead, and how his glasses glinted just right in the foggy beam of sun filtering down from the clouds. Renzo swiped his hand over his forehead, leaning on the ax as he waited for Emil to get out of the car, and after a beat, he did.

He still hadn't taken Renzo's advice and grabbed a coat, so he wrapped his arms tight around his middle and jogged over with a raised brow. "Do you have a second job as a lumberjack?"

Renzo sighed and shook his head. "Someone has to take care of you softies." His smile dropped away when Emil gave

a giant shiver, and he dropped the ax, stepping over to the woodpile, where he snagged a very thick, very heavy grey hoodie. “I swear to God,” he said, shoving it over Emil’s head without warning, “it’s like you’re trying to die of hypothermia.”

“Says the man out here in seventeen-degree weather with his shirt off,” Emil groused. He pulled a face when the hoodie sleeves rucked up his button-up ones, and he shook his arms hard to get them to fall back down.

Renzo just grinned at him as he stepped back. “My core temperature is hot as hell right now. This is the only workout I get most days.”

“Well, it’s working for you,” Emil said, eyeing him again.

Renzo flushed gently and gave Emil a slight shove toward the house. “Go inside. I’m almost done here, and then I’ll come make some hot chocolate.”

“What is it with you and that stuff?” Emil demanded as he started walking.

“Stop complaining and be grateful!” Renzo called just as Emil grabbed the door handle and let himself in.

The place smelled like the holidays—candles with cinnamon and pine. He took a deep breath of it as the warmth from the floor heaters seeped into his clothes, and it wasn’t long until the sweater was too much. The last thing he wanted to do was take it off, but he didn’t have permission to keep it.

Being there was gift enough.

He peeled it away and hung it on the back of the chair before he wandered into the kitchen. He loved the house. It was old with obvious original flooring he hadn’t paid very close attention to the first night he was there.

The walls and shelves were covered in photos and trinkets and books that told the history of that little family, and Emil felt an ache deep inside him he hadn’t expected. Family had always been a disappointment in his reality.

Parental love and affection were things that existed in novels and on TV, and everyone in his life from before had the same damn experience. Even Victor, who had learned love and kindness in spite of the way he'd been brought up.

But as he stared at a family photo hanging over a shelf in the kitchen, Emil realized that maybe they were the fucked-up ones. Or maybe Renzo was just luckier than anyone else Emil had ever met.

“Fucking fuck,” Renzo’s voice called from the foyer. “And I’m so glad I can say that without having to give up cash.”

Emil peered around the corner of the kitchen. “Cash?”

“My brother hates swearing, so he put a swear jar on the counter.” Renzo jutted his chin toward it, and Emil followed, chuckling when he saw it was a mug that was very clearly painted at his shop. “I’m going broke because I can’t watch my mouth until I’m in the classroom. And the kids are a lot worse than I am.”

“You let the kids swear at you?” Emil asked as he watched Renzo snag a T-shirt from a small laundry pile, and he covered up his bare chest. Emil was only a little disappointed. Renzo was gorgeous no matter what he did or didn’t have on.

Smiling, Renzo shrugged as he breezed past him and went for the stove. “My kids are all in their late teens and early twenties.” He glanced over his shoulder and laughed at Emil’s shock. “Where did you think I worked?”

Emil flopped his arms helplessly. He hadn’t really given it much thought. He figured maybe middle school because Renzo’s patience seemed infinite. “Uh. Younger than that, I guess.”

Renzo laughed. “God help any child under the age of eighteen that comes into my classroom. I’m a complete asshole, and I have no energy to try and spare the feelings of some child.”

Emil’s eyes widened. That should have been awful, but it was strangely hot. He sat down on one of the barstools and

watched as Renzo moved through the kitchen, putting together a bunch of ingredients into a pot.

“So, this isn’t a powdered mix?” Emil asked.

Renzo spun, a horrified look on his face. “You’re joking, right? You’re, like, European. There’s no way you’d settle for that shit.”

Emil covered his face and laughed against his palm. “I’ve never given a single fuck about hot chocolate, Renzo.”

“Well, you should,” he said with a sniff. “There’s an art form to it. And believe me when I say this will change your life.”

Emil’s smile widened. “I’m glad I get to be here to observe.”

Renzo gave a little sway of his hips, which made Emil’s mouth go dry, and he tried and failed to keep his cock from tenting his pants. Making some child’s hot drink shouldn’t have been sexy either, but the way Renzo moved was like watching an expert dance. He added everything to the pot, and as he started stirring, he shot a wink over his shoulder, and Emil’s face erupted with heat.

“Stop.”

“Nope,” Renzo said. “You’re gonna beg to fuck my brains out after you taste this.”

Emil choked on his own tongue a bit. “That’s a bold claim.”

“I know.” Renzo grinned as he spun back toward the stove and carefully lifted the pot, pouring the chocolate into two mugs. “And you’ll see why in a second.”

Emil said nothing, half-drunk on watching Renzo just move. He had a kind of grace about him that wasn’t traditional, and somehow, that made him even more beautiful. He wanted to savor it, to hold it close and let it sear into his brain because with the way his life was, he had no reason to believe this wasn’t temporary.

“Okay. Don’t gulp it. It’s made for sipping. And I take gifts in the form of chocolate-covered fruit baskets and massage oils,” Renzo told him, pushing a mug close.

Emil looked down and saw it was very likely something Matty had painted. It was a countryside with a small dog running off in the distance. “Was it your brother’s dog?”

“Hmm?” Renzo frowned, looking up from where he was blowing on his chocolate. “Oh! Uh, no. We’ve never had a dog. My parents weren’t convinced Matty would be able to take care of it on his own, and they were too old, and my sister’s horrifically allergic.”

Emil brought the mug toward his face and took a deep breath. The scent was very rich—almost bitter in a way—and there was something underneath it. Something a little spicy. “Has Matty ever wanted to live on his own?”

Renzo’s face did something complicated, and he let out a short breath. “I don’t mean to be a dick, but—”

“None of my business,” Emil said immediately. “I get it. I’m sorry. I’m still learning the whole proper social etiquette thing.” He said it like a joke, but Renzo’s face fell like he felt sorry for him, and Emil hated it, even if he deserved it.

It was pathetic to not know how to talk to someone without being an offensive asshole. And it was worse having to admit it.

He swallowed heavily, then brought the chocolate to his lips and took a long sip. At first, it was just rich and heavy against his tongue. Then, after a beat, it was spicy. The warm burn hit him in the back of the throat, then all the way down to his gut.

“Wow,” he breathed out.

Renzo’s grin widened. “See?”

Emil took another sip. He wouldn’t be able to have much, but Renzo had been right about one thing: it was the best hot chocolate he’d ever tasted.

He couldn't say it made him want to fuck Renzo's brains out, but that was mostly because he'd been wanting to do that from the first time he saw Renzo outside chopping wood with abs all on display. And he doubted a mug of hot chocolate—no matter how good—could change how badly he wanted the man.

He dabbed the corners of his lips with his fingers, then set the mug down. "So."

Renzo looked at him, and their gazes locked, almost like a challenge. "My room?"

Emil coughed. "Oh. You..."

With a furious blush, Renzo looked away. "I mean, yes, I want to. But it wasn't like I expected it. I'm...shit. I'm sorry."

Emil was on his feet and walking around the counter before Renzo could get too deep into his embarrassment. Grabbing him by the hips, Emil pinned his backside and leaned in, pressing a sucking kiss to the place his pulse was hammering.

"I want you," he murmured.

Renzo's head tipped to the side, and he buried his hand in Emil's hair. "Yeah?"

"Yes. I've been thinking about you since I left here. I loved the chocolate, but it was completely unnecessary." Emil kissed his neck again, then added, "I just didn't want to cross any lines that you drew."

Renzo let out a soft sigh and scratched his nails over Emil's scalp, making him feel soft and melty. "I was trying to protect myself. You make me feel a lot of things that terrify me."

"I get it," Emil told him. Not because he'd been there, but he knew what Renzo had been through. And God help him, but Emil couldn't ever promise not to be that guy because he was still trying to figure out what kind of person he was.

The idea of hurting Renzo made him want to tear his own face off, but he had no idea how to believe in himself either.

For a long time, it seemed like every choice he made left good people in pain.

“Come upstairs,” Renzo whispered.

Emil pulled back and touched the side of Renzo’s jaw with the tips of his fingers, drawing their gazes together. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m not ready for...for more. For anything serious. But I want you,” Renzo told him.

That hurt a little. Emil couldn’t help it, but he was also beyond grateful for Renzo setting those boundaries because he wasn’t ready either. But there was no way he could deny himself Renzo’s body if he was offering it so freely.

He leaned in, answering him with a searing hot, sloppy kiss that had Renzo groaning and bucking hard against him. “Upstairs,” Renzo repeated.

Their fingers linked together, and Emil let Renzo take the lead, dragging him up the stairs and into the familiar bedroom he didn’t think he’d get to see again.

It was the same as he remembered—warm, small, slightly messy. It smelled like Renzo fresh from a shower, and Emil found himself wanting to dive headfirst into the blankets and burrow. Instead, he waited for the door to close, and then he backed Renzo against it, tilted his head up, and kissed him.

“Mm, sunshine. You taste like chocolate,” Renzo murmured against Emil’s lips.

He grinned and kissed him deeper, then moved to the hinge of his jaw and bit down on his earlobe before sinking teeth into the crook of his neck. Renzo shuddered and rocked forward, his thick erection tenting the front of his jeans.

Emil reached between them and cupped him, then dragged the heel of his hand over the outline of his lover’s erection. “Like that?” he asked when Renzo moaned.

Renzo’s eyes were closed, and he nodded almost frantically. “You make me feel...”

Emil waited for him to finish his sentence, but he didn't. Emil kissed him gently on the lips, trying to coax out the rest of his words. "Tell me," he whispered.

Renzo shook his head, and his cheeks were flushed with embarrassment. "It makes me sound...I don't know. Pathetic, I guess."

Emil cupped his cheek, but he couldn't get Renzo's eyes to open. "There's nothing you could say or do that would make me think you're pathetic. The only thing you've ever been—besides so hot I want to die," he said, just to make Renzo smile...and it worked, "is brave. And strong. And beautiful."

"You don't know me well enough to really think that," Renzo said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Emil stroked his thumb along the barely there wrinkles next to Renzo's left eye and waited until his lashes fluttered, and then his eyes opened. "Hello."

Renzo laughed softly. "Hello."

Licking his lips, Emil studied Renzo's face for a long moment, then shook his head. "You're right. I don't know you very well, but I know genuine people. And yes, my bar for honesty and kindness has been set pretty low," he added, making Renzo laugh again, "but that doesn't mean I can't tell the difference."

Renzo started to shake his head, but he stopped when Emil increased the pressure on his cheek. "I'm an okay person. People tend to paint me as some saint because I actually enjoy being with my brother, or because I'm a teacher, or...I don't know. I'm not some sexist shit-bag who argues that women don't belong in STEM or something. But I feel like those things are the bare minimum. And for the record, I *don't* always enjoy being with my brother."

Emil laughed. "That's because he's your brother. But I don't think you're a saint for loving him. Or for treating him like a person."

Renzo's face did something complicated—an expression Emil didn't recognize. It looked almost sad but also a little

grateful.

“Those aren’t the reasons I think those things about you,” Emil said.

Renzo closed his eyes in a slow blink. “Then what is it? And yes, I am fishing. I’m feeling really insecure. I didn’t expect to like you this much.”

Emil’s heart felt like it was beating double time, and he took a breath to try and calm his body down. Honesty was getting easier, but it would never be his first nature. Not when it left him showing his soft underbelly. “It’s the fact that you let me in. I know I don’t have all the details about you and your ex. But the fact that I’m here and you’re saying these things to me after what he put you through...” Emil trailed off with a shrug.

Renzo released a trembling sigh. “That’s what terrifies me. You’re doing all the things I wanted someone to do. You’re the person I’d been dreaming of for years, but I can’t...I won’t survive getting hurt again. Not like that.”

“You would,” Emil told him. “But if this is too much for you—”

“It is. But I don’t want you to go,” Renzo said. He grabbed Emil by the waist and dug his fingers in. The sensation was a strange cross between painful and ticklish, but he didn’t move. “Please don’t go.”

“I won’t.” He sealed his promise with a kiss, then laid his mouth to the side of Renzo’s neck and asked, “What do you want from me right now?”

“Show me how good it can be between us. Not just filthy. I want to see the rest. I want you to—” He cut himself off, but Emil heard the words that were unspoken.

I want you to make love to me.

A tiny piece of Emil wanted to run, but if he did, he’d never forgive himself.

So he stayed.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE ONLY WAY Renzo survived Emil being in his space was the fact that he allowed Renzo to take a moment without him having to fear that he'd run. He just kissed him and told him to take his time, and he didn't look upset that Renzo was slipping away into the bathroom to compose himself.

But the earth felt like it was tipping too far on its axis. It felt like the rotation had both sped up and slowed down and that gravity was shifting. Renzo told himself that it was just going to be some fun.

Yes, he had a crush, but those were hardly new.

He'd been wild about Oliver for the short time he'd known the guy before learning about Victor, and he'd even spent six months pining after the new barista at the coffee shop near Matty's work until the guy up and quit one day without notice. But Emil was different, and Renzo was starting to realize that it was more than just the fact that he wasn't like anyone Renzo had ever met before.

He wasn't foolish enough to think that it was fated or tragic enough to think they were star-crossed. But he *was* logical enough to admit that the only real problem was him getting in his own way. Emil could be something to him, but Renzo didn't know how to knock down that last bit of wall that he was using to protect himself.

Taking several deep breaths, almost to the point he felt like he was going to hyperventilate, he turned on the faucet and splashed water on his face. When he looked up, he grimaced.

His hair was a mess from the wind, his lips chapped from the cold, and he had chocolate on the corner of his mouth like he was some kind of toddler playing house with the neighbor.

He scrubbed it away and then stared at himself again, wondering what the hell a man like Emil saw in him.

He'd called Renzo beautiful, which was something Renzo had never heard from his ex. Hell, even when John had bothered to give him compliments, they always came with some sort of backhand.

'You're so cute, that's why I put up with you.'

'You take such good care of me, that's why I don't mind that you're awful in bed.'

That one had burrowed under his skin and made a home there because John had said it so fucking often Renzo had started to believe him. And it wasn't like he had a laundry list of past lovers he could fall back on for an ego boost.

Yet, Emil seemed not just into him but hungry for him, and Renzo didn't quite know what to do with himself. He didn't want to fuck up. He didn't want their first night to have been a fluke.

He really wasn't sure he'd be able to survive it still whole if Emil walked away from today with regret.

"Suck it up," he murmured to himself, then pawed around in his drawer for the condoms and lube. If he really did turn out to be nothing more than aggressively mediocre in bed, at least he'd have a tender ass to remember Emil by.

The thought almost made him want to cry, and he quickly squared his shoulders and walked out. There would be no better distraction than Emil's naked body. He'd deal with whatever else came after it was all over.

"So, is it a bad time to tell you that your walls are super thin and you're kind of loud when you talk to yourself?" Emil asked the moment he saw Renzo.

His mouth dropped open to reply, but he was instantly silenced, caught up in the pale, gorgeous expanse of Emil's

naked chest. He was leaning against the bed with one knee propped up on the mattress, and he had his slacks open in a wide V, his hand down the front of his boxers.

Renzo swallowed heavily, then forced himself to look up. “Sorry. What?”

Emil laughed a gorgeous, rumbling sound in his chest. “Come here, beautiful.”

Renzo moved like he was helpless to do anything except obey Emil’s command, and he didn’t stop until he was in front of his lover, feeling warm hands pushing his T-shirt up, spreading wide, long fingers over his chest.

“Can I take this off you?” Emil asked.

Renzo nodded silently, and he only shifted enough to be helpful as Emil peeled the fabric away from him and tossed it against the dresser. It hit the floor with a soft, dull thud, and Renzo tracked it with his gaze before looking back at Emil.

“Change your mind?” Emil asked.

Renzo shook his head, then forced his tongue to unstick from the roof of his mouth. “Sorry. I think I’m having some attack of self-worth.”

Emil’s brows dipped in a frown, and he used the tips of his fingers to trace lines over Renzo’s collarbones, then around his nipples, and over his abs. “Do you want to talk about it, or do you want me to distract you?”

“Distract me.” It was the easy answer, and probably the wrong one, but Renzo didn’t want to waste any more time. He only had a few hours before he had to hit pause on this and pick up Matty, and he couldn’t let himself be a mess.

It was too near Christmas, and Renzo had promised himself years ago he’d always let this time be magical. There was no room for personal crises or pain. Whatever else he was feeling, it could wait.

He turned his face up just in time for Emil to cradle it between both hands and take a kiss. This one was softer than before, painfully tender and deep. Their tongues moved in a

careful dance as Emil eased Renzo back onto the bed, and then his clever, wonderful hands moved to his waistband, popping the button and dragging the zipper down in a slow slide.

Emil's lips didn't leave his as he pulled the jeans down, laughing into the kiss as Renzo wriggled back and forth until they hit the ground. A moment later, he swallowed down Renzo's heavy moan when his hand dove into the slit of his boxers and pulled out his impossibly hard, aching cock.

"Yes," Emil coaxed as he began to stroke him. "Yeah. God, I love you like this. Do you know how responsive you are?"

Renzo blushed, his blood searing hot as it rose to the surface of his skin. He'd never been called that before. His ex once described him as a cold fish, and he wondered now if Emil was just different or if John had been lying the entire time.

"Renzo?"

He blinked and looked up to find Emil hovering over him a few inches, his brow furrowed again.

"Is something wrong? Feels like I lost you for a second."

"Never," Renzo promised. He shoved all thoughts of his ex away as he curled one hand around the back of Emil's neck and tugged him down. Their lips met, a little more frenzied this time, and it was far too easy to get lost in the sensation of being devoured as Emil slung a leg over his thighs and straddled him.

His boxers were silky and had to be expensive, and the sensation they created as his dick dragged against them was almost too much. "I need...something."

"Anything," Emil promised.

Renzo pulled at the elastic and let it snap against Emil's waist. "Off. Please. I need to get fucked. I need you to just...to please..." He was losing his words.

Emil just nodded, like he could read all the lines of silence, and he quickly sat back, pulling and tugging until they were

both naked, spread out on the cool sheets with the comforter bunched up above their heads.

Renzo squirmed until Emil seized his wrists, and the second he pinned them above Renzo's head, he went completely still. It was like Emil had hit a button on his body, draining the will to move—but in the best way. The only thing left was the subtle twitch in his hips and the way his chest heaved with every breath.

“Better?” Emil asked.

Renzo nodded, his eyes still a little wide and wild. “I don't know what's wrong with me.”

“Nothing,” Emil said immediately, then leaned down and captured his mouth in a searing kiss. “There's absolutely nothing wrong with you. You're so fucking responsive. So perfect.”

Renzo's eyes slipped closed, and he groaned loudly because the truth tripping off Emil's tongue was too raw and too real. He wasn't sure he could take it because he wasn't sure he'd believe it the moment Emil was gone again. But there was no place for those thoughts right then.

“Need you,” he murmured.

“You have me.” That was also honest, almost like a promise that was too soon for him to make. But Renzo hoarded those three words behind the beat of his heart. Emil kissed him again, moving from his lips to his jaw to his neck.

As Renzo lost himself to the sensation of Emil's tender mouth, he heard the snick of the lube cap opening and then two fingers toying with his hole. Renzo's body twitched and tensed, but Emil remained more patient with him than anyone had ever been.

He toyed with him—played with him, a soft push against the taut ring of muscle until Renzo breathed and relaxed and let him inside. Emil groaned when he slipped in to the first knuckle, then let out a shuddering exhale as Renzo's body allowed him to push deeper.

“So fucking tight. God, you're so fucking tight, baby.”

The shift in their power balance was odd and profound, Renzo realized. The first night, he'd been the bossy one, and Emil had been nervous and petrified. But now, Renzo lay not only helpless and bound by Emil's powerful hands, but he liked it. He wanted to let Emil drag every inch of pleasure from his skin like he had no other choice but to submit to him.

"Tell me you're okay," Emil whispered.

Renzo realized he'd tensed up again, and he quickly nodded, taking breaths until his body melted against his lover's. "This is new for me."

Emil pulled back to look at him, his mouth puffy and red and so soft. Renzo wished he had use of his hands to touch it, but he was also grateful he didn't. "It's new for me too. And if it's too much..."

"It isn't. I think I...I think I need this. I've never just let myself go like this. It's a little scary, but I trust you."

Something cracked in Emil's face. His eyes went a little watery, and then he surged in and took Renzo's mouth in a kiss that made his toes curl. "You're amazing. I can't get over how amazing you are." Emil started pumping his fingers faster, deeper, searching until they hit that spot inside him that made Renzo's back arch, his lips parted on a soft cry. "That's it. Fuck. Look at you, Jesus," Emil babbled, his voice strained like he was the one getting fucked.

"Need you inside me. Fucking please, please get inside me," Renzo begged. He pulled his hands from Emil's grasp and curled them both into his hair, tugging hard, forcing him into a biting kiss.

Emil nodded frantically, his body trembling just a little as he pawed around for the condom, using his knees to shove Renzo's legs further apart. Renzo fell back against the mattress, gripping the sheets above his head as Emil settled into the wide V between his thighs, and he closed his eyes because if he watched Emil slip inside him, he'd lose it.

He was already too close to the edge, and he wanted to savor this. He had no idea what would come after, and if he

only had this one moment to be selfish, he needed it to last.

“Ready for me?” Emil asked.

Renzo swallowed against a dry throat. “I feel like I’ve been ready my entire life.” He meant that in a thousand different ways, and maybe Emil realized that because he cupped his hand around the back of Renzo’s neck and dragged him close—their mouths parted, panting against each other as Emil positioned his cock and then slowly sank inside.

Renzo felt like the entire world was shrinking down to the points he and Emil were touching. The press of soft, spit-slick lips, hands somewhere between cruel and tender, and the thick cock stretching Renzo to the point he didn’t know if he wanted to scream or beg. Or maybe both.

He clenched down around Emil as he gave another thrust, and Emil bowed his head forward, groaning so deep Renzo could feel the rumble of it along his skin. “More,” Emil demanded.

Renzo clenched again as Emil began to thrust harder, deeper, pushing his thighs up higher until they burned. Renzo gripped the sheets as tightly as he could for leverage, and when Emil thrust again, Renzo met him with the same force.

The sound of skin against skin was so wildly erotic Renzo was pretty sure he was going to shoot his load without more touch than the friction of Emil’s body against him. He forced his eyes open, and he immediately met Emil’s gaze. His eyes were red, feverish, searching Renzo’s face like he was afraid of what he might find there.

So Renzo kissed him. He was half out of his mind with the way Emil’s angle was nailing his prostate, but the only thing that mattered right then was making sure Emil knew that he was perfect. That everything he’d done up to that moment was better than Renzo thought possible.

“Okay?” Emil whispered.

“There are no words for how okay I am,” Renzo managed with a strained laugh. He let go of the sheets and curled his fingers into the back of Emil’s soft hair. “You’re amazing.”

“That’s my line,” Emil grunted as his cock thickened. Fuck, he was close too. “I never want to stop. I want to just move in here and let my dick live in your ass.”

Renzo burst into laughter, Emil chuckling along with him, and the motion made the pleasure so much fucking better. God, had he ever done this during sex? He knew the answer, and he hated it, but it also felt strange and almost special that the first time sex was truly good was with this man.

Emil pulled back and leaned in, nuzzling Renzo’s jaw with his nose. “Going to come?”

“Yeah,” Renzo muttered. He released his other hand and managed to slide it in between their bodies. “Fuck me hard, lovely. Please.”

Emil’s eyes slammed shut as he nodded, and then he gripped the sheets beside Renzo’s head and did exactly as he was told. His hips pulled back and slammed forward, sending the headboard crashing into the wall. Renzo’s back arched, and Emil managed to get a hand under him, changing the angle again, and somehow, it was even better.

He tried to form words like *God*, and *fuck*, and *please*, but the only thing he could manage was a stuttered moan as he finally curled his fingers around himself. And in a single stroke, on the edge of a shattered breath, he let go.

His vision whited out as he spurted between them, soaking his own chest hair, come smearing against Emil’s heated skin as Emil pinned him back to the bed with his entire body. Renzo lost time as he gave in to pleasure and sensation, and somewhere in the crashing waves, he felt Emil thicken, heard him gasp, and felt the heat of his orgasm as it exploded into the condom.

Time didn’t stop, but it felt like it stuttered through a few seconds before Renzo came back to himself, and he took a breath, pinned by the weight of Emil’s lax body. His arms felt like he’d chopped a thousand cords of wood, but he managed to lift one hand and drag fingers down Emil’s spine.

“Tell me I didn’t kill you,” Renzo managed after a beat, his voice ragged and hoarse.

Emil chuckled. “Not dead.” The words were muffled with his face buried in Renzo’s shoulder, and pressed to his naked skin like that, Renzo could feel the curve of his smile. “Give me a second and I’ll move.”

“I’ll give you however many seconds you need.” He didn’t entirely mean that. He had no idea how long they’d gone, and he still had to pick up his brother. He felt a small curl of resentment—not really directed at anyone—because he wished he could have time to just be.

Emil eventually took a breath as his cock softened, and he reached between Renzo’s legs and pinched the condom in place as he pulled out. Renzo grimaced at all the sensations now decorating his skin, but he was still too wrecked to do more than lie there as Emil tied the condom off and dropped it into the little bin beside the bed.

“I need to remember to take that out. My sister found one of my used condoms one time, and she served it to me on my breakfast plate,” Renzo told him.

Emil blinked in horror, then burst into laughter. “I hope I can meet her one day.”

Renzo hoped that too, but that thought was more frightening than most. “She’s...unique.”

Emil grinned as he flopped back down next to Renzo and propped his head up on his arm. He reached out, tracing a light touch over Renzo’s hip. “Was that with your ex?”

Renzo frowned, and then he rolled his eyes a little. “Oh, God no. My ex and I never hooked up here. I, uh...I just...” Renzo flushed deeply, but in that moment, it seemed almost impossible to lie. “I like jerking off with them sometimes. It feels good.”

Emil’s grin softened, and he reached up, tracing a touch around Renzo’s puffy, sore lips. “I’ve never tried it, but maybe I should.”

Renzo went hot all over at the image of Emil jerking off in his place—maybe even with Renzo’s name whispered as he let go. “You’ll have to let me know how it goes.”

“Maybe I’ll call you,” Emil said, playful, but Renzo could hear a touch of something else—honesty and vulnerability. “Make you listen to me while I do it.”

Renzo shuddered. “Yeah. Yes.”

Emil leaned in and took a very soft, lingering peck. “How much longer do you have before you need to go?”

And there it was: reality crashing back in on him.

He rolled over and peered at the little clock on his nightstand. “Hour...ish.” He settled back against Emil, letting their knees knock together. He didn’t know why, but it felt like the most important thing in the universe to let Emil know that he didn’t want this to just stop. “You?”

“No plans for me today. I’m going to FaceTime my friends later...if they remember. They’re in the Bahamas right now.”

Renzo’s brow furrowed. “Really. So are mine. That’s...” He froze as realization hit him, slow and kind of heavy. Emil fit the bill as exactly the sort of person Victor had known before he gave up his entire life to become Oliver’s. And Renzo knew some of their story—how Victor’s ex-fiancée had been cheating. How his friends had covered it up.

How Victor had left most of them behind.

But not all of them.

“Victor and Oliver,” he dared in a voice so quiet it could almost be called a whisper.

Emil’s eyes closed, slowly, pain rushing over his face. “Oh, God.”

“Hey,” Renzo started, but something between them snapped, and Emil was rolling over and climbing off the bed before Renzo could actually move. “Please don’t—”

“No,” Emil said. “No, I...I should go. This is weird.”

“It doesn’t have to—” Renzo stopped when the look Emil shot him was pure humiliation and grief.

“It’s better this way. God, I should have known. I’m sorry.” He fumbled with his pants, and Renzo felt frozen, pinned to the bed, helpless to do anything except watch. When Emil had the last button done up on his shirt, he turned and looked at Renzo. “For what it’s worth, I’m trying not to be the man I was, okay?”

Renzo just nodded and said nothing—did nothing—as Emil turned on his heel and left. The moment he heard the front door shut, he dropped his hands over his face and fought the urge to scream.

How had it gone from literal bliss to the ghost of what was in a single second? And why did he just lie there when he could have stopped Emil from running?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SEEING Victor's face was only a momentary balm. Where it was supposed to bring him joy and comfort to set eyes on his friend again, instead it just sent Emil careening back to hours before when he'd fled Renzo's house. Every time he blinked, he saw the realization hit Renzo—the way his eyes widened and his lips parted in a grimace.

It was clear from the way Renzo had looked at him he knew everything. He knew what a monster Emil had been—the things he'd done. And maybe he also knew that Emil was trying to better himself and earn Victor's forgiveness, but from the look Emil had seen on his face, it wasn't enough.

And how could it be? Why should it be?

“Hey,” Victor said, his brows dipped in a low frown. He was lounging on what looked like a very comfortable chair on a terrace, and Emil could hear wind off in the distance. The sun had Victor backlit, glowing like he was a literal angel, and if anyone deserved to become one, it was his friend. “Talk to me.”

Emil swallowed heavily. “I fucked up.”

Victor sat forward. “Explain.”

Emil fixed his gaze on his condo wall, not able to meet his friend's eye. “I met Renzo.”

“Oliver's friend,” Victor said, just a twinge of bitterness in his tone.

Normally, that would have made Emil laugh. He found it adorable the way Victor loved so intensely, so fiercely, that even a perceived threat was a target for annihilation. But unfortunately, he couldn't find a single touch of humor in his current situation.

“His sister's house is right next to my, um. My mom's.”

In his periphery, Emil could see Victor's eyes widen. “Your mom's?”

Emil dragged a hand down his face, then said, “It was one of the reasons I wanted to come out here. She died at the beginning of the year, and there was no one to handle all the shit she left behind.” Emil had never talked to Victor about his childhood, and Victor knew there was a reason for it. He knew Emil's mother wasn't in his life. And he'd never asked why. Emil cleared his throat. “Anyway, he was there with his brother. His sister's on vacation or something, and he's housesitting. We, uh...we met one night.”

“You very clearly did more than just meet,” Victor said cautiously.

Emil covered his face and flopped back against the couch cushions. His throat was searing hot, and he realized it was from holding back tears, which made him feel even worse.

“What did you do to him?” Victor demanded.

Emil flinched, hating that Victor needed to ask that question. And more hating that it was a fair one. “I don't think I did anything,” he answered. His voice was barely a whisper. “I really, really liked him.”

When he was brave enough to look again, he saw Victor's face full of pity. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't have assumed.”

Emil quickly waved him off. “Trust me, I deserve it. But no. I, uh...I realized he was Oliver's coworker, and he realized who I was.”

“Oh. Emil,” Victor said very quietly.

Emil shrugged. “It's fine. I assume he knows about me. The way he looked at me...” His voice cracked, and he cleared

his throat. “Oliver’s probably told him what a piece of shit I am.”

Victor glanced to his right, and it was no surprise a second later when Oliver’s face appeared. “I have never in my life called you a piece of shit, honey,” Oliver said. “And if we’re being honest, I don’t remember if I ever talked to Renzo about you specifically. I’ve told him a little bit about Victor’s past and mine. He knows how we met and what I used to do. But I wouldn’t do that to you.”

Emil’s chest ached. He wasn’t sure how he came close to deserving that from Oliver. From either of them. “Just...the look on his face...”

“Are you sure you didn’t imagine it?” Oliver pressed.

Emil frowned. “Yeah. I’m not delusional.”

“I’m not saying you are. But you’re talking to someone who knows exactly what the mind can do when it’s convinced that things are going to go badly.” Oliver smiled, and Emil knew that somewhere off the camera view, Victor was touching him sweetly, intimately—in ways that Emil wished someone would touch him.

“He just looked so...disappointed,” Emil said.

But even as he spoke the words, he wondered if maybe that wasn’t true at all. Maybe Oliver was right. The moment he connected the dots, he’d panicked because anyone who knew about the person he’d been before he torched his life couldn’t possibly think he was worthy of a chance to be a better man.

“Okay, so I’m going to guess that instead of talking this out, you just left,” Victor said, a tiny smile playing at his lips.

Emil gave him a flat look. “I must be so transparent.”

“Only because I’ve known you since we were young,” Victor told him with soft eyes. “I know what scares you, Emil. And I know what happens when you get like that.”

Emil rubbed at his face again. “So what? I just call him and say, ‘Sorry for being a delusional moron, but I assumed

you hated me because I was a garbage friend to someone you care about'?"

Oliver let out a coughing laugh. "Or, you could call him and say that you panicked because the situation is complicated but that you'd like to talk about it."

"That sounds way too rational," Emil said, waving his hand.

Oliver gave him his most impatient look. "I know, honey. But you're clearly torn up, and Renzo is one of the nicest people I've ever met. And he's so hot..."

"Right?" Emil said, leaning forward. "He chops wood with his shirt off. In the snow."

Oliver made a choking noise, then yelped and jumped. "Oh my God, baby. I don't think he's hotter than you. Get a grip."

"You two are fucking ridiculous," Emil muttered as he heard Victor whisper something savage and probably a little needy. "Just get married already?"

Oliver beamed at him. "Yep. And you'll be up there in a gorgeous tux right next to Victor. Renzo won't be able to control himself."

"Yeah. Maybe he'll take his shirt off and chop some wood to impress him," Victor muttered.

Oliver shoved his hand over Victor's face and pushed him back. "Anyway, ignore him. I should go get him out of his mood, but please just talk to him. Renzo is a really good guy, and you deserve to be with a really good guy. Okay?"

"Okay," Emil said, but he wasn't being honest. He wasn't ready to believe that just yet.

The screen went dead a second later, and Emil dropped his phone to his lap, putting both hands over his face to cover his trembling breath. He felt foolish, and his insides ached. He wallowed in the ghost of Renzo's touch that lingered on his skin and the smell of him because he still hadn't been able to bring himself to shower it off.

He wanted to believe that Oliver was right—that it was just his brain being cruel—but he wasn't sure if he was strong enough to take the risk. Was it better to love and lose? Or was it better to steal away in the night before he knew and hoard away the bits of Renzo he would be allowed to keep?

He lasted until eight that night before he cracked.

Things might have gone differently if he'd been able to distract himself with alcohol or if Dahlia wasn't away for the next two weeks, but that was life. And his self-control was next to nothing these days.

He ate dinner, finally showered off, and found himself lying in his bed, staring up at the unmoving ceiling fan—at a little spider spinning a web between the blades. He blinked and saw Renzo's face. He breathed and felt Renzo's mouth on him. He flexed his abs and felt the hot, tight heat of Renzo clenching around him seconds before he came so hard he was pretty sure he saw God.

And then the thread of control snapped, and he picked up his phone before he could stop himself.

It rang four times before a tired voice picked up, and it took Emil a second to find his words. "I'm so sorry."

"For bailing? Or making me feel like shit? Or..."

"For all of it. For letting my fear and panic take over," Emil interrupted.

Renzo sighed, then let silence rest between them for a long, long moment. "Why?"

"Because I was afraid you were going to look at me the way everyone else does, and I didn't think I could take it. I wasn't expecting you to know the person I hurt."

"Oliver or Victor?"

"Victor," Emil said. "I was one of the people who helped hide the affair. And then I made him feel like he had no one he

could turn to when everything fell apart.”

“Jesus,” Renzo breathed out.

“I know. I know,” Emil said. He fought back the ache that was making a comfortable home in the back of his throat. “He’s one of the best people I know.”

Renzo let out a small laugh, the sound surprising. “He hates me. Like, if I was on fire, he’d probably toast marshmallows over my corpse.”

Emil scoffed. “He doesn’t hate you. He’s obsessively in love with Oliver, and he’s petrified that he won’t be good enough for him.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Renzo said.

“Tell me about it. They’re so in love it’s disgusting.” They both laughed, and for a single beat of a heart, Emil could forget why things were terrible. But it didn’t last. “Victor forgave me, and I’ve been doing everything to be a better man than the one who let him down. But I assumed Oliver told you about me.”

“He never mentioned you by name. He talked about Victor’s past a little, but it wasn’t my business,” Renzo said. “I was in shock that we were connected.”

Emil rubbed at his eyes, feeling more foolish than before. “I kind of think maybe this is proof why I can’t be good for you.”

“That sounds like a cop-out,” Renzo said, his tone a little snappy. “We all have our issues. God knows I’m literally drowning in them because I have a shit-for-brains ex who made me feel like I was a cold, dead, useless fish in and out of bed.”

“Fuck him,” Emil spat, feeling suddenly vicious to the bastard that hurt Renzo. “You’re gorgeous and passionate and so fucking responsive it makes me feel like I’m going to lose my mind.”

“It’s different with you,” Renzo told him. His tone was softer now, more afraid, and Emil understood why. “I can’t

explain it.”

“You don’t need to. I get it. Trust me. But the one thing I didn’t want to do was hurt you. Then I just bailed...”

“Emil, please don’t take this the wrong way, but it wasn’t like I spent the day sitting around crying into my tea. I was really confused, but it was obvious whatever you had going on was a personal thing.”

Emil blinked, then burst into laughter. “You’re serious?”

“Not in a cruel way,” Renzo started to defend, and Emil laughed harder.

“I don’t,” he managed to get out. “I don’t think you’re being cruel. I just built up all this shit in my head like it was some giant mess, and it turns out you were looking at me like a dog who got his head caught in a chip bag.”

Renzo choked on a laugh. “Okay, not *that* bad, but...yes, I suppose so. I figured you’d call and explain once you were calm.”

Emil rolled onto his stomach and pressed the phone to his ear as he buried his face in the pillow and attempted to smother himself. Humiliation was the worst feeling. “Cool. Yeah. Great.”

“Emil...”

“Just let me die,” Emil groaned.

Renzo laughed, but the sound wasn’t mocking. “Come on, baby. If it helps, I’m still absolutely fucking wild about you, and I wish you were here. I wish you’d stayed so we could have made out until the very last second before I had to leave.”

Emil’s cheeks burned for a different reason now. “I’m sorry I fucked it up. And I won’t see you until after the new year, and...”

“About that,” Renzo interrupted.

Emil swallowed back the rest of his sentence and let out a shaking breath. “I totally get it if you want a little more time.”

“Actually,” Renzo said, and Emil swore he could hear his smile, “Matty’s not having it that you’re going to be alone for the holidays, so if you don’t mind spending Christmas with a couple of guys you barely know, who can only sort of cook a holiday ham, we’d love to have you.”

Emil didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know what to think.

“It’s not pity,” Renzo added. “In case you’re working yourself up over that. Matty really likes you. And he does feel a little sorry for you, but not in a bad way.”

“Thanks,” Emil said from behind a groan, but he was smiling now too. “Uh. I think...yeah. I think I would like that.”

“Good. Great. So I’ll see you tomorrow,” Renzo said in a rush. “Bring pajamas and slippers if you have them, and try to get here before noon because that’s when the festivities start.”

Emil felt a sudden rush of panic. “Are there going to be other people?”

“It’s just me and Matts this year,” Renzo said. “And you.”

And him.

Because they wanted him there.

He was wanted.

“I’ll see you at noon” was all Emil managed to get out, and then silence carried them for a while until Emil was brave enough to say good night and hang up.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“DOES HE KNOW,” Matty demanded, pacing the room with his arms crossed over his chest, hands splayed out in his ultimate posture of irritation, “that it’s Christmas? That he’s late and that’s rude?”

“I’m sure he’s battling holiday traffic, bud,” Renzo said. He didn’t want to admit to his brother that he was low-key panicking too. Matty’s anxiety always manifested in anger, and Renzo was more the type to just shut down.

But he’d gone to bed thinking everything was good. And Emil had been mostly communicative that morning. But right around ten, he went radio silent, and it was fifteen past noon. Granted, Renzo said that noon was the preferable time for him to show up, not a requirement, but his messages had gone unread since late that morning, so he didn’t know what to think.

There was every chance Emil was back in his head and he’d decided to run again.

And if that was the case, Renzo was going to hunt him down and beat the shit out of him. Probably more verbally than anything, but he’d bring Matty along to get a few swings in.

He couldn’t let this happen again. He couldn’t allow someone close to let them all down.

“Call him,” Matty demanded.

Renzo rubbed at his face. “No. That’s not safe, and you know it.”

“I don’t care. I don’t care...about safe,” Matty said, stomping his foot. His nostrils flared, and his cheeks went very pink, and Renzo snapped into action.

He moved across the room and stood in front of his brother, capturing his gaze for as long as Matty was comfortable holding it. “We’re not going to do this, bud. This is Christmas, and Emil was an invited guest. And I know you put a lot of effort into his gift, but sometimes things don’t work out. Throwing a tantrum isn’t going to change Emil’s mind.”

“Why would he not come? What did you say?” Matty demanded.

Renzo’s eyes widened. “Cute that you blame me.”

“He was sad. And lonely,” Matty told him, taking a step back. “Maybe you were mean!”

“I—” But maybe he was mean. Maybe Emil needed someone to take him seriously, and Renzo had just brushed off his panic like it was nothing. Like his feelings meant nothing. Fuck.

Fuck!

“Just let me—”

“He’s here! He’s...his car! He’s here!” Matty screamed loud enough to make Renzo’s ears start ringing, and before he could react, his brother was flying out the front door and hurtling down the driveway.

Following his brother, Renzo immediately soaked his socks in melted snow. “Argh!” he shouted, trying to hop out of the slush. “Do not run in front of the car, Mattia! Stop right now!”

Matty came to a skidding halt before the edge of the driveway, but it was obvious Emil had seen him because he’d slowed his drive to a crawl. Renzo’s heart was beating out of his chest, and he was uncomfortable and cold, and his feet were wet, and everything was terrible.

Except everything was also wonderful because Emil was there.

Nothing had been ruined.

“—so sorry,” Emil was saying as Matty all but dragged him from the driver’s seat. “I got a flat tire, and when I was on the phone for help, it died, and by the time I got it hooked up to my car—”

“I forgive you. Did you bring me any presents? Did you know you’re supposed to bring presents for Christmas? Are you Jewish?”

“Matty!” Renzo shouted.

Matty turned and offered his brother a sheepish look. “I’m not being greedy.”

“Right. Sure. Go inside before you get frostbite on your toes, please.” He pointed at the house and gave Matty his most serious face until his brother rolled his eyes, groaned loud enough to scare the birds from the pine tree in the front yard, and then stomped away.

Renzo waited until the front door slammed, and then he hid a burst of laughter behind his palm as he walked down off the porch steps. “So, in case you were wondering if Matty was excited to have you...”

Emil’s cheeks were flushed—maybe from the cold, but his expression told a different story. “I don’t know that anyone has ever wanted my company that much. Even if I did bring gifts.”

Renzo’s stomach swooped, and not entirely in a good way. His ex tried to win Matty that way too. But he quickly reminded himself that Emil didn’t have any of those old red flags John did. “I hope you didn’t go all out.”

“I didn’t,” Emil said as he fished two duffle bags from his back seat. “And I kind of feel like shit about that because I could totally afford to, but I had no idea what to get.” When he turned, Renzo realized he was wearing a plain white T-shirt under his coat, and it had rucked up, showing off his abs. His fingers went all hot and tingly, suddenly desperate to touch all that exposed skin and see how warm it was.

Emil followed his gaze, and his shy smile turned into a slight smirk. “Are you happy to see me too?”

“Don’t let it go to your head,” Renzo told him. He stepped up and grabbed one of the bags off Emil’s shoulder. “But yes. I am.”

“Can I kiss you?” Emil murmured.

Renzo wanted to say yes. Desperately. But while he knew that Matty definitely approved of him dating Emil, he wasn’t ready to be that open. “Can it wait? I haven’t told Matty the details yet, and I don’t...” He stopped on a sigh, then shrugged. “If it doesn’t work out, he’ll take it hard, and I want to make sure the two of us are sure.”

“You know that neither of us can promise forever,” Emil told him.

Renzo nodded. “Yeah, no. I know that. But...”

“I’m sorry,” Emil interrupted. “I’m being kind of a shit. I know what you’re trying to say, but I’m feeling a little insecure now that I know you’ve talked to Victor and Oliver.”

Renzo bit his lower lip a little too hard, then let it go. It felt puffy and fat. “Do you think they tried to convince me not to see you?”

“No,” Emil said. He shifted his bag on his shoulder and then hugged his middle like he was either afraid or cold. Or maybe both. “Victor’s too kind for that.” Emil swallowed heavily, and then his eyes cut across the lawn and settled on the house where they first met. “They didn’t know before. Um. About my mom.”

Renzo blinked in surprise. “Your best friends didn’t, but you told me the first night we met?”

“You caught me at a vulnerable moment,” Emil confessed. The fact that he wasn’t special should have hurt, but Renzo understood it, and that softened the sting. “I don’t really know how to explain it, you know?”

Renzo didn’t. He doubted he ever could. But he’d do his best to try. “Why don’t we go in? It’s freezing.”

Emil snorted a laugh. “Yeah. Not even sure where my balls are right now.”

Renzo grimaced as he laughed, then put his hand at the small of Emil’s back and gave him a shove inside the door. Matty was, of course, waiting just inside, and he immediately took everything out of Emil’s hands.

“I need to show you where presents go,” he declared and marched toward the living room.

Emil shot Renzo a helpless look, but Renzo just smiled and set the second bag down by the coffee table before walking into the kitchen to check on the pies that were nearly done baking. They were all in mini tins, and he’d set them out with the array of cookies he and Matty finished the night before. There was already cocoa in a hot carafe waiting and then their small dinner, which only had to be reheated.

A true and proper bachelors’ Christmas, his father would have called it. Renzo felt a pang of grief hit him in the chest so hard it almost took him out at the knees. On the day-to-day, he didn’t miss his parents this much. He didn’t let himself. He couldn’t.

But there were moments like this where all he wanted was some advice. His dad’s knobby, arthritic hand on the back of his neck, shaking him gently and telling him not to be a jackass. ‘That boy likes you, and it’s okay to let yourself be happy,’ he’d say. ‘Not everyone is like that shit-for-brains asshole you brought home,’ he’d add.

His eyes were hot, and he blinked until he was sure he wasn’t going to burst into tears before walking back to the living room, where Matty was very carefully setting out the handful of gifts Emil brought. They were very poorly wrapped, with corners stuck up in every direction and too much tape.

Renzo blinked, then fell into a fit of giggles as he made his way to the couch. “Should I ask?”

Emil lifted his chin, but it was clear from his expression he was actually embarrassed, which made Renzo feel like total

shit. “I’ve never done it before. I tried to follow this YouTube tutorial, but I just...sucked at it.”

Renzo’s heart began to thrash against his ribs, and it took every ounce of his self-control not to yank Emil into a kiss. “I’m sorry.”

“I wrapped ours,” Matty told him. He pointed out several. “Except those. Because Renzo said those are for me. I don’t think he got you anything.”

“Yes I did. Oh my God,” Renzo said, slapping a hand over his face. He gave Emil a pleading look. “I swear I didn’t forget you.”

“The invite is enough of a gift.”

“And yet,” Renzo said, “I got you something.” He glanced at the clock, cleared his throat, then pointed.

Matty shot to his feet. “I have to go. It’s my shift at the hotel. I’ll be back, but no peeking in the gifts,” he added, shaking his finger at Emil. “It’s the rule.”

Emil blinked, then looked over at Renzo as Matty disappeared. “Hotel?”

“He’s a hotel manager on a video game. It’s... complicated,” Renzo added. He didn’t have the energy to explain the complexities of a Roblox society to Emil, who he was pretty sure had never touched the online world apart from email and maybe some social media DMs. “He takes it almost as seriously as his job at the mall.”

Emil’s lip twitched as he finally walked over to the couch and flopped down just a few inches from Renzo. “Sorry I was late. Today was a hot mess. I had an actual panic attack and didn’t leave on time, then the tire, and the damn phone, and...”

Renzo silenced him with a palm to Emil’s stubbled cheek. He liked that his hair was so pale he couldn’t see it unless he turned his head just right in a stream of sunlight. He rubbed his thumb against it and watched the way Emil went all pliant and soft. Fuck, what he’d give for them to be alone. “Would you like that kiss now?”

“He won’t come down and see it?” The question wasn’t sarcastic or judgmental, which made Renzo want to kiss him even more.

“No. Trust me, we won’t see him for an hour and a half. But I’m having trouble giving a shit even if he did,” Renzo admitted. He shifted a little closer, and Emil mirrored him until they were so close they were sharing breath. “Is this okay?”

“Yes. I wasn’t sure you’d want to do this again. So please. Please.” His second please was on the edge of begging, and Renzo’s dick twitched.

He didn’t torture Emil any longer. He leaned in and captured his mouth, a gentle press at first, then hotter and filthier as he used his thumb to part Emil’s lips and slip his tongue in. He caught Emil’s moan on his inhale, then dragged a hand down his torso and used the heel of his palm to drag over his half-hard cock.

“Don’t make me come in my pants,” Emil begged. “I only have these obnoxious candy cane pajamas.”

Renzo grinned, then laughed against Emil’s lips before pulling away. “Seriously?”

“It was all the store had left,” Emil defended.

Renzo’s eyes went wide. “You went shopping for this?”

Flushing again, Emil looked away. “Sometimes I feel like such an out-of-touch freak with you. I don’t...I don’t mean to be completely disconnected. And I’m trying.”

“Shit,” Renzo breathed out. “I am so sorry. I’m not trying to make you feel like that, sweetheart. God, I like you so much, and I find all of that stuff so fucking adorable I don’t know what to do with myself.”

Emil smiled, but he still looked distressed. He twisted his fingers in his lap and refused to make eye contact. “Thanks.”

Renzo could hear where he’d fucked up in the broken threads of Emil’s tone. He lost all fucks about whether or not he’d discussed Emil with Matty. He turned his body, then

gently touched Emil on the chin. When the man looked over at him, Renzo cradled his face between both of his palms and just held him like that as quiet settled around them.

“I’m okay,” Emil breathed out after a moment.

“I know. But I made you feel bad, and that wasn’t what I meant to do. I’m not used to people like you, sweetheart. At all. I know my edges are sharp, and I made them that way on purpose. After John,” he said with a shrug, “I didn’t know how else to protect myself.”

Emil bit down on his lip, then let it go. It was shiny with his spit, and Renzo couldn’t help himself. He dragged his thumb over it, watching as color bloomed in Emil’s cheeks.

“But I don’t want to hurt you. I’ll do better.”

“I don’t know if—”

“If you’re about to say you don’t know if you deserve that, I’m going to stop you right there,” Renzo interrupted.

The way Emil’s eyes cut to the side told Renzo that yeah. He’d been about to go on another self-deprecating spiral.

“I’m in therapy to try and help with that,” Emil told him as Renzo finally dropped his hands, though he stayed in close. “It’s kind of a...not-healthy thing? She said it was partially attention seeking—like saying that shit is a way for people to feel sorry for me so they try to comfort me. Something I guess I learned from my mom.” His gaze moved to the window for a split second, and then he leaned back against the cushions and stared up at the ceiling. “It feels like I’m never going to get better sometimes. Like there will be these parts of me that are all...toxic.”

Renzo breathed out a long, slow breath, then mirrored Emil’s position. They both kicked their feet up on the coffee table, and after a beat, Renzo found Emil’s fingers and linked them with his own. “I get that. Kind of like how I am sometimes. I mean, I know it’s not the same. What you went through—”

“No,” Emil said swiftly. “We don’t need to compare and figure out who had it worse. It was different, and I think you

do get it.” He rubbed his thumb over Renzo’s wrist. “You’re right to want to take things slow. I’m so fucking lonely, but I’m so afraid of the ways I might start behaving if I get insecure or whatever.”

Renzo wanted to tell him that it was okay. That he could deal with it and be patient with him, but the truth was, he couldn’t back that up. It had been a long, long while since he’d been so open with anyone, and he was still afraid.

“What do we do?” Renzo finally asked.

Emil shrugged, then lifted their hands and kissed Renzo’s knuckles softly and sweetly. “This is pretty nice.”

Renzo laughed very softly and dropped his temple against Emil’s shoulder. “Yeah. It is.”

“And I like getting off with you.”

Renzo flushed hotly and nodded, turning his face slightly into Emil’s T-shirt as Emil dropped their hands. “Mhm. That’s very nice.”

Emil chuckled and scratched his fingers over Renzo’s relaxed, open palm. “That’s kind of an understatement, but yeah. Maybe we can...do those things and try to keep feelings out of it for a while?”

Renzo wanted to say yes, but he had no idea how that was possible. The more he knew Emil, the more he was falling for him. “I don’t trust myself with that, sweetness.”

Emil hummed in thought, then shifted slightly to the side so they were better facing each other. “So what if we go ahead and let feelings happen with the sex. Because I really like the sex...”

“Yes,” Renzo whispered.

Emil lifted his free hand up and traced a line between Renzo’s brows, down his nose, then over the swoop of his cupid’s bow. “And we leave out labels and expectations until we feel ready.”

For what, he wanted to ask. To be together? To move on? What if, at the end, he felt one way and Emil felt another?

But he supposed all relationships were that sort of risk, and maybe this strange, unconventional thing was exactly what he needed.

“Tell me what you’re thinking?”

“I think I like you,” Renzo said. “I think I’d be willing to try anything because you’ve made me feel things I didn’t know I could.”

“Like...in bed.”

Renzo covered his face and groaned against his palm. “Not what I meant, but yes. That too.”

Emil leaned in and nipped at his jaw. “I want to be a better man for the people in my life who matter, and you’re becoming one of those people. I want to be worthy of a man like you, and I know I need time.”

And Renzo needed space to finish healing. To learn to trust again and not panic—not assume that everything would lead down the same path John had taken him. And if he was allowed to do that while also keeping Emil close and getting to touch him and fuck him the way he craved?

It almost felt too good to be true.

“Is that my Christmas gift this year?” Renzo asked.

Emil chuckled and tipped Renzo’s head up by his chin, taking a small but possessive kiss. “It’s one of them. Thank you for having me. I thought I was going to be alone this year.”

Renzo’s heart ached harder than it ever had, and he grabbed Emil by the wrist, pressing his palm to his chest to soothe the pain. “Anytime you need someone, I’m here, okay?”

“I won’t hold you to that promise, but thank you.”

Renzo couldn’t tell him what that reply meant to him, so instead, he just kissed him until they were hard, and a little desperate, and neither of them could breathe.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“I...” Emil covered his face, a thousand words coming to the edges of his tongue, but he knew none of them were right. “I don’t...God, I don’t know!”

BZZT!

The alarm made him jump half a foot, and Matty collapsed to the ground, rolling onto his back to cover his face. “It was *Frozen!*”

Emil blinked, then looked over at Renzo with a frown. ‘*What is that?*’ he mouthed.

Renzo pressed his fingers to his mouth and shook his head in disbelief. One more way Emil was a total fucking weirdo with no connections to the outside world. He knew that leaving the life he’d been living in since he was sixteen would be an adjustment, but he hadn’t realized how profoundly he wouldn’t fit in.

He hadn’t realized just how much he wouldn’t matter in ways he used to and matter in ways he never thought he could.

He felt off-kilter, and he wished Victor was back so he could ask him if he felt the same way.

He had a feeling, though, Victor’s answer would be wildly different because he had never been the kind of person Emil had. He’d always been kind. He hadn’t had to learn empathy like a baby giraffe learning to walk.

“Okay,” Matty said, finally climbing to his feet. “It’s Emil’s turn again.”

Emil desperately searched for a polite way to decline. He was happy, but he was exhausted, and they'd been playing charades for the last hour, which had tested his resolve to not break out wine or scotch to dull just how awkward he was.

Luckily, he didn't need to say a word. Renzo jumped to his feet and said, "Nope. It's time for your one present and then bed."

"But—"

"No buts," Renzo said. "You know the rules, and we're not breaking them for guests."

"He's not a guest. He's your husband," Matty declared.

Emil, who had taken a mouthful of cocoa, choked and managed to catch most of it as he spat it out. "Um..."

"That's literally not how marriage works," Renzo said. His voice was calm, but Emil could see through it. His fingers were suddenly trembling, and his cheeks had gone splotchy. "And even if we were married, that changes nothing. Go pick the presents."

Matty turned to dive under the tree, and Renzo turned to him, mouthing, '*Sorry*,' as clearly as he could.

Emil waved him off as he swiped cocoa from his face and had mostly composed himself by the time Matty appeared with one massive gift for himself.

"Try again," Renzo said.

Matty groaned and put the gift back, selecting something else. "I guess I'll just have this one, then," he said with a pout.

"Sounds good. Now, get ones for me and Emil," Renzo told him. When Matty moved back to the gifts, Renzo leaned in. "He thinks I don't know he snooped. He knows what gift he picked. He tried to throw me off with the big gift," he murmured.

Emil laughed. "Every year?"

"Every year," Renzo said. "Of course, I taught him that trick when he was a kid, so I only have myself to blame."

Emil felt a pulse of affection for Renzo. He was like a parent, but not quite. He hadn't lost his role as big brother, which he had a feeling was wildly important to him. He couldn't get over the fact that he was allowed to be a guest in this life—to observe it, even if there was no promise he could ever be part of it.

A small piece of him wanted to rewind back to that afternoon and tell Renzo they didn't need to take it slow. To beg for a chance that allowed them to be more, but he knew better. He knew he had to do it this way. Or he'd lose him for good.

“Okay, these,” Matty said. He came up with identical gifts, and he was grinning, which told Emil they were from him.

Renzo took them and gently set Emil's on his thigh, then sat back and gestured for Matty to tear into his, which he did without any remorse for the poor wrapping paper that was immediately destroyed.

Emil was so lost in Matty's enthusiasm that he forgot about his own gift as a box of LEGO was unearthed from the sea of paper. Matty made a loud squeal, clapping his hands as he got up and did a little jig.

“Roblox! Everyone's going to be so jealous! This was what I wanted!”

Renzo looked far too pleased with himself. “I know. Now, you can have an extra half hour if you want to open it and sort the pieces, but no building until tomorrow. I'm exhausted, and I know you're going to get me up at the butt-crack of dawn.”

Matty's eyes narrowed, and Emil had a feeling he wanted to order him to put money in the swear jar, but after a beat, he forgot about it and grabbed the box, shouting, “Good night!” before disappearing up the stairs.

Emil shifted, then felt his own gift start to slide, and he caught it. “Should we wait for tomorrow to open these?”

“God no,” Renzo said. “He'll notice if we do.”

Emil laughed softly, staring at his lap. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been given a gift of any kind. He

was pretty sure Victor had tried once, but even he had sent his personal secretary out for it. It likely ended up with the pile of other gifts that Emil had never looked at again.

He lived in a world where material things were so accessible, nothing ever mattered. And no one had ever put heart into anything. Everything he ever owned was for the simple aesthetic of having it. Even his damn car was nothing more than a giant, waving flag telling people how much he was worth.

The thought made him sick, his stomach twisting against all the cocoa and cookies as the edge of his nail picked at the tape.

“I know it’s not as nice as what you’re probably used to,” Renzo started, but he stopped when Emil cleared his throat.

“I promise it’s not that.” He was slightly embarrassed at how thick his voice sounded, but he couldn’t help it. With every passing day, it became harder and harder to hide his emotions. “This is, um. My first.”

“First what?” Renzo asked, his tone filled just slightly with something like horror. “Please don’t tell me this is your first present.”

“My first real one, yeah,” Emil whispered. “This is...um. It’s nice. Thank you.”

“You don’t even know what it is,” Renzo said softly.

He didn’t. But he didn’t give a shit. He finally found the courage to tear at the edges, and he was far more careful with the paper than Matty had been. He folded it into a neat little square, then pried the edge of the box open to find a mug nestled in some pink tissue paper. He was entirely unsurprised.

He pulled it from the wrapping, and his gaze caught on the image that Matty had hand painted. It was two shadowy figures leaning against a railing, Christmas lights in the background, more shadowy people on an ice rink behind them.

Emil didn’t need to see details to make out exactly what he was looking at. “He was watching us.”

Renzo was leaning in close, his breath warm and soft against the side of Emil's neck. "Looks like it."

Emil ran his thumb over the smooth, glossy surface. "What's yours?"

Renzo made a soft humming noise and displayed his. It was two shadowy figures drinking cocoa. "His second favorite Christmas tradition."

Emil set his mug on the table, but he couldn't take his eyes off it. "He...likes me, doesn't he?"

Renzo's brow furrowed, his head tilted to the side like he was studying Emil for his question. Maybe it was the wrong thing to say. The words had been honest and vulnerable and tumbled past his lips without any real permission, but he didn't want to regret them.

He was allowed to want that, wasn't he? He was allowed to care. To crave acceptance from all the really good people in his life.

"Emil?"

He blinked and realized that he'd gotten lost in his thoughts. Clearing his throat, he leaned forward to grab his mug of cocoa, and he took a sip before grimacing. It was cold and a little congealed.

"Yeah, give me that," Renzo said, plucking it from his hands. He rose, but instead of stalking off, he offered his free hand and tugged Emil to his feet. Neither of them said a word as Renzo led him to the kitchen, and Emil watched with a sort of mute fascination as Renzo washed up the remaining dishes and put everything in the drying rack.

It was strangely domestic and, in the weirdest way, erotic. His cock had been half-hard for most of the afternoon, but now it was starting to thicken behind his pajama pants. He was grateful Matty wasn't here to see it because there was no hiding it behind the flimsy fabric.

He palmed himself in an attempt to tuck, but Renzo turned too quickly, and his eyes cut down before moving back to

Emil's face. His cheeks were dotted with color, and his lips parted on an inaudible gasp.

“For me?”

Emil nodded. “Of course it's for you. I...there's no one else.” And he wasn't sure there could be, which was what terrified him about their agreement. It was for the best, yes, but what kind of ruin would be left behind if Renzo decided he was done?

Renzo licked his lips, then offered his hands, and Emil took them. They were very warm from the water and very soft. The pads of his fingers were wrinkled just slightly, and they felt strange and delicious as they stroked over Emil's skin.

“You really like when I touch you, don't you?” Renzo whispered.

Emil nodded. He had no words to describe how it felt whenever Renzo put hands on him. The moments had been few and far between, but Emil craved them like a man starving. He shuddered and tugged until Renzo was in his space, and then he leaned in and nuzzled his nose against the edge of Emil's jaw.

“Kiss me,” Renzo whispered.

Emil moved like the words were a command, taking soft lips against his own, and then a warm tongue slick and sweet from the cocoa overwhelmed his senses. He groaned as softly as he could manage as Renzo's fingers dug into his hips and slotted a thigh between his.

“We need to take this to my room,” Renzo murmured. He pushed one hand into Emil's hair and scraped nails over his scalp. “This isn't the Christmas surprise I want to give Matty.”

Emil snorted a laugh, nodding as Renzo captured him in another kiss. They broke apart moments later, both panting slightly, and Renzo knocked their foreheads together as Emil attempted to catch his breath. “I can't believe I'm here.”

“I know. Me too,” Renzo said.

Emil wanted to believe that was a good thing, but that quiet, cruel voice told him that maybe it was nothing more than pity driving Renzo's offer to keep him for the holidays. After all, he was pathetic.

He quickly shoved that aside and let Renzo link their hands as he tugged him toward the stairs.

They crept up as quietly as they could manage, and Renzo closed his door softly before twisting the lock. The room was dimly lit by a light in the closet, and the blinds were drawn. It felt for a moment that they'd slipped into a bubble, and the rest of the world didn't matter.

Life, trauma, the holidays, family, friends—they all sat outside, waiting to creep in with the morning. But for now, Emil could have this. He could have Renzo's lips and tongue and teeth. He could have his hands, and his warm body, and his hard, gorgeous cock.

"What are you thinking about?" Renzo asked quietly as he moved closer.

Emil didn't really want to share what was in his head. It sounded insane and needy, which wasn't how he wanted Renzo to think about him. So instead of spilling his guts, he dragged his hand down Renzo's chest, then cupped him through his fleece pajamas. "This."

"Oh?" Renzo asked, his eyes alight with humor. He rocked his hips forward, his dick pulsing with need. "Is that all?"

"God no," Emil blurted. He used his free hand to drag Renzo closer by the hip, then slipped his fingers under his shirt and flicked his nipple, making Renzo hiss through his teeth. "This too. Want to get my mouth on it."

Renzo's eyes slipped closed. "Not stopping you."

Emil thrust Renzo's shirt up, then dipped his head low, laving at it with his tongue before pulling on the little peak with a careful bite. Renzo groaned, and Emil heard him slap his hand over his mouth to control the noise. It did something to him, the idea that he was pushing Renzo toward the edge of his control.

“More,” Renzo said.

Emil moved to the other side as he let Renzo’s dick go so he could pull his shirt the rest of the way off, and he dragged his fingers down Renzo’s naked back before thrusting them past the elastic waistband of his pajamas, cupping his firm, round ass.

“You are so hot,” Emil said behind a groan.

Renzo shuddered and thrust his hips forward, his dick brushing along Emil’s stomach. “So are you. You’re so fucking needy. I love the way you pull me close—the way you put your mouth on me like you can’t keep away.”

“I can’t,” Emil admitted. He realized he was going to make himself too vulnerable in a moment if he wasn’t careful, but he was struggling to care. Not when Renzo was carefully stripping him down and walking him toward the bed.

He hit the mattress and fell back with a dull thud, the scent of fresh laundry soap rushing around him. The sheets and blankets had obviously been cleaned, thanks to the way they’d soiled them the last time he was there, and that made him all hot around the collar.

“You’re blushing,” Renzo said. He lifted himself up and straddled Emil’s thighs, scooting forward so their dicks were aligned. He took them both in one hand, his palm a little rough and calloused from the work he did around his sister’s—and it felt strange and so good. “Wanna tell me what you’re thinking about?”

“Just what we did last time,” Emil told him. “And how I can’t believe I’m here right now.”

Renzo bit his lip as he looked down at Emil, and then he reached out with his free hand and traced a touch over his lips before pushing the digit past his teeth and along his tongue. Emil sucked like his life depended on it, and Renzo pushed until just before his gag reflex was triggered.

“Fuck, you are so good at that. It’s like you were made to take a dick,” Renzo murmured.

It felt like liquid fire had been poured into his veins, and Emil closed his eyes tight against the sensation. His cock throbbed hard, and he realized that if Renzo moved his hand even for a second, he was going to shoot off.

“You like that, don’t you?” Renzo asked, his voice full of wonder. He squeezed his fingers, but he didn’t stroke. “You like being needy for me. Like that your body was made for taking my dick.”

Emil swallowed heavily. “You...you can’t...I’m so...”

Renzo squeezed a little harder. “I know. I can tell. I can tell how hard you’re trying not to come, sunshine. And I’m so fucking proud of you.”

“Oh God,” Emil groaned. He fell back and laid his hand over his eyes. “Please...please, just...”

“Take pity and let you come? Or take pity and make you stop.”

“S-stop me,” Emil begged. “I’m not ready, but your hand...your body. What you said...”

Renzo let them go, then squeezed tight at the base of Emil’s dick until the imminent orgasm backed off. “There you go. It’s okay, sweet thing. Just breathe.”

Emil obeyed, taking in lungfuls of air and letting them out until he stopped shaking. After a beat, he dropped his hand and felt a painful curl of shame grip him by the throat. “I’ve never been so close before from just...that.”

“I’m going to take that as a compliment,” Renzo told him. He dragged his finger in a circle around Emil’s left nipple, then his right. “And one of these days, I’d love to spend all night edging you into fucking oblivion.”

“Fuck,” Emil gasped. “Please not tonight.”

Renzo smiled and shook his head. “No. Not tonight. We need sleep, and honestly, I’ve been wanting to get inside you since you showed up here. I need to feel you around me. I need to come inside you, like, in the next five minutes.”

Emil went hot again, and he nodded almost frantically, bringing his heels to the bed and spreading his legs as best he could with Renzo sitting on his thighs. “Yes.”

Renzo leaned forward as he shifted his legs behind him, and he kissed Emil before whispering against his lips, “I’m not going to make you beg tonight, but don’t think you’ll be getting off this easy in the future.”

Emil let out an animal noise that came from deep in the pit of his chest, and it seemed to spur Renzo on, who quickly got his hand between them and grazed dry, punishing fingers over his hole. It should not have been hot—it should not have felt good—but Emil’s hips shifted, almost like his ass wanted to take Renzo dry.

“Patience. Just give me a second,” Renzo said on the edge of a laugh. He gently nipped the edge of Emil’s jaw, then pulled back, leaving him very cold and alone.

Emil knew the sudden, acute feeling of abandonment was just the ugliness in his mind trying to convince him he hadn’t earned any of this, so he ordered it to fuck off while Renzo rummaged around his nightstand.

He had obviously meant what he said because he only took half a second, and then he was back with slick fingers, easing one of Emil’s knees toward his chest as he pushed inside of him. Emil made a sound he didn’t know he could make—somewhere between a gasp, a groan, and a sob. He shifted his hips, his cock filling out, impossibly thick and leaking steadily from the tip.

He didn’t know what to do with his hands, and eventually, he just grabbed his dick and held on, praying to God he wouldn’t embarrass himself before Renzo could slip inside him. After a beat, Renzo stretched him gently with tiny pulses of his hand, and Emil forced his eyes open and looked at him.

Their gazes connected, and Emil’s heart started beating so hard it almost felt like he had two in his chest. He rubbed his free hand over his sternum, then reached up and tugged at Renzo until he leaned in. He was entirely unprepared for the

way Renzo softly grazed lips over his eyelids, his nose, then his cheeks before taking his mouth in a lush, wet kiss.

Emil was falling too hard and too fast. How was he supposed to keep Renzo at arm's length? How was his entire life not supposed to become about this man? He felt possessed, obsessed, wrecked, and defiled, and Renzo hadn't even fucked him yet.

"Please," he managed to gasp. He needed something to distract him so he didn't say something stupid, like start professing his undying love.

Renzo's eyes crinkled with his grin, and he reached between them to roll his condom on and slick himself up.

Emil stared for a second, then carefully wriggled out of his grasp. At Renzo's frown, Emil turned away, gripping the headboard as he presented his ass. "Like this. Please?"

He said a silent prayer that Renzo wouldn't ask, and apparently, the universe was feeling generous because all Renzo did was spread Emil wide, then blow a hot puff of air over his hole. Emil felt it twitch, felt his body begging without his permission.

Renzo let out the smallest moan as he rubbed his thumb over him, then finally got to his knees and lined himself up. "Ready for me, lovely?"

Emil shuddered, then nodded. "Make it hard, okay?"

Renzo didn't answer with words. Instead, he answered by gripping Emil by the hips and slamming inside of him. The burn was intense—pain and pleasure all wrapped up in the glorious explosion that happened when Renzo hit the perfect angle on the first thrust. Emil buried his shout in the pillow, hoping he wouldn't wake Matty, and he did his best to swallow back his second groan when Renzo pulled out almost all the way, then slammed back in.

It was by some miracle Renzo's bed was far enough from the wall that it didn't slam into it because the entire bed shook with the force that Renzo used to fuck him. Emil's vision whited out just a few seconds in, and his entire existence

shrank down to the wild ecstasy that was swimming in his veins.

His cock was leaking between his legs, but he couldn't let go of the headboard if he didn't want his face to slam against it, so he spread his knees as wide as he could—wide enough until his dick was dragging against the blanket.

“Holy fuck, are you—” Renzo asked, trailing off on a groan. He pushed against the small of Emil's back, mounting him and fucking hard downward so Emil found himself humping the bed with every one of his lover's thrusts. “Can you come this way, baby? You gonna ruin my sheets?”

“Mm—mhm,” Emil stuttered, out of his mind with lust and unable to form words. His hips were moving in time with Renzo's, and all he could hear was the slapping of skin as Renzo fucked him harder and more thoroughly than anyone ever had before.

“Fuck. Fuck,” Renzo gasped. “Christ, I'm going to come. Please tell me you're close, sunshine. I can't hold on much longer.”

Emil still couldn't speak, so he hoped his battered, broken moan was answer enough because his entire body was hot now, and he could feel himself reaching the edge. He tilted his hips a little more, and on the next thrust, Renzo hit his prostate dead on.

That was all it took for Emil. He let out a high-pitched whine into the pillow as he fucked downward, his cock shooting spurts of hot come into the fabric beneath him. Renzo's moan matched his own, and he could feel him thicken, then the heat of his spill as he filled the condom buried deep in Emil's ass.

There was a moment after that, long, long heartbeats of time where neither of them could move. Then, like a marionette with cut strings, Emil lost strength and collapsed onto his stomach. His legs burned with the effort to straighten, and all the air left his lungs as Renzo collapsed on top of him.

He felt warm, lazy kisses pressed against his neck and shoulders, then the uncomfortable sensation as Renzo carefully pulled out. He wanted to move his head, to look over and watch as Renzo managed to stand and discard the used rubber, but he couldn't.

He listened as his lover moved around the room, and then a door opened, and Emil heard water running. Renzo returned just as Emil found the strength to turn over and move out of the wet spot. His foggy eyes attempted to focus on Renzo's face.

He was still flushed with exertion—his hair clumped with sweat, his little ringlets falling over his forehead. He looked more beautiful than ever, and Emil found enough muscle power to lift his hand and brush a few stray curls away from his eyes as Renzo took a warm cloth to wipe his stomach clean.

Renzo grinned. "It always gets like that when I sweat. Or when it rains."

"You're so beautiful," Emil whispered.

Renzo smirked. "And you're come-drunk."

Emil wanted to argue with him, but maybe it was easier to let him believe Emil was just babbling after getting his brains fucked out. Emil had been that kind of man, once. He turned tail and ran at the first sign of affection or attachment. It was easier that way.

Renzo was the first person who ever made him want with a singular focus he couldn't shake. And as terrified as he was, it wasn't as much as it should have been.

He closed his eyes when a warm hand touched his cheek, and he let himself be kissed. "We don't have to get up and do Santa stuff, do we?" he asked when Renzo pulled back.

"No," Renzo said with a laugh. "You filled your Santa quota for the year. I think sleep sounds good."

"And I can...stay?" He felt tender and unsure. He would go without question if Renzo asked him to, but it would crush him, and that was something he couldn't bury.

But Renzo just huffed a quiet sigh and slipped under the covers, nestling closer. “If you left after that, we’d need to have words.” Renzo tucked his head into the crook of Emil’s neck, then turned his face up so his lips were resting against the cut of Emil’s jaw. “Get some sleep, sweetness. Tomorrow’s going to be here way too soon.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

RENZO FULLY EXPECTED to be pounced in the morning, but he'd forgotten he was too tired to unlock the door after he and Emil had fucked, so it was Matty's wail of distress that dragged him from his far-too-comfortable sleep. Emil didn't budge, so Renzo quickly threw his legs over the bed and hurried to the door.

Matty was standing there, wringing his hands, his eyes wide and a little watery.

"I'm sorry, bud," Renzo said. He tugged Matty close and kissed his cheek. "I wasn't trying to lock you out."

"No locked doors," Matty scolded.

It had been a long-standing rule in the house after a six-year-old Matty had almost burned to death when he hid with a candle and a box of matches. His parents had gone a bit too far in explaining why it was dangerous, and now Matty believed anytime a door was locked, someone could die.

Renzo nodded. "Yep. No locked doors."

A breath passed, then a second, and then Matty shook himself out of his distress because it was Christmas. He bounced on the balls of his feet, but as his mouth opened to shout, Renzo grabbed his wrist.

"Emil's still sleeping."

Matty looked mortally offended. "But...it's *Christmas*."

"I don't think he's had very good Christmases in the past," Renzo told him quietly. Emil was a little more forthcoming

with details about his childhood, but not enough. It didn't take a genius to know that no one had ever prioritized him though. So he felt safe in assuming Emil didn't put a lot of stock into any holiday.

Matty sighed. "We have to wait for presents?"

Renzo didn't want to disturb his routine much, so a compromise was in order. "Why don't you go organize all the gifts, and I'll wake Emil up with some coffee, okay?"

"*And* cinnamon rolls," Matty said.

"Yes, yes. I'll start the oven." Renzo gave his brother a gentle shove toward the stairs, and they headed down, Matty's feet heavy enough that it would be a miracle if Emil slept through it.

Matty hurried to the living room while Renzo threw a pod into his sister's Nespresso, and he listened for noise on the stairs as he waited for the cup to brew. It was still silent, so Renzo had a feeling Emil was either still knocked out or unsure if he was welcome to come down.

The second part made his heart ache enough that he felt it all the way down to his toes. The last thing he needed was to be wrapped up in a man with issues that could be seen from space, but goddamn if he didn't want to do everything in his power to make sure that Emil never went another day without feeling like he was worthy.

Like he was...well. A word that Renzo wasn't sure he could speak. At least, not yet. But as much as he wanted to deny it, he could see it. Emil was the last person in the world Renzo would have envisioned to help heal the broken pieces his ex had left behind, and yet, he was the only one who made sense anymore.

"I'm done!"

Renzo jumped, startled by his brother's voice, and then he hurried over to the oven to turn it on. "Go ahead and crack the can, then put the rolls on the baking sheet," he told Matty.

He was nothing like his sister, who spent the night before carefully kneading and rolling dough by hand. Renzo was a

grocery store canister kind of guy, and he appreciated that his brother didn't care what was on his plate so long as it was vaguely circular with icing.

"Go wake Emil up," Matty ordered. "If you're late, you don't get presents."

Renzo rolled his eyes. "Sell me another one, kid." But he did grab the coffee cup, and he headed up the stairs, cursing a little when some of the hot coffee spilled on his bare feet. He paused by the bedroom door, then carefully eased it open, where he found Emil sitting up on the edge of the bed.

"Morning, sunshine. Did we wake you?"

Emil snorted. "It's obvious Matty's excited about Christmas."

"Regrets?" Renzo asked.

Emil bit his lip. "Uh...are *you* having regrets?"

"Would my answer change yours?" Renzo challenged.

Emil passed a hand down his face, then shook his head. "No. I just don't want to seem like some needy loser who had his first decent Christmas Eve after forty."

Renzo tried not to wince, but by the look on Emil's face, he failed. Walking over, he set the cup down on the nightstand, then cradled Emil's cheeks between his palms. Emil turned his head and nuzzled into the palm that had been warmed by the mug. "You're not a loser," Renzo said very softly. He stroked his thumb over Emil's jawline. "You just had a shitty childhood and a life with no real support system."

"Except, I kind of am," Emil said. "Most people don't need therapy to learn how to process human emotions."

"More people than you realize probably need therapy for that," Renzo fired back, stepping closer until he was between Emil's thighs. He moved his hand, tipping Emil's face up with a curled finger under his chin. "And the fact that you're trying makes you brave."

Emil ran his tongue over his lower lip, then wrapped his arms around Renzo's waist. "I feel like I'm going to start

crossing lines here.”

“How so?” Renzo asked in a soft whisper.

“I’m starting to feel things I promised you I wouldn’t.”

“All you promised was that we could take it slow before we defined things,” Renzo reminded him. And maybe that was putting it a little simpler than he’d meant before, but the truth was, the lines were already starting to blur for him.

Logic told him he needed to pull back.

His heart was telling him that Emil was someone good—someone important. Someone he needed to keep from slipping away.

“Let’s start a tradition,” he said in the silence between them. “Christmas mornings should start with kisses.”

Emil smiled, the grin seeping into his eyes, lighting them up like the dawn. He carefully rose to his feet, slipped into his discarded, ugly candy cane pajama pants, then curled his fingers into the back of Renzo’s shirt and fulfilled their new Christmas tradition. The kiss was a careful, gentle press at first, then Renzo’s mouth opened just a little, and it deepened.

He felt a rush again—the same rush he felt every single time Emil touched him. It was a feeling he wanted to hoard away, to keep for himself and refuse to share with anyone else. And as his dick started to take interest when he heard footsteps on the stairs.

They had just enough time to break apart before the door slammed open and Matty appeared like some sort of disgruntled Christmas elf.

“Presents!”

“Come on,” Renzo said, extending his hand. “Before we’re both murdered in this crappy bed.”

It was the first time in a while that Renzo didn't feel a wave of crushing loneliness after gifts were opened, paper was cleaned up, and Matty was in his room talking to all of his friends online about the presents he'd gotten. Even when his sister was in town, she was usually occupied with either work or talking to one of her overseas lovers until dinner, which left Renzo on the sofa, staring at the dying fire and the remnants of their cinnamon roll breakfast.

And in the time between that—when he and John were together—the loneliness was somehow worse. The one thing his ex had never been able to do was take away his Christmas mornings with family. Sometimes John would go see his own, peppering Renzo's day with texts and calls, his passive aggression doing all the work of making Renzo feel like shit for not giving up this one thing.

When he and John had been physically together, John would either be on the phone or busying himself with any other task besides being with Renzo. Even in the same room, it felt like there was a vast ocean separating them. Renzo had brought it up once or twice, but John had made him feel like such a moron for feeling like that, he'd learned to keep his mouth firmly shut.

But now, he wondered how he'd ever been able to stand living like that. Lying on the sofa, Emil's arms carefully curled around him and keeping him close, was paradise. And more than that, he felt safe, and wanted, and adored. His heartbeat was slow and steady, his limbs heavy and lazy, and every now and again, Emil would press a kiss to his temple, and Renzo wondered how he was ever supposed to give it up, even for a little while.

"You're tense," Emil said after a long forever of comfortable silence. "Did I do something wrong?"

Renzo sighed and turned his head, taking a deep whiff of Emil's sweater. It smelled like him—expensive laundry detergent and some cologne Renzo assumed could only be purchased from an Italian boutique found in the streets of Rome. He let his palm rest flat and heavy on the top of Emil's thigh.

“I did, didn’t I?” Emil pressed when Renzo didn’t answer right away.

Eventually, Renzo shook his head. It *was* because of Emil, but it sure as hell wasn’t his fault. “This is one of the best holidays I’ve had since I was a kid.”

Emil’s body twitched, startled. “And that’s...bad?”

“It scares me a little,” Renzo admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. He tilted his head back to look at Emil’s face. His lover wasn’t looking at him. His gaze was fixed across the room at an empty spot on the wall with a big drywall patch lump. Renzo dragged his fingers over Emil’s leg, feeling the way his body responded in the smallest, most subtle way. “I didn’t want to jump into anything so fast.”

“But you did. Because of me.” It wasn’t really a question, but Emil’s tone was fragile. Like if Renzo answered him wrong, he’d shatter.

“I didn’t think I could ever fall for someone again. I didn’t know I was even capable of feeling like this,” Renzo admitted. “It’s starting to make me question if I ever loved John.”

“Your ex.”

Renzo nodded and laid his ear against the side of Emil’s chest. His heartbeat was a little fast, maybe with nerves or maybe with something else. “John had really strict definitions of love. And it used to make me question myself because he always said there were limits to what a person was capable of feeling.”

“I don’t understand,” Emil said with a confused frown. “What does that even mean?”

Renzo huffed a laugh, shaking his head a little sadly. “I still don’t know, exactly. He tried to make the claim that the big, intense, powerful feelings people get when they fall in love aren’t sustainable. That the bigger the feelings, the quicker the relationship will end. Before we split, he was actually writing a book about how those feelings create an addiction—that they’re responsible for people cheating and

how the affected partners are the ones at fault for not creating a more emotionally stable environment.”

Emil frowned down at him. “And he cheated on you, right? So the book was what? A manifesto to make sure you always took the blame?”

Renzo felt his cheeks heat. “It was easier for me to not think about it, but yeah. That’s pretty much it.” Embarrassment flooded him. John hadn’t actually declared those reasons openly, but last spring, he’d sent Renzo some pages to look over—friend to friend, he’d claimed.

Renzo knew John had done it to make sure Renzo was never able to move on or forget. And the fool that he was, he read the pages, and it had sent him spiraling back to when things hurt the worst. He never did reply to John, but he knew he didn’t have to. His ex had triumphed in that moment.

He snapped back to reality at the feeling of a warm palm sliding over his cheek. He glanced up into Emil’s concerned gaze. “Listen, I don’t say this very often, but I know people. I have enough money to know people. So if you want this problem taken care of...”

Renzo interrupted him with a sharp laugh. “I’m going to assume you don’t mean this in some sort of mafia, swimming with the fishes sense.”

Emil shrugged, looking unrepentant. “No, but I *could* if you—”

“Oh my God, no. I don’t.” Renzo shivered, then heated again, but for an entirely different reason this time. He twisted his body around, pushing Emil against the arm of the sofa, bracketing him in with his hands. He nuzzled his nose against Emil’s jaw, then kissed him long, and slow, and a little messy.

“Fuck,” Emil whispered, digging his fingers into Renzo’s hips. “Tell me again we can’t do this here.”

“We can’t do this here,” Renzo said, hating himself for those words. “But you have no idea how badly I want to.”

Emil laughed, the sound tense as he ran his hand up Renzo’s spine, then grabbed him by the back of his hair.

“Yeah. I kind of think I do.”

They kissed again, longer this time, Renzo’s dick thickening hard and on the edge of painful. He dropped his hips, ready to thrust against Emil’s abs, when he heard a soft gasp, then the sound of feet running away.

It was like a bucket of cold water being dropped over their heads. They flew apart, and Emil covered his face with both hands as Renzo leapt up to stand.

“Fuck,” he whispered.

It wasn’t that Matty didn’t understand the concept of sex. He’d had a couple of girlfriends at camp in the past, and from the way he blushed, Renzo was damn sure they’d gotten physical. But he also knew that Matty would be hurt Renzo hadn’t said anything first. Especially after insisting all weekend that they weren’t more than friends.

“I should go talk to him.”

Emil swallowed heavily. “Maybe I should...”

Go, Renzo assumed. He wanted to tell him no. To beg him to stay, but he had no idea how upset Matty was going to be, so he just hung his head. “Yeah. That’s probably a good idea for now. I’ll call you later?”

Emil nodded, and while he was putting on a brave face, Renzo didn’t miss the way his hands were shaking as he stood up, arms limp at his sides. Renzo wanted to pull him close, to make promises that it was going to be fine, but he couldn’t. Everything felt surrounded by chaos, and this was only proof that Renzo could never have anything easy or simple.

He could fall in love. That wasn’t the problem. It was everything else in his life that made being with him not worth the work. And when Emil didn’t spare him a glance backward, and when he left his gifts on the coffee table when he gathered his things to go, Renzo couldn’t blame him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“...AND?”

Renzo rubbed a hand down his face and sighed, staring up at the ceiling instead of at his friend’s face. “And then he left. We’ve texted once, but that’s it.”

Oliver drummed his fingers on the table, and Renzo tried not to flinch. That sound always drove him up the wall, but the fact that Oliver was in the middle of vicious jet lag but still agreed to meet him for coffee was enough for Renzo to forgive him almost anything.

It also helped a little knowing that Victor was with Emil right then, probably talking about the same thing. He just didn’t know what narrative Emil was using. Was he talking about how much he liked Renzo, but their situation was too complicated? Had Emil just used him for a good time over the lonely holiday, and now that things were getting real, he was trying to find a way to bail and...

“I can see you spiraling,” Oliver said.

Renzo blinked back to reality and grabbed his latte, taking a sip before grimacing at how quickly it had gone tepid. “I feel bad talking to you about this, considering your history with him.”

Oliver scoffed. “It’s not my history. And Victor forgave him, like, a million years ago. I think he gets it better than we can.”

Renzo frowned. “Gets it?”

“Yeah, like...” Oliver shrugged, his brow furrowed in thought. “I don’t...” Then Oliver started to look a little nervous, and Renzo’s heart sped up a bit.

“Hey. What’s wrong?”

Oliver laughed and dragged a hand down his face. “You know how sometimes I joke about how I used to be a hooker in my past life?”

Renzo almost laughed because it was now obvious that Oliver thought Renzo hadn’t believed he was telling the truth. “Oliver,” he said carefully and as kindly as he could, “I took you seriously when you told me that.”

Oliver looked a little stunned. “Oh. Um...”

“And don’t worry. I haven’t told anyone. The assholes in both our departments have such big pearls they like to clutch over crap like that. But it’s fine.” Renzo leaned over briefly and brushed his hand over Oliver’s. “We’re fine. You’re fine. It’s all...you know...”

“Oh my God, okay,” Oliver said, laughing. “I get it. It’s all fine.” He stopped and cleared his throat. “So, I guess my point is that real love and real friendships are precious to me, but I’m also a lot more selective than Victor sometimes. He’s seen how bad people can be, but I’ve seen it intimately. If Emil had been my friend and hidden something like my fiancée having an affair, I would have thrown our friendship off a fucking iceberg.”

Renzo’s lips twitched into something like a smile, but he felt his cheeks burn. He knew all about Emil and Victor’s past friendship and what Emil had kept from him. Emil had never been shy about the fact that he’d been a bad person, but the person he used to be was not the one Renzo had fallen for.

Still, a curl of humiliation crept up his spine when he realized Oliver was probably judging him for what he’d done and how he felt.

“It’s, um,” he said, then cleared his throat. “I feel like he really has learned to be a better person, and...”

“Fuck! No,” Oliver said. He moved like he was going to lunge forward and grab Renzo by the front of his shirt, then froze because the table wobbled, and their coffees threatened to spill. He sank back into his chair. “Stop being a weird martyr or whatever. I’m saying that because of my past, I really suck at second chances, but you and Victor are the kind of people Emil needs in his life. And I was going to say that Emil and Victor are a lot alike.”

“Okay,” Renzo said very slowly, his blush fading. “How so?”

“Once they have us, they don’t let people like you and me go,” Oliver said.

Renzo’s brow furrowed. “So feel free to tell me to fuck off if you don’t want to talk about it, but how did you and Victor, you know...happen?”

Oliver coughed, faint color darkening the tips of his ears. “Yeah, so...when Victor kind of...accidentally became my client.”

Renzo coughed to hide a laugh. “How does someone accidentally become a client? Like oops, he tripped and fell on my dick and agreed to pay me my rate, or...?”

“Oh my God,” Oliver choked, hiding his face. His shoulders shook with the laughter, and he peered over the tops of his fingers, his eyes crinkled in the corners. “He thought I was his hired driver. I thought he was my client for the night. He got into my car and criticized it for being a mess.”

Renzo snorted. “Seriously?”

Oliver shrugged. “He was having a bad night, and he was pissed that his travel agency sent him such a shit ride.”

Renzo chuckled, thinking of Emil and how prissy he could be. “These rich boys are so damn *fussy*.”

“I know,” Oliver said, dropping his elbows on the table and leaning forward. “Victor tries to pretend like he’s some paragon of humility and virtue, but really he’s just a spoiled little shit who really, really gets off on seeing me in lingerie.”

Renzo blushed hard. It had been a while since he was truly attracted to Oliver, but the man was still obscenely beautiful, and picturing him in lingerie was almost too much. It wasn't Renzo's thing, but it wasn't like he would have told Oliver he wasn't into it if they'd dated.

“Sorry. TMI. I do that way too much,” Oliver said with a sheepish smile. “But yeah, he's not the kind of guy I thought I'd ever date. When he's in, he's *all* in. I told him I needed space, and he gave it to me, but the minute I sent him an email that I wanted to reconnect, he came running. Literally. He showed up at my graduation with zero chill and basically proposed that night. After I ghosted him for months.”

Renzo bit his lower lip. “So you're saying the silence is on me.”

“Yeah,” Oliver said, not pulling his punches. “Emil knows he has something with you that he's not going to get from literally anyone else. But he also knows you have more power right now because he thinks you're the only one in the relationship willing to call it off. So he's going to sit in this silence and wait for you. Probably forever, if you make him.”

Renzo's chest burned with the ache every time he got when he thought about how neglected Emil had been for his entire life. And now, without even realizing it, he was contributing to that. “God, I was just waiting on him. I kind of made him leave, so I was waiting for him to tell me we were okay.”

Oliver grimaced. “And he's sitting there waiting for you to decide if he's still worth it.”

Renzo's entire body hummed with panic. If he'd been uncertain at all about Emil before, he wasn't now. He knew Emil was his happily ever after. “I need to call him.”

“Give him a little while. He's with Victor, who's probably telling him to just be strong and be patient and that you'll come around.”

Renzo groaned and flopped backward in his chair, covering his face with one hand. “I didn't even mean I wanted

space. Matty just kind of freaked the fuck out when he saw me and Emil together, so he left. He was kind of short with me over text, so I figured he needed time to figure out if being with me and all my complications was worth it.”

Oliver’s face fell. “Matty doesn’t like him?”

“Matty loves him,” Renzo said with a small laugh. “He thinks the sun rises and sets at Emil’s command. But he’s sensitive about me being in a relationship. The last time I was with someone was John, and...” Renzo trailed off. He and Oliver were a lot closer now, but like Oliver hadn’t shared details about his past with Renzo, Renzo had kept the trauma of his ex to himself.

Oliver knew it had been rough, but he didn’t know how rough.

“John was cruel in ways I don’t like to talk about. Not just to me,” Renzo added, and Oliver looked ready to kill, which was another reason why Renzo loved his friend so damn much. “I don’t think it matters how nice a guy is. Matty will always be a little scared at first that he’s going to lose me.”

“Do you think he’s ever going to be okay with you and Emil?” Oliver asked.

Renzo softened all over, and he was grateful he had the answer he did. “He already is. Matty kind of freaked, but by the end of the day and a lot of talking, he was able to work through his anxiety. He’s expecting Emil over for New Year’s Eve, but I don’t even know if he’ll come at this point.”

Oliver snorted a laugh. “If you called him right now, he’d apologize and thank you for the invite.”

“He’s not that into me,” Renzo started to defend.

Oliver crossed his arms on top of the table and grinned at him—sharp and a little evil. “Bet me.”

“Terms?” Renzo said. He knew Victor and Emil were similar, but Oliver didn’t know Emil as well as Renzo did now.

“Loser has to dust the winner’s office every weekend for a month.”

Renzo grimaced. The university was going through some upgrades, and the dust was next-level. Housekeeping took care of the trash and the vacuuming, but Renzo spent more time with a dust cloth than he did on marking papers during the last semester.

“Deal,” he finally said. He pulled his phone out of his pocket, but before he could pull up Emil’s contact info, his heart began to race. He took a few deep breaths, but his hands began to shake.

Oliver quickly laid warm fingers to his wrist. “Hey. I was mostly kidding. If you’re not ready—”

“I’m ready,” Renzo said in a rush. “I’m more than ready. I was being a moron, waiting for him to restart a conversation that I paused, because that’s...” That’s how it had been with his ex. Everything had been on John’s terms, no matter what. And Renzo was still trying to learn what it meant to finally hold power in his own life. He licked his lips, then voiced another quiet fear. “What if he turns me down?”

“Not a chance in hell,” Oliver said with a small laugh. “But if he does, you’ll move on. You’ll meet someone else, and you’ll learn how to be happy with a person who makes you feel good about yourself. There are more good men in the world. I promise you that.”

Renzo’s heart ached in all the worst ways when he thought about being with anyone else but Emil. He rubbed at his sternum. “I haven’t had the best luck.”

“I know. But you were caught up with a dick-weasel for way too long. It made you forget how fucking hot and fun you are.”

Renzo choked on a laugh as he rubbed his thumb over the side of his phone. He stared down at Emil’s name on the screen. “I’m seriously not.”

Oliver let out a sharp laugh. “First of all, yes, you are. I still call you the hot professor at home, and Victor gets so pissed about it. Secondly,” Oliver went on before Renzo could stop him, “Emil called us while we were on vacation and

waxed poetic about the sexy shirtless lumberjack for half a goddamn hour.”

Renzo’s whole body erupted in a blush. “To Victor? No wonder he still hates me.”

Oliver burst into laughter. “He doesn’t hate you. And he’ll warm up a lot more once you and Emil are official. Which you will be. Trust me.”

Renzo lost the ability to argue with him any further. Instead, he forced his thumb to move, and he tapped Emil’s name on the screen, then held the phone to his ear. His heart beat hard enough it was almost a rhythmic accompaniment to the ringing.

“Hey. Hi,” a voice said after a beat of silence. Emil cleared his throat. “Hi.”

Renzo tried not to laugh. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Emil said again.

Renzo’s grin was so wide it hurt. “Sorry to call like this. You’re with Victor, aren’t you?”

Emil made a small choking noise. “How did you know? Are you here right now?” Renzo heard a chair squeak loudly in the background. “Where—”

“No, no. I’m at a café with Oliver,” Renzo told him. “I feel like they’re the children of divorced parents who are trying to fix shit.”

Both Oliver and Emil laughed at the same time, and Renzo quickly turned away from his friend. “I don’t have long, but I think I’m about to lose a bet.”

“Oh?” Emil asked softly.

Renzo swallowed heavily. “First of all, I’m sorry I didn’t call you. I was being a moron and thought I couldn’t. I thought I had to wait for you to come back to me.”

“Back?” Emil breathed softly. “Renzo...I never left.”

“I know. I know that now. Let’s just call my bad decisions my shitty trauma and move on.”

Emil laughed again. “We can do that. What’s the other thing?”

“I was calling, um...well. Matty and I both are hoping you can still make it for New Year’s Eve.” There was a long, long pause, and suddenly, Renzo’s heart dropped to his feet. “I totally get it if you made other plans, considering I was a jackass who—”

“I can’t,” Emil said in a rush. Renzo felt like his heart was starting to crack, ready to shatter into a billion pieces. “You have no idea how much I want to, but I just found out I’m being subpoenaed.”

Renzo sat up, blinking in surprise. “What?”

“I got the email about two minutes ago. Victor did too. It’s a long story, and I can explain it all next time I see you, but it looks like I have to get a flight back to California today. I’m so sorry, gorgeous.”

“What the fuck!” Oliver cried suddenly, staring at his phone in horror.

Renzo laughed, though his heart was still a little tender. “I guess Victor just told Oliver?”

Emil sighed. “Yeah. He’ll obviously come along, but I can’t promise the whole thing will be over before the next semester starts. We have a ton of meetings, and the first hearing isn’t until the second week of January. I’m so sorry,” he said again.

Renzo sagged forward, fighting the urge to bang his head against the table. “I hate this. I hate that I can’t just come with you. My sister won’t be back before then.”

“I figured,” Emil said. “But please know this has nothing at all to do with you or the fact that we haven’t talked much. I’m still so fucking wild about you.”

Renzo’s whole body ached with a need to have Emil there with him. “When does your flight leave?”

“We’re booking private, so whenever Victor’s ready,” Emil admitted. There was a reluctance to his tone, which told Renzo

he was hesitant to remind him of just how wealthy he was, but Renzo couldn't give a single fuck about that.

He was too busy forming an idea. "Promise to call me a lot while you're away?"

"Not a chance in hell I wouldn't. Unless you asked me not to," Emil added. He cleared his throat, then hesitated before he asked, "Will Matty forgive me? He's not still upset that we were kissing, is he?"

"No, sunshine. He's not upset, and he'll forgive you once I explain why. It would mean a lot if you called him too though. He's pretty obsessed with the idea of you sticking around." And being his new brother, but Renzo didn't say that aloud. Matty would always get ahead of himself, and Renzo knew he had to tread carefully.

"Count on it. Send me his number, and I'll FaceTime with him as soon as I can," Emil said, then cleared his throat a little awkwardly. "I should get going. I have to grab a couple things from my place before we take off."

Renzo nodded. "I—" He stopped himself. He felt the words right then—those three important words. But he wanted to be more sure, and there was no chance in hell he'd say them for the first time over the phone. "Talk later."

"Yeah," Emil all but whispered, and Renzo knew right then he felt it too.

The line went dead, and then he looked up at Oliver. "If I leave right now, I can beat him to his condo. Maybe. I don't have the address, but—"

"I have it," Oliver said without looking up from his phone. "And I'm going to buy you some time. Will half an hour be enough?"

"No," Renzo said, "but I can make it work. Thank you. I love you."

Oliver looked up with a grin just as Renzo's phone buzzed. "I love you so fucking much. Now, go. You're wasting time."

As though someone lit a fire under his feet, Renzo began to move faster than he had in years, and in a flash, he was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

EMIL WAS AN EMOTIONAL MESS. The only time he'd ever felt worse was when he'd been removed from his mom's custody and given over to his dad, only to learn the man wouldn't even see him for almost an entire year. But Emil had been a teenager then, and now, his emotions felt sort of unused and atrophied.

He'd finally started to thaw when shit hit the fan at Renzo's, and then he spent the next seventy-two hours just... waiting. Renzo had texted once, and Emil had replied as politely as he could manage without losing his grip and begging Renzo not to abandon him. But he'd been starting to wonder if maybe begging was the right choice since Renzo had gone completely silent on him.

And Emil might have felt like the world was finally coming together when his phone started to ring and he saw Renzo's name on the screen, but moments before the call came through, he and Victor had gotten the email.

Charlie was suing them for breach of contract and defamation of character. Emil didn't even need to contact his lawyer to know that the lawsuit was both frivolous and pointless—and there was no chance in hell it would see a judge before it was thrown out—but the fact remained he had to go back.

He had to deal with the consequences of selling his shares of the business and leaving Charlie high and dry after what he'd done. Emil was pretty sure this was some sort of karmic

event, considering the part he'd played in covering up Charlie's affair with Victor's ex, but it was killing him.

He hadn't been sure he was even still invited over for New Year's Eve with Renzo and Matty, but he'd been sitting on the edge of hope.

Now, he had the invite and had to turn it down, and he wanted to put his fist through the wall.

"You need to take a breath," Victor said, letting go of one of his crutches to grip Emil's shoulder. He squeezed gently while catching Emil's gaze. "This isn't the end of the world."

Emil dragged a hand through his hair, trying to tamp down on his frustration. "How bad would it be if I told them all to fuck off and just send me the fine?"

"Bad," Victor said. "The sooner we can get this taken care of, the sooner you can be back home."

Back home. The words tumbled around his chest like a pinball—heavy and weighted—and he rubbed at his sternum. He hadn't felt like anywhere was home. Not since he was a child, and even then, everything in his life had been fragile and prone to breaking.

It felt right now though, and his throat got a little hot, so he quickly cleared it.

"Sorry," Victor said. He removed his hand and grabbed the handle of his crutch, easing a few steps back. "I didn't mean to—"

"You didn't," Emil said before Victor could finish his very misguided apology. "I'm terrified because I really like him, and it feels like the timing of this is purposefully trying to get in my way."

Victor opened his mouth to say something, but his body jolted, and he reached into his pocket for his phone. Emil watched a series of emotions play out in his expressions, and then he looked up with the smallest grin. "You should go get your stuff ready."

Emil winced. Victor didn't seem angry, but the words were so dismissive, and he had a feeling Oliver was behind it. Maybe he was trying to get Victor home for a quickie before the chaos of the road, and Emil swallowed down his furious envy.

“Yeah. Yes. I'll see you at the airport?”

Victor was still smiling as he turned and started for the restaurant's front door. “Yep. Oliver and I will be there.”

Emil tried for a smile and failed, but Victor wasn't looking at him, so he didn't feel too bad. He did his best not to think too much about Renzo and how much time he was losing now, but it was damn near impossible to shake out of his funk.

Early relationships were never easy—at least, as far as he knew. Hell, Victor and Oliver spent seven months apart before crashing back together. But he couldn't allow this to be a death sentence. He slid behind the wheel of his car, then grabbed his phone.

Emil: Can I see you before I go? I don't have a lot of time, but I don't want to be gone for weeks without kissing you goodbye.

He waited a minute, then two. Five passed with no answer, and he figured if Renzo was trying to tell him something, it was coming through loud and clear. Whatever happened on Christmas, and Emil's inability to just break the silence between them and fix whatever went wrong, was enough. Renzo had been through the wringer, and Emil couldn't blame him for being so shy.

It was what it was.

The back of his throat felt hot and thick, and he tried to swallow past it as he finally put his car into gear and headed for his condo.

There were few moments in Emil's life that he could say he was genuinely taken by surprise. It wasn't that he was particularly aware of his surroundings. It was that he'd shut himself off and stopped really caring what was going on around him.

It had started off as a defense mechanism—something his therapist was teaching him about now, years too late. Eventually, it just turned into a habit and a way of protecting himself from ever being hurt or used.

The first time he'd ever been truly floored was when Victor had opened up to him about how much pain he was in, and Emil was overwhelmed by the guilt for keeping the affair a secret.

The second was shortly after that, when Victor forgave him without asking him to grovel.

The third was right then at the top of the stairs, in the doorway of his condo, where the only person in the world he wanted to see that day was sitting. Renzo was curled into his thick winter coat, hunched on the top stair, looking a little uneasy as Emil just...watched him, standing on the bottom step like he was rooted to the ground.

Then Renzo cleared his throat and hopped to his feet, and Emil began climbing up toward him with so much purpose that not even God himself would have been able to stop him. Renzo's arms were open, and Emil found himself crowding Renzo back against his front door, kissing him like it was the only thing keeping him alive.

"Hey," Renzo said with a laugh after long moments of offering his warm tongue and plush lips. "Hi, sunshine," he added, his voice softer and sweeter.

Emil took in a trembling breath, then dropped his forehead to Renzo's shoulder. "Victor and Oliver knew, didn't they? That you were coming here?"

"Yes. I thought Victor would tell you. I didn't get your message until a couple minutes ago, and I decided it was better to just..." Renzo shrugged. "Surprise?"

After a second, Emil burst into laughter and surged in for another kiss to hide it. “Surprise is fucking right. But you know I don’t have a lot of time.”

“I know,” Renzo said. “But I was made aware of my fuckup today, and I needed to make sure I saw you before you left.”

Emil frowned, then shivered and realized they were still standing in the freezing cold. He reached past Renzo and tapped his door code into the pad above the lock, then pushed them both inside where it was warm and a bit more forgiving than his concrete stoop.

Renzo bit his lip as Emil shrugged off his jacket, then did the same when Emil offered to take his. The way Renzo looked so uncertain, like he didn’t know if he was welcome, was killing Emil.

“I’m really sorry,” Renzo said.

Emil’s frown marred his forehead. “What the hell could you possibly be sorry for?”

“Leaving you in silence.” Renzo licked his lips as those words hit Emil square in the chest. “Oliver explained some stuff to me today, and I think I understand you a little better than I did before.”

Emil had no idea how to respond to that, so he gestured for Renzo to follow him into his living room. It was sparse, mostly unpacked, but it still wasn’t decorated. It was as sterile and lacking in personality as his last place, but this time, it wasn’t on purpose. If life hadn’t decided to fuck with him again, he’d probably have spent the next few weeks trying to make his place feel a bit more like him.

Whatever that was.

“Amazing view,” Renzo said softly behind him, dragging Emil from his thoughts.

He blinked, then realized it was the first time Renzo had been over. It wasn’t any fault of their own, of course. Emil had taken his sweet time finding a place, and Renzo had been busy with his brother’s routine.

But it felt strange to know this first time meant they'd also be torn apart by the ticking clock. He turned and beckoned Renzo close, and he felt safe the moment his lover's firm body was pressed against his own.

"Sorry I haven't had you over before now."

Renzo shook his head. "I'll have time to see your place when you get back."

Emil carefully dragged his fingers through Renzo's hair, then trailed a touch over the cut of his jaw, loving the way it made him shiver. "I hate that I'm leaving. I hate that I can't invite you to come."

"Do you really want me there?" Renzo asked.

Emil winced and glanced away. "I don't...know. That time of my life was almost as much of a nightmare as my childhood, and I'm not sure I want you to be a part of it." He hesitated, then said, "I'm also selfish, and I want you there so I don't feel so alone."

Renzo cupped his cheek, drew his gaze back, then kissed him softly. It was warm and chaste, lasting just on the edge of too long. "Call me every day, okay? I have jack shit to do apart from lecture prep. For the next few weeks, however you need me, I'm yours."

I'm yours. Emil wanted to hear those words in another context, and maybe with time, he would. But he knew he needed to be patient. "Thank you," he finally whispered.

Renzo nodded, then linked their fingers together and pulled him over to the sofa. It was still stiff with factory newness and the lack of use since Emil still wasn't at a place he felt like he could relax, even when he wanted to. But it felt good to sit there now with Renzo's leg pressed against his own.

"May I ask..." Emil paused, biting down on his thumbnail before Renzo reached over and pulled his hand away from his mouth. He flushed along the apples of his cheeks and couldn't bring himself to look over. "What did Oliver say about me? I

mean, if he called me a complete disaster who needs to be handled with kid gloves, he's probably right, but—"

"Oliver and I don't come from the same world," Renzo said, cutting him off. "But things that make sense to us don't always make sense to people like you or Victor. Sometimes I think I'm doing the right thing. I thought—" Renzo paused, then laughed, though he didn't sound like he was amused. Emil took his hand and stroked his thumb over the place in Renzo's wrist where his pulse was racing. "I thought you needed time away from me."

"Renzo," Emil breathed.

"I know, I know. When I hear myself say it out loud, I realize how ridiculous it is. And I hate blaming everything on my ex and the disaster he left behind, but you're the first person I've had feelings for since my divorce." Renzo turned his hand so he could link their fingers together, and he squeezed like he needed the comfort. "I'm not trying to make excuses. I promise."

Unable to help himself, Emil dislodged Renzo's grip on him so he could cradle his face, stroking his thumbs over Renzo's flushed cheeks. "If anyone sucks at this, it's me. I never learned what healthy love was until recently, and it's going to take years before I trust myself to be better than I was. I wasn't angry. I was just...sad, I think."

"Fuck," Renzo said miserably, leaning into Emil's hand. "That's worse."

Emil laughed in spite of himself and brushed a kiss over the corner of Renzo's mouth. "It isn't. Sad is good. Sad is being able to feel things that aren't just anger and...I don't know, lust? Envy? Emotions that made me feel like crap all the time. Sad means that I'm falling for you—that I fell for you, and the distance between us made me miss you."

"We didn't even need to be apart, and now you're leaving," Renzo whispered.

Emil sat back, then reached for Renzo, pulling at him until he turned his body, then threw a leg over Emil's thighs.

Neither of them was particularly hard right then, but Emil knew that could change in an instant. Just the feeling of Renzo sitting on him was enough to start a small spark under his skin.

“I’m not going forever,” he murmured, curling his arms around Renzo’s waist. He was heavy on him, and it was fucking glorious. “Just for as long as our shitty ex-partner can manage to drag this all out.”

“You won’t be in trouble?” Renzo asked.

Emil reached up and stroked fingers over the back of Renzo’s neck, making him shudder, his eyes slipping closed. He gave a contented hum, and Emil wondered if he could sell his soul in order to stay. “The worst that’ll happen is I’ll have to pay him money. But Victor already talked to his team, who said they’re pretty sure they can get the whole case thrown out on our company’s decency clause.”

Renzo blinked at him. “Your company had a decency clause?”

Emil laughed, realizing how ironic that must have sounded, but he shrugged. “It was to prevent active members of the board from getting involved in any major public scandal.” He stopped, then shook his head. “No, that’s not really true. It was to give the company the right to distance themselves from anyone who acted up in public. Charlie would have gotten away with what he did, except he got caught with Victor’s fiancée in his apartment and was ignorant enough to get drunk and come to work a few days later to brag about it. He ran his mouth off at a bunch of interns, who put it all on social media...” Emil shrugged. He remembered the long days after Charlie’s affair, and his only saving grace was that Victor had disappeared and hadn’t known about any of that.

But it was still bad.

Victor’s disappearance went public shortly after, which made Charlie look even worse. And maybe if Victor had been someone like him—like Emil—no one would have cared. But everyone liked Victor. Hell, most of them liked Victor more

than they liked themselves. So Charlie became the villain and Victor the conquering hero.

It was no surprise Charlie was this desperate to save face.

“He’s suing us for breach of contract since Victor and I sold our shares at the same time for well under their value. We also rejected several bids by him and other members of the board.”

Renzo lifted his brows. “On purpose.”

Emil scoffed, putting his hands at Renzo’s hips so he could ruck up his shirt. He fought back a groan when he touched warm, naked skin. “We weren’t really interested in being kind. Well, I wasn’t. I was trying to find a way to assuage my guilt. Victor just wanted out.”

“I’m sorry,” Renzo said softly.

Emil’s eyes widened. “You’re saying sorry to me? I was the monster.”

Renzo’s eyes cut to the side, and then he shrugged. “I’m petty. If I had a way to fuck my ex over and ruin his reputation at work, I would. I wouldn’t even hesitate, and I wouldn’t lose sleep over it. Maybe you weren’t the best person in the world, but you didn’t fuck Victor’s partner.”

Emil couldn’t argue there. He *wasn’t* the best person, but there were lines he could never cross. And, he supposed, his most heinous crime aside from keeping Charlie’s secret was letting people think the worst of him. There were rumors upon rumors about things he’d never actually done, and he never bothered to correct them. The less people knew who he truly was, the better.

Or so he thought.

It was a lonely existence, but it was better than someone looking at him with pity, thanks to his past. It was better than anyone knowing what he’d gone through and the life he’d lived before sixteen. It wasn’t his fault, but he couldn’t stop feeling humiliated about what he’d gone through, no matter how hard he tried.

A touch on his jaw brought him back to Earth, and Renzo was staring at him with heavy-lidded eyes. “What is it?”

“Complicated feelings,” Emil said. He tried not to think about how much time had already passed. “Will you kiss me?”

“If I kiss you, I’m not going to want to stop.”

Emil laughed. “That’s not exactly going to discourage me, sweetheart.”

Renzo pinked in his cheeks again and slapped Emil on the chest. “It’s going to lead to other things, and you have a plane waiting.”

“There’s a private jet with Oliver and Victor waiting. And I think they’ll forgive me for being late, considering they’ll know exactly why.”

“Oh God,” Renzo breathed, but when Emil urged him down and pushed his tongue past Renzo’s lips, his argument was lost to a quiet, needy moan.

This was one way to break in a new sofa.

Emil buried his face against the cushions, the fabric rough against his chin, but he didn’t care. He could barely feel it. Every sensation was eclipsed by Renzo’s warm tongue breaching the ring of muscle in his ass. Emil’s thighs were shaking, his knees unstable beneath him as they sank into thick cotton stuffing, but he couldn’t move.

Renzo’s hands were more than steady as he held Emil in place by the hips, and after what felt like forever, he laid a sloppy kiss to his hole, then pulled away.

“Please,” Emil whined. It had only been a few minutes, but it felt like Renzo had been teasing him for hours. He was past the point of begging, and now he just wondered if this delicious torment was going to be his reality for the rest of his life.

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Renzo said, laying a gentle bite to Emil’s hip.

He hadn’t realized he’d babbled all of that aloud, but he was too needy and desperate to be embarrassed. He pushed up higher on his knees and glanced over his shoulder to find Renzo perched on the edge of the coffee table, his hand slowly stroking his own cock. Emil throbbed and leaked all over his cushions.

“You’re so beautiful,” Renzo whispered. He stood up, then grabbed Emil by the back of his hair and forced his face to turn back toward the window. The blinds were down almost all the way, apart from a small sliver, and Emil could make out people across the street walking along the sidewalk.

He felt a rush of something at the thought of being seen.

“Oh, baby, you like that, don’t you?” Renzo murmured. “I can tell exactly what you’re thinking.”

Emil let out a trembling breath, which ended on a whine. “Fuck me. God, please just fuck me.”

Instead of answering with words, two slick fingers slipped inside him, and Emil’s eyes slammed shut. He buried his face in the sofa cushion to cover the sound of his groan. Renzo just laughed as he fucked him that way, pressing his body weight down on Emil until his legs threatened to give out.

“So loose for me now,” Renzo murmured, and Emil moaned, rough and overwhelmed. “You like that, don’t you? Being sloppy and open.”

Emil was pretty sure his entire body was going to catch fire—or at the very least give up the fucking ghost if Renzo didn’t fuck him soon. “Renzo. Come on. Please fuck me. Please...”

“Okay, baby. I’ve got you.” Renzo ran a soothing hand up Emil’s spine, but the sensation was almost too much. He shivered, and Renzo quickly grabbed him by the hips to angle his ass up and then thrust in, bottoming out in a single slide.

Emil let out an animal noise, burying it in the sofa cushions, and his body started to tremble as he began to fuck

his hips backward. He heard Renzo grunt, almost startled, but it only took a second for his lover to get with the program. Emil felt a rush of relief right before the pleasure started to eclipse everything else. His skin was hot, and he felt sweat dripping down his temples as he lost himself to the sensation of being so, so full.

“Yeah,” Renzo breathed out, his voice ragged. His hips snapped forward, sending Emil crashing into the cushion. “Yeah. Look at you fucking take it. Look at you split open on my cock.”

Emil wanted to see. He craned his neck and arched his back, but the only view he got was of Renzo’s stomach muscles clenching as he fucked Emil within an inch of his life. His vision went blurry, and his balls began to tighten as he felt himself reach the edge.

“Gonna come,” he gasped.

Renzo’s body moved forward, his hand coming around to grab him by the dick, and Emil only just managed to hold up his own weight as Renzo began to stroke him in a fast, furious rhythm. Everything whited out, and it took him a second to realize he was coming before the full force of his orgasm hit.

A strange noise left his chest as he let go, and his arms gave out just before his knees did. His body went boneless, and Renzo used his own to press down, fucking into him in short, shallow thrusts until he was gasping. Somewhere, in the haze of it all, Emil felt Renzo’s dick thicken, and then his insides went hot as Renzo’s come filled the condom.

In slow motion, everything stopped, and all that was left was their stuttered breath and the occasional, careful kiss Renzo laid over his shoulders. Renzo rolled to the side, letting Emil drop his legs to the floor, and his lungs filled with air.

He was still dazed from everything, but in the back of his mind, he knew he couldn’t lie there forever.

“Is Victor going to murder me?”

Ah, he thought. *Right*. He had parts of his life to get on and closure to find with his past. He blinked his eyes open, then

turned his head and found Renzo lounging against one of the throw pillows. His cheeks were pinked, and his hair was mussed. He was the most beautiful thing Emil had ever seen in his life.

“I like you so much,” Emil whispered.

Renzo curled his hand around the back of Emil’s neck and drew him in for a soft kiss. “I like you too. You promise you’re coming back?”

“I promise. I need to finish this so I can finally start living.” His tongue felt loose, his heart vulnerable, but he also felt the safest he’d ever been. He shuffled closer and kissed Renzo again. “Promise me you’ll be waiting?”

Renzo smiled, then traced a line over Emil’s jaw. “I’ll be waiting.”

And that had to be enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

EMIL TOOK A LONG DRAG off his cigarette, watching as the smoke drifted from his lips. He'd quit so long ago, and he had no idea why he was bothering with it now. He told himself it was better than drinking—because the craving for a decent scotch and the fog that would come from it was almost unbearable. But he had a long video session with Sarah and was able to cancel his bottle service order to his room.

Kicking his foot up on the chair, he leaned back and stared across the empty pool. It was cold, but not nearly as cold as back home. It made him want to laugh because he'd been living in Providence for a fraction of his life, the time measured in months, but he felt entirely unused to the West Coast now.

The air was thick after a heavy rain, and it smelled like ocean brine. He thought it would make him more nostalgic, but instead, he just felt a violent wave of agony, missing Renzo with a ferocity he didn't think was possible. It had been forty-eight hours since he'd landed, and they'd talked at least half a dozen times, but it wasn't enough.

Emil had a meeting with his attorney in the morning, and he was anxious. He didn't actually give a shit what Charlie did to him or what he had to say. He didn't care if somehow, this whole thing made him go broke. He just wanted to go back and be with the only people that really mattered.

Leaning forward, Emil scraped the lit cherry from the half-smoked cigarette on the ground, then moved to stand when a buzzing in his pocket stopped him. He wasn't expecting it to

be Renzo, but he was hoping, so he quickly fumbled for his phone, heart sinking when he saw the name on his screen.

“Dad,” he said by way of answer.

“Are you drunk?”

Emil almost laughed at the absurdity—but the feeling only lasted a second because of course his dad would think that. “Sober, actually. A few months.”

There was a long pause, and then his dad sighed and slipped into Norwegian. “Court ordered? You know I have plenty of lawyers on my team who can take care of that for you.”

Emil hadn’t spoken the language in so long it took his brain a second to recalibrate and process what his dad was saying. Then he rubbed his face and tried not to give in to his urge to tell his dad he was just as bad as his mother had been. “Personal choice. Don’t worry about it.”

His dad hummed. “Well, I just heard about the lawsuit.”

“Are you calling to berate me?” Emil asked.

“I’m calling to see if you need me to send someone for you. I know you have a trusted team, but I’m not sure you’re in your right mind right now. After selling everything off—”

“You did the same thing,” Emil interrupted.

“I sold them to you.” His dad went suddenly quiet. “Emil, is there a child who you’ve been keeping from me?”

The thought was far too comical for him not to laugh. “Are you serious? You think after everything I went through, I’d bring a child into this world?”

“It’s not as though it’s under your control most of the time,” his dad reminded him.

Emil rolled his eyes so hard it hurt. “Trust me, I’ve been more than careful. And I prefer to fuck men.”

His dad just laughed. “I knew I raised a smart son.”

“You didn’t raise me at all,” Emil couldn’t help.

His dad snorted. “Well, I paid for the best education anyway. But the point is, I know I’ve been away for a while, and I didn’t expect to come back to this. I don’t want your name and reputation taking a hit on this, so if you need help—”

“I don’t,” Emil said, quieter than he expected to be. He knew the pain in his gut was for the small child he’d been who deserved better. He harbored a quiet fantasy that his father would have his come-to-Jesus moment. Maybe he’d wake up one morning and realize all the hurt he’d caused a young child who had no control and grew up with no idea what it meant to be loved.

Of course, Emil was a pragmatic man, and he didn’t really believe it would actually happen, but it hurt every time he realized the truth of his situation.

His dad cleared his throat. “I heard about your mother. You must be relieved about that.”

Emil blinked, staring sightlessly across the still water of the pool. “Relieved?”

“After what she did to you.”

He didn’t know why those words bothered him. Maybe he should be relieved. Maybe he should feel petty and happy that she was gone. Maybe he should celebrate the fact that she probably died alone and in pain after everything she’d put him through. Half his childhood memories were still strange, abstract blanks in his mind. And in a moment of harsh honesty, Sarah told him he may never get them back.

And that was probably a good thing.

“I need to go,” Emil said. “I have a meeting early in the morning.”

“Don’t drink too much tonight,” his dad said.

“I told you I’m—”

“Sober,” the man said with a harsh laugh. “Something we do tell ourselves, don’t we? Call me if you need my help.”

“I won’t,” Emil said, but he was speaking into silence. His dad had disconnected before he could even take a breath to reply. Letting the phone clatter to the table, Emil put both hands over his face and forced himself to take in a few trembling breaths.

Every muscle in his body was hurting like he’d just finished a twenty-mile hike, and he couldn’t seem to let the tension go. Had he been that much of a callous monster before Victor had dragged him out of this world? He wanted to say no. He needed to believe it. And maybe he could, because he didn’t think there was a force on this Earth that could make his father see the thing he’d become, but it hadn’t taken much for Emil to crack and eventually shatter.

He swallowed past a lump in his throat, and then he finally stood and forced himself to walk back inside, heading toward his cold, lonely room.

After a shower, Emil shoved his clothes into one of the dry-clean bags, grimacing at the smell of smoke clinging to them. It had been a momentary relief, but now he just felt sick to his stomach. Switching off all the lights, he curled up under his covers and stared at the clock. It was five minutes to midnight. Five minutes to New Year’s Eve.

He had a meeting in the morning, then a holiday by himself when he should be sitting by a bonfire with Renzo in his arms and Matty beside him, ringing in his second chance to be the person he deserved to be.

The hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach got worse, and after a few beats of his heart, he cracked. He reached for his phone before he was consciously aware of it, but he didn’t stop himself from hitting Renzo’s name on his phone, even when he realized it was far later on that side of the country.

The call rang twice before Renzo picked up, his voice thick and heavy with sleep. “Hey, sunshine.”

“I woke you. Shit.”

“I told you to wake me if you needed me, and I know you wouldn’t have called if you were fine,” Renzo said.

Emil closed his eyes against the assault of truth. He both loved and hated how well Renzo seemed to know him in such a short time. “My dad called tonight.”

Renzo sucked in a breath, and when he spoke again, he sounded far more alert. “What did he want?”

“To see if I needed more lawyers. He implied he knew people who could make the problem go away,” Emil said, then laughed bitterly. “I shouldn’t be surprised he didn’t care about me. He only cared about what might happen to my reputation.” His dad hadn’t come out and said that any slight against Emil would reflect against him, but he didn’t need to. It was his dad’s one rule after Emil had come to live with him.

So far, he hadn’t broken it in a way that embarrassed the man.

“Did you tell him to fuck himself and then hang up?” Renzo asked.

Emil turned his head and grinned into his pillow. “No. I’m not as brave on my own as I am with you.”

“Oh, my baby,” Renzo breathed. “Want me to fly to... where is he?”

“Fuck knows,” Emil answered honestly. “One of his chalets somewhere in the Alps?”

“Well, that sounds expensive,” Renzo said.

“Good thing you have a rich man obsessed with you,” Emil told him, still grinning. “But I’d rather save an Alps trip for when we can have our own private sanctuary and you can fuck me breathless.”

“Christ, I miss you,” Renzo said, and Emil felt those words almost like they were a physical touch. “How long ’til you’re back again?”

“I wish I knew,” Emil said. “Feels like forever, and I’m so angry I won’t be with you tomorrow.”

“Me too,” Renzo whispered.

“If travel wouldn’t upset Matty’s routine, I would have invited you two along,” Emil told him, his fatigue making his private words trip off his tongue. “I have this big, ugly suite with two bedrooms and a fucking grand piano. Like, who even plays a grand piano in these places?”

“Frank Sinatra?” Renzo said. His voice sounded a little strange and almost tense. “Would you have seriously wanted us there? You said you didn’t want us to—”

“I know,” Emil interrupted. “Past Emil didn’t know what the fuck he was talking about when he said he wanted to keep you away from all this. There’s nothing here except ghosts, and I’d never let them hurt you. But...I don’t know, maybe we can work up to a family vacation. Let Matty know ahead of time so he feels good about traveling?”

Renzo was quiet for long enough that Emil started to feel tendrils of panic. Had he gone too far? He knew he was jumping twenty steps ahead, but he was so goddamn gone on Renzo he couldn’t help himself. “I haven’t done that in a long time,” Renzo eventually murmured. “Matty was younger. My parents were still around.”

Emil buried himself deeper into his blankets. He was fighting sleep and losing the battle. “We could go anywhere. We could...see the Northern Lights. We could build igloos. And snowmen.”

Renzo’s laugh was soft and faint, but Emil knew it was because he was fading fast. “Or we can keep it simple. A suite in a nice hotel by the ocean.”

“I have that now. God, I wish you were here. Give me a reason I shouldn’t just let that little fucker take my money so I can come home,” Emil begged quietly. He wasn’t sure what he wanted Renzo to say. He only knew he felt wild and reckless and would immediately get on a plane that night if Renzo only asked.

“It’s not worth it to let someone like him win,” Renzo said after a beat. “I’m not going anywhere. And soon enough,

you're going to open your eyes, and I'll be right there.”

Emil's chest ached. “I want to kiss you.”

“I want to kiss you too,” Renzo said. “Soon, okay?”

“Promise me,” Emil said. “I know I'm being needy and probably wildly unattractive, but if you could just forgive me for that—”

Renzo's soft laugh interrupted his word vomit. “I think you're the sexiest man I have ever met in my entire life. And the fact that you want to need me, of all people, is kind of giving me an ego.”

Emil grinned and curled up on his side. “The idea that you didn't have one before fills me with rage. I want to meet your ex and do something that lands me in jail until my very expensive, shady lawyer gets me out.”

Renzo made a soft, agonized noise. “Stop it. I'm serious,” he added when Emil burst into laughter. “The idea's tempting, and this is not the man I normally am.”

“I like all the parts of you. Even the ones who secretly like the idea of me beating the absolute fuck out of your ex.”

Renzo chuckled along with him, but he went quiet after a beat. “You know that doesn't mean I still have feelings for him, right?”

Emil blinked in surprise. “Yeah. Of course I do.” He hadn't considered that at all, but maybe he was a fool for not worrying more. “Do people think that about you?”

“I thought it about me,” Renzo admitted. “I talked it over with my therapist because I didn't understand why I couldn't let go. I was grateful when the relationship ended and pissed off at myself that I had to catch him cheating before I ended it. He reminded me that even when you hate someone—like truly hate someone—you're still allowed to grieve. You can grieve the life you were supposed to have and were denied, or you can grieve the loss of small comforts that made up your day-to-day routine. He said I was allowed to grieve losing him, even if it was for the best.”

Those words hit Emil like a physical blow. He'd never let himself feel anything about his mom because of the pain she'd caused. She hadn't loved him. She'd used him to fulfill her compulsions instead of getting help for her illness. She saw him as a means to getting her fix. Not as a person.

Things had been so bad he had chunks of time missing, so he told himself he wasn't allowed to be sad when he was finally taken away. And he'd carried that with him for so long now he had no idea how to think any other way.

But with time, maybe it would get better.

With the tenderness Renzo offered him and with all the patience.

"You still there?" Renzo asked.

Emil rubbed at his eyes, trying to chase away the fog. "Yeah. Sorry. Just tired, I think."

"I know. I'll let you go."

Emil hated those words, no matter how necessary they were. "Call me tomorrow?"

"We'll definitely talk tomorrow," Renzo said. "Just try to get rest and remember this is a small moment. There are bigger and better things waiting for you."

"I," Emil said, then stopped. He felt it—those three small words that were far too big for so few letters. But he held back. Saying them now wouldn't be fair to either of them. "Yeah. Talk tomorrow."

"Good night, sunshine."

Those words sent Emil into a fitful slumber, but in spite of that, he had a smile on his face and warmth where his heart beat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“I DON’T LIKE IT HERE.”

Renzo looked over at his brother and laid his hand on his shoulder. “I know, bud. But it’s only for a second. I just need to upload a couple of things to my drive, and then we’re leaving.”

Matty began to bounce on his feet. Sometimes, when he was excited, it was easy to forget he was a grown adult and had been through the wringer, thanks to Renzo’s bad decisions and crappy ex. And that was weighing heavily on him in spite of the fact that he knew he was making the right choice.

Emil should be several walking red flags, but he wasn’t. He was a good person who was dealt a shitty hand, and he was one of the few people in the world who was trying to become better. Renzo wasn’t going to ever demand perfection. How could he when he was the furthest thing from it. But he was learning to trust again, and Emil made him feel safe.

So making the phone call right after he and Emil talked had been easy. Setting up his plans and his tickets and letting Matty know had been simple.

It had been the next morning that was hard and almost impossible not to second-guess himself. What if he got it wrong? What if he was actually unwanted?

“When do we get on the plane?” Matty asked as Renzo fished his keys out of his pocket and opened his office door. Matty looked around nervously, and Renzo knew who he was looking for.

“John doesn’t work in this building,” he said, ushering his brother inside. “And you have the itinerary in your email, bud. Instead of asking me a hundred times, why don’t you look.”

“I’m nervous,” Matty spat, crossing his arms. “Don’t be a jerk.”

Renzo threw up his hands. “I’m not trying to be, but last-minute flights are stressful, and surprising Emil is making me feel a little...”

“Crazy pants?” Matty said.

“Let’s not use that phrase,” Renzo told him tiredly as he dropped behind his desk. “But also, yes.”

Matty snorted as he dropped into one of the empty chairs. He swung his legs and looked around at all of Renzo’s shelves. “No pictures of me.”

“I have a bunch, but I keep them where nosy students can’t find them,” Renzo said, pointing to a couple of frames facing away from the door.

Matty grinned. “Because I’m better-looking than you.”

Renzo’s brows shot up, and then he laughed. “Sure. Whatever you say.”

Matty just grinned but stayed quiet as Renzo worked, which made his quick task easy. The internet was better now that the campus was all but deserted, so he had everything uploaded and ready to go. His only excuse for staying home was work, and now he was mobile. Which meant he could give Emil what he’d been begging for.

The only fear licking at his heels was that maybe Emil was just talking through emotion. Maybe he hadn’t been serious. Even when Victor and Oliver promised it would be the best gift—even when Victor insisted he pay—Renzo couldn’t shake the worry that he was doing too much.

Emil said he felt needy, but all he wanted was a promise that Renzo would be waiting for him when he got back. He wasn’t jumping in a plane and upending his entire trip.

“Can we go?” Matty asked. “We’re gonna be late.”

“You only want to get there early because you want Saugy Franks,” Renzo accused as he turned off his monitor and grabbed his keys.

Matty grinned at him. “I’m going to get four hot dogs.”

Renzo choked. “The hell you are. You’ll be crop-dusting the plane the entire flight.”

Matty slapped a hand over his mouth to hold in his giggles. “I will not,” he said through his fingers.

Renzo rolled his eyes. “Fool me once, bud. Fool me once.” They turned the corner to reach the elevator when a figure appeared, and Renzo came to a skidding halt. His heart began to beat so hard he felt light-headed, and the moment was made worse with the way Matty grabbed his hand and squeezed.

John’s gaze was as cold as ever, his smirk as cruel as it had been the last time Renzo had run into him months and months ago. He locked eyes with Renzo and then did the inevitable. He raised his hand in a wave and started walking toward them. Renzo knew he was too far from the elevator or the stairs to make a quick escape, and although Matty was now shaking, there was no way to get out of this.

“Don’t be scared of him,” Renzo murmured. “He can’t do anything to you.”

Matty shook his head and looked up at Renzo with an imploring, terrified gaze. “Please don’t get arrested.”

“Arrested? Who’s getting arrested?” John drawled.

Renzo absently pulled his brother closer. “Don’t worry about—”

“Renzo said he’d get arrested if you ever looked at me again,” Matty declared. Which was true. He had said that to Matty several times and to John once during their worst and final argument before the divorce hearing.

John just laughed and leaned his shoulder against the wall. “Is that so?” He used his patronizing baby voice he’d always used on Matty, and Renzo really did want to punch him.

Matty tugged on Renzo's hand again. "Emil's waiting. Please don't go to jail."

At that, John immediately straightened. "Who's Emil?"

"None of your damn business," Matty spat, and Renzo almost burst into half-hysterical laughter because apparently, seeing John again was what it would take for Matty to swear openly.

John's smile widened, and Renzo felt a sudden and furious wave of protectiveness rushing through his veins. For their entire relationship, John had always looked for Renzo's soft spots—the tender underbelly where he could dig his nails in to hurt him. Only this time, Renzo wasn't afraid. Even if John could get to Emil, Renzo would die before he let anything happen.

"Boyfriend, is he?"

"None of your beeswax, you ugly—"

Renzo squeezed Matty's hand to quiet him, and before he spoke, he made sure his tone was dry and emotionless. "We have places to be. Have a great day and happy holidays."

He started to walk away, and then John cleared his throat loudly. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

Renzo didn't stop walking until a cruel hand gripped his shoulder and pulled him to a stop. Renzo took a breath. John wanted him to fight back. He wanted Renzo to make a scene so he could go back to calling him unhinged.

Luckily, he'd had enough therapy to know how to deal with what John wanted. Very slowly and very carefully, Renzo stepped out of John's reach, then looked at him with a completely blank expression. "I hope you have a nice New Year."

John's eyes flared, and Renzo knew it was working. "I didn't have a choice, you know. You were so fucking impossible. You made my life so damn miserable, I had to do something."

“Okay,” Renzo said flatly. He could feel Matty staring at him. He knew Matty was waiting for him to do something, and he couldn’t explain right then that he was. That he was battling someone like John with the only weapon that would ever be effective: apathy.

John’s jaw clenched. “Does your little boyfriend know how frigid you are in bed? Does he know your dick only stays hard for half a minute?”

Matty sucked in a breath, but Renzo squeezed his hand again. He glanced to the right, and he could see the entrance to the stairs. It was only three flights down, and he knew Matty could make that easily. After that, it was a hundred feet to his car, and then John would be in his past again and Emil in his near future.

“Are you even listening to me?” John snapped.

Renzo blinked, and then his lips twitched in a barely there smile. “Sorry, no. I have a flight to catch. Happy holidays,” he repeated robotically. He tugged on Matty’s hand again, and this time, John didn’t try to stop him.

Renzo kind of wanted to laugh, and he kind of wanted to cry. He felt a little foolish for being so petrified every time he saw John on campus smirking at him from across the quad. If only he’d known back then that there was nothing left to hurt him.

All of that pain was a memory, becoming more and more distant every day.

Renzo debated about the stairs, but since it was obvious John wasn’t following them, he pushed the button for the elevator instead. The tension between him and his brother was high, and Matty was practically vibrating with the need to say something, but he waited until they were inside the elevator car and the doors were firmly closed.

“I said a bad word,” Matty whispered.

Renzo blinked, then laughed as he pulled Matty close and wrapped his arms around him. “Yeah, bud. You did. But you get a pass on that one, okay?”

Matty nodded against Renzo's chest. He was still faintly trembling, so Renzo eased him back and pressed two fingers against his pulse to make sure he wasn't going tachycardic. Matty shoved him off after a second and marched forward when the doors opened.

"My heart's feeling fine."

"Okay," Renzo said. Matty had been fine for years, but he would always be a little nervous. He waited a beat, then jogged up to his brother and grabbed his shoulder right before they reached the doors. Matty looked up, his expression a little furious, but Renzo just smiled. "Thank you for defending me. I don't know if that's ever happened before."

Matty's jaw clenched, and then he nodded. "Emil would have. He would have beat him up."

Renzo laughed again, his chest aching with the need to see Emil right then. "Yeah. I think so too, so it's a good thing he wasn't with us because I'd like to spend the New Year together and not waiting to post his bail."

"Me too," Matty said, deflating a bit. "I should have beat him up though. He's a big, ugly jerk, and cops would be nice to me because I'm disabled."

"He *is* a big jerk, but let's not give in to violence," Renzo said from behind a sigh. He reached past Matty and opened the door, letting his brother out first. The wind was icy, and he wondered if it was warmer on the other side of the country. "Besides, he doesn't matter to us anymore. We have a good life and better people in it."

"Is that why you didn't fight with him?" Matty asked as he bounced up and down near the front of the car.

Renzo quickly unlocked it with the fob, and they both climbed in. He started the engine, and since they'd only been in the office a few minutes, it only took a second to warm up. "Remember when I took you to see my therapist who was helping me with the divorce?"

Matty nodded. "He was nice. He had Orange Fanta in his fridge."

Renzo shook his head. “Yeah, yeah. Can’t forget that.” Only because Matty had obsessed about getting his own minifridge for his own drinks, which Renzo had eventually caved and bought him. “Anyway, he taught me this trick. People like John—”

“There are more people like John?” Matty asked, looking horrified.

Renzo grimaced. “I’m afraid there are quite a few people like him in the world. And they’re very good at getting you to like them before they pull away their mask and show you the kind of people they really are. But there are some ways to beat them at their games.”

Matty’s brows lifted. “How? You have to teach me in case I ever fall in love with someone like him.”

You will over my dead body, Renzo thought to himself, but he shoved the thought aside because there was always a chance Matty would meet the wrong person, and Renzo couldn’t control that.

He leaned back and smiled at his brother. “Your biggest weapon is not showing you’re angry. Or sad. Or hurt. Or even happy. You just give them a very blank face and no emotion when you talk. The one thing they want from you is to know they have power over your emotions, so you take that power away, and they have nothing.”

Matty shrank back. “What I did was bad.”

Renzo reached for his brother’s hand and pulled him close, kissing his forehead. “What you did was the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me.” And he meant that. His sister had only ever berated him for being foolish enough to get into a relationship with John and for not seeing all of his red flags. She never forgave him for not leaving earlier, and she never did understand why he couldn’t just end it.

The only thing he got from friends and family after the divorce was relief John was no longer around and disappointment because he hadn’t been smarter or stronger. It was something he’d always have to live with.

“Thank you,” Renzo whispered. “Thank you for standing up for me.”

“I hate him,” Matty said fiercely when Renzo pulled back.

“Me too. We just can’t ever let him know that.” He put his car in reverse and backed out of his spot. “But he doesn’t matter, okay? Our lives are much better now.”

“Yeah. And Emil is prettier than him. A lot prettier,” Matty said, bouncing happily. “He likes painting mugs with me, and he even drank cocoa out of the one I gave him. And he makes you go all red when he kisses you because he’s good at it, right?”

Renzo flushed.

“Yep. Like that,” Matty said.

“And we’re done with this,” Renzo told him as they took the entrance to the freeway. “Now, be quiet and stop trying to embarrass me so I don’t crash the car.”

“Okay,” Matty said, and Renzo looked over at him, grinning as his chest felt like it was going to burst with joy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

EMIL ACHED from head to toe, and the last place he wanted to be was his hotel room. The city seemed alive with celebration, but he didn't want to be part of that either. He wanted to be with Renzo, and since he couldn't do that, he turned to Victor and shot him an imploring look.

“Tell me you and Oliver don't have big plans tonight.”

“We do,” Victor said, giving his leg a pat. “And you're definitely not invited.”

Emil shrank back into the seat and glanced out the window as they passed the view of rolling hills covered in fog. It had taken him exactly twenty-four hours to realize he didn't miss any of this. At all.

“Stop making that face,” Victor scolded after a moment. “I will not succumb to guilt, and honestly, you look like you could use extra sleep.”

Emil blinked at him, then burst into laughter. “Your honesty is brutal and refreshing.”

“I'm saying this because I'm worried,” Victor told him. “This whole thing is a giant pain in the ass, and I know you've been struggling with things since we moved.”

Emil winced. He knew Victor wasn't trying to take a dig at him for how closed off he'd been, but he still regretted it. He couldn't help but wonder how different things might have been if he'd just let himself feel safe with Victor years ago when they'd met. But if he'd done that, would they still be exactly where they were?

Sacrificing his past pain might mean never having met Renzo and that wasn't a life he wanted to live.

"I'm not trying to be cruel," Victor said in the space of continued silence.

Emil quickly shook his head. "I didn't think you were. Today was long, and I know seeing Charlie was probably hard on you. It was hard on me, and he didn't hurt me the same way." Emil didn't know if bringing up the past was the right move, but Victor had been stoic and apathetic during the entire meeting.

Several times, Emil had tried to read his face because it was the first time he'd been face-to-face with Charlie since finding him in bed with his ex. But Victor showed no emotion. He sat quietly and let the lawyers handle everything. A few times, Emil could see Charlie trying to get a rise out of either of them, but Emil had been too exhausted to rise to the bait, and eventually, Charlie just sat there looking defeated.

But the last thing in the world Emil wanted was for his best friend to hurt anymore because of that man, and Emil didn't want to poke at an tender spot.

Victor let out a small sigh, turning his gaze out toward the horizon. He was holding his crutches between his legs, twisting them almost nervously. "He was still a bad friend to you. He enabled you when you were self-destructive."

Emil shrugged. "I made sure I was surrounded by people who wouldn't call me out. It was easier than dealing with... everything, you know?"

Victor laughed, then looked over at Emil with soft eyes. "Yeah. I do. But life is better now, right?"

Emil couldn't help his smile. "Yeah. I think it is. And I promise I really will be fine alone tonight. I'm trying to figure out how to do that, you know? Sit with my thoughts and just..."

"Be?" Victor offered. He sat back and closed his eyes. "It gets easier. It just takes time."

If Emil was going to trust anyone on that, it would be the man who just went through the darkness and came out the other side with the absolute love of his life.

The car dropped the pair off at the front of the hotel, where Oliver was waiting. Emil offered a quick hello before darting off, wanting to give the couple quiet time so Victor could decompress. It was the least he deserved after having to face the man who'd attempted to ruin his life and make him look like a complete fool.

Emil's problems and tender ache paled in comparison, and as he headed up the elevator to his suite, he tried to cope with the guilt that came with it. Victor's life had been upended not only because Charlie had betrayed him but because Emil had kept it quiet for so long. Emil had walked in on Charlie and Alice in Charlie's office one afternoon months after they'd started their affair, and that was months before Victor would learn the truth.

Alice had been mortified, but Charlie had just laughed it off and pulled her close when she tried to run and grab Emil's arm. "He's cool," Charlie had told her. "He's not going to say anything. Emil's the one person around here who doesn't give a shit."

Emil had smiled and nodded because he didn't know any other way to be. He'd spent his entire adult life cultivating that exact reputation. How was he supposed to give that up for one man?

Then he saw the pain on Victor's face, and everything he thought he knew about himself was destroyed.

The night after Victor left was the first night Emil had a nightmare about his mom in more years than he cared to count. He woke up pale, sweating, a sob lodged in his throat and her words ringing in his ears. He didn't know if that was actually how she'd sounded, but that was the monstrous voice

he remembered. Her laugh had been cruel, her anger even worse, and nothing he ever did pleased her.

In a weak, terrifying moment, he almost picked up the phone and called her. Sanity crept up on him before he could do something so irrational, but he felt the smallest measure of regret now. Facing her might have helped. It wouldn't have fixed anything, but it would have allowed him to see her as she was—sick, helpless, and trapped at the mercy of her own mind.

But now she was gone, and he only had the shards of his memories to piece back together.

Taking a breath, Emil told himself he wasn't going to let the stress get to him. The loneliness was only temporary. It would be weeks at most before he got to see Renzo again, and he had no problem dropping the cash to fly back, even if it was only for a day, just so he could kiss him.

The thought made him smile as he swiped his room key and let the door swing open and saw...lights? Had he left the lights on?

And was that music?

For a moment, he thought maybe it was housekeeping, and then he saw the bags. His heart began to beat a little faster, and he wasn't sure if he should run or if he should follow the sounds. Luckily, the universe decided for him.

The only person Emil wanted to see appeared in the bedroom doorway. Renzo wore a shy smile, like he wasn't sure if he was going to be welcomed. Emil was afraid for a moment he was hallucinating, but then Renzo let out a nervous laugh, and something broke.

Emil was crossing the room before he was really aware of it, and Renzo was moving to meet him halfway. He was struggling to believe it was real, even after he threw his arms around Renzo's waist and found the warm lips with his own.

"You're here," he murmured in between kisses.

Renzo laughed and tried to pull back, but Emil couldn't bring himself to let go. "I'm here. Baby...hey. I'm here.

Matty's with me.”

Those three words were the only thing that could stop Emil from going any further. He cleared his throat and gently pulled back, glancing behind Renzo into Matty's face. The man was all but bouncing on his toes, and it was a far cry from the shocked and betrayed look on Matty's face the last time Emil had seen him.

“Hey, bud,” Emil said.

“I want a hug, but I don't want a kiss like that,” Matty said.

Emil burst into laughter, which felt almost like he was crying, and he stepped away from Renzo and opened his arms. Matty hit him at a speed walk, almost knocking him over. He was short but dense and strong as he swept Emil into an embrace.

It felt like family.

It felt like home.

“I was going to yell surprise,” Matty complained when he pulled away. “We were putting up ribbons.”

“Streamers,” Renzo corrected. “I hope you don't mind.”

Emil cleared the thickness from his throat and shook his head. “I don't mind.”

Matty grinned and linked their hands together, tugging him into the second bedroom, where, sure enough, metallic gold and matte-black streamers were hanging over the window with what looked like some old Scotch tape.

He had no idea what to say. He couldn't give a name to the feeling in his chest. It felt like it was going to burst free and consume him.

“I love it,” Emil finally managed.

Matty pumped his fist, and Renzo let out a small sigh, relief on his face. “Victor gave us a key,” Renzo said. “It's not a bonfire or fireworks, but we're together. I hope it's enough.”

Emil's eyes widened, but then everything made a whole lot more sense. Victor hadn't been mean about rejecting Emil for the rest of the evening, and Emil had fully expected his friend to want to spend time with his partner, but it had stung.

Now, he realized it was just cruelty to be kind. And the very fact that Renzo was afraid this wasn't enough almost made him burst into hysterical laughter.

"Kiss me," Emil murmured instead.

Renzo touched his cheek, then placed a chaste kiss against the corner of his mouth and let it linger there until Emil felt like the world was right side up again. He pulled back, then turned to Matty. "Another hug?"

Matty flung himself at Emil again, and Emil squeezed him tight. "You two are the best. I thought I was going to be alone on New Year's."

Matty made a distressed noise, pulling back to look over at Renzo. "Alone? He was going to be alone?"

"I have some friends here," Emil said quickly, ruffling Matty's hair. "But they're spending the night together. I thought I was just going to call Renzo and maybe get to FaceTime with you for a few minutes."

Matty flung his arms up in the air. "But now we're here, and we can *par-tay!*"

Emil's grin threatened to split his face. "We sure can. What do you say we call down for some room service and get this party started?"

Matty jumped on the bed, ignoring Renzo's cry for him to stop, and shouted, "Happy New Year!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

MATTY'S ENTHUSIASM wound down not long after the food arrived. It had been a long flight, and the jet lag was powerful enough that he was flopped on the uncomfortably narrow couch by the terrace door, snoring away.

Renzo and Emil had gotten comfortable in one of the round, oversized swivel chairs with some movie on the TV that Matty had fallen asleep to. Emil hadn't said much over the last several moments, lost in the feeling of Renzo drawing careful lines over his forearm.

It was the closest to peace Emil had ever felt in his entire life, and he wanted to bask in it forever, even if he knew it wouldn't last. "How long are you here for?" he finally asked.

"Matty has six vacation days, and I brought work with me, so we don't have to rush home. If you don't mind us around that long," Renzo added. "I had a panic attack about not asking first, but Victor swore up and down you wouldn't want us to leave."

Emil tipped Renzo's face up by his chin and kissed him, soft and sweet. "I never want you to leave. Not...I mean, I'm not trying to move fast or anything—I don't mean move in, but..."

Renzo's quiet laugh stopped Emil's babbling. "You're cute when you panic. And I know what you meant. I feel the same way."

Emil let out a small breath. "Okay." He dropped his head to the side of the cushion and stared at Renzo's profile. He was

so fucking beautiful it hurt to look at sometimes. He reached out and ran his thumb over the edge of Renzo's jaw, loving the way his rough stubble felt against his skin. "There's more I want to say, but I'm not sure I'm ready."

Renzo was silent and still for so long Emil felt the urge to panic—like maybe Renzo had figured him out and was now trying to find a way out. Then he shifted his body, turning so he could look directly at Emil. "This morning, I went to my office to upload some of my files from my work computer so I could have an excuse to stay here with you longer."

Emil smiled. "Yeah?"

Renzo didn't smile back. "Matty was petrified to come with me because he knew campus is the only place he'll ever see John again."

Something in Emil's chest sank, but this time, he said nothing.

"I told him not to be afraid. It's the holidays, no one was there. He trusted me." Renzo took in a trembling breath. "John was in the hallway when we were leaving."

Emil's hands curled into fists. "Did he speak to you?"

Renzo let out a small laugh and closed his eyes. "Yeah. Matty yelled at him. Well, as much as Matty's ever yelled at anyone. For a second, he tried to step between me and John."

"He loves you so much," Emil said quietly.

Renzo passed a hand down his face, then finally opened his eyes. "When he was really little, he was sick all the time. My sister and I didn't really understand his disorder. There's a lot more information about it now, but it sounded made-up to me. I'm not even really sure I believed my mom until Matty's heart almost gave out."

Emil sucked in a breath. "Seriously?"

"He's got defects," Renzo said. "He takes medication for it, but there's a good chance he's going to have a heart attack really young. Luckily, it's not a death sentence anymore, and his life expectancy is average."

Emil had no idea how relieved that was going to make him feel until that moment. He was so attached it felt almost dangerous. “I...that’s good.”

Renzo laughed. “Yeah. After his surgery, I got weird. Protective,” Renzo said with a shrug. “Threatened to beat up some kids who were a lot younger than me for calling him nasty names.”

“Fucking good,” Emil said, his voice a low growl.

Renzo rolled his eyes, but he kept smiling. “Matty found out how cruel just about anyone could be way too young. He had a therapist at his school who used to play really loud music and bang drumsticks on her desk really close to where he was sitting as a form of punishment. My mom went ballistic when he told her that was happening.”

Emil’s stomach was sour. “How could they—”

“Trust me,” Renzo interrupted, “I know. We were so picky about who we let into his life after that. Maybe to his detriment because he struggled when he first got his job. He’d forgotten people could be dickheads. Then John came along and quietly tortured him. I don’t even know half of what he did. Matty wouldn’t tell me, and he’s probably right—it’s probably for the best. I’d end up in jail, and that wouldn’t be good for either of us.”

Emil let out a long, slow breath. “I have a really good lawyer. Like, a really good one.”

Renzo’s eyes went suspiciously bright. “Yeah. If you’d said that to me six months ago, I might have taken you up on that. But when Matty was literally trying to protect me from John’s asshole, I realized in that moment he’d lost his power over all of us.”

Tilting his head to the side, Emil studied his lover. “Okay.”

“My therapist taught me about grey-rocking. Where you don’t feed the narcissist what they want to be fed. For John, it was being able to make me feel foolish and ignorant.” Renzo let out a bitter laugh. “He was so good at it, and that’s so fucking absurd. I’m a goddamn doctor. I graduated summa

cum laude. Got my master's with distinction." He licked his lips as a small spark of inferiority shot through Emil, but it only lasted a second before it was replaced by burning pride in his lover's accomplishments. "I'm one of the top research chemists in the region, for fuck's sake!"

Emil grabbed Renzo's hand, pressing a kiss to the inside of his wrist. "I know, baby. I know you're one of the smartest men I'm ever going to be lucky enough to meet."

Renzo looked immediately embarrassed, taking a shaking breath. "Sorry. Just...for a while, I felt like I'd lost myself, you know? He said it so many times that I started to believe it."

Emil's brows furrowed. "Said what?"

"That I was stupid. Worthless. Lucky to have him because who'd want to deal with all this," Renzo all but whispered.

Emil felt that familiar impulse again—the one that said if he gave in, he wouldn't see the sun outside of a prison courtyard for years, no matter what kind of lawyer he had. He rubbed a gentle circle against Renzo's palm. "I will tell you every single day how amazing you are if you need me to."

Renzo let out a small laugh, this one far less bitter than the last. He reached for Emil, curling fingers around the back of his neck, and kissed him. "It was important for me to learn how to be worth something on my own. Knowing you feel the same way is a bonus."

Emil looked into Renzo's eyes. "I'm having big feelings, and I want to say the words. But I don't want to scare you off."

"God, I want you," Renzo murmured. Swallowing heavily, he glanced over at the chair, then reached forward and snatched his phone off the table. It was twenty minutes to midnight. "Matty's alarm is going to wake him up in fifteen minutes. Do you think we could finish by then?"

Emil's breath stuttered in his chest, but he pulled Renzo close and spoke right against his ear. "I want to take my time with you soon. But yes. I'm so turned on by you and so fucking happy you're here, I'll be done in five."

Renzo laughed and turned his head, kissing Emil deeply. His tongue tasted sweet, burning hot as it danced against Emil's. "Come on," he whispered. "Be a good boy for me and keep quiet, okay?"

Emil shuddered, those words sparking under his skin. He was grateful Matty was unconscious because there was no way to hide how hard he was behind the zipper of his slacks. Renzo stood up first, then their fingers tangled together, and his lover pulled Emil past the threshold of the bedroom door.

It shut with a click that sounded like a promise of so much more to come. The feeling was overwhelming to the point Emil felt like maybe he wanted to cry a little. Renzo hadn't rejected the words unspoken, and the silence had seemed to whisper them back.

Emil was in love. He was falling so hard and so fast there would be little left when he hit the ground.

"I need you," he murmured as he watched Renzo back up toward the bed, his fingers in the hem of his sweater. His skin was burning with the desire to touch, but he waited, and God, it was worth it. Every inch of skin exposed tormented him just a little more. His dick pulsed in his boxer briefs, and he palmed himself as Renzo stripped down until he was wearing nothing.

Emil reached behind him blindly, feeling for the lock and turning it with a soft click. Renzo's eyes darkened at the sound, and he licked his lips as Emil began to stalk forward. His fingers moved over his buttons, popping them one by one, and by the time his torso was bare, he was in front of Renzo.

"Let me," Renzo murmured. "I know we don't have forever, but I want to undress you."

Emil captured his gaze. "We do have forever. If we want it."

Renzo's fingers began to tremble, but he managed a nod just as he got the button through the hole and the zipper down. Emil let out a sigh of relief when his cock sprang forward

through the slit in his briefs, and he bit back a sharp moan when Renzo palmed him, giving him short, loose strokes.

“More,” he begged.

“There’s going to be so much more. But tonight, you’re going to sit on the bed with your hands at your sides and be still, okay?”

Emil nodded, holding in his groan as Renzo’s powerful, perfect hands guided him around, then down to the edge of the bed. The mattress was just on the edge of too soft, and he sank a few inches into the memory foam, but he was steady as he watched Renzo stare down at him.

He was exposed, raw, needy. He was terrified because a single sentence—hell, a single word—could send his world crashing down around him. But Renzo didn’t look like he wanted to toy with the power he had over Emil.

“Touch me,” Emil whispered.

Renzo cupped his cheek and grazed a touch over his lips with the edge of his thumb. “I’m going to. I won’t make you beg tonight.” Then he dropped to his knees, and Emil went dizzy as he lost all the air in his lungs.

He had just enough time to bite the inside of his cheek to muffle any noises before Renzo’s mouth was open. He guided the head of Emil’s dick to his lips, then suckled at his slit before swirling his tongue around, urging his foreskin down with careful, gentle strokes.

Emil held his breath as Renzo locked eyes with him, and unable to look away, he watched as his lover sank all the way down. He felt Renzo’s throat spasm, felt his tongue pulsing along his shaft. His cock twitched again, releasing a flood of precome, and Renzo swallowed it down with a happy little sigh.

Emil wanted to grab his hair and fuck his face, but more than that, he wanted to be good. He wanted to be obedient. He wanted to be worthy of Renzo on his knees like this—and not just for now, but for the rest of his life.

His arms felt weak, and he wasn't sure he was going to be able to hold himself up if Renzo took any longer, but Renzo apparently had been serious. He wasn't going to make Emil beg. He had no intentions of tormenting him.

He pulled back, then gripped the base of Emil's dick and began to suck him in earnest. It was hot—the pull of his mouth and the stroking of his fist, and Emil's balls began to tighten. He let out the smallest whimper, then shifted his hips.

“Gonna—”

“Mm,” Renzo hummed, sucking harder, stroking faster.

Emil's eyes slammed shut, and pleasure erupted from every atom of his body. He was immediately disobedient, his hips fucking forward, but Renzo didn't seem to mind. He gripped Emil by the hips and urged him on until he was spent. Every drop had been swallowed, and in the haze of his postorgasm bliss, he felt Renzo pull off and press wet, warm kisses to the insides of his thighs.

Emil quickly gathered himself as he came to, and he looked down, reaching for Renzo with trembling fingers. “You...I want...” He couldn't form words quite yet, but Renzo just laughed softly and climbed to his feet, quickly straddling Emil's spread legs.

“Like this,” Renzo murmured, his voice thick and lips puffy. He took Emil's hand and curled it around his rock-hard dick, guiding him in fast, tight strokes. “Just like this,” he repeated behind a groan.

His hips began to move, his ass rocking over Emil's thighs, and if he hadn't been so spent, he might have been ready to go again. His dick gave a valiant twitch as he looked down to see his own hand flying over Renzo's gorgeous cock, and he felt warmth in his chest when Renzo moaned, then tipped his head forward.

Renzo's dick pulsed once, then twice, then spilled hot ropes over Emil's knuckles. He let out a long, deep groan as he dug teeth into the top of Emil's shoulder, his body trembling with the aftershocks. His breath came in stuttered gasps, and

Emil quickly ran a hand up and down his spine until his breathing began to even out.

“You feel so good,” Renzo murmured, kissing the spot he’d bitten. “I don’t know how it’s so good every time.”

Emil closed his eyes and basked for a long moment. Renzo was so warm and fit so damn perfectly on his lap. He never wanted to let go. He stroked his fingers up and down Renzo’s sides with just enough pressure not to tickle him.

Renzo let out a soft, happy moan and nuzzled into Emil’s neck. “I love you.”

Emil froze. The words had risen and died on his tongue so many times out of fear that it would send Renzo running. Emil had struggled to believe he was capable of loving—and capable of being loved—but he knew Renzo had been hurt by someone who used his love to control him.

He would have rather kept his feelings to himself for the rest of his life than risk losing this man.

So hearing it now—the quiet, whispered words against his skin—it was almost too much.

“I’m sorry,” Renzo said quickly. He started to pull back, but Emil clung on, desperate and panicked.

“Don’t. Please...please don’t.” He took a breath, then carefully leaned back so he could look into Renzo’s eyes. He could tell his lover was half-panicked, and he needed to make it right. “I’ve been falling in love with you since you sat down beside me in front of a fire where I was trying to burn out the most painful pieces of my past. You gave me something that night no one ever has.” He reached up, cupping Renzo’s cheek. “You gave me something no one else ever could.”

“I’m not sure—” Renzo started, but Emil pressed a finger to his lips.

“Please trust me on this, okay? I know I don’t have the most experience in the world with loving someone. And I know I’m the last person in the world who should speak on matters of the heart. But believe me when I tell you that it’s the truth. If it’s not you, Renzo, it’s no one.”

Renzo closed his eyes in a long, slow blink, then leaned in and kissed Emil. Their tongues danced together, a slow push-pull that Emil wanted to lose himself in forever. They broke apart with soft pecks, Renzo gently nuzzling their noses together.

“Thank you for loving me. Thank you for wanting me.”

“Thank you for giving me most of you,” Emil said.

Renzo pulled back, shaking his head. “All of me, gorgeous. You have literally all of me. I keep telling myself to be careful, to be more afraid, but I don’t need to be. It was never like this with anyone before you.”

Emil smiled and leaned up for another kiss. “I know what you mean. I still have a lot of work to do, but I trust myself now, and I never thought I would.”

“I love you,” Renzo whispered again, then carefully slid off Emil’s lap and held a hand out for him. “I’m sorry we have to stop short and go hang with Matty, but—”

Emil tugged him close, stopping his words. “Never apologize for him. I love him too. He’s part of you. This is everything I’ve ever wanted in a family, okay?”

Renzo said nothing, and Emil could tell he was overwhelmed, so he stayed quiet and let the silence comfort them both as they got dressed and moved back out into the main area of the suite. He froze when he realized Matty was awake, staring up at the ceiling, blinking slowly.

“Hey, bud. Been up long?” Renzo asked.

Matty yawned, his jaw cracking, and he shook his head. “No. I beat my alarm.”

Renzo laughed as he reached for his brother’s phone to stop it before it started. “Sure did. It’s a New Year’s miracle.”

Matty groaned as he stretched, then climbed to his feet and looked out the window. The cityscape was gorgeous—lit up bright and twinkling with lights that Emil had seen for years upon years, but he’d never appreciated them before. Not like this.

Emil moved up next to him, and when Matty leaned into him, Emil put an arm around his shoulders. “Love you, bud.”

Matty looked up at him with wide eyes. “You do? Like a brother?”

“Yes,” Emil told him.

Matty let out a small, happy sigh. “Good. Do you want to be my real brother? Because you could if you get married to Renzo.”

Emil laughed softly and glanced behind him, but Renzo was across the room, out of earshot, as he was pouring cider into three small, clear cups. He looked back down at Matty and saw another piece of his future. “I think I’d like that. Someday. But we have to keep it a secret for now.”

Matty nodded sagely. “Because proposals are secret. Renzo’s probably going to cry.”

“So will I, if he says yes,” Emil murmured.

Matty scoffed. “He’ll say yes. He’s obsessed with you.” His brows furrowed as he looked thoughtful, and then he reached over and took Emil’s hand in his, squeezing it. “We could be best friends for now. So we can keep each other’s secrets.”

Emil’s heart twisted in his chest—it was agony, but in the best way. “I could use a best friend.”

“Yeah. I can tell. You seem kind of sad, but I make people happy, so I’ll do my best for you.”

Emil closed his eyes to keep back the tears threatening to release. “Sounds perfect.”

“What are you two talking about?” Renzo asked. His frown was deep and concerned as he stared at Emil, and Emil could only imagine what he looked like right then.

Matty took his cup of cider and smiled, winking at Emil. “We’re best friends now.”

“It looks like you’re conspiring against me,” Renzo said.

Matty grinned wider. “We are!”

Emil groaned and nudged Matty with his elbow. “Come on, man.”

Matty made a gesture like he was zipping his lips, then stood up on his toes and kissed Emil on the cheek. “Love you.”

Renzo made a soft noise as he watched Emil pull Matty in for a hug. When it was over, Matty walked back to his chair and snatched his phone from the table. “Countdown gonna start, but I’m not kissing you guys.” He grimaced, then gasped. “Ten,” he said, his voice getting louder. “Nine, eight, seven, six...”

“Five,” Renzo whispered, turning his body toward Emil and cradling his cheek with his free hand.

“Four! Three! Two!” Matty shouted, jumping up and down.

Emil tugged Renzo close, their bodies touching from chest to thighs. “One,” he whispered back.

Their lips met as Matty screamed, “*Happy New Year!*” in the background.

The kiss felt like fireworks. It felt like a promise of forever, and then maybe even longer than that. They broke apart after a short forever when Matty crashed into them, and as Emil held them both close, and for the first time in his life, he felt whole.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

“THERE’S ONLY one person in the world who would actually do this.”

Renzo’s mouth twitched in a smile as he tightened his arms around Emil’s waist. The music had softened, and he knew the countdown was coming. They swayed slower now, and Renzo’s heart was beating in time with the melody. “Have a wedding on New Year’s Eve?”

Emil hummed as he looked down at Renzo. “Okay, I probably would too. But leave it to Oliver to organize this whole shindig.”

Renzo burst into laughter, hiding the sound in his lover’s chest. “Shindig. You really are a new man.”

Emil scoffed, but Renzo could feel his grin when he pressed a kiss against his temple. He turned his cheek, looking out over the field where an old house once stood. It was land now—land that was theirs, together. It was a dark past giving way to a bright future. There was already a dog run going up and a room for Matty. He’d picked out an Australian shepherd, and he had a countdown calendar filled with the date they were going to break ground and the date the contractors said the house would be finished.

Renzo didn’t think he could ever be this happy. He didn’t think anyone could. And he knew they had a long way to go—a long road to walk—but that didn’t matter.

He looked up at Emil, who was smiling down at him, fond and charmed and so fucking lovely it made Renzo ache down

to his core. Words tumbled onto the tip of his tongue, ones he'd wanted to say for a long while, but he'd been holding back.

Emil still struggled with self-worth, and Renzo still struggled with his own fear. But the stone walls he'd put up to protect himself now felt like they were made of the thinnest glass, begging to be shattered.

“Marry me.”

Emil blinked at him. “Cute.”

“I know I am, but I'm also serious.” Renzo pushed up to close the few inches that separated them, and he kissed his lover. “I don't have a ring or a fancy speech. I just know I love you, and I'm fine if you say no, but I want to marry you.”

“I'm a mess.” Emil's eyes were now wide and watery, and he was clinging on to Renzo just a little bit tighter.

Renzo laughed. “Yes, you are.”

“I'm always going to be a little bit wrong,” Emil whispered.

Renzo shook his head. “No. You were never wrong. You were just mishandled and mistreated by the people who were supposed to protect you. But you have us now. All of us.” He meant himself and Matty. Even Camilla, who'd lent her house to Oliver and Victor for the wedding reception and only complained a little. Emil also had Victor and Oliver as his own and Dahlia, who was the most amazing best friend a person could ask for.

But more than all that, Emil was his, and Renzo couldn't help himself but want to make it official. “I love you more than I have words for,” Renzo said. He picked Emil's hand up off his waist and kissed the knuckle of his ring finger. “I want you to be my husband, and I want to be yours.”

Emil swallowed heavily, his mouth dropping open, but then someone behind them began to shout.

“*Ten, nine, eight, seven...*”

“Fuck,” Emil whispered.

“Six, five, four...”

“There’s not a deadline,” Renzo said quickly. “You don’t have to say yes now.”

“Three, two...”

Emil cradled Renzo’s cheeks and kissed him.

“One!”

“Renzo...”

“Happy New Year!”

“Yes,” Emil whispered against his cold, chapped, kiss-swollen lips. “When?”

“Now. Tomorrow. Ten years. It doesn’t matter,” Renzo said, half sobbing, half laughing because he’d said yes. Emil had said yes. And neither of them was afraid anymore.

“That sounds perfect,” Emil said, then kissed him one more time, sealing it like a promise. It all fit. And Renzo would never let go.

Have you read the swoony, romantic start to this series with Victor and Oliver? Grab Halo [HERE](#) on Amazon.

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The Sin Bin: West Coast

Malicious Compliance

Collaborations with Other Authors

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AudioBooks

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

E.M. Lindsey is a non-binary writer who lives in the southeast United States, close to the water where their heart lies.

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