



Stand By Me

Author: *Megan Linden*

Category: Romance

Description: Clay Jackson was still getting used to living in DC after over a decade of being away, but at least he had a job, now. KRK Security seemed like a dream come true and meeting a cute guy on the first day of his new assignment could be an icing on the cake. But said cute guy was his brother's best friend. And his brother? Yeah, he hated Clay's guts. Mario de Silva had a terrible taste in men, but it wasn't always the case. His first crush, years ago, had been quite perfect. Now, Clay literally walked back into his life as if they were in a movie, and Mario was determined not to waste this chance.

No matter what.

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CHAPTER ONE

Clay Jackson paused on the other side of the street from his new place of work to take it all in.

KRK Security headquarters were situated in Downtown DC, an easy metro ride away from his apartment—or as easy as it could get around here, at least. The building was huge for a relatively small company, but Clay guessed it was about status as well, since the company's clientele was predominantly rich and powerful.

On the outside, the headquarters resembled any other office building, glass and sharp lines everywhere, but he knew that inside, especially in the parts the clients didn't get an access to, it was cozier and more laid-back. He'd gotten a tour of the entire place during his orientation, from the communication center to all the training spaces, and he liked what he saw.

Still, what he appreciated even the most the opportunity to work with a team again. He'd missed that more than he'd been willing to admit.

He looked around, cataloging the space out of habit. Alongside several office buildings there were the requisite coffee shops and a bistro further down the street. Everyone was sharply dressed and seemed to be in a hurry, most with a coffee or a phone in hand.

Clay glanced down at his own suit, somewhat hidden under his coat.

Yeah, he hadn't missed this.

He was likely to go out on a new assignment today, though, so he needed to look the part. The only time the KKK Security employees were allowed to dress casually at the office was when they were certain they wouldn't be interacting with any clients. The dress code was hardly a surprise, of course, simply something Clay needed to get used to, again. It had been over a decade since his job required him to wear a suit on a daily basis.

When yet another car turned into the underground parking of the firm, Clay decided it was time to get moving.

He crossed the street and entered the building, fighting the unease that made his stomach roll. He was a grown-ass man, not a school boy getting jitters over his first day at a new school. He knew what he was doing and he was damn good at it, too. He was going to be fine.

He greeted the man at the front desk as he scanned his security card at the entrance gates.

"Please, wait here." The guy motioned to the bench near the elevators. "Victor will be right there with you."

Clay nodded. "Of course, thank you."

He assumed that Victor meant Victor Arendall, the assistant to Kalei Lee, the big boss. Clay had met him briefly the first time he'd been here, but he hadn't expected him to be the welcoming committee today.

The elevator door opened and Victor walked out. He was a head shorter than Clay and all smiles.

"Good morning. I'm not sure if you remember me—"

"I remember. You prefer Vic, right?"

That earned him an even bigger smile.

"Right. Kalei wanted to greet you personally on your first day, but he's stuck on a call, so you get me for the time being. Welcome to KRK Security. Hopefully, you'll feel right at home."

I hope so, too, Clay thought but didn't say as he followed Vic into the elevator.

Soon after they exited on the third floor, where the field team offices were situated, Clay noted a couple of people leaving what he remembered was a kitchen. Each of them was holding a big mug in their hands.

"Can I bore you with some paperwork before you go get your fix?" Vic asked.

"Sure. I don't drink coffee anyway." At the familiar look of surprise, Clay added, "I hate the taste."

Vic shook his head with a comically disbelieving expression on his face.

"That's the scariest thing I've ever heard and I work with people who handle guns."

"I do that, too," Clay reminded him, amused.

"Scary," Vic muttered as he led him in the other direction, towards a small empty conference room. "Theresa, our HR manager, is out sick or else she'd be handling these." He took a seat at the table and motioned for Clay to do the same before handing him a dark blue folder with a gray KRK logo and a post-it with Clay's name on it. "Since you've already signed the most important things, these are just some forms that you couldn't fill out earlier and additional information about the insurance.

I can most likely answer all your questions, but you are of course welcome to wait until Theresa's here if you want to."

Clay didn't. He started reading through everything quickly and signing where indicated.

Halfway through the process, Kalei came in. He was average height and build, but he possessed the kind of intensity that had made Clay pay attention to him from the first moment they'd met, right before the job interview. It was clear the man had what was needed to lead a large team of former service members.

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"Good morning." He offered Clay a hand when Clay stood up to greet him. "Welcome to KKK Security. It's good to have you with us."

Clay shook his hand. "It's good to be here, sir."

"Please, call me Kalei, everyone else does. We're not very formal around here." He tilted his head towards Vic with a shadow of a smile. "Unless you get on the wrong side of this one."

"Damn right. Speaking of, you need to call Noa before the debrief," Vic told Kalei, who nodded and excused himself.

So, the atmosphere really wasn't formal around here.

"You'll get used to it," Vic said and, when Clay looked at him, shrugged. "All of our field personnel have been in the military or the Secret Service, like yourself, and expected similar ways of doing things. But Kalei took what's best of different worlds and created something better. You'll see."

Clay nodded. He had no problem calling his boss by his first name. It was the idea of having a boss in the first place that had been worrying him. Kalei being open and friendly could actually help with that.

Finally, after Clay had signed everything that was left to sign, Vic led him to the kitchen.

"You have to drink something, right?" he said. "And I need another coffee."

There were a few guys in the surprisingly spacious kitchen and they all turned towards the two of them as they entered.

"Hey, everyone, this is Clay." Vic waved towards him. "It's his first day, so be nice, please."

"Oh, right, we heard there'd be a new guy today." The man standing closest to the door offered Clay his hand. He looked vaguely familiar, but Clay couldn't place him. "Diego Martinez, nice to meet you. Most people use my last name around here, but feel free to do whatever."

"Clay Jackson. Clay's what I'm most used to, but last name is fine, too."

Then the handshakes and introductions with the rest of the group continued, until the last guy stepped forward.

"Jeremy Callan. Heard good things about you."

Clay raised his eyebrows, but before he could ask, the man went on.

"Troy Abbot is a close friend of Pascal, my partner. He talks a lot."

That prompted a laugh out of Clay. Troy. Of course.

"That he does. But he's also the one who let me know about the opening here, so I shouldn't complain too much, should I?"

"We can commiserate, if needed."

"Deal." Clay looked around the group. "I hope the shoes of my predecessor aren't too big to fill out, but I'll try my best."

Everyone present either snorted or grimaced. Even Vic, as he quietly slipped out of the room with his coffee.

"Don't be an asshole and you're already ahead." Martinez clapped his shoulder. "The bar is basically lying on the ground."

Clay didn't know what to say to that. Apparently, he'd already managed to put a foot in his mouth.

"Don't mind us," Dave, the redhead who was built like a brick wall, spoke up from his place at the small table. "We're really glad the guy is finally gone, that's all."

Travis, a blond, tanned guy who could probably pass for a surfer if he wasn't in a suit, nodded and met Clay's gaze head on.

"He was a homophobic asshole who mouthed off one too many times."

If this was a test, it was the easiest one ever.

"Then I'm glad he's gone, too," Clay said. "The last thing I want is to have a guy who hates my guts on my six."

"Hoo-rah." Dave and Travis clinked their mugs together in a toast while the rest of the group nodded.

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Something unclenched in Clay's gut.

Maybe this whole thing would be even better than expected.

* * *

An hour and a half later, they were all in the conference room for what Clay had already learned was a Monday tradition—everyone from the field and comms personnel who was available had to be there for a status report on all the ongoing and upcoming assignments.

"Okay, let's move on to the new projects." Kalei stood up. "We have a Smithsonian gala up for grabs, since Jeremy wants to experience things from the other side for a change."

People laughed, and Clay glanced at Jeremy, who shrugged.

"'Wants' is a bit of a stretch here," he said. "But yeah, Pascal would kill me if I was working on this one, as well."

"The man wants to celebrate his success. As he should." Martinez raised his hand. "Anyway, I'm available, so all I need is a partner to get this show on the road. It's expected to be bigger than the benefit gala we'd covered last time, and it's likely we'll need more people later on, but that's TBD."

Just like that, Clay found his perfect opening.

"I'm game," he said, not expecting all three dozen people present to turn their heads his way. Damn. "It's been a while, but I have experience with these kinds of things."

He swallowed back a groan. Why the hell did he feel like he had to explain himself? He was pretty sure most of the others knew his background at this point, so expanding on it could be seen as bragging. The only way he could prove his worth was on the job, with time.

Kalei nodded at him, though.

"Great. Martinez, Clay, you're on the Smithsonian gala, then. We'll talk on Wednesday, let Vic know he needs to fit you in. Now, the last thing—"

Martinez reached out over Jeremy sitting between them, his fist raised.

"Let's do it," he whispered. "I hope you're ready to piss off some of your former Secret Service colleagues, because they usually hate us."

Clay chuckled, but bumped his fist with Diego's. "Oh, I'm ready."

He doubted any of the agents he'd worked with were still there, but it didn't matter. He hadn't looked back even once since he'd left the Secret Service to take on the private assignment of protecting Jake Wilkinson, the president's son who was about to lose the agency's protection and who had been Clay's charge for years at that point.

He hadn't stopped being Clay's charge until around six months ago—at least officially. If someone was to ask Troy, Jake's partner, he'd say they were still working on severing that relationship.

Clay could already picture Troy's face when he learned that Clay's first official assignment would lead him to Jake's workplace. There was no way he'd believe it

wasn't on purpose.

As if.

Clay really was trying, and while he was still messing up at least half the time, he couldn't afford to fail at work, too, that was for sure.

He needed this, Smithsonian or not.

He needed a new start.

CHAPTER TWO

Mario de Silva should have been at his desk right now, going over the graphics for the dinosaur trivia game the museum was developing for the kids. Instead, he'd been tasked with showing around the security team for the upcoming gala.

Shouldn't they know all of this already? There'd been two benefits here in the last six months.

"Don't frown so much, it's not a good look on you," Carina, the front desk manager and his friend, told him from her seat on the other side of the counter.

"Wasn't it you who told Andie last week it's not her job to look pretty for other people?" Mario tossed back, his gaze fixed at the entrance. They were supposed to be here any minute now.

"It was, and it isn't. But you're going to scare off the visitors with that brow game you have going on. You don't have to be pretty, but you don't need to come across like you're ready to murder someone, either. You're a part of our PR team, after all." Carina reached out and nudged him in the shoulder. "Come on, spill. What made you

so cranky?"

Mario only needed to send her a look for her to figure it out.

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She winced. "Damn, really? I thought this one would stick around. Maybe not forever, but..."

"Yeah, me too." He grimaced. Carina probably had a point about his face scaring people, but since there was a lull in visitors now, he didn't care. "Apparently, he stuck aroundjustlong enough."

"Then he's an asshole."

Mario wasn't going to argue with that. He'd met Terry a month ago at the gallery exhibit Andie had dragged him to, and he thought they clicked. There had been sparks, but Mario made it clear he wanted to wait a while before jumping into bed. He was tired of fuck 'em and leave 'em types, and all the first dates that ended up being one-night stands and nothing more.

Terry agreed, and everything seemed to be going well. One date turned into two, then three. They texted a lot, too.

And then, yesterday, after they'd slept together on Friday, Mario got a text that boiled down toWe're looking for different thingsandThanks, bye.

Seriously, if half of those guys hadn't written to him at some point later on suggesting a booty call, he'd start doubting his skills in bed.

Instead, he was left doubting everything else.

"Where are all those non-assholes, then?" he asked, not really expecting Carina to

answer.

She did seem to have something to say, but before she could do that, the front door opened and Mario turned towards the entrance, straightening up.

He'd noticed the sharp suits first, before glancing up at the faces of the two newcomers.

He froze.

It couldn't be.

But it definitely, definitely was.

"Clay?" Mario still asked, as if he wasn't sure. As if there was a chance in hell that his first, hopeless crush wasn't standing in front of him now, in a suit cut to perfection.

Clay's eyebrows shot up. "I'm sorry, do I know you?"

Get it together, Mario told himself, ignoring the small ping of disappointment Clay hadn't recognized him.

"I'm Mario de Silva. Ben's best friend all the way from when we were about ten," he added, in case his name alone wasn't enough. After all, the man had been out of the country for over a decade. There was a lot of things he hadn't known or remembered about his brother, to Ben's occasional frustration.

"Of course!" Clay smiled brightly and looked Mario up and down. "Wow, it's been a long time."

I hope you like what you see. Mario bit down hard on his lower lip to make sure the

words didn't get out, and he didn't miss the way Clay's gaze paused at that for a split second.

He could feel his face heat up and glanced at the other guy in search of a distraction.

"Hi, I'm Diego Martinez, we're from KRK Security. We're here in preparation for the upcoming gala."

Mario nodded, reminding himself they were all on the clock, here, and he needed to forget about his teenage fantasies. He cleared his throat and handed them both visitor passes before leading them away from the entrance.

For the next hour and a half, they walked through every room on the ground level that was going to be open for the gala, and while Mario sometimes answered questions about foot traffic, bathrooms, and who had access to certain areas, mostly he just watched them work. It was actually interesting to look at the familiar space from their perspective. Never before had he seen anyone so thoroughly ignore any exhibits and focus on entrances, windows, vantage points, and whatever-else.

But Mario wasn't going to lie—he spent the majority of his time staring at Clay.

The sheer presence of him in the room made something in Mario sit up and take notice. There were things he remembered—Clay's wide shoulders, his dark brown hair, his calm and steady voice—but the changes caused his heart to beat a little faster, too. The beard, for one. Mario wanted to run his hands over it, again and again, to feel it against his skin. Then there were also Clay's smiles, coming so easily now. Twelve years ago, he'd been tense and serious, and when he'd smiled, it was always a quick, fleeting thing.

Twelve years. Jesus.

Mario had heard from Ben that his brother was back in DC, but since Clay was a thorny topic for his friend, Mario had never asked for any details. He definitely hadn't expected to see the man in the flesh.

He hadn't expected to joke around with him, hoping for another one of those smiles, either.

Sure, he'd imagined their meeting a few times, but he'd figured it would be like any other precious childhood memory crushed by the harsh realities of adulthood. He'd pictured either disappointment, or total indifference on his part.

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And instead he turned back into a starry-eyed seventeen-year-old, only now with even more X-rated ideas.

Hopefully he wasn't being as obvious about it now as he'd been back then, when Ben had to bodily remove him from a room whenever Clay was there. Clay had never said anything or avoided him on purpose, but he'd had to know.

Mario cringed at the memories of his poor attempts at flirting.

"You okay?" Clay's voice pulled him back to the present.

"Yes, sorry, I drifted." He stood up straight from where he was leaning against the wall. "Are you ready to continue? There's one more room on this level, and then a few places upstairs that your brief indicated you wanted to see."

Diego checked his watch and exchanged glances with Clay.

"How about we check that one last room here, and then set up another meeting for tomorrow to go over the upper level?"

"Sure." Nobody had told Mario this would be an ongoing thing, but there was no way he was backing out now. His teenage self would never forgive him.

His adult self wouldn't, either, if he was honest with himself.

"Great," Clay said, grinning at Mario, and, oh.

Oh, boy.

He was in big trouble.

* * *

Andie almost choked on her mojito as Carina did her interpretation of Mario's stunned face hours later on their usual Monday night out.

"I did not look like that," he protested weakly, covering his eyes.

Carina chuckled. "Honey, you went from a grumpy old man, ready to throw somebody out of his lawn, to a young boy, standing in front of another boy, asking him to love him."

Mario swallowed down his drink, telling himself that his face heating up was because of the alcohol.

"Aww, that's cute." Andie threw her arm around his shoulders. "Your first crush, coming in, older and gorgeous, to sweep you off your feet. Who doesn't want that?"

"He wasn't doing any sweeping, though," Mario said as he slumped against her.

"Well, he was definitely sweeping his gaze over you," Carina told him.

He lifted his head. "Are you sure? I thought I caught something, but—"

"I'm sure." Carina pointed at him with her glass. "He liked what he saw, too. Can't say it's going to lead anywhere," she warned, ever the cruel realist. "But he did look."

"See?" Andie jostled him in enthusiastic shake. "He looked."

Andie, on top of being a never-ending well of optimism that highly exceeded his own, was also quick to get sloshed. Mario glanced towards the three glasses of water on the far end of their table before sighing.

"Even if he did, it doesn't mean anything."

"It means you have a shot." Carina handed him a shot glass and smirked, clearly amused by her own joke. "Question is, are you going to take it?"

"Of course he is!" Andie said, indignant on his behalf. Then she turned to him. "Right? You have to take it."

Mario shrugged, staring at the blue liquor in his hand.

"I'm tired of taking chances," he admitted, more serious than he would've liked.

It was still true, though. Making the first move got harder after a while, when all he ended up with was another failure to add to the list.

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"Then you can stay single." Carina clinked their glasses together. "If you're going to be as happy about it as I am. Otherwise, I heard it gets miserable."

The thing was, Mario wished he could be as happy as she was, being single. His life would definitely be easier. But he'd always dreamed of a happy, stable relationship, like the one his parents had. Not getting it, ever... His stomach rolled at the mere thought.

"It is miserable." Andie hooked her chin on Mario's shoulder. "We need to find ourselves some boyfriends."

She moved like she was going to slid out of the booth and literally go looking right now, so Mario pulled her back against his side.

"Okay, Cupid, let's just stay here for the night," he told her, pushing a glass of water towards her.

Andie drank half of it before turning to him with her Bambi eyes.

"Only if you promise to take your chance with Clay."

"I don't know—"

"If you're choosing between being miserable and a chance at not being miserable, is it really a choice?" Carina cut in.

Mario frowned as he downed his shot, not sure if he understood her. Maybe he was

too tipsy for this conversation.

"Come on." Andie jostled him again. "Promise me."

He cleared his throat against the burn of alcohol.

"Fine," he said once he was sure his voice wouldn't be too raspy. "I promise."

Maybe taking one more chance wasn't going to be so bad.

Maybe.

CHAPTER THREE

If Clay were to run into someone at the Smithsonian, he'd expect it to be Jake, not Mario de Silva.

He remembered a scrawny, black-haired kid covered in freckles who was always there at their house after school, glued to Ben's side and throwing apologetic looks his way whenever Ben was particularly mean to Clay, as if he was somehow the one responsible for it.

Clay also remembered the same kid seeking him out one day to ask about his experience with coming out, because he'd been thinking about doing the same thing. The boy had been scared but determined, and he'd stared at Clay as if he had all the answers Mario might need, which, sadly, couldn't have been further from the truth.

But today... Today Clay saw a guy he wanted to take out for drinks, maybe a date or two, try that normal people stuff he kept hearing about. Back in Switzerland, he'd never gone past the second date stage, mostly sticking to one-night stands or booty calls, on occasion. He was technically there for an assignment and though Jake kept

telling him he was allowed to get out there and have fun, Clay couldn't imagine trying for anything serious.

And all that time, he hadn't realized how much he'd put his life on hold until he'd come back home.

It wasn't like he hadn't known it was going to be a requirement, of course. He'd taken that under advisement when he was considering the offer to accompany Jake to Switzerland. But it was quite different to look back on it now and see how everyone else had moved on. Some of his colleagues and friends were in decade-long relationships, some of them were divorced, but most had at least one serious, long-term relationship under their belts. Meanwhile, Clay's record was a year and a half, back before he'd left the States.

A few months ago, he'd promised himself to try getting back out there, especially after Jake reunited with Troy, came out, and started living his life. But Clay had gotten busy with readjusting to the life in DC, trying to reconnect with family, visiting friends, searching for a job... He'd put away quite a lot of money during all these years, on top of everything he'd sent back home, and that allowed him to flounder for a while, but not forever.

He couldn't be happier to be back in the saddle now, so maybe with the job issue taken care of, it was time to finally give dating a serious try.

Hold up, he told himself later that night, staring at the ceiling. You don't know if he's even interested in one drink, let alone dating.

Mario was young and hot, and probably in high demand among the gay population of Washington, DC. He might also be in a relationship already.

If things were different, Clay would ask Ben about it, but... no such luck.

He'd thought—hoped—that once his brother grew out of being a sullen teenager, he would stop hating Clay so much, but it seemed like the opposite happened, instead. Nothing Clay did was ever okay. When he dropped by Mom's house to visit them, his brother would say it wasn't often enough, but when he showed up more frequently, he'd hear he was trying too hard. Clay had even considered not showing up at all anymore, but he didn't come back to DC to lose what little he had left of his family.

Even if all he really had left was Mom.

Pushing thoughts of Ben aside, he wondered if Jake might know Mario well enough to give Clay some info. They weren't working in the same departments, though, so that was unlikely, judging from the number of employees the museum had.

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Besides, Clay hadn't even told Jake yet that he'd been there at the Smithsonian today.

He rolled onto his stomach and pressed his head into the pillow. What a mess this "keeping his distance" was turning out to be.

In many ways, this part of his life was easier back in Switzerland. He and Jake were always together, always available, always there for each other. But when they'd gone back to the States and Clay's assignment officially ended, what they had was apparently called codependency now, something they needed to work their way out of instead of embracing.

So they were trying. Clay even set up a bunch of stupid rules for himself to follow, to avoid picking up his phone and texting Jake every time he wanted to share something. He still grabbed his phone a lot but often managed to stop himself from sending a text.

It rarely felt like a victory, though.

It had been hard enough to disentangle their friendship from the working relationship. Disentangling a healthy friendship from a codependent us-two-against-the-world relationship was pretty much a nightmare.

A nightmare, which, currently, left Clay unable to text his closest friend about the cute guy he'd seen today.

He groaned into the pillow.

Yeah, he was definitely fucking things up.

* * *

Thankfully, a good night sleep greatly improved his mood. So much so that as he arrived at work and sought Martinez out in his office, Clay earned himself a glare.

"You're too chipper for a guy who doesn't drink coffee," Martinez told him before taking a big gulp from his oversized mug and motioning him to take a seat at the other desk.

At KKK, offices were shared by permanent field partners, which meant the desk was Jeremy's, but he was out today, supporting the team covering some big event down in Arlington.

"Or I'm chipper because I don't drink it." Clay toasted him with his tea before he pulled out the tablet with his notes.

Martinez rolled his eyes. "Nasty propaganda."

They'd gone over some of the biggest issues yesterday, but they wanted to run through everything before heading to the museum in the afternoon. Martinez opened the floor plans on his desktop computer along with the copies of the previous benefit assignments.

As they worked, Clay found himself relaxing at their back and forth. They bounced ideas of each other one second and joked the next, and ended up grabbing lunch together when they were done.

"Man, I can't imagine it. Eleven years on an out-of-the-country assignment?" Martinez shook his head. "My entire military career was shorter than that."

"It sounds worse than it was," Clay said, used to people's reactions to that particular topic by now.

"I hope so, for your sake." Martinez grabbed another fry. "There are no solo missions at KRK. On the usual personal detail assignments, it's two pairs of field agents on rotating schedule. Everything else is individually planned and can take from two to twenty people. I don't think we've ever gone higher than that."

"That's twenty field agents or does that include the comms personnel?" Clay asked after swallowing a mouthful of his burger.

"Field agents. Comms support is always there, too, of course, and they're amazing. More often than not, you'll end up working with the same comms specialist on every op once you get your permanent partner, so it's almost like having your own small team, you know? But for the bigger assignments like this one, we'll get several." Martinez finished his fries and sat back. "Did they show you our comm links yet? If not, you need to check them out ASAP. They're state of the art. I wish we had them in the Air Force, but at least I get to have them now."

Clay grinned. "Oh, in that case, I'm going there right after this."

"Eat up, then. I'm going with."

True to his word, Martinez led him to the comm center—an open space set-up on the second floor, which also served as the field tech equipment storage room. There was a team of six there currently, three guys and three women, each of them sitting behind a desk with double monitor set up. As the introductions went on, Clay doubted he'd remember all their names right away, but the least he could do was make an effort.

"And this here is Edward, who insists we call him Eddie. He's my favorite," Martinez told Clay, dropping onto the chair by the desk of the man in question, "but sadly, he

doesn't return the sentiment."

Eddie didn't even glance at him, turning back to his keyboard after greeting Clay.

"That's what you get for disabling your comm."

"That was one time!" Martinez protested. "And I was already off duty."

"There were two minutes still on the clock," Eddie told him in a way that suggested they had this conversation already. More than once.

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"You knew—" Martinez started, but Clay cleared his throat loudly. He hadn't come here to see them debate their issues. He wanted to see the tech.

"I'm sorry." Eddie turned his chair to face him. "What can I do for you?"

"Martinez here," Clay said with a wave towards the man, "told me our comm links are the best of the best. I wanted to see them, if I could."

Eddie grinned. He even offered Martinez a warm look, probably for the compliment on the equipment.

"Of course." He nodded. "None of my teams is in the field right now, so give me a minute to log out and I'll show you everything."

Clay barely resisted bouncing on his feet. He'd become more and more interested in communications technology in the last few years, so if he could work with a team again and have some cool gadgets, this just might end being the best job ever.

One could hope.

* * *

With all the excitement about the comm links and other devices, Clay almost forgot they were heading to the Smithsonian later on to meet with Mario again.

Almost.

"So," Martinez started as they left the car and headed towards the entrance, "we have a job to do in there today, but afterwards, when we're done, I can slip out if you want to make your move."

Clay barely avoided stumbling on the curb. "What?"

Martinez gave him a look that clearly told Clay playing stupid wouldn't get him very far, here.

"I saw what was going on yesterday. Onbothsides," Martinez added with emphasis. "And you know each other already, so why not make a move?"

"Because knowing somebody doesn't make it any easier sometimes," Clay said before he could stop himself.

Damn it. What was he doing?

Then again, Martinez was the one who broached the topic.

"Oh, I know, trust me," he now offered dryly. "But do you have any morbid history together?"

"Morbid? No. He's... He's my brother's best friend. I've known him since he was a kid."

"Well, we both saw him yesterday. He's definitely not a kid anymore." Martinez laughed at Clay's glare. "Easy there, I'm not after him, I'm just saying."

Clay shook his head. "Why are we even talking about this?"

"Because I wanted to play a matchmaker?" Martinez shrugged. "To be honest, I

thought you might be keeping your distance because you assumed I'd disapprove since we're on the job."

"Well, that might have been one of the reasons," Clay admitted. He wanted to make a good impression on his first assignment, after all.

"He's not even a client," Martinez pointed out. "And even if he was, who am I to throw stones? How else do you think I'd manage to score a Supreme Court Justice for a partner?" He gave Clay a rueful smile. "Keep it to after hours, and there's no issue. Not with me, at least."

A Supreme Court Justice?

"That's where I know you from!" Clay said, when the missing piece suddenly slotted into place and he remembered the news of the attack on Judge Krasinsky. Martinez had been on his protection detail and got shot while saving his life. "Even in Switzerland, I followed the story of Krasinsky's road to confirmation. With a happy ending, nonetheless," he added with a smirk.

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard every possible Bodyguard joke already, so save it, please. Apparently, even being compared to Kevin Costner gets tiring after a while."

Clay raised his hands in a "I'm innocent" gesture as they paused by the entrance.

"No jokes. Congrats, though. From what I saw, he seems like a good guy."

Martinez's smile turned soft for a moment, but he quickly covered it up with a smirk.

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"He is, that. Too smart for me, too, but it is what it is." He gestured towards the door. "Come on, let's go see your smart guy now."

Clay shook his head. No point in arguing, was there?

"After you."

CHAPTER FOUR

Mario had assumed that seeing Clay come in wouldn't have the same effect on him the second time around. He was ready this time. He remembered the freaking vision from yesterday, so he knew what to prepare for, right?

Wrong.

If anything, his reaction was even stronger now. There was no shock component, so his libido—and his damn heart, Jesus Christ—easily took over. He tried to fight it, he really did, but it wasn't his fault that Clay hit practically all his buttons.

He was responsible for a good half of them in the first place, after all.

Get it together, de Silva, Mario told himself, purposefully ignoring Carina behind the front desk as Clay and Diego walked towards them like they were doing an ad that promised things highly inappropriate to think about at work.

"Okay, let's get to it," Mario said after they exchanged greetings. "The upper floor today, right?"

"Yes, we want to see where to put our people at," Clay told him with a nod.

"Sure. Right this way, then." Mario gestured them to the left. When he glanced at Carina, she wiggled her eyebrows and tilted his head towards Clay who was thankfully looking the other way.

Mario waved her off and turned around quickly. He remembered last night's promise all too well, but he'd never promised to do it today, had he?

He still might, of course, but... Not now.

Maybe later.

As it turned out, "later" took much longer than Mario had thought. He'd assumed that since there was less space on the upper floor Clay and Martinez were interested in, it would take less time than yesterday, but it was actually the opposite. They checked every little detail, comparing their notes with the security cameras and their angles and making sure there were no blind spots.

Once again, Mario found it quite fascinating. He'd seen his fair share of crime shows and such, but it was different in real life, especially when it involved Mario's workplace, the museum he'd thought he knew like the back of his hand.

Apparently, while he could give a tour through every exhibit with his eyes closed, he greatly underestimated the number of security measures around.

"That's typical," Clay told him when Mario admitted that out loud. "Most people don't pay attention to things that are of no interest to them. You do have emergency drills, though, right?"

"Of course. Fire, blackout, shooting drills." Mario rubbed the back of his head.

"That's how I know some of this stuff—but not all."

Clay lowered the tablet he was taking notes on and met Mario's gaze.

"Well, I know nothing about this stuff." He indicated the exhibition behind him.
"Which means you're still ahead, by my count."

They exchanged smiles, and Mario suddenly felt the freaking butterflies in his stomach as if he was thirteen years old.

Neither of them looked away, and they just stood there, watching each other. Getting to know each other—again.

I know you, Mario thought. I want to know you even better, I want to—

A dull sound of something hitting the floor interrupted their moment. Mario turned around to see Diego crouching a few feet away.

"Sorry, dropped my things," he muttered, and Mario quickly took a step away from Clay.

Shit, they were both on the clock. And Clay worked in a field full of ex-military personnel, which wasn't exactly the most accepting environment.

"Are you two ready to move on?" Mario shoved his hands in his pockets and focused on the sculpture on the other side of the room to avoid facing either of the men.

"Yeah," Clay said quietly. "Let's go."

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With that, he turned away and headed towards the next room. Mario felt like he'd made a mistake here, somewhere, but didn't know what it was.

Was Clay angry about the staring? Or about him pulling away?

Or was Mario reading too much into things, trying to make it seem like Clay cared when he probably didn't?

Mario stayed quiet for the rest of their tour, limiting himself to answering their questions when asked. He kept watching Clay, though—noticing how comfortable he looked in that suit, how he quickly calculated distances and angles Mario only half-understood, how his quiet confidence shone through as he worked...

Even all those years ago, Mario had always admired Clay's commitment. He'd been juggling community college, various part-time jobs, and taking care of Ben when their mother couldn't. He'd trained to be accepted into the Secret Service, and then he'd given his all to the agency as well. He'd barely been home, which Ben saw as indifference and abandonment, but Mario saw it as hard work and the drive of someone who would never admit he'd taken too much on.

And sure, some of it was Mario's crush talking. But not all.

Now, it seemed like Clay was still working hard, but through the years he'd gained the confidence which—looking back—hadn't been there before he'd left.

On the other hand, Clay was a few years short of forty. He should know his worth by now.

Mario would love to learn more about his journey to get there—or anything else, really. He wanted to know Clay, to really know him. See him for who he was behind all the shine of a childhood crush that exploded back to life.

It was a big risk, though.

Less risk than trusting yet another asshole from the app you delete every other month, the voice at the back of his head that sounded way too much like Carina pointed out.

Then they got to the end of the tour and headed back towards the front entrance. If Mario was going to take a chance, he was running out of time.

"Excuse me, I need to make a phone call before we leave," Diego said out of the blue, halting their little group. "Mario, it was nice to meet you. Thank you for all your help. Clay, I'll meet you outside in a few."

Mario watched him go, wondering if there was a chance that the guy was doing what Mario thought he was doing.

Oh, God.

He risked a glance at Clay, praying that his face wasn't as red as he thought it was. Clay seemed to be hesitating and Mario stilled, waiting, but in the corner of his eye he saw Carina waving at him to get a move on, so maybe he shouldn't wait, maybe he should just—

"Clay?" The voice to his left made Mario turn, but not before he saw a flash of surprise on Clay's face.

The voice belonged to Jake Wilkinson. Mario had never spoken to the guy, but it was hard not to know who he was. A former president's son becoming their co-worker had

been quite a story among all the Smithsonian employees a while ago.

"Hey," Clay greeted his—what, a client? His former charge? His friend?

Hopefully nothing more, Mario thought, as if he had any right to do so.

"What are you doing here?" Jake moved closer, and Mario took a step back, suddenly feeling like he was the one intruding.

Clay glanced between the two of them, and that seemed to clue Jake in that he'd interrupted something.

"Oh! Sorry!" He looked at Mario and winced. "I'm sorry, I was surprised—"

"It's fine," Clay told him. "I'm here on assignment, we're scoping the place before the gala. Mario here," he added, offering Mario a brief smile, "got stuck with giving us a tour, but it turns out we go way back. He's Ben's friend."

He was that, yes. So why did it sting to be introduced like this?

"Hi, I'm Jake. I work in the geology department." Jake reached out and Mario shook the offered hand.

"Mario. I'm in PR," he said with a polite smile. "I've been tasked with showing the guys around, which was quite a different tour from the usual but very interesting."

Jake frowned at that and turned to Clay. "You should've called if you needed anything."

And that was Mario's cue to go.

"I'll leave you to it," he said before Clay even opened his mouth.

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So much for taking that chance.

Maybe it was for the best, though.

For a moment, Clay seemed like he wanted to protest, but then he clamped his mouth shut and nodded.

"Thank you for everything. It was good to see you."

Mario swallowed. "You, too. Don't be a stranger," he added, walking backwards a few steps before bumping into someone. "Sorry," he muttered and quickly disappeared behind the first door he could see.

Before it clicked shut, he could feel somebody's gaze on him, but it could have been anyone. Carina, for example, watching it all unfold from the front desk.

Oh, God.

If that was the case, he was never living this down.

CHAPTER FIVE

Clay watched Mario go for a moment before turning back to Jake.

Fuck. What a mess.

"It's not your job to do this and it would be weird to request you by name," he said,

tamping down on his irritation at having his moment with Mario interrupted. It was his own damn fault for not telling Jake he was going to be here in the first place.

Jake crossed his arms against his chest and looked down for a moment before meeting his gaze.

"You didn't even mention it, though. Are you avoiding me or something?"

Ouch. Of all the places Clay thought they'd have this conversation, the museum foyer wasn't one of them.

"I've been focusing on the new job." Which wasn't even a lie, but he made himself say the other part, too. "And I was working on that healthy distance I've heard so much about."

He softened it with a brief smile, and Jake offered him one as well, but it seemed like he did it despite himself.

"I'm telling Troy he'd gotten through to you, too."

"Well, he might have made a good point. Which, let's be honest, doesn't happen a lot."

Jake chuckled. "More than you think. But this," he waved between them with a frown, "this sucks."

"Yeah, it's... an adjustment."

"Healthy distance is one thing, but I don't want us to go too far in the other direction."

Something clenched hard in his chest and Clay had to keep himself from crossing his

arms against it.

"I don't want that, either. But since the codependence is all we know, we're bound to mess up on our way to being healthy. Or something." He shook his head. "I don't know, ask Troy. Or better yet, your therapist."

"I'm pretty sure I can guess what I'd hear." There was a shadow of a smile on Jake's face again, but this time it felt more real. "How about you come over tonight, or tomorrow? I'm sure even according to all the healthy standards it's been a while since we hung out, just the two of us."

"I could do tomorrow." Clay nodded. "What about Troy?"

"We're capable of spending time apart, you know," Jake told him, then frowned at Clay's disbelieving look. "We are!"

"I'm sure," Clay said, fighting a smile. "Since Troy is so against codependency and all."

"I hate you." Jake unwound his arms only to punch Clay in the shoulder lightly. "If you must know, Troy has some work thing."

"Fine." Clay checked the time. "I need to go now, my partner's waiting for me outside. I'll be there tomorrow at seven, okay?"

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"Okay, good." Jake waved him off. "See you tomorrow."

Clay nodded again and hurried out, finding Martinez leaning against the wall by the entrance.

"Sorry it took so long."

"No problem. Did you score a date?"

Clay grimaced. "No, it's— Never mind."

"Damn. I'd think that with your face and everything, you'd have game to go with it."

"I have game." Clay followed Martinez towards their car. "Also, 'my face and everything'?"

"Don't go fishing for compliments now," Martinez threw over his shoulder. "You know what you look like."

"Nothing to write home about." Clay shrugged. "Especially comparing to other people working at KRK," he added. "I mean, seriously."

"Yeah, that's a bizarre number of beautiful people, but Kalei won't admit he makes any hiring decisions based on a hotness factor." Martinez paused before opening the car door to grin at him. "Our egos refuse to accept that, though."

Clay snorted, shaking his head. As they pulled out and headed back to the office, he

spared a glance back at the museum.

He'd missed his chance with Mario today, which was a bummer. But maybe he would get another chance before the benefit.

And if not... Well, he knew where Mario worked at now.

All was not yet lost.

* * *

Jake opened the door with a phone pressed to his ear and waved him in.

"I have to go, Mom, Clay's here." Jake nodded as if his mother could see him. "Okay, I will. Love you, too. Bye." He disconnected and put his phone on the counter in his kitchenette. "My mom says hi."

Clay put a bag of take-out on the table before taking a seat.

"Tell her I said 'Hi, Ma'am'."

Jake turned from where he was pulling out the plates to roll his eyes at him.

"She told you to call her by her name."

"I'm not calling the former First Lady by name, no matter how long it's been."

Honestly, he was not that keen on her in the first place. He was happy for Jake that he had a closer relationship with his mother these days, but Clay still held a grudge over things she had and hadn't done for her son in the past. Jake's often-repeated defense about how she had been pushed into things by his father only carried so much weight.

This was one of the few topics Clay and Troy were in perfect agreement on, actually, but both knew they wouldn't get far with Jake on this, so they mostly dealt with it by sending each other knowing looks.

Speaking of...

"I forgot to ask yesterday—is Troy's work thing actual work, or work he's not getting paid for but can't stay away from?"

Troy and Jake had met years ago, in the White House, when one of them was the communications director and the other—the president's son. They'd fallen in love, then fallen apart, and had gone in different directions, both far away from the White House. But while Jake had kept his distance from politics, Troy had become involved in the education reform this year—a hard-won battle that was nearing its end soon.

Clay would bet Jake was counting the days until the president was scheduled to sign the damn thing now that it had made its way through Congress at last.

Jake huffed as he took a seat. "Actual work thing."

"Why the huffing, then?" Clay handed him the dumplings and put the coleslaw between them.

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"Why else? I can't wait until he's out of politics again."

Clay measured his words, not wanting to freak Jake out.

"Are you sure he's going to stay away from it?"

Politics could be addictive, especially the highs of success, no matter how rare they were. Clay had seen it back in the White House.

Jake sighed, rubbing his forehead.

"I think so? That's where his head is at right now, at least." He picked up his fork. "To be honest, I think he missed writing more than politics, so if I were to guess, I'd see him writing a book out of it."

Clay raised his eyebrows. "Like a memoir of his time in the White House?" That didn't sound like Troy at all.

"Fuck, no. I meant more like the process of creating a reform like this, the insider view, something like that."

"Ah." Clay paused to swallow a piece of dumpling. "That would actually be a pretty good compromise, though, right? He's not staying in, but he's still connected."

"Yeah, that's much better. But it's nothing more than a guess, so we'll see." Jake waved his fork at him. "I want to hear about you, though. How's the new job? What are the people like? Tell me everything."

Clay sat back in the chair. "It's been good so far. Better than I expected, to be honest. And different."

"How?"

"New people, new ways of doing things. You know how it is."

Jake nodded. Seven months ago, he had been in the same position, starting at the Smithsonian.

"The people are nice," Clay went on. "I guess I expected some posturing or some new guy initiation bullshit, and instead I got a guy who made sure to introduce me to the group in the right way, and a bunch of people who only cared if I'm a homophobic asshole or not."

"What? Okay, start over, will you? With details this time."

So Clay told him everything... Well, mostly everything. He skipped over his interest in Mario and his failed plan to maybe make something out of it.

For now, he told himself. If there was going to be anything to tell, he would share it with Jake, but for now, he wanted to keep this one close to the chest. Just in case.

"It looks like I'm going to be busy, but it's fun," he finished with, instead. "On top of all the prep for the gala, I have a training schedule and a bit of time to play with some gadgets that caught my eye."

Jake smiled, putting his head in his hand, arm resting on the back of the couch they'd moved to at some point of the story.

"So what you're saying is, you're in your version of heaven. If heaven consisted of

planning ops, fighting, and toys."

Clay settled in the same position as Jake. "It does for me."

He would probably add a particular guy to that vision right now, but that was way too fast and he knew it.

"Good." Jake bit his lip, obviously hesitating. "I thought you were avoiding me because you were miserable and didn't want me to know. I was thinking about an intervention, but Troy told me to give it time."

"Stop telling me things where I have to agree with Troy," Clay teased but at Jake's frown, he grew serious. "Okay, fine. I'm sorry. Yes, I was texting you less, but not because I didn't want to talk. Or because I was miserable," he added quickly. "I wasn't. I was trying to give us both space and to focus on a new start."

"Without me."

"What? No! That's not—" Clay rubbed the base of his nose. Why couldn't he find the right words when he needed them? "Listen, you're the closest friend I have. You know that. I have no intention of moving on without you. Maybe I overcorrected—"

"Maybe?" Jake crossed his arms over his chest.

"Yeah, maybe. Neither of us is a good judge of the correct amount of contact here, you know?"

"Well, it's not enough contact for me. We've never gone days without at least one text if we didn't see each other."

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"That's fair," Clay agreed. Yeah, he'd definitely overcorrected. "I'll try to do better. But you have Troy now, and your friends, and I have a new job and new people there who will hopefully become friends as well." He paused. "I don't know. Maybe it's not a bad thing if we learn to text other people, too."

"Sure, okay." Jake pulled his knees up, and Clay sighed.

"Jake."

"No, no, I know, okay?" Jake said, avoiding his gaze. "You're right, and Troy is right, and it's... It's easier than it was even a few months ago, so we're making progress."

"But?"

"But we've already drifted apart! We see each other less, we talk less, now we even text less. What's next?"

Clay took a deep breath. He knew how overwhelmed and scared Jake could become when he started heading for the worst-case scenarios.

Usually, Clay could talk him down, but it was never easy.

None of it was.

"Next is trying to find the right balance," Clay finally said. "We see each other less and talk less because we don't live together anymore. That's a normal shift that happens in a situation like that. It's not because we suddenly care less but because we

needed that space. You needed that space, too, remember?"

Jake's head shot up at that.

"Oh, so it's my fault now?"

Clay glanced at the coffee table with the reminders of their dinner and wondered when it all went wrong. He'd been hoping for a quiet and easy night, not... this.

"That's nobody's fault and you know it."

Jake sprung onto his feet and crossed the small space towards the window.

"Do I? Do I know it?" He turned to face Clay. "I've barely managed to get to a point where I feel like I have the right balance between everything—my job, and Troy, and you, and everyone else. I don't want things to change."

"And what about me?" Clay asked quietly, realizing in that moment that neither of them had taken that into account, not really.

And they should have. He should have.

Jake frowned. "What?"

"You have your balance—a partner, a job you love, new people in your life. And what about me? Don't I get to have balance, too?" Clay clasped his hands together hard enough to hurt, but the words were rushing out of him now. "I'm starting over, just like you have. You've managed to get there earlier, and I'm happy for you, but I want to move forward, too. I want a cool job, and a relationship, if I manage that, and more friends. I'm not deleting you out of my life simply because I'm searching for those other stuff, too."

"It feels like that, though," Jake told him quietly. "It feels like you're pushing me out."

Clay shook his head. "I'm not. But I also cannot stay in place I've been for longer than a decade until you're ready for me to move forward."

"It's no longer your job, after all, is it?"

And didn't that hurt like a punch to the throat.

Clay stood up, ignoring Jake's widening eyes and his own instinct to make things better. He had enough for today.

He needed to get out of here.

"Clay, wait—"

"No," he cut Jake off. "You know what, no. I'm not going to. And since, as you pointed out, it's not my job anymore, I don't have to."

He headed for the door, ignoring Jake's protests, only to see Troy there when he opened it.

"Sorry, I wasn't sure if you'd still be here by now—" Troy started, and then paused, glancing between him and something behind his shoulder. Probably Jake.

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"Don't worry." Clay stepped around him. "I'm leaving."

He ran down the stairs without looking back, his chest burning as if he'd run ten miles already.

CHAPTER SIX

Mario did not spend the next few days thinking about Clay and how that moment in the foyer could have been his last chance to make a move.

He didnot.

Maybe he didn't work with the usual level of enthusiasm, and refused to go out with either Ben, or Andie and Carina, but it didn't mean anything. He was simply tired. Spring was barely even there and the winters were always hard for him, so. It could all just as well be the weather.

He knows where you are, he kept telling himself.He knows where to find you if he wants to.Silence means that he doesn't.

Sadly, Mario wasn't a novice when it came to people blowing him off—both gently and not so much.

All the self-talk about letting it go failed miserably on Tuesday morning, though, when he received a call from the administrative office asking if he could show the security team around one more time.

"If you're busy, we can send someone else—"

"I'm not!" he cut in, wincing at how overeager he sounded, but if the woman on the other side of the line thought he was acting weird, she didn't comment on it.

"Great," she said instead. "Is tomorrow morning fine?"

"Yes." Mario grinned at the coffee he was holding in the staff kitchenette. "It's fine. I can meet them at nine down in the foyer."

"I'll relay the message. And thank you. Director Sato appreciates you helping out."

Let's hope she remembers that when it's time for the year-end bonus, he thought but didn't say.

Andie appeared at his side the moment he disconnected.

"What has you grinning so hard?"

He looked around making sure the place was empty before turning to face her.

"I may have another shot."

"With the hot security guy?" She grabbed his arm and pulled him towards the small table. "Did he call?"

Mario shook his head. "No, he doesn't have my number. It was the administration. The security company wants another walk-around or something, I'm not sure. They asked if I could do it once again, so I said yes, of course."

Andie sat back with a sigh. "Lucky you. Why don't I get to have a hot security guy

come and sweep me of my feet?"

"Next one is yours, how about that?" Mario nudged her leg with his. "Although not Clay's partner, he's not straight, either."

"All the good ones aren't."

"Trust me, we have our share of assholes, too," he told her, grimacing as he remembered a few.

"I know, I know." Andie waved him off. "I didn't mean to kill your buzz. I am happy for you!"

Mario grinned. "Thanks. I'm determined to at least give him my number this time. Jake or no Jake."

"Ask Carina to create some diversion, if needed. She'll totally do it."

"That's... not a bad idea, actually."

"That's because I'm smart." She took a sip of his coffee and gave him a winning smile. "You should listen to me more often."

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He chuckled and took his cup back. Andie had been his first friend here, and she introduced him to Carina later on. The three of them had been thick as thieves ever since, and weathered many dating disasters.

"When do I not listen to you? Sober-you, at least. Drunk-you is too wild for me."

Andie scrunched her nose. "She's too wild for me, too, trust me."

"She gives the best hugs, though."

"Hey, sober-me gives the best hugs, too!" Andie protested and pulled him up to prove her point.

Mario ended up laughing into her hair as she squeezed him hard.

His week was definitely improving now.

* * *

When Clay showed up the next morning a minute before nine, something was different about him. He seemed tired, the lines around his eyes more pronounced and his movements a little stiffer. He still looked good, of course, but then again, Mario didn't think he'd ever seen Clay look bad, now or in the past.

Martinez didn't come this time, but there were two other guys with Clay instead, both in jeans and T-shirts, with messenger bags slung over their shoulders and wired glasses on. They were the embodiments of geek stereotype, pretty much, but Mario

didn't judge. Outside of work, he'd fit the description, too, if he didn't have perfect vision and thus no glasses to complete the look.

"Hey," Clay greeted him with a smile—dimmer than last week, but still there—before introducing his two companions as Eddie and Todd, communications specialists.

As it turned out, Clay's job today was similar to what Mario had done last week—walking Eddie and Todd through the areas previously covered and responding to their questions as needed. It resulted in Mario and Clay having plenty of time to talk.

"Going on four years now," Mario said when Clay asked how long he'd been at the Smithsonian. "I started off doing kid tours, but I moved to the PR office two years ago and really like it there. They let us create cool games and events for the kids. And I still get to talk to people about dinosaurs, which is fun, since practically everyone loves dinosaurs. And the kids..." He shook his head. "They ask the greatest questions, I swear."

"You have to have the patience of a saint, though." Clay leaned against the railing as Eddie and Todd sat cross-legged a few feet away, laptops open, working on something between the two screens. "I bet most questions are one and the same, aren't they?"

"Well, yes, but that's why I try to feed them trivia, too. Kids love it. No matter how small or silly the detail is, it's like you gave them the greatest treasure they get to share with their parents or friends." Mario smiled. "I hardly ever got jerks. I guess they don't care about dinosaurs."

"Their loss."

Clay turned towards Mario, who held his breath, unable to help that quickening of a

heartbeat or that shiver down his spine as the moment stretched between them. Desire, in recent years, wasn't so complicated, but seeing Clay again had sent Mario back in time—back to when every emotion was either shaky and uncertain or big and wild, but rarely anything in between.

What it would be like to reach out and touch, to run his fingers over Clay's face? Mario curled them into his palm to stop himself, but he couldn't help wishing...

"Okay, I think we're set here," Todd spoke up, his voice like a jarring sound of pressing the brakes too hard.

Mario's head swerved towards them hard enough to hurt and he saw Eddie glaring from his seat on the floor at Todd, who stood up and rolled his shoulders.

"Eddie?" Clay prompted, most likely noticing the man's expression, but Eddie got up, too.

"Yeah, we can move on."

With their moment broken—again—Mario suddenly had no idea what to say to Clay. On one hand, he could make a move now, offer his phone number, maybe even suggest coffee, or drinks, or—anything, really. On the other, if he'd read it all wrong and Clay wasn't interested, they would be forced to spend the rest of this tour in awkward silence, with Mario too embarrassed to mutter a word.

Besides, Clay could say something as well, couldn't he?

Thankfully, Todd had some questions about keycards, so Mario had to focus on actually doing his job here for a while, which slowly helped him relax. By the time Todd was satisfied and hurried after Eddie to a new spot, Mario was able to return to Clay's side and smile at him easily.

Inquiring about his time abroad outside of work seemed as safe topic as any, but when he learned that Clay had picked up both German and French, and half of his to-be-read pile were books in one of those languages, Mario couldn't help but gawk in awe.

"Wow. I don't think I'd be able to get through a book in Italian, and I've been hearing it my whole life."

"You probably would, if you tried," Clay told him. "We have it easy with so many people speaking English abroad, and we end up not even trying, but it's not that hard, if you put your mind to it. Though, to be fair," he added, "I'm pretty sure I wouldn't make an effort either, if I had stayed in the States."

"You made enough of an effort to learn not one, but two languages," Mario pointed out.

"It's less impressive when you're there." Clay shrugged. "Besides, I had a lot of time on my hands."

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And Mario wanted to ask, wanted to learn how this whole thing even worked back there—did he have to follow Jake everywhere? Did they ever run into any trouble? What would happen if Jake hadn't decided to come back home last year?—but it didn't feel like the right time to get into it, so he let it go.

"I'm sticking with 'impressive'," he said instead and grinned when Clay smiled.

"Fine. I'm not going to discourage you from being impressed by me, if you wish."

Aren't you?The words were teasing, a joke, but Mario had noticed that Clay was actually doing the opposite of trying to impress him.

Too late, Mario thought.Close to two decades late, actually.

As they were nearing the end of their tour, he got more and more nervous. He was running out of time to make his move—and he'd promised himself he would, come hell, high water, or any former White House residents.

Carina had laughed in his face when he'd told her that, but she'd agreed to keep Jake busy if needed.

Mario had nothing to lose at this point, really. Sure, he would mope a bit if Clay flat-out refused to take his number, but he could handle that. He'd moped after men half as interesting as Clay before, so at least this time it would be more warranted.

And then he would get over it, because that was what he did. He got over stuff and moved on.

But—and he was afraid to even think it in case he would jinx it—it could also work. He could actually go on a date with Clay. He could maybe build something with him.

Besides, his teenage self would kill for a chance like this, so he had to take one for the team now.

There were still two other guys with them who probably didn't want to witness Mario being awkward, though.

Then, Eddie paused and turned to Todd.

"I have to—We have to go check something."

"What?" Todd frowned. "We have everything we need."

"No, I just remembered something we missed in the previous hall." Eddie looked at Clay. "Go on, wait for us in the lobby. We'll be right back."

Then he all but dragged Todd away, muttering something to him that had Todd glancing back at them with wide eyes before he and Eddie disappeared behind the half-open door.

"Is it safe to leave them be?" Mario asked.

"Yeah, I think so. I've been warned Eddie can be stubborn, but he apparently always means well." Clay turned to Mario. "You heard the boss. Come on."

The foyer was busy, with a few group tours gathering there at the same time, which meant nobody paid any attention to the two of them.

Okay, Mario told himself as he straightened his back. Now or never.

"So," he said and already had to push back a grimace. Great start. "I guess you won't be needing my help anymore, but I thought—" He pulled out his phone. "I could give you my number if you ever wanted to, I don't know, get a drink or something. Dinner, maybe."

Oh, God. Kill me now.

The few seconds it took for the corners of Clay's lips to start twitching almost gave Mario a heart attack. But then Clay offered him a grin and pulled out his own phone.

"Great. I'll definitely text you about that 'something'."

Mario was pretty sure his own smile was visible from space, but he didn't care.

"That's... That's good."

Better than good, really.

The butterflies in his stomach agreed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

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Back at the headquarters, Clay couldn't stop thinking about texting Mario as he worked his way through all the tasks Vic would hunt him down for. Once he was finally done with those, he headed to the gym upstairs in the hope of a better distraction.

"Someone's in a good mood," Martinez greeted him with from his place spotting Jeremy, and suddenly everyone who wasn't handling over two hundred pounds of weights looked towards him.

Clay was glad he didn't have Mario's pale skin, because he'd have been red like a tomato right now.

"Yeah, well," he said, trying for nonchalance. "It's a nice day."

He knew he wasn't the happiest those last couple of days, but the fight with Jake had really brought him low. Actively choosing not to text Jake or respond to his texts was way different than simply trying to limit them, and Clay had found himself avoiding his phone altogether.

Now, thanks to Mario, he'd managed to push it to the back of his mind and actually enjoy himself for a bit. With some of his energy back, he figured he might drop in to see Mom and Ben tonight, since he hadn't been there in over two weeks now.

"A nice day," Martinez faux-whispered to Jeremy, who rolled his eyes, but Dave and Travis next to them actually laughed.

"Leave the man alone." Dave sat up after finishing his set and accepted the towel

Travis handed him. "Getting laid does wonders for a guy's mood."

"How would you know?" James tossed from his place at the leg press machine and the group whooped and laughed.

Clay chuckled as he listened to the jabs and insults that followed, glad that the heat was off of him for the moment. He had no business admitting that just getting a guy's number was enough to lift his mood.

Still, thinking about Mario kept him in high spirits for the rest of the day, and he left work much happier than he'd been when he'd arrived there in the morning. He texted his mom that he was on his way and received a bunch of excited emojis in reply.

At least one of them would be happy to see him, then.

For whatever reason, Clay had become his brother's number one enemy years ago and while he'd been hoping Ben would grow out of it, it didn't seem likely anymore. The most Clay could expect now was a cease fire, and that was on a good day.

Still, he refused to give up. He had sworn a long time ago he'd do better than his father ever had.

And he did. He'd sent money from Switzerland every month, which was enough to help put Ben through med school and allowed his mom to cut down on her hours a bit, too.

However, she refused to accept his money ever since he'd been back, insisting that with Ben working and contributing to the household now, they were fine without it

"You've done more than enough," she'd told him. "Now it's less money, more visits, you hear me?"

And so Clay made sure to drop in every two or three weeks, at least. It had been weird at the beginning to see each other so often, but it was good for him, too. He'd missed sitting at their old table and listening as his mom went on and on about what happened at her work or in the neighborhood. They'd done that through the phone as well, but it hadn't been the same.

It was always hit or miss whether his brother was going to be home or not. Clay hated to admit that sometimes he was relieved when Ben was out, but it didn't make it any less true. His mom was easy to predict and even easier to please. His brother was the exact opposite.

Tonight, Ben was there, and he narrowed his eyes as soon as their mom pointed out Clay's good mood while hugging him hello.

"Yeah, it's been a nice day." Clay went over to the kitchen sink to clean his hands and inhaled the tomato and garlic smell coming from the stove. "And what about you?"

He made sure to turn to Ben as well, when he said it, but his brother still chose to ignore him, glancing down at the plates he was holding the moment their gazes met.

"Good, good," Mom assured him, dropping the pasta into the water. "No shift until Friday, so I'm resting."

"Resting as in putting your feet up and actually resting, or as in cleaning up the house from top to bottom because you can't sit still?"

She swatted him with a dish towel. "Shut it, you. You know I'd go out of my mind if I had to sit and do nothing."

Ben looked up at that. "He spends a lot of time at his actual job sitting around, so what would he know?"

Clay held back a sigh as he took a seat at the kitchen table. There was no use of rising to that bait.

"How's the residency going?" he asked instead.

"Fine," was all he got, and Mom quickly filled the following silence.

"He's been working non-stop and hardly sleeping." She shook her head. "Now, tell us about your new job. How is it? Are the people there nice?"

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Clay turned to her with a smile, even if she could probably tell it was a bit forced.

"Yeah, they're all nicer than I expected, really. Very welcoming." He went on a bit about his coworkers as the three of them ate. "We're going out for a beer tomorrow night, actually."

"Are you on an assignment already?" Mom asked.

"Yes, an upcoming gala that's expected to have a high turnout. We're in the planning stages and it's going well. Other than that, we train a lot," he added, and if it was partially for his brother's benefit, nobody could blame him. "They're keeping me busy, that's for sure."

"We're honored to get onto your tight schedule, then." Ben sat back and crossed his arms against his chest. "Not as often as Jake Wilkinson, I'm sure, but still, it's the thought that counts, right?"

Clay knew, he absolutely, one hundred percent knew that he should ignore it and move on. And he would've, at any other time, but after the fight with Jake, Ben's words hit harder than they had any right to.

He met his brother's gaze.

"Can you just... not?" he asked, weary and done playing nice. "I don't expect a red carpet, but would it kill you to control yourself for one night? You're not a child anymore."

Ben's eyes narrowed as he took him in without a word. Then he stood up.

"Excuse me," he told their mom without glancing at Clay again, and left the room.

Clay rubbed the base of his nose. "I'm sorry, I—"

"You have nothing to be sorry for." She squeezed his shoulder. "I tried talking to him, more than once, you know? But nothing seems to stick for long."

"It's fine," he lied, because what else was he to do? Not all siblings were close, after all. It happened. "I'll work on my patience."

She huffed. "I'd say you have more of it than your fair share. You're allowed to stand up for yourself."

"I don't have a problem standing up for myself, Mom." He shook his head. "Far from it, really. I'm just trying to cut Ben some slack."

"A lot of slack, you mean," she corrected him. "Like you said, he's not a child anymore. You don't have to shield him from—"

"Mom, please, let's drop it, okay?"

She stared at him for a long moment, then squeezed his shoulder again.

"Is something wrong with Jake?"

Clay sat up at that. "What?"

"Is there something wrong with Jake?" she repeated, her eyes boring into his, the same brown that stared right back at him every time he looked in the mirror. "Is it his

father?"

"Why would you think there's something wrong? Did something happen?" He turned towards the living room where TV was. If he somehow missed—

"No!" Mom's voice snapped him out of it. "I only assumed something might have happened by the way you reacted when Ben mentioned him. He does that a lot and it rarely bothers you."

"I never said it didn't bother me," he muttered before rubbing the base of his nose again. "Maybe I was finally sick of it today."

She dropped her hand from his shoulder. "Maybe."

She went to get up from the table but paused when he started talking, words pouring out fast.

"We had a fight. Jake and I, I mean. I don't know, maybe that's why I overreacted."

"You didn't," she insisted, before offering him a sad smile. "You want to talk about it?"

"No." Absolutely not.

"Okay," she said with a nod. "I'm sure that, after so many years in each other's pockets, you know a thing or two about making up."

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He winced. Those few times they had fought about something other than the security concerns, it had always come down to slammed doors, sulking in their respective corners for a while, and then making up a couple hours later.

It had been almost a week now.

"It's different."

"Of course it is." She leaned closer. "Nothing is forcing you to make up now, for one. You can take your time and think things through."

Clay was about to protest that nothing had ever forced them to make up, but then he realized his mom was right. Back in Switzerland, they'd been alone and protecting Jake had been Clay's priority. Now, they both had their separate lives, and things were much more complicated.

"It's no longer your job, after all, is it?"

It still hurt every time the memory resurfaced, uninvited. Which was stupid—Clay knew Jake had lashed out and didn't really mean that, heknewthat—and yet it lingered, like a slowly-healing bruise.

"It's okay to need time." Mom brushed his hair from his forehead. "I'm sure you'll work this out. You mean too much to each other not to."

He stared at this empty plate. "We tried to make it—"healthier"—better and ended up making things worse."

"Like I said, you can take your time." She got up and dropped a kiss on the top of his head, making him feel seven instead of thirty-seven. "Until you figure it out."

Hopefully, it wouldn't take too long. He missed his best friend.

He took his phone out on the way home later in the evening and opened his text chain with Jake. He had no idea what to follow up their fight with, and yet there was a bunch of Jake's apologies that had flooded in that first night and continued, at least once a day, ever since. The one from today had come an hour ago.

Please, let's talk.

Clay stared at it for a long couple of seconds.

We will, he wrote, and deleted, and then wrote again. I just need some time.

He hit send and saw that Jake read it immediately, but when the dots of a reply in progress appeared, he put the phone away.

He should've texted Mario instead, to start a conversation. Push things along.

Then again, he wasn't at his best after that dinner, so it was probably better shelved for another day.

Soon, though, he promised himself. Definitely soon.

CHAPTER EIGHT

On Monday evening, Mario decided that Clay wasn't going to text him. That was it. Game over.

He'd tried, he'd failed, he needed to move on.

"He may still do it," Andie said, watching him drown another shot, but she didn't sound very convinced to Mario's ears.

To be fair, he barely heard anything over the shouts and singing coming from the next booth, but still. She couldn't really believe what she was saying.

"When, in a month? When he's bored? No, thanks." Mario put his glass down harder than he intended. Oops. "You know that three days is it. Five is... embarrassing, really."

"Five is far from embarrassing," Andie argued. "It's slow, I'll give you that, but I wouldn't count him out yet."

Mario turned to Carina who was sitting out this round and sipped her beer instead.

"She's a hopeless romantic," he announced, nodding towards Andie.

"Takes one to know one." Carina gestured between the two of them.

"Hey!" Mario and Andie both protested at the same time, then looked at each other and shrugged.

"Fair enough," Andie mumbled.

Carina took another sip of her beer. "At least you haven't told his brother about it yet, so that's good, right?"

Mario grimaced. Ben had texted him on Wednesday night, complaining about Clay, who had apparently told him to fuck off, so no, Mario hadn't felt like it was the right time to clue Ben in on this latest development.

"Yeah." He took a sip of his water, because while he was drinking on a Monday night, the least he could do was to be responsible about it. "Maybe it's for the best, really," he said, unsure if he wanted to convince them or himself. "There's no way I can explain that to Ben and not have him explode."

"Let him explode," Carina told him. "Maybe that will get him off of his high horse."

"He's not that bad," Mario protested. He probably shouldn't have complained so much about Ben hating his brother to them. "He had a hard time after their father left."

Carina raised her eyebrows. "He's your age, right? Twenty-nine is way too old to use your parents as an excuse for your shitty behavior."

"And even if it wasn't, the same hard thing happened to Clay," Andie pointed out. "Why would it be okay for Ben to act shitty and not Clay?"

"I didn't say it was okay." Mario pointed his water glass at her. "All I meant was that Ben was likely to be pissed off at both of us when he found out."

"Let him."

Mario took another sip of his water. If only it was that easy.

But it didn't matter, anyway, since there was nothing for Ben to find out about.

"Okay, enough wallowing for the night. I'm gonna call a ride and go home," Mario announced, but when he pulled out his phone, a notification about a new text came in.

From Clay.

"It's him!" he said, probably a bit too loud but he didn't care.

Hey, I'm sorry for taking so long. I just had a lot going on.

The next one came a few seconds later. But I'd love to see you if you still want to?

Mario grinned at Carina and Andie. "It's him."

"What did he say?" Andie leaned closer to see for herself.

Mario read them the texts out loud and tapped the screen to reply.

"Na-ah." Carina covered it with her hand. "Shouldn't you make him wait now?"

Mario hesitated. She had a point. Texting back right away after five days of radio silence seemed desperate.

"Does it matter, though?" Andie scrunched her nose. "I hate these games. You want to text him, text him. You don't, then don't."

"But the rule about not texting while drunk should still stand," Carina insisted, not moving her hand.

Andie toasted her with her shot glass. "That, I agree with."

"Thank you," Carina told her, and Mario thought she'd meant it to be sarcastic but it came out fond instead.

"I'm not drunk," he tried to argue, but both women shook their heads.

"Drunk enough." Carina patted his hand. "Go home. You can text him tomorrow."

Andie hummed in agreement, and Mario slumped, capitulating.

Fine. He would wait.

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His future self would probably be thankful for his restraint tomorrow.

* * *

Oh, yeah, Mario was definitely thankful the next morning. While he hadn't drunk too much, he tended to be overly emotional after a few drinks and it could have ended really badly last night.

Now, though, caffeinated and alert, he stared at his phone, trying to decide what to send.

It took him the entire train ride and walk to the museum to finally settle on:

I do want to. Your schedule is probably trickier than mine, so let me know when you're available and we'll figure something out.

He added a smiley face—because why not—and hit send before walking into the building and seeing Carina already there behind the front desk.

"Hey, you." He leaned over the counter, but whatever she was going to say got interrupted with a text alert.

Great! Any time after six this week is fine with me.

Mario couldn't contain his grin, which apparently told Carina everything she needed to know.

"Having a hot date in your future, perhaps?" she teased, but there was a genuine smile on her face, too. She could be blunt and overly rational, but Mario never doubted she wished him well.

When he showed her the last text, she nodded in approval.

"Nice, he's making himself available to you."

"Right?" Mario was honestly surprised that Clay had no plans at all for the whole week, but he wasn't going to complain, especially if it got him that date he was hoping for.

Besides, it wasn't like he had that much planned, either.

"Okay, we have that seminar after work today that I want to attend, so I'm going to suggest drinks tomorrow at Jackie's," he decided, already typing before he even finished the sentence.

The reply came right away again.

I'll be there. :)

Carina's grin probably mirrored his own.

"Somebody's got a date," she sing-songed, then picked up her phone. "I'm texting Andie, be prepared for a volcano eruption of excitement."

Mario chuckled. "I'll be right there with her, so it's fine."

"Don't come to our group chat until you two get your exclamation points and heart-eye emojis out of the way."

He pretended to pout. "So, never?"

She rolled her eyes. "Go and be ridiculously happy somewhere else, please. You're messing with my vibe."

"Love you, too." He glanced at the time and straightened up. "I'm going, I'm going."

He grinned all the way to his office.

* * *

Mario paused and glanced up at the neon sign above the entrance to Jackie's. He usually didn't suggest this place for any of his dates, not wanting to spoil the place for himself if—when—it inevitably went badly, but for some reason, it felt right this time.

Hopefully he wasn't going to be forced to find another bar for his Monday outings with Andie and Carina.

He went in, noting that the place was less crowded than he was used to—probably because of the Monday's happy hour—which meant they shouldn't have a problem grabbing a table for themselves tonight. He walked up to the bar, ordered a beer, and turned to watch the room, only to spot his date in a booth further back.

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Clay raised his bottle with a smile when their gazes met.

The bartender put his beer in front of him just then, and a few seconds later, Mario was sliding into the seat on the opposite side of the small table from Clay.

"Hey."

"Hey." Clay tilted his head, still looking at him intently, and Mario took a sip of his beer to hopefully stave off a blush.

"I apologize again for not texting you sooner." Clay leaned back in his seat. "I hadn't had the greatest week and I didn't want it to affect—" he gestured between them—"this."

Mario was taken aback, both by the apology and the honesty, so for a few seconds he didn't know what to say.

"Did something happen?" he finally asked. "I mean, if you want to talk about it."

Clay shook his head.

"Not really, no. A few things piled up, but it will be fine. It's already getting better," he added, giving him a lazy smile.

Mario remembered that smile from years ago, when he'd first realized he might be feeling something more than a hero worship towards Ben's older brother as he'd watched him flirt with a guy at the community pool.

"And how was your week?" Clay asked, pulling Mario back to the present.

I spent the majority of my time thinking about you. But that probably wasn't a correct response, even if it was true.

"It was good. I had a weekend off, and I spent it with my family. It was my father's sixtieth birthday, so you can imagine the de Silva clan invasion."

"Sixtieth? Wow, how the time flies." Clay took a sip of his beer and looked to the side for a second. "Tell your parents I said hi. They were always so nice to me."

For a few years back then, when Mrs. Jackson had still been working two jobs, de Silvas saw more of Clay than of her whenever they'd come pick Mario up or drop him off.

"I will. They always spoke highly of you, too, you know?" Mario gnawed on his lower lip as he stared down at his bottle. "Actually I..."

He hesitated, not sure if he really wanted to get into it—especially on the first date.

"What is it?" Clay prompted, leaning with his elbows on the table.

Mario glanced up at him briefly before lowering his gaze again. Too late to back out now.

"I think they wouldn't have handled my coming out as well as they did, if they didn't... If they didn't know about you."

The silence that fell seemed particularly jarring amongst the surrounding noise of the bar.

When Mario finally gathered enough courage to look up, Clay seemed completely astonished.

"I don't know what to say."

"Nothing to say, really." Mario shrugged, attempting nonchalance. "They always liked you, so when I came out, they didn't have that 'sexual deviant and abomination' picture of a gay guy that so many people have, especially religious folks. They'd already known a nice, hard-working, and reliable guy who happened to be gay, so it made it easier for them to see I can be like that, too."

He was pretty sure his mom used "a role model" at least once to describe Clay, but seeing as they were on a date right now, Mario wasn't going to share that bit of the story.

"Wow, that's—" Clay took a long sip of his beer. "Thanks. I had no idea your parents had such a high opinion of me. It means a lot."

Mario suddenly realized, way too late, that maybe it wasn't just Ben who had put Mario's parents, especially his father, on a bit of a pedestal. From what he'd remembered, Clay hadn't had many close friends back then—at least none that Mario had ever seen—so he probably hadn't had anyone else's parents to look up to.

"They were happy to hear that you're back in the States," Mario offered softly. His mom had even told Ben, who was visiting with him at the time, to give their best to Clay, but Mario would bet Ben had never relayed the message.

Clay's smile grew even more. "Do they still have their restaurant?"

"They do. Pops keeps telling everyone he's going to hang up his apron and give everything over to Monica, but I don't see it happening anytime soon."

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Not that anyone complained, including Monica, Mario's oldest sister, who worked as the restaurant's manager already anyway. No one in the family could imagine their father staying home for good.

"Maybe I should drop in there, say hi." Clay paused with his beer halfway to his lips. "I mean... If you don't mind."

"No!" Mario protested as the warmth that had nothing to do with simple desire spread through his body. God, his heart didn't stand a chance, did it? "Of course not. They'll be happy to see you."

Clay sat up straighter. "Okay, then. Now, tell me what all the rest of your family have been up to."

Mario laughed. This, right there, might be the easiest first date he'd ever had.

CHAPTER NINE

As their evening went on, Clay became more and more convinced that finally texting Mario had been the best decision he'd made in a long time, aside from taking the job at KRK Security. He'd wanted to avoid making a mess out of this while he'd been in his funk, but wallowing in self-pity wasn't good for him, either.

Luckily, it was impossible to wallow while in Mario's company.

After they'd covered his family and more of the memories they'd shared from back then, they moved on to things about DC they enjoyed, both old and new.

"I don't know if I've readjusted yet," Clay admitted as they finished their first round. "So many things have changed that there's this weird blend of different and familiar. But I think I'm getting the hang of it, especially now that I have a job and a somewhat normal schedule."

Mario signaled the waiter for more beers before meeting his gaze again.

"How's the work going, by the way? I couldn't exactly ask that while you were on the clock."

"I enjoy it a lot. It's like I said about coming back—it's both familiar and new—but in the best way. Familiar enough to be comforting, and new enough to also be exciting, which, to me, is the perfect combination."

The conversation flew easily over the next round, and then over tacos from a late night food truck nearby. Spring had finally come to DC, so they walked down the block without freezing to death. As it turned out, they lived a few blocks away from each other, so Clay got off on Mario's stop to walk him home.

"You don't have to do that," Mario said, but there was a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as they were leaving the platform.

"I know I don't," Clay assured him. "I want to."

He wasn't quite ready to say goodbye yet. Mario's charm and joyful energy drew him in and he didn't want their evening to end.

Mario's smile grew bigger, but he seemed to be trying to hide it as he lowered his head.

"Okay."

The area seemed very similar to Clay's, aside from a few more trees on the sidewalk. Mario explained he was living with his cousin, whose parents had moved to Texas to be closer to the rest of the extended family.

"We renovated the space together to make it more suitable for our needs, which had been a trip. But we're getting along well. Not to mention, this way the rent is something I can actually afford."

Clay grimaced. "I hear you."

The rental prices in DC were astronomical, and if not for his savings, he'd probably be living in his childhood bedroom—at least until Ben would kill him in his sleep, or vice versa. With the KRK Security paychecks, Clay was going to be more than fine going forward, but he knew from Jake that the museum employees weren't making anywhere close to that kind of money.

"Did you live with Jake the whole time in Switzerland?" Mario asked.

"Yeah. This is actually the first time in my life that I live alone. It felt weird at first, but I love it now."

"I bet. Whenever I come home to the mess Roberto leaves in the kitchen, I wish I didn't need a roommate." Mario shook his head. "Don't get me wrong, I love his cooking, but the mess, I could live without."

"I hate any kind of mess, just ask—" Clay paused. Nope, not going there. "I've been called anal retentive and, yes, I've heard the jokes."

Mario lifted his hands, playing innocent.

"I wasn't going to say anything," he said, but the badly concealed laughter made Clay

roll his eyes.

"I'm particular about the way I keep things, so having to clean up after one person instead of two is a nice change, that's for sure."

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Mario sighed, pausing in front of the corner building next to a laundromat.

"Sounds great. Anyway, we're here."

The abruptness of their evening coming to an end took Clay by surprise, even though he'd already dragged it out as long as he could.

"I'd love to do it again," he said, refusing to overthink it. He'd already made Mario wait too long before texting him in the first place. There was no reason to put this part off, too. "If you want to, of course."

Mario's whole face brightened. "I do. I had a great time tonight."

"Me, too." Clay reached out and brushed his fingers over Mario's cheek. He knew he couldn't really feel it heating up under his fingertips, yet it seemed like it as he watched the blush spread on Mario's face. "Dinner next, maybe?"

"Yeah," Mario breathed out.

There was no way Clay could miss the way Mario's gaze fell to his lips.

He took a step closer and leaned in, slowly, but there wasn't even a shadow of hesitation in Mario's eyes. He met him halfway and, as their lips brushed against each other, there was a spark Clay hadn't felt for a long, long time.

Maybe since his teenage years, when everything had been brand new and exciting, and over-the-top intense.

Their kiss was brief, but long enough for Clay to want to pull Mario closer and let himself forget everything else but this, right here. He wished he could drag him upstairs—or anywhere,fuck, even that dark corner to their left was tempting—and get his hands on Mario's naked skin to see where that blush ended.

But Clay also wanted to do this, whatever it was, right.

"I—" He pulled back, instantly fixating his gaze on Mario's lips. "I should go," he whispered, but did not move away even an inch, instead brushing his thumb over Mario's cheek.

Mario blinked slowly.

"Okay," he murmured, but didn't move away, either. At some point, he'd put his hands on Clay's hips, and Clay wished he didn't have layers and layers of clothes on, so that he could feel Mario's touch on his skin.

He leaned in for another kiss, soft, and slow, and just as good as the first one. It was almost innocent, if not for the havoc it caused inside him.

A car speeding through the otherwise quiet street broke the moment, and Clay did take a step back this time, reluctantly, but didn't drop his arms until Mario had done so first.

As they stared at each other, Clay hoped he read everything right—the heat in Mario's eyes, the brightness in them, the soft smile unlike any he'd seen before.

He wondered what his face showed Mario in return.

"Dinner on Friday?" he whispered, still afraid of speaking too loud in the intimate space between them.

Mario nodded. "Yeah. Yes," he repeated after clearing his throat. He blinked a few times and looked around the street as if remembering where they were. "Friday's good."

"Okay." Clay forced himself to take another step back. It was time to say goodbye, now.

Still, it took Mario disappearing inside his building for Clay to turn and head home, the taste of their kisses still lingering on his lips.

CHAPTER TEN

Mario slumped against the entrance door to his building as soon as they closed.

Jesus.

He ran his teeth over his lower lip, trying to chase the sensation of Clay's touch. Those kisses had been...Wow.

The giddiness overflowed inside him, pushing out joyful, unbridled laughter that made him clamp his mouth shut quickly to not alert the noisy neighbor from the first floor.

Clay Jackson had kissed him.

He'd kissed Clay Jackson.

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And they were going to do much more than that.

It had taken a lot out of him not to invite Clay upstairs, since even after only one taste, he wanted everything. To hell with his rules and being careful, he wanted Clay now.

And Clay wanted him back. That was more than clear, in the way he'd looked at Mario, the way he'd touched him, the way he'd kissed him...

Mario hit the back of his head against the door. He wasn't going to think about this here, where anyone could walk in at any time.

As he got to his apartment, his first impulse was to call Ben to tell him everything—almost everything—and talk at him until the mess in his head quieted down to something more manageable than happy flailing all over the place.

But there was no way he could tell Ben about this. Not now. Probably not for a while yet, assuming he and Clay worked out.

Please, Mario thought, pouring himself a glass of water. Please, let us work out.

He'd been here a few times before—wanting so badly for the first date to turn into the second, and the next, and the next. But he'd never wanted it quite as much as this time around.

He'd wanted Clay half a lifetime ago, and he wanted him now. All that history made it feel bigger, somehow.

Before tonight, there had been a bit of a doubt at the back of his mind whether Clay could ever measure up to that picture-perfect vision of him Mario had been harboring as a teenager. Now, that worry was gone. While Clay wasn't exactly the same, he was still himself in many ways that first attracted Mario to him all those years ago. And he fit in new ways, too.

Mario could also see a chance of there being a them, now. A couple. A real relationship, not just a teenage fantasy.

Don't get too much ahead of yourself, he could already hear Carina say. And she'd be right, of course. She had seen him get excited about a guy way too many times, only to watch it crash and burn soon after.

But neither of those men were Clay, so maybe they'd been doomed from the start anyway.

Okay, time to hit the brakes. He didn't need Carina's voice in his head to know that was overkill.

Still, when he went to bed that night, he couldn't help but think that maybe all those twists and turns that had brought him to here and now were ultimately worth it, if they landed Clay Jackson back in his path.

* * *

"Just don't get too much ahead of yourself, honey, okay?" Carina told him the next day at lunch, and he almost choked on his burrito.

"I know," he said when he cleared his throat. "I know. But the date's been great and there's going to be a second one tomorrow, so I don't have to overthink whether or not he's going to want it. I'd say it's an improvement already."

"I despair over how low your bar is, these days."

Mario sighed and put the burrito down.

"Touché. But I know him... Okay, Iknewhim," he corrected himself before she could say it. "He's a reliable, loyal guy. Sure, I don't know his relationship history over the last decade, but without any reason to think he's an asshole, I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt and go with my gut on this one."

Andie offered him a thumbs up, but Carina kept her gaze on him for a while longer before nodding.

"Okay," she finally said. "I hope you're right."

"Trust me, I hope I'm right, too."

"What does Ben think about you dating his brother?" Andie reached for her lemonade, but paused at whatever she could see on his face. "That bad?"

Mario schooled his expression and sat back.

"I haven't told him yet," he admitted and got two pairs of eyebrows shooting up in response.

"You still haven't told your best friend you went on a date with his brother?" Carina asked slowly.

"It's... complicated."

"We've been over this. The longer you keep it secret, the more complicated it becomes."

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Mario rubbed the back of his neck. "It made more sense to wait when I didn't know if anything would even come out of this."

"But something did come out of it," Andie pointed out gently.

"I know, I know. But like I told you before, there's a history there, which means Ben won't be happy about this, today, tomorrow, or next week. So yeah, I've been stalling, and I know I'll have to talk to him soon, I just... I'm not looking forward to it."

"We can tell." Andie put her hand over his wrist and squeezed it gently. "I get why you didn't want to tell him before anything happened, but now that it's happening, you have no choice."

"He may not like to hear it," Carina said, "but he'll like it even less if he finds out too late."

Mario sagged in his seat, no longer hungry. "Yeah."

Andie offered him a sad smile. "It may go better than you think."

As much as he appreciated her optimism, he knew it was definitely unwarranted in this case. If Mario were to guess it, it was more likely to go worse than he expected instead of better. Way, way worse.

So even though a part of him knew he wasn't helping the situation by putting that conversation off, the rest of him hoped for some kind of miracle as he waited for the right moment.

Who knew, maybe Ben and Clay would work things out once and for all sometime very soon, and this whole thing would stop being an issue?

Yeah, right. As if.

Before Mario could spiral further down this path, his phone pinged with a new message from Clay.

I can't wait to see you tomorrow.

He grinned.

Me too,he typed. I had a great time last night.

It was such a relief not to be the first one to reach out. Mario had gotten so used to always being the one making an effort with any guy he was seeing that he hardly noticed it anymore—at least until now.

He was about to share it with Andie and Carina, when the next text came in.

Best first date I've ever had.

Mario stared at the words in disbelief. Not that it wasn't true for him as well, but he would never come out and say it—in person or in a text.

Yet now that Clay had done it first, Mario figured it was safe to reciprocate.

Same here. Not even a competition.

A grinning emoji he got in return made him want to laugh, the joy bubbling inside of him again. Carina cleared her throat and Andie chuckled next to her, but he ignored

them to send the same emoji back.

Let's hope we can continue in the same vein, he added a moment later and held his breath as the three dots appeared on his screen right away.

The bar is set pretty high, but I like our chances, Clay sent.

So do I, Mario wrote back, his heart beating too fast. So do I.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

First thing after getting to the office on Friday morning, Clay headed to the comm center hoping to catch Eddie coming off the night shift.

As it turned out, he didn't have to hurry. Eddie was there, in sweatpants and a threadbare T-shirt, talking with James who lounged low in his seat, his nape resting on the back of his chair. He looked like he had started to change after a tactical op and abandoned the idea halfway through—he still had his boots and black trousers on, but he'd swapped the black top of the uniform for a maroon T-shirt.

The office was otherwise empty, which wasn't all that surprising—the day shift wouldn't start for another thirty minutes.

At the sight of Clay, both men sat up.

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"Clay, hi." Eddie rolled his chair around to face him. "Can I help you with something?"

"Hi, I wanted to catch you before you left to ask about the Smithsonian auditorium, but I can come back later—"

"No, no." James got up and stretched, and Eddie followed the movement with his eyes before turning his gaze away.

Oh, Clay thought, a lightbulb going off in his head. So that's how it is, huh?

"I need to get going anyway," James went on. "Thanks for tonight, Eddie," he said softly, patting him on the shoulder. "Couldn't have done it without you."

Eddie rolled his eyes, clearly suppressing a smile. "I bet you say that to all the techs."

"No one but you," James promised, walking backwards towards the door, and turned right before the brief look of longing appeared on Eddie's face, here and gone.

Clay didn't miss it, though, and instantly regretted coming in there and interrupting these two.

"Don't keep him too long, okay?" James asked as he passed him by, but before Clay could say anything, Eddie got there first.

"Go away now! I can regulate my own bedtime, thanks." Then, when the door closed behind James, he turned to Clay. "Come on, sit and tell me what you need."

"Sorry, again, for the interruption," Clay offered, taking a seat James had previously occupied.

Eddie waved him off, turning to face his screens.

"Don't worry about it. James likes to come over after an op to wind down, that's all. He says the hum of computers and the typing calm him down."

Yeah, Clay thought dryly. I'm sure the computers are what's drawing him in.

"You said something about the Smithsonian auditorium?" Eddie prompted. "What do you need?"

"I was wondering if you could show me how much each of the upstairs guys are going to see, depending on their position. I have my notes and predictions, but Martinez told me to talk to you, since you've, and I quote, 'probably done this already and more accurately, too'."

"Tell him he needs to do better than that if he wants to get back in my good graces. But," Eddie added, clicking at something on the screen, "he isn't wrong. We can create different models depending on how many people you want—"

As they got into it, Clay forgot about James, but a few hours later, when he was talking with Martinez on the roof of their office building, taking a break from the floor plans and security positions, he remembered the morning scene he'd walked in on.

"Hey, are there any rules regarding relationships within the company?" he asked, stretching his legs as he leaned back in the lounge chair and crossing them at the ankles. Kalei was a genius for creating this space.

Martinez shot him a look from his seat. "No, but HR likes to know about it, just in case. I mean, there's basically no official chain of command around here outside of bigger ops, so as long as Kalei or Noa aren't doing it, there's no issue, you know?"

Clay nodded. Kalei was the de facto owner and CEO of the company, but Noa Alana was the close second as the COO. Clay had only seen him once so far, in passing, since Kalei was the one overseeing the field assignments, while Noa handled the financial and administrative side.

"Why?" Martinez asked. "Did you get laid inside the company already? Damn, that's—"

"No! I barely know anyone, how would I—" He paused. "Never mind. No, it's not about me. I saw something this morning that made me wonder, that's all."

"Uh-uh. Who was it?" Martinez kicked Clay's chair lightly. "Come on, spill. I can come up with at least three options off the top of my head, so it's likely I already know."

Clay turned to him. "And does nobody really care about straight or not straight?"

"Well, if they do, they're either not saying anything or they don't last very long." Martinez shrugged. "I don't know if it's the word of mouth, or natural selection, or what, but somehow we ended up with more people who aren't straight than those who are."

That, Clay didn't expect. "Really?"

"Yep. There's you, me, Jeremy. There's Melissa, who actually married her girlfriend a few months back, and half the company was at the wedding. Then there's Dave and Travis who I'm pretty sure are screwing each other. And Eddie, who would destroy

the Internet for James, so once James pulls his head out of his ass and sees it, it's likely there'll be something there. And there's Vic, but I don't see that one ending happily." Martinez paused. "So, anyway, is it one of them? Because I'm barely getting started here."

Clay huffed. "Unbelievable. I mean, don't get me wrong, it's great, but I never thought I'd find a place like that. The best I hoped for was 'we don't care, but please don't ever bring your date to any work events'."

"Is it like that in the Secret Service?"

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"Hopefully not right now. But back then... Let's just say there's a reason I wasn't out at work. Well, there were a couple of reasons, but, you know. I'd never get to be the First Son's personal detail if they'd known."

"God bless America," Martinez muttered darkly.

"To be fair, I haven't worked there for... almost twelve years, fuck. A lot of things could've changed."

"Some of it, yes. I know the guy who's the primary detail for the president's chief of staff and he's married to a guy. Does it count if the chief of staff is also openly gay, though?"

Clay was pretty sure it was a rhetorical question, but he still answered.

"For the agency? No idea. But it would've counted for me, back then."

Martinez's shoulders slumped.

"You're right. It would've mattered to me, too. So maybe we can give that to someone else now, huh?" he asked, smile crooked. "Show them it can be done."

"Says a guy who became famous for taking a bullet in the line of duty," Clay teased. "I'm pretty sure you've already shown them."

"Aww, you say the sweetest things."

They both laughed. They weren't the type to chase fame—Clay definitely wasn't, and from what he'd learned so far, neither was Martinez. They were simply two guys doing their job.

They sat there in silence for a while longer, but then it was time to get back to work.

"Oh, and by the way? It was Eddie and James." Clay pulled himself up. "They were the ones who made me ask about the rules, I mean."

"I figured it might be about them, since these two are the most obvious. How James hasn't caught on yet, I have no idea. He's trained to notice things, for fuck's sake."

Clay snorted. "Not so well trained in noticing feelings, I'd guess."

"Aren't we all," Martinez muttered, walking towards the roof exit. "But don't think I forgot about you catching some feelings back at the museum. I expect a story at some point."

Clay burrowed inside his jacket, only now realizing how cold he was. They'd been sitting out there for a while and the weather wasn't that warm yet.

"We'll see." He wasn't used to talking about guys with anyone but Jake—and even that was rare, not to mention lacking in detail. "Too early to jinx it."

Martinez patted him on the arm. "For what it's worth, though, you're more than welcome to bring any date to the company parties. They're low-key and fun, actually. But if you want to start with something less crowded, some of us bring partners to the biweekly Sunday basketball games. Let me know if you're interested, alone or with a date, and I'll give you the details."

Clay nodded, ignoring the warmth in his chest. "Thanks. I appreciate that."

Returning to the States had been like a jump with a faulty parachute. He'd had an idea where he would want to land, but none on how to actually get there, or whether the back-up parachute would open. He'd wanted to come back, and he'd been thrilled when Jake decided to return, but all Clay had left here were his mom, his brother, and money in the bank to let him weather a storm or two.

So far, almost nothing went the way he'd expected, but maybe he should better appreciate the things that had turned out well. Like this job, and people here, and Mario...

Oh yeah, he'd gladly appreciate Mario tonight. And maybe tomorrow morning, too, if things progressed the way Clay hoped they would.

That thought brought up a different kind of warmth inside him and he bit his lip, happy that Martinez walked ahead of him.

It was much too early to become a topic of company-wide gossip, after all.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The restaurant Mario had suggested for their dinner was within walking distance of both their apartments. If he'd proposed it partially because of how convenient it would be afterwards, well, who could blame him, right?

As he left for the date, he let Roberto know he might not be back tonight, but he didn't give his cousin time to ask questions. As much as Mario loved him, Roberto was terrible at keeping secrets. If Mario admitted he was going out with the Clay Jackson, the news would spread down the de Silva phone tree in fifteen minutes, tops.

Of course, he could also lie about who he was going out with, but he preferred to avoid that if at all possible. It was bad enough that he still had to tiptoe around the

topic while talking to Ben.

Not much longer, Mario promised himself. If everything went well tonight, he'd talk to Clay about telling Ben. They would just have to weather that explosion when it happened and deal with the fallout—him probably more than Clay, since, well, Ben already hated his brother anyway. It couldn't get much worse there.

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Hopefully, so many years of friendship would be enough for Ben not to end up hating Mario, too.

Don't borrow trouble, he told himself on his way to the restaurant. Ben wasn't going to like it, but he'd have to get used to it. And maybe having Mario in between would actually make the brothers grow closer again.

He didn't exactly hold his breath forthathappening, though.

As he entered the restaurant, he quickly scanned the tables and found Clay already there, at a small table for two in a nook by the wall. Watching him as he stared down at his phone reminded Mario of how Clay had always been early to pick him and Ben up from class or wherever in the past. There had been maybe one time through all those years that Clay had been late, and that was because the road had been closed off for a motorcade.

"Hey," Mario said now, pausing by the table and smiling down at the man who had ruined him for any other guy ages ago and didn't even know it.

Perhaps one day Mario would tell him—far, far down the line.

While they were babysitting their grandkids, maybe.

Clay lifted his head and smiled brightly at him, putting his phone away and getting up.

"Hey. Please, have a seat." He waved towards the other chair. "You look great, by the

way," he added as they both sat down, and Mario's face immediately heated up.

"Look who's talking," he tossed back, pointedly staring at Clay. The guy was swoon-worthy in a suit, but now, with a black shirt and no jacket on, nor a tie... Mario wanted to do things to him he was embarrassed to even say out loud in public.

"Penny for your thoughts," Clay said with a badly concealed smirk, and Mario narrowed his eyes.

"You're doing this on purpose."

Clay grinned, raising his eyebrows. "And what do you mean by 'this'?"

"Tormenting me."

"Not quite." He leaned closer. "Not yet, at least," he added, lower, and Mario's cock stirred.

Damn.

"I do enjoy watching you blush," Clay said. "That, I'll admit to."

As if it didn't make Mario's face heat up even more.

"Like I said," he muttered, taking a sip of his water. "Tormenting."

"You don't know how hot you look when you blush, do you?"

Mario grimaced. "I look like a giant tomato on a stick."

Clay snorted. "Lovely visual. But no." He reached out slowly and brushed his

fingertips over the heated skin of Mario's cheek, sending a tingling flicker of pleasure down his body. "Not even close."

When he dropped his hand, Mario immediately missed the contact.

Get a grip, he told himself, but before he could say anything out loud, the waiter came over to take their order.

Once they decided on the food and were left alone again, Mario cleared his throat.

"So, how was your day?"

Clay's quiet chuckle clearly told Mario his change of topic wasn't as subtle as he hoped.

"Good," Clay said after a beat. "Kind of funny, actually. Apparently, KRK has the densest population of queer people per square foot of office space—among all the private security companies, for sure, but I'd say most of the other fields as well."

Mario's brows shot up. "Oh? And how did you learn that?"

He'd seen Diego Martinez. If the rest of the men in that company were that handsome, Mario was screwed if any of them had decided to make their move on Clay.

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"Martinez spilled." Clay sat back in his chair and Mario's thoughts were temporarily derailed by the line of his shoulders, stretching the black material in the best of ways. "I asked him about something I saw and he gave me the rundown on Who's Doing Whom or Who Would Like To Be Doing Whom in our company. It was... eye-opening."

"A lot of office romances, huh?"

"Nothing that's currently public, but there's some potential. I wouldn't be surprised if it went there. It's an adrenaline-fueled environment, and if there's a spark... I can't say I wouldn't have gone there, back in my Secret Service days, if I knew someone who was interested."

Mario bit his lip. There was a question that had been on his mind, buried but ever-present, for well over a decade at this point. He probably shouldn't ask it, though.

Definitely, he corrected himself. Definitely shouldn't.

"You okay?" Clay frowned. "I'm not saying I'd go there now, at KRK. I wouldn't bring this up—hell, I wouldn't even be here—if I planned on hooking up within the company." He paused and rubbed the top of his nose. "I'm sorry if I made it sound like it."

"No, no." Mario shook his head. He was happy to hear that, sure, but he knew it hadn't been where Clay's head was when he said it. "I just thought about—" He paused. "Feel free to tell me it's not my business. I know I'm probably overstepping, and we're not at the point of swapping these kind of stories, but. I thought about

Jake."

Clay narrowed his eyes momentarily before his expression cleared again.

Fuck. Mario was about to ruin this date, was he? But he'd already passed the point of no return on this one.

"Have you and Jake ever—" He waved his hand. "You know. Slept together. Been together."

Oh God, kill me now.

"No," came Clay's reply and Mario felt compelled to meet his gaze. Whatever Clay was thinking, he wasn't relaxed anymore, that was for sure. "I know that's what many people think, especially judging from all the media garbage after Jake's coming out, but the answer is no. Not in the White House, not in Switzerland, not after." He frowned at the bread basket. "He's still very important to me, though."

Mario wanted to reach out and touch him, but the waiter came back with their food, so as they sat there in silence waiting for the guy to go away, Mario tried to formulate a different response.

"I'm sorry," he said as soon as they were alone again, this time with the food neither of them moved to eating. "I shouldn't have asked."

Clay nodded, but Mario had no idea if it was an acknowledgment of his apology or an agreement with his point.

"Did I blow it?" he asked after the silence stretched too long for him to handle. "Did I blow our date with that question?"

The thought alone made him want to go hide somewhere and not come out for a week.

Thankfully, Clay offered him more grace than he deserved.

"No." He straightened in his chair, as if he was coming back from wherever he'd gone in his head. "I understand why you'd ask."

"Still, that's not a second-date question." Mario slowly picked up his utensils. He needed something to do and the honey-laden smell of that chicken made his stomach growl.

Clay followed his lead and started on his dish.

"Probably not. But close to two decades of knowing each other gives you a pass."

Mario startled and smiled down at his plate.

Close to two decades. That was a big chunk of his life—Clay's, too. They hadn't been in contact this whole time, of course, but such a long span of time still counted for something.

"Thanks. No more questions about Jake, though. I promise."

It was a loaded topic, after all, even without Clay and Jake sleeping together. It represented the eleven-year-old gap, a gap that was especially hard for Mario's best friend.

Thinking of Ben wiped the smile off his face, but then he noticed Clay was frowning at his plate again, not eating.

"Clay? You okay?" Mario leaned closer. "Have I put my foot in my mouth again?"

"No, it's nothing you did." Clay hesitated. "It's just... weird right now between me and Jake, and I'm overreacting. Ignore me."

"You sure? Because we can talk about it if you want."

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"Thanks, but I'd rather not to. We had a fight and we need to move past it, but for now, it is what it is. Besides," Clay pointed at him with his fork, "I'd rather listen to you."

The warmth spread through Mario and his shoulders sagged in relief. Maybe they could salvage this date, after all. They'd started off great, and with some luck, they could get back to that.

Mario's conscience was nagging him about Ben now, though. He couldn't keep putting this off, no matter how much he wanted to.

Somehow it was easier to plan that conversation when he wasn't sitting across Clay, who was smiling at him from the other side of a small table that made it easy to pretend all those leg touches were accidental.

Go figure.

"So, I was thinking—" he started, only to be interrupted by a buzzing vibration coming from Clay's pocket.

"Damn, sorry. I silenced it but I have it set to vibrate for a few select numbers." Clay pulled it out and glanced at the screen. "It's my mom. Would you mind? I'll go outside and make sure it's not an emergency."

"Of course, go ahead."

Mrs. Jackson wasn't a chatty lady, preferring a text over a phone call every time. He'd

be concerned in Clay's shoes, too.

Hell, he was concerned, period.

In the few minutes Clay was gone, Mario slowly finished his meal, trying not to dwell on all the different catastrophes his overactive imagination was presenting him.

Finally, Clay was back, apologetic expression already on his face.

"Apparently, Ben almost fainted at work and they refuse to let him out without someone picking him up. He called Mom, but she can't leave her shift, so she called me. I'm sorry, but I need to—"

"Of course you need to," Mario cut off any apologies. "It's Ben. Of course you need to."

Clay's shoulders relaxed a bit as he offered him a soft smile. "You, Mario de Silva, are the perfect date, I swear."

Mario let out a surprised laugh. "This date has been far from perfect."

"You aren't, though," Clay told him with a nod that broke no arguments. Then he grew serious again. "I'll take care of the bill on my way out, feel free to—"

"I'm taking care of the bill and you are leaving right now." This time it was Mario who meant business. "Go help Ben. And then text me later, I want to know he's okay."

Clay stared at him for a moment, then leaned in, put a hand on the back of Mario's neck, and drew him in for a short kiss before taking off while Mario's lips were still tingling.

A kiss like that after calling him perfect?

Damn.

Mario shook his head, trying to clear it a little. Neither of them was perfect, that was just a fact.

But maybe they could be perfect for each other.

Yeah, he thought with a grin that startled a girl who was passing by his table. That sounds right.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Rushing back home to pick up his car was enough time for his heart to almost get back to normal, but the adrenaline was still pumping in his veins. Most of it was worry about Ben, about what could have happened to make him almost faint, but there was also a memory of Mario's wide eyes after their kiss.

Not to mention the kiss itself, which had felt necessary in that moment, after the way Mario made it clear he got his back and he'd take care of things.

Whatever Clay had been expecting when he first saw Mario after all those years, it wasn't this—the slow, sure slide into something that could change Clay's whole life.

But there was no time to think about it now. He needed to get to Ben.

Keeping to the speed limit was a challenge, but the last thing he wanted was to get pulled over and end up taking even more time to get to Ruth's Children Hospital. While his brother wasn't going to be happy to see him either way, there was no need to make it even worse.

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The lady at the front desk smiled at him when he introduced himself.

"I didn't know Ben had a brother," she said, as if that was something that would make anyone feel good to hear. "He's been working too hard," she went on, picking up the phone, "but it's what the interns often do, you know? Work themselves into the ground to impress their bosses."

She notified the person on the other end of the line that Ben's family was here to pick him up, then instructed Clay how to get to the emergency department.

A young nurse was waiting for him at the entrance and he introduced himself as Kevin.

"We tried to make him wait in one of the exam rooms, but he insisted we needed the bed and he was fine waiting in the rec room." As he talked, he led Clay through the busy department, seemingly unbothered by the constant rush of staff moving in every direction, machines beeping, people shouting, phones ringing. Clay, in turn, was trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. "He was right, we needed it, but we wouldn't have moved him if—" Kevin stopped talking abruptly. "Sorry. What I meant was, he's fine. Exhausted, clearly, but fine. I should've led with that."

He should have, yes, but Clay wasn't about to make the guy feel bad when he was trying to be helpful.

"Don't worry about it," he offered. "I'm just glad to hear he's fine."

Kevin paused by the door at the end of the corridor, where the noise level was much

more manageable.

"Here we go. Come on in."

As Clay followed Kevin into the room, he quickly took stock of the space. There were a few people inside, most of them sitting on or next to the large couch where Ben was situated, holding a red cup with both hands and smiling at something the black-haired woman sitting next to him was saying.

Then he turned his head, noticed Clay, and his smile disappeared.

Of course.

Clay opened his mouth to introduce himself, but Kevin got there first.

"Everyone, this is Ben's brother, Clay. Clay, this is everyone."

Smiles and greetings followed, but soon most of the group dispersed, probably assuming that since Ben's ride was here, it was safe to leave him be.

"Don't let him out of your sight until he's in a bed," a stern-looking nurse in her sixties told Clay as she passed him by, basically confirming his suspicions.

"I can take care of myself," were the first words out of Ben's mouth since Clay had gotten here.

A few people shook their heads and the black-haired woman next to Ben—who had introduced herself as Erica, a fellow intern—jabbed him with an elbow. "Obviously not."

"Nothing happened!" Ben protested.

"Low sugar, elevated heartbeat, obvious signs of sleep deprivation—"

"I'm in the first year of my residency," he cut her off. "That describes every last one of us."

"And yet," she said, showing off her teeth. "Not all of us get caught."

Leaving the couple to their flirting for the moment, Clay glanced at the man standing next to him, who had introduced himself as Gustavo Sanchez, the chief resident of the hospital's emergency department.

"Is there anything I should worry about the most?" Clay asked in a low voice, not wanting to bring Ben's attention to himself.

"He's been pulling double shifts too often, but that's about it. He's not wrong about all the interns not being at their best, so he needs to sleep and stay hydrated, and he should be fine."

Clay nodded. "I'll sic our mother onto him. That should do it."

"If she's anything like mine, it sure as hell will." The man squared his shoulders. "Jackson!"

Clay straightened out of habit, but Ben actually shot up to his feet. "Yes, sir."

"Go home with your brother. I don't want to see you until Monday or I'll personally handle things. And you don't want to waste my time, do you?"

"No, sir."

"Good. Now, go."

Ben nodded sharply, then looked back at Erica, who demanded he texted her in an hour or else and shooed him off.

Clay smiled at her and followed Ben out of the room after saying his goodbyes, but dropped the smile when he saw the slump of Ben's shoulders and the way he was dragging his feet. Clay bit his tongue, though, knowing full well that nothing he could say would make any of this better.

When they got to the busiest part of the department, Ben straightened and picked up the pace, even smiling and waving at people who offered their well wishes. It was nice to see his baby brother being so obviously liked at his workplace and to watch him smile and joke around, even if he was also obviously putting on a show now, pretending to be better than he was. Clay wished he could see this happy version of Ben more often, when it was actually real.

He figured that staying on the topic of work might prolong the moment.

"This place is intense, isn't it?" Clay offered as they neared his car.

Ben scoffed, his earlier smile long-forgotten. "This place is one of the top pediatric ERs in the state," he gritted through his teeth before getting in and slamming the door, making Clay's nostrils flare.

He counted to ten before getting into the driver's seat.

"I didn't mean anything bad, I was—"

"Can't you just drive me home?" Ben cut him off, already turned away and leaning his head against the side window. "The sooner you do that, the sooner you can go back to whatever you had going on." He shrugged. "I had no idea Mom would call you."

Clay slowly backed out of the hospital parking lot. "She couldn't get out of her shift."

"She could've told me, I would've called Mario and we would've ordered—"

"It's not a problem." It was Clay's turn to interrupt. For a split second, he considered telling Ben that calling Mario would've interrupted his plans either way, but he swallowed that down. It was his anger talking and he was better than this—most of the time, at least. "I'm glad she called me," he said instead.

And it was true. No matter how much shit Ben gave him, Clay didn't want to be anywhere else right now.

"That makes one of us," Ben muttered quietly enough that he could pretend he was talking to himself, but Clay knew better.

He tightened his grip on the steering wheel and counted to a hundred this time.

"Listen," he finally said, gaze fixed on the road in front of him, "I know I'm not your favorite person, but if there's something going on with you, if you're sick, or—"

"Are you fucking serious?" Ben sat up and turned to him with a glare that made Clay instantly regret glancing over at him. "I'm not sick, I'm not dying. I overdid it at work and embarrassed myself, that's it."

"Okay. That's... well, not good, but, you know. I'm glad it's not worse."

"Are you? Are you really? Or do I need saving and protecting for you to care?" Ben snorted. "Forget it. You have other people for that."

Clay found it hard to breathe through the sudden tightness in his chest.

"I've always cared about you and I never stopped. You don't have to need me for anything in order for me to do so. I asked because I care and I'm here because I care."

Ben turned towards the side window. "Well, you were somewhere else for eleven years, so I guess you didn't care then, did you?"

Back to square one, then. Clay inhaled slowly and started again.

"That's not—"

"I'm tired," Ben cut him off without looking towards him this time. "Can you let me rest or is that too much to ask for, since I'm not dying?"

Clay clenched his teeth and drove.

* * *

It took over an hour for him to annoy Ben into sleep.

Which, technically, shouldn't be possible, but whoever got to decide that, clearly underestimated Ben's range of anger and resentment towards Clay. After the silent treatment for the rest of the car ride, he tried to block Clay from going after him into the house. When that failed, he shut himself off in the bedroom in response to Clay's suggestion of another glass of water.

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Thankfully, when Clay went to check if Ben hadn't fallen asleep on the toilet or brained himself on the tiles, he found his brother sleeping soundly in his bed. His clothes were lying haphazardly on the floor, so Clay picked them up and put them in the hamper before pulling the blanket from the foot of the bed to cover Ben to his middle.

Ever since Ben was maybe four or five years old, he'd never wanted his covers up to his chin for some reason. "The middle and no further," he'd repeated every night, summer or winter. Clay would sometimes pull them up once Ben had been asleep, to make sure his brother wasn't too cold, but Ben would inevitably push them down to the acceptable level, seemingly without waking up.

Clay smiled at the memory of that little kid, reminding himself that there had been a time when his brother hadn't hated him so much.

Now, Ben had this entire different life—the demanding job he clearly loved, people who cared about him, a woman whom he might be dating—and Clay knew nothing about it, outside of whatever their mother shared with him.

That's what you get for leaving for so long, Ben would have most likely told him. And sure, yes, Clay got the point. But he'd tried to keep in contact, tried to call, and text, and email. Ben had refused any and all of his offers. He'd even opted out from travelling to Switzerland with their mom each of the few times she'd come to visit.

Clay rubbed the base of his nose and left the room. Maybe it would be better to stop trying. Maybe there was a line he had to finally draw in the sand, tell Ben enough was enough. He could go on hating Clay if he wanted to, but Clay was done.

Yeah, right. He couldn't imagine throwing the towel now.

It was tempting, sure. And maybe a break from sticking his head out only to take another hit to the jaw was a good idea for a bit.

But he wasn't quitting on his brother. His family.

No matter what.

A text message signal beeped in his pocket and he pulled out his phone, expecting it to be Mario. Clay had let him know earlier what was going on and they'd exchanged a few texts, but it had been a while, so he figured Mario had fallen asleep. But maybe he—

The text was from Troy.

I need to talk to you about Jake.

Clay sat up and called Troy right away, the ideas running amok in his head.

"Whoa, I didn't think—"

"What happened?" Clay demanded. He couldn't leave Ben alone until their mother came back, but he needed to know what was wrong.

"What? Damn it, no," Troy said with a sigh. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. He's not in danger, or injured, or... whatever else you thought could've happened."

Clay fell back against the couch cushions. This evening was an absolute hell on his nerves.

"All of that, and more," he admitted, staring at the wall as Ben's words from earlier about him needing to be saved in order for Clay to care came back to take another swing at Clay's heart.

Maybe his brother had hit closer to home than Clay had realized.

"Sorry," Troy said. "I wasn't trying to be an asshole here."

A few weeks ago, Clay would have made a crack about how Troy was an asshole, just not about this, and they would have traded some friendly insults before moving on.

Now, it was awkward like it hadn't been since before Jake and Troy had reconnected for good.

And Clay hated that. He hated all of it.

"What were you trying to do, then?" he asked, tired and weary.

"Exactly what I said in the text—talk to you about Jake." Troy paused. "He misses you, and he's hurt. He's also sorry, okay? He's really sorry. You know he didn't mean what he said."

"Do I?"

"Yes, you do," Troy stressed. "You know him better than almost anyone else. Hell, maybe even better than anyone, period, and you know I take no joy in admitting that."

Yeah, Clay knew. They'd begrudgingly grown to be friends over the last several months, but there was always going to be a part of Troy that wouldn't forgive Clay

for getting all those years with Jake that he'd missed out on.

"So you know how he gets sometimes," Troy went on. "He's scared and takes off running in the opposite direction, but first he needs to burn all the bridges while he's at it or it doesn't count."

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Clay snorted despite the ache in his chest.

"It's not a completely inaccurate description," he admitted, but he was pretty sure it was clear in his voice that Troy's words hit the mark.

"I used to write for a living," Troy reminded him in that dry tone of his. "Anyway, he overreacted, then he crossed a line, and he's been regretting it ever since. A lot. And from what he told me, he apologized a lot, too. If he hadn't used up his grand gesture last year on me, you'd have probably already gotten one, too."

Clay groaned. "No, thank you. Keep him away from any cameras."

Then he glanced towards Ben's bedroom. Only a few minutes ago he'd been sitting here, thinking about how many times he'd tried to make amends to no avail. And here he was now, on the other side, refusing to take an offered hand from a person he considered family.

He sighed. "Okay."

"What?"

Clay cleared his throat and tried one more time, a little louder.

"Okay. You're right. And you know I take no joy in admitting that," he added, trying to break the tension.

Troy snorted. "So you'll talk to him?"

"Yeah. Not today, because I can't deal with it now, but I will." Clay stared down at his hand. "I want to make it work for both of us, and we need to have a conversation for that to happen."

There was silence on the other end of the call for a while—Clay probably surprised Troy with that admission as much as he surprised himself—but then Troy cleared his throat.

"He knows he's at fault here for more than just that one shitty thing he said."

Clay rubbed his nose again. "Yeah. I'm not perfect, either, though, so I guess it's time to move forward in a different way."

Once again there was a bit of silence on Troy's end and then, "That went easier than I thought it would."

"What can I say?" Clay glanced towards Ben's room. "You caught me at the right time."

He sagged further into his seat. Maybe he wasn't able to fix everything, but this thing with Jake? That he could fix.

Soon.

Tonight, he was where he needed to be. Everything else had to wait.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

There were no new texts waiting for Mario in the morning when he woke up. The last message from Clay was from close to midnight, when Ben was still sleeping soundly and Clay planned to nap on the couch.

Mario was about to text him to ask for an update, when he figured he might as well text Ben directly, as long as he did it without letting it slip that he was aware of what had happened last night.

Just woke up and don't feel like getting up. You?

It sounded like hundreds of texts they'd sent each other over the years, so Mario figured it was fine. He hit send.

The reply came right away.

Head hurts like if I had a bad hangover. Which would actually be preferable to the night I had :/

Mario sent a question mark and bit his lower lip, waiting. Predictably, a string of texts came in, one after the other.

I overdid it at work and they went all overprotective, 'you're too weak to drive' etc, so I called mom to pick me up

Who did she send? Ugh, yeah, you can guess

I should've walked home instead but didn't want to make a scene

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More of a scene, that is. They all must think I'm a moron who can't take it

Damn. Mario didn't know how much longer he'd be able to not react to the way Ben talked about his brother. It was easier when Clay had been away and unattainable, but now...

Mario let that go for the time being and refocused on supporting his friend.

You can take it, as long as you're not trying to work through exhaustion. And you know it! But you're fine, right?

Yeah, just my ego bruised, Ben replied.

Oh, that's okay, then. Mario smiled as he typed. You should be used to it by now.

Fuck off came two seconds later.

They texted back and forth for about half an hour, and, among the friendly jabs and insults, he learned that Ben's crush on Erica might not be so one-sided as Ben had feared.

It was so tempting to come out and say it, to confess about his no-longer-unattainable crush as well. Mario held back, though. That was not a conversation to have over texts.

He did, however, promise himself that he would talk to Clay about telling Ben next time they saw each other, no matter what. The sidestepping they'd been doing

seriously needed to stop.

After Ben decided he was going to nap some more and hopefully sleep his headache off, Mario got up and went about making himself breakfast. As he sipped his coffee and waited for his toast to be ready, he decided to text Clay before he'd spend too long overthinking it.

Late mornings are the best mornings.

The reply came a few minutes later.

Is this the right moment to tell you that I'm a morning person?

NO WAY. A dagger to the heart would hurt less.

I go on runs early in the morning *twists the knife*

Mario laughed and almost choked on the last of his toast.

You don't drink coffee. You are a morning person. What cyborg are you?

One that hopes the human will still want to reschedule that date from yesterday.

Damn. Clay had a talent of throwing him a curve ball at the drop of a hat, which was yet another thing Mario loved about him.

His brain screeched to a halt.

Oh boy. Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy.

It wasn't that it was particularly shocking or anything. Not really. He'd suspected he

was falling for Clay again basically from the moment he'd seen him walking into the Smithsonian foyer that first time. But there was a difference between falling and having already fallen, and...

They'd only had a date and a half.

Talk about too much, too fast.

A glance at the phone in his hand reminded him that he left Clay without an answer, so he got himself together enough to reply.

In that case, the cyborg would be happy to know that the human definitely wants to. ASAP, in fact.

After sending that, he busied himself with cleaning after breakfast, pretending he wasn't anxiously waiting for Clay's response.

He probably should have played it cool, not jumping on it. "ASAP" was a little desperate.

Thankfully, Clay didn't seem to care about whether or not he appeared cool—or desperate.

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How about tonight, at my place? We could order in.

Jesus. There were two options here. Either Mario had had incredibly bad luck with dating, or things were way different in Switzerland.

Maybe both.

Or maybe it was simply who Clay was. No bullshit, no games. If Mario managed to stop himself from putting his foot in his mouth, again, they could actually have a great time.

Sounds good! Text me the address and I'll be there.

They hashed out the details and flirted some more, but then Clay had to go, and Mario needed to fill his day somehow or he'd end up overthinking everything about tonight.

Nothing on his e-reader could keep his interest for longer than a few minutes, so he finally decided to clean the whole apartment, aside from Roberto's room. That would keep him busy for a while.

He muttered curses all the way through cleaning the kitchen, but it did work as a distraction.

Around four, he got a text from Ben.

I know it's last minute, but do you want to come over and hang out tonight? It's been

a while.

Shit.

Can't tonight, Mario texted back, choosing not to explain himself. He didn't want to lie outright—the situation was already bad enough. How about next weekend?

I have a shift scheduled but they might pull me off of it after yesterday. I'll let you know on Monday, k?

Sure. I'm free that whole weekend, so anytime is good.

Mario took a deep breath. The next weekend, then. He would tell Ben about him and Clay the next weekend.

And then he'd just watch the dust fall.

* * *

Get it together, Mario told himself a few hours later as he waited for Clay to let him in. You wanted this before you truly knew what it meant, but you're an adult now.

An adult who shouldn't be acting like a teenager on his first date at the thought of this evening possibly involving having sex.

As he walked up the stairs, he noticed the stairway was nicely kept, definitely better than the one at his place. On the outside, their buildings were very similar, but the inside was a different story.

Up on the third floor, Clay was standing in the open doorway, and the soft light from his apartment lit him from behind, leaving him in a shadow.

Mario's heart sped up.

He forgot about the building and everything else. His sole focus came down to the man in front of him.

"Hey." Clay stepped aside to let Mario in but stayed close enough for them to brush against each other as Mario passed him.

Mario could swear he felt the heat of Clay's body through all the layers of clothing between them. There was definitely heat pooling low in his stomach at the smell of Clay's fresh, citrusy cologne.

"Hey." His voice came out low, a little breathless, and Mario busied himself with taking off his jacket as he looked around in search of a distraction.

Everything was in muted colors, and what little furniture there was, it appeared to be made from natural materials. Among a lot of open space, the big leather couch dominated the room, and Mario was glad to note that it was big enough to comfortably fit them both, if the mood struck them to do something other than sitting on it.

"Nice place," he commented, glancing down the small corridor to what he assumed was the bedroom door before handing Clay his jacket.

"Thanks. Although I didn't have much to do with it. It was pretty much like this when I rented it, which was one of the reasons I chose it."

Clay motioned for Mario to take a seat on the couch and offered him a glass of wine before ordering food from an Indian place nearby. Soon enough, they were facing each other as they sat sideways on the couch, wine glasses in hand and legs almost-but-not-quite brushing.

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They talked a bit about the upcoming gala and Mario admitted that the Smithsonian employees had moved past the excitement of the Washington celebrities at this point, but they weren't yet tired of it enough to complain too much.

"Thankfully, with the education bill finally passing, there's no need for another benefit for quite a while. Who knows, maybe we'll come to miss them, regardless of the fact that we've not been invited to any of the parties," he said. "The mounting excitement is nice, not to mention all the gossiping afterwards. If I believed everything I heard, I'd assume I have dirt on half the Hill."

Clay chuckled. "The highest currency in this town."

"The alleged hookup stories are usually the most interesting, if the least likely."

"Of course they are."

Once the food arrived, Mario proceeded to share some of the more exaggerated stories and watched Clay laugh out loud, with his head thrown back and a hand on his chest. Mario's gaze lingered there, imagining his own hand in its place, tracing the muscles through the fabric.

He glanced up to see Clay watching him with intensity that made Mario's breath catch. His heartbeat picked up again. Clay's pupils were wide, his eyes bright and focused on him and him alone.

Mario took another sip of his wine to help his suddenly dry throat, itching to climb into Clay's lap and kiss him until both of them couldn't breathe.

He put his glass away next to his empty plate, and turned just so.

Then it was a single brush of hand against hand, and suddenly, the world was on fire.

There were hands reaching out and seeking touch, arms that grasped, and pulled, and bodies that slid, easy like breathing, until Mario was straddling Clay's thighs and, oh, fuck, maybe he hadn't known about fire before. He hadn't known he could burn like this.

He hadn't known a lot of things.

And now there would be no escape from this feeling, no emergency exits, no detours. He would never be the same after this.

It had been inevitable, of course.

Everything from that first look in the museum and the quickening of his pulse over something that should have been buried over a decade ago but wasn't—everything led to this, right here.

Clay slipped a hand under Mario's shirt, pressing his palm against his back, and Mario gasped into the kiss and rolled his hips forward. Clay tightened his grip on Mario's hip as he closed his teeth over Mario's lower lip.

A gasp turned into a moan, because, God, yes, this, more of this.

They disentangled themselves for long enough to shed their shirts before pressing close again. At some point in the future, hopefully, Mario would get the chance to explore Clay's chest with his lips and tongue, but for now he needed another kiss like he needed air, even though the feel of Clay's skin against his already made him breathless.

He could barely think as Clay ran his hands over his back, finding all the sensitive spots like he'd already seen the map, already knew how to get there. Mario didn't know whether to lean back into the touch or press impossibly closer to Clay's chest as the fire burned brightly inside him.

"Bedroom?" Clay whispered against his neck at some point, and Mario nodded, clasping his hand on Clay's nape.

Yes. Yesyesyes.

He was about to reluctantly move away, but then Clay tightened his grip around him, whispered "Hang on," and stood up, supporting his weight as if it was nothing.

Mario circled his legs against Clay's hips, but that was all he was capable of doing, because he was now living through some impossible sex fantasy he hadn't even known he had.

Dating a bodyguard had more perks than just regularly seeing the guy in a suit, apparently. Jesus Christ.

"I want you to fuck me," Mario said right against Clay's ear, and the grip around him tightened even more.

Mario almost came right then and there at the thought of that leaving marks over his pale skin.

"Oh, I will," Clay promised him in a low voice.

And then they were on the bed, Clay covering him as they kissed again, pressed together even closer than before. When they pulled apart to lose the rest of the clothes, Mario didn't know where to look—at the definition of Clay's chest, his hard

cock Mario couldn't wait to have inside him, or the round lines of Clay's ass when he turned to grab lube and a condom from the nightstand as they rearranged on the bed. Mario wanted to stare at the sight until it became carved in memory, but right now, what he wanted—needed—even more was Clay back over him, closer and closer still, until they were touching everywhere.

Until they were one.

Clay was there a second later, pressing him against the mattress once again and pulling him into another kiss. He pushed his thigh against Mario's cock, and Mario swore, gasping into Clay's mouth.

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He was way too close to the edge already, the fire inside him rushing everywhere all at once.

He whined when Clay's weight suddenly disappeared.

Clay swore as he settled on his knees between Mario's legs, spreading them wider and running his hands over Mario's heated skin.

"Fuck, you don't even know what you're doing to me, do you?"

Mario would be happy if Clay was even half as affected as he was, half as overwhelmed, and desperate, and ready to make stupid promises way too early.

Thankfully, he didn't voice any of that, as Clay ran his fingers over his entrance and Mario lost the ability to speak.

Clay took his time, careful at first and then more demanding, as he stretched him slow and perfect, whispering how good Mario was, how gorgeous, how Clay couldn't wait to slide into him.

And then he did.

Mario gasped. He was reduced to only this, gasps and breathless moans, while Clay's gaze was pinning him in place, demanding his full attention. As if Mario could focus on anything else but the insistent, growing pleasure as Clay started to move, the incandescent fire in his blood, and the way their bodies seemed to fit together better than anything he'd ever experienced.

His orgasm, when it came, overwhelmed Mario's whole body, from the core to the chest, and throat, and mind. His fingertips were tingling and it was as if his skin was too small all of a sudden, his mind reaching further and further until he came back to himself, held together safely under Clay's weight.

Then Clay licked the flushed skin of his neck, sending a shiver down his sensitive body, tickling a little, and Mario let out a short laugh and grinned at the ceiling.

Clay lifted his head and whatever he saw on Mario's face made him grin as well. He leaned for another kiss, tasting like every dream Mario had ever had, and more.

And Mario hadn't been waiting around or pining after Clay over the last decade, but he would have—he would have waited a decade more—if he'd known this was waiting for him on the other end.

He was glad he didn't have to, though. Not anymore. Not for a single second longer.

Everything he'd ever wanted was right here.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Clay had never expected to have the best sex of his life at thirty-seven but, well, here he was. All the people who said you peaked in your twenties were either still in their twenties or led unfortunate lives. He would feel sorry for them, he really would, but right now, he didn't have space to feel anything but the overwhelming pleasure, the kind that seeped deep into his bones and set up to stay.

When he licked into Mario's mouth, it was as if they'd done this a thousand times already and yet it also felt new at the same time.

And he just wanted to keep kissing, keep touching... Keep Mario close.

"You good?" he murmured against Mario's lips at some point and got an incredulous look in response.

"Am I good?" There was a laughter behind the words. "Am I good, he asks," Mario went on, seemingly addressing the ceiling. "He does this to me and he asks if I'm good."

Clay nibbled at his jaw. "Okay, okay, I get it. You're better than good."

"But am I?" Mario teased before shaking his head. "You're lucky you're this hot," he added as he brushed Clay's hair from his forehead.

"I'm lucky you think I'm this hot," Clay whispered. He wasn't falsely modest, but he also knew many younger men didn't give a second glance to guys on the other side of thirty-five.

Mario seemed to barely resist rolling his eyes. "Dude, I'm pretty sure everyone thinks you're hot."

"Dude?" Clay laughed, balancing more of his weight on his elbow. "I guess it's time to get out of this bed if you're calling me 'dude' while we're naked and covered in come. Shower?"

Mario gave him a nod but also pulled him in for another kiss, so it took some time before they actually got out of the bed and into the bathroom. Luckily, the shower stall was big enough to fit them both. They ended up running out of hot water, but Clay got one more orgasm out of Mario, so neither of them was complaining.

"Bed or leftovers?" Clay asked, and Mario seemed to do a double take for some reason, but then he smiled and nodded.

"Leftovers, then bed?"

"Perfect, come on."

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And that was how they ended up shirtless in the kitchen, leaning against the counter as they finished the rest of the food from earlier in the evening. Clay had put on some sweatpants, but Mario opted for tucking a big towel around his hips, so he was a hell of a distraction. Now that his flush receded, his freckles were once again more pronounced, covering his shoulders and petering out down his chest.

Clay wanted to lick them all at some point soon. Not tonight, since they were both spent, but soon.

Tomorrow, maybe. In the morning, Clay could play the sexiest version of connect the dots ever played.

"Do you need to be somewhere tomorrow?" he asked, putting his empty container away and leaning back on his arms.

Mario gave him a blatant once-over before meeting his gaze. "No."

"Great." At Mario's raised eyebrows, he shrugged. "I was thinking about a long morning in bed."

"Were you," Mario said more than asked, as he put his box in the trash, too. Then he pushed himself away from the counter and moved closer to Clay. "Any plans in particular?" he whispered, nuzzling against Clay's beard.

Clay didn't even try to resist. He hooked a few fingers over the towel knot and pulled Mario closer, pressing his mouth to the line of Mario's jaw once again.

"Yeah," he whispered. "Any objection?"

"Not really, no." Mario put his hands on Clay's hips. "Only that the morning is a long time away from now."

Then he lowered himself onto his knees, pulling Clay's sweatpants down as he went. His towel was now hanging in Clay's grasp.

Okay, so maybe they weren't that spent, after all.

* * *

Clay had forgotten how different it was, waking up with someone else in his bed. Especially someone he still wanted to be there in the morning.

He always woke up quickly—there was no lingering, half-asleep, half-awake stages. He was alert and aware right away, like a light switch. And being aware of a warm body pressing against him in bed was a pleasure he'd gone without for way too long.

Mario was still asleep, which meant Clay was free to look at him, learning and relearning things.

He took in Mario's exposed shoulder, the dip of his neck, the lines of his face.

Then he noticed a freckle on Mario's left eyelid and, for some reason, that little spot was what made something in Clay's chest tighten and expand before settling down in a new way.

Was that how one realized they'd fallen for someone? A split moment of time between one blink and the next and suddenly he was so drastically changed?

...Wasn't it sad that Clay hadn't known that until now?

Better late than never, at least.

He expected a freakout to come next. They'd barely been on a few dates. They'd spent one night with each other. Mario was Ben's best friend.

All of that should scare Clay, and yet...

It didn't.

Well, that last point did scare him a little bit, but he refused to dwell on it for long. Ben wouldn't want to stay angry at Mario forever, so he'd probably concentrate all his anger on Clay, which, sadly, wasn't anything new.

Besides, if Ben was to be angry at someone, it should be him, anyway. Clay was as used to Ben's hostility as one could get, while Mario didn't deserve to suffer like that.

He was joyful in a way that lighted up any room, and yet he could be present and thoughtful, attentive in a way that could become addictive for Clay in no time.

He already couldn't wait to have Mario's focus back on him again.

As if hearing that, Mario sniffed and stretched before blinking his eyes open.

"Hey," he whispered, offering a smile Clay was helpless against, so he leaned in for a kiss.

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The press of their lips was soft and lingering, and as Clay drew back, he knew Mario could see a similar smile on his face now.

Clay ran his fingertips down Mario's back, to the spot he already knew to be particularly sensitive. "Hey."

He was rewarded with a rumbling sound and a roll of hips that brought Mario's groin closer and made his morning erection obvious as it pressed against Clay's hip.

"You're an evil, evil man," Mario told him, but the way he dragged his lips over Clay's shoulder made it clear he didn't really mind the evil part.

"I don't know." Clay shifted a bit and they both inhaled sharply as their cocks slid against each other. "I think I'd only be evil if I didn't intend to follow through."

"Oh?" Mario arched his eyebrow. "And do you?"

Clay rolled them both until he was leaning over Mario. "Let's see."

He started with another kiss on Mario's lips but didn't linger there this time. He made his way down Mario's jaw, his neck, and lower, pressing his mouth to every freckle on his way, exactly like he'd pictured last night. He licked into the dip of Mario's collarbone and ran his teeth over the area, eliciting a gasp in reply.

He hid his grin against Mario's chest. He wanted to hear more sounds out of Mario, every moan, and sigh, and gasp. Maybe even a scream, if Mario was the type.

"I can tell you're happy with yourself right now." Mario ran a hand through Clay's hair before moving to his cheek. "But when I was promised follow-through, I was expecting more than a few kisses, you know."

Oh, it was on, now.

Clay licked, and nipped, and kissed his way down Mario's chest, and he did bring out a lot of noises out of him. By the time Clay got to his cock, Mario was constantly whispering profanities and encouragements, with a few threats thrown in here and there. He tried to buck his hips, too, but Clay kept him down, and it brought out the loudest moan yet.

Interesting.

But then Clay licked the tip of Mario's cock and that reaction was even stronger.

"Fuuuck," Mario moaned and gripped the back of Clay's neck hard. "Okay, you win, I surrender, whatever, just stop playing and suck my cock, please, fuck."

And who was Clay to refuse such a nice request?

He lowered his head, taking as much of Mario as he could, though he needed to pull back when Mario's cock hit the back of his throat. It had been a while since Clay had done this last and he was going to need a minute before trying to go any further. He hollowed his cheeks on his way up and sucked harder.

Mario tried to buck his hips again and swore louder.

Clay sneaked one hand to grip Mario's cock at the base as he circled his tongue over its head and underside. Once he fell into a rhythm, he closed his eyes and enjoyed it all—the taste and weight of the cock on his tongue, the sounds Mario made, the way

he gripped Clay's nape or failed to keep his hips down.

Clay's own erection was pressing against the sheets, and it had been years since he'd come like this, but he actually might get there if it went for much longer.

Finally, he took pity on them both. He sped up his rhythm as he pulled on Mario's cock while sucking on its head. He glanced up to see Mario's flushed face and bright eyes, and that seemed to push Mario over the edge, because he arched off the bed and came a moment later, spilling into Clay's waiting mouth.

With one last lick along the underside, Clay pulled back when Mario was done. He sat back on his hunches between Mario's spread legs, running his hands up and down Mario's calves, not wanting to lose the contact as he admired the view.

Because Mario was breathtaking like this. Clay never wanted to let him out of his bed again—or into any kind of clothes.

Mario waved his hand weakly and Clay figured he wanted a kiss so he leaned over him and licked into his mouth, sharing his taste.

Mario hummed, kissing back, but when they paused for breath, he murmured, "I meant for you to come up and fuck my face."

Damn. Clay bit his lip and gripped the sheets next to Mario's head hard.

"Your mouth will be the death of me."

Mario smirked. "Hopefully a small one." Then he pushed at Clay's shoulders. "But my limbs seem to be working again, so just roll over and let me return the favor."

"You don't—" Clay started even as he did as he was told, but the look Mario gave

him kept the rest of that sentence away.

"You have no idea how long I've wanted to do it." Mario settled between his legs.

"And after getting the taste of it last night, I want it even more."

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A part of Clay wanted to ask, but the rest of him was rapidly losing focus at the sight of Mario's lips so close to his cock.

"I hope your fantasy included me coming embarrassingly fast," he managed instead. "Because that's what's about to happen."

Mario flashed his teeth at him. "One of them, yes." He licked his mouth as he turned his gaze to Clay's cock. "Trust me, I don't mind. At all."

Clay closed his eyes and put his head down. If he wanted to last any time at all, he could not watch this.

As it was, the first lick of Mario's tongue from the base to the tip of his cock made Clay grip the sheets again, barely resisting pushing his hips up. The heat spiraled to every corner of his body, the trembling of nerve endings easy to give into.

The muscles of his thighs trembled as well when Mario started to suck, going lower before pulling up.

"You can move, you know," Mario murmured with his lips brushing the sensitive skin right under the head of Clay's cock, making it impossible to think clearly. "Fuck my mouth. I want you to."

With that, Mario swallowed him again, and Clay hesitated for barely a second before he let himself go. He bucked his hips a few times in quick succession, and the slide of his cock further into that wet heat was incredible.

Then Mario swallowed around the head as it hit the back of his throat and that was it.

"Now," Clay managed to breathe out in a warning.

Mario pulled back a bit but didn't let Clay's cock slip out of his mouth, tongue swiping along the sensitive skin.

Orgasm hit Clay like a sledgehammer, breaking him into little pieces with a force that took his breath away.

He probably made a sound, but he didn't hear a thing. There was only the pleasure, the enveloping heat, and his whole body shivering with aftershocks.

And Mario.

His fall was complete.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Mario was in the shower—on his own this time, because they didn't seem able to focus on the cleaning part while they were in there together—when it hit him that his teenage dreams were nothing compared to his current reality.

Sex was way better than his teenage self could predict, for one, but it was also more than that. Everything Mario had wanted back then, from kissing and sex to hanging out together, he got to have now, without worrying he'd make a fool of himself.

Well, without worryingmuch, at least.

They were yet to have a talk about actually being in a relationship, after all, which left Mario wondering. He had been known to jump the gun a time or two on this topic

in the past, however, so he was holding off on that conversation for now.

Especially since they needed to have a talk about Ben first. This one really couldn't wait, which meant the easy and carefree time of their date-turned-sleepover-turned-a-weekend-together was coming to an end as soon as Mario got out of the bathroom.

It's going to be okay, he told himself as he stared at his reflection in the mirror over the sink. He noted a few places Clay had left his marks on his body and brushed his thumb over the one above his hip.

His chances were looking good, at least.

After putting on the sweatpants and the T-shirt Clay had offered him earlier, Mario walked out into the living room, determined, only to come to a halt as he caught sight of Clay, shirtless and turned away from him as he read one of the take-out menus.

Damn.

Mario couldn't help himself. The wide expanse of Clay's shoulders narrowing down to his waist, the muscles on display under the tanned skin... All of that made it impossible for him not to come closer and put his hands on Clay's hips before kissing the top of his spine and inhaling his scent deeply.

Clay leaned into the touch and turned his head to the side. "How about Thai for lunch slash dinner?"

"Sure." Mario pulled back and went to grab his green tea. "I'm starving."

Clay's grin was a teasing one. "I'm not surprised. Anything in particular?"

"Yellow curry with tofu, please."

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As he listened to Clay making the call, Mario took his mug and settled on one end of the couch, sitting sideways and pulling his legs up.

"What is it?" Clay asked, taking a seat on the opposite end when he finished placing their order.

Mario tilted his head. "What's what?"

"You look like you're gearing yourself up for something, so..." Clay voice halted at the end, leaving space for Mario to fill it out.

If only he knew where to start.

"How do I say I think we should talk without making it sound like I'm going for a break-up speech?" he asked at last, grimacing before he even finished.

Wow, that was terrible.

Clay raised his eyebrows, but at least he didn't seem spooked. He leaned his head on his hand, with his elbow resting on the back cushions, and held Mario's gaze.

"Does the conversation need that intro in the first place?"

"I thought so, but I obviously don't know what I'm doing here, so now I'm not sure," Mario said, glancing down at the space between them—small but there.

Then Clay breached that space, bumping his calf against Mario's feet.

"Come on, say what's on your mind."

Everything, Mario wanted to tell him, but that wouldn't help.

"I'm thinking about us, and how I consider us to be in a relationship already, and I hope you don't think it's too fast—"

He cut himself off, but it was already too late. So much for holding himself back on that topic. Damn it.

"I don't," Clay offered, saving Mario from spiraling. "I know it's fast, but I'm not interested in keeping up a pretense of not committing when I'm ready to commit."

Mario's heart soared in his chest at the easy admission. He wanted to kiss Clay for that, but kissing would lead to sex, so it needed to wait.

For now.

"I'm ready, too," he admitted quietly before speaking up louder. "I want to spend weekends like this with you, and do all the other things people in relationships do. But there's an elephant in the room we need to address or this whole thing will blow up in our faces."

Clay slumped against the cushion and lost his smile. "Ben."

"Yeah." Mario bit his lower lip. "I know the two of you aren't close." And wasn't that an understatement. "But he's important to me. I don't want to hide this from him."

"It's not going to go over well, I can tell you that already." Clay shook his head when Mario opened his mouth. "I'm not saying don't do it, I'm just stating the obvious. Ben doesn't want anything to do with me, so for you to date me... He's not going to take it

well."

"But we can't not tell him, either, so we don't have a choice."

Mario knew better than Clay how difficult it was going to be for Ben, but he hoped they would get past it. He couldn't imagine losing that friendship, but he also wasn't going to preemptively back out of a relationship he wanted. He had to believe he could keep them both.

He had to.

"No, we don't have a choice," Clay agreed. "How do you want to do this?"

Mario sighed. "He's supposed to text me tomorrow to let me know when he's free over the weekend. I'll do it when I see him, since the sooner we do this, the better."

"Okay. I'd offer to take one for the team, but we both know it would make things worse," Clay said with a sad half-smile.

This time it was Mario who reached out, resting his hand on Clay's knee. "Yeah."

They were silent for a minute as Clay stared down at the couch.

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"I don't know what I did wrong," he finally said in a quiet, subdued voice. "It's like... One day we were good and, sure, we fought sometimes, but it was the usual stuff between brothers. And then, boom, I'm his worst enemy."

Mario wasn't sure what he could say without betraying any confidences, so instead he moved his hand lower and circled his fingers around Clay's ankle, squeezing gently.

"I'm sorry."

Clay nodded, but then he seemed to shake himself off and looked up to meet Mario's gaze.

"I'm sorry you're going to be pulled into the middle of it now."

Mario rubbed the jut of Clay's ankle with his thumb. "Better than the alternative of not having this."

It earned him a real smile before Clay grew serious again.

"I never want to come between the two of you, so if I somehow..." He paused. "If I ever make it sound like I'm trying to get you to pick sides or convince you to make a case for me or something, tell me, okay? I don't want to be that person."

Mario swallowed, feeling horrible that he hadn't even thought of Clay putting him in a situation like that, and yet he'd suspected Ben might.

Damn, he was a shitty friend.

In the end, he just nodded and squeezed Clay's ankle again.

Sure, he'd fantasized about being able to bring the brothers closer. He wouldn't admit to it out loud, but he at least tried not to lie to himself. When he was thinking clearly, though, he knew that avoiding a flat-out war should be the best he aimed for, here.

Anything above that would be pushing their luck.

* * *

The absolutely worst part about the great weekends was that they had to end.

They dragged it out as much as possible, with Mario leaving Clay's apartment when it was already dark outside, but it was time to get back to the real life.

This is your real life now, too, Mario told himself, looking up at Clay's apartment building before heading home. They'd set up another date for Tuesday and made tentative plans for Saturday, if Clay wasn't busy after the gala, or if Mario wasn't hanging out with Ben then.

The good humor sustained Mario all through Monday, which of course meant Andie and Carina teased him mercilessly during and after work. Still, they were obviously happy for him, too, which he appreciated a lot.

It stung that Ben would never support this the same way, even if—or when—he would later come to accept his choice of a partner.

"You're not giving him a chance to support you," Carina reminded him gently before they parted for the night.

Mario rubbed his forehead. "I know. I promise I plan to tell him as soon as I see

him."

"Good."

Ben was supposed to let him know when he was free, but he hadn't texted him, so Mario decided to nudge him after he waved Andie and Carina goodbye.

Hey, do you know when you're free yet?

He was almost at his place as his phone pinged in his pocket.

I'm still not sure about the weekend, but I'm definitely free on Friday. What about you?

Friday. Mario could work with that.

Friday is fine. I'm thinking something low-key, maybe a game night at my place? R should be out.

There was no way Mario wanted to have this conversation anywhere public.

I thought you'd suggest a night out! Internet is not a place to find a guy, dude. I thought we've been over this.

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We have, Mario wrote and then stared at the screen. There was no harm at hinting, was there? And maybe I'm no longer looking.

Ben sent back a bunch of question marks to which Mario very maturely responded with a winking face emoji.

He refrained from adding an eggplant one, at least.

You bastard, that's why you couldn't meet me over the weekend. You've already found a new guy!

Mario winced. He knew Ben didn't really mind about the weekend, but the joking would stop once he learned who the guy was. Because, at the end of the day, Ben didn't have a problem sharing Mario with anyone. He had a problem sharing Clay.

God, it was going to be a mess, no question about it.

Mario was determined not to let it destroy anything, though.

I'll tell you everything on Friday, he wrote back. I promise.

I'll bring popcorn, your dating stories are the craziest.

Mario snorted without humor.

Yeah, this one is going to blow your mind.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Clay looked around his apartment once Mario left and considered his options.

He could lie down on the couch and watch TV. He could clean up.

Or, he could pick up his phone and finally do what he'd been meaning to do for days now.

He went with option three, since he was finally feeling ready—or at least as ready as he would ever get before actually doing it.

Hey, you busy?he typed and sent before he'd talk himself out of the idea.

The reply came right away.

No, I'm free. Why?

Clay took a deep breath.I thought we could talk. I could come over tonight—or tomorrow night, since it's pretty late.

Normally, he wouldn't make plans at this hour, but now that he'd made the decision, he wanted to get this over with.

Sure, come over tonight! I really want us to talk.

Okay, I'm leaving in 5.

It took around half an hour to get to Jake's place, but once Clay got there, he still wasn't sure what to say. The downside of not really ever fighting like that through a decade and a half of knowing each other was that they had no blueprint of making up

afterwards.

No time like the present to figure it out.

He took a deep breath and knocked, and the door opened right away. Jake was bouncing on his feet, clearly vibrating with nervous energy, but he still smiled at Clay as he waved him in.

"Hi, there. Thanks for coming."

"Hi." Clay paused to take off his jacket. "I hope I didn't interrupt anything, with Troy or—"

"No, no, Troy had already left by the time you texted. It's good."

Both of them hesitated, and Clay hated how stilted it felt. Before he could think of something to say, though, Jake gestured towards the couch.

"Sit down, I'll make us some tea."

Clay nodded and did just that, rubbing his hands on his thighs as he burrowed into the familiar cushions.

Then they had another awkward moment when Jake came back with the mugs and sat sideways on the other end of the couch, pulling his knees up to his chest. Clay busied himself with trying to drink tea that he knew was too hot, and from the looks of it, so did Jake. The silence stretched on.

"I'm sorry it took me so long," Clay finally started, ready to admit to his part of this mess. "I needed to think things through, and meanwhile other things happened, and it's been—a lot."

Jake straightened in his seat. "I'm sorry for what I said. I really am. I'm sorry for all of it. I didn't listen to what you were trying to tell me, and I should've. I was too focused on my own feelings." He grimaced. "I thought I was making progress, and I had been, kind of, but then this happened and I went back to being a self-centered jerk."

"Hey, don't do this," Clay chastised him. "I don't need you to call yourself names, and you don't need that, either. You've done a lot of work since we've been back."

"Yeah, well, I needed to do some more after our talk, that's for sure. Because that shitty dig about the job is merely a part of what I'm sorry for, okay? You told me you were trying to build your life anew and I didn't listen. I should've been cheering you on and giving you space, like you had done for me, and I failed at that. I'm sorry."

"Thanks, I appreciate it." Clay relaxed back into the cushions. "I could've been better at texting and all that, but it's not like I know what I'm doing, either, you know?"

Jake shook his head. "I didn't, that's the thing. I came to realize it afterwards, but... I expect you to always know the answers, always know what's best, even if I don't want to hear it. And that's not something I should expect from anyone! That's too much for any person to bear and it's a recipe for disaster."

Clay inhaled deeply as something started to slowly uncurl in his chest.

"Yeah, it's a recipe for disaster, but you're not the only one at fault, here. I've been expecting this from myself as well, and it's been messing with my head for a while now. Because I like being the guy with the answers. I like coming in and fixing things, and we both know I'm a control freak in some ways—"

"Some ways," Jake whispered, barely audible, but they both chuckled at that, and it cracked the tension in the room, allowing Clay to breathe in a little easier.

"Yeah, well. I appreciate a controlled environment. And we had that in Switzerland for a long time. I got used to it. I guess I forgot how many things I can't really control, so it's been an adjustment. Before you say it, yes, I'm glad we're back. I don't regret it, at all. It's simply that—an adjustment."

"I should've realized that just because things fell into place for me, it didn't mean they did for you," Jake said with a shake of his head. "You were telling me about it in different ways, but it didn't hit me until it was too late."

"To be fair, it didn't hit me, either, until I said it out loud. I was mostly focused on the job search for a while, and only once that was done, I started thinking about other things. Hell, I didn't start thinking more seriously about finding a partner until after—"meeting Mario.

Damn. Another thing Clay had figured out by talking out loud.

"After what?" Jake asked with a tilt of his head.

Clay cleared his throat and took a sip of his tea.

"I'll tell you later. Anyway, it didn't hit me for the longest time, either. All I knew was that I was floundering, and while I tried to do my best, things weren't clicking into place. Finding the job at KRK was actually the first real click, you know?"

"Yeah. The offer at Smithsonian was like that for me, too."

Clay nodded. "And once you got that, other things had slowly fallen into place. I hope it will be like that for me, too, but I'm not there yet. I'm making progress, but there's a lot still in the air and it needs my attention. I don't want you to feel like I'm neglecting you, but I also can't focus on you the way I could before."

"I understand," Jake said. "I really do, now. As your friend, I don't really want you to pause your entire life to be available for me, that's... That's awful, and I behaved like a jerk."

"We were both used to things being different," Clay offered. "And as good as it is to be back, it's also important to acknowledge that many things were easier, back then. Not better, but definitely easier."

Jake ran a hand through his hair. "I needed that for a while, but I don't need—or want—that now."

"Yeah. Same."

The quiet admission echoed inside Clay's head after he said it. He thought about his

family and the life he'd left behind when he'd followed Jake abroad. His brother had already hated him, his longest relationship recently ended, and there was no telling where the Secret Service would send him next, if he'd stayed.

He'd needed a change almost as much as Jake had, back then. But not anymore.

"I still don't think limiting our texts is the way to go, though," Jake said, pulling Clay back to here and now. "And not only for me, but for the both of us. I want to be your support system, too. That's how it's supposed to go, right? You're not a guy with all the answers and I'm not a needy man child anymore." He paused, making a face. "Well, most of the time."

"Stop that." Clay kicked him lightly. "But you're right about the rest. It's good for me, too. Erasing you from my life or replacing you was never my intention."

"It better not," Jake told him, but then grew serious again. "You could lean on me more, you know?"

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Clay took another sip of his tea to give himself a moment.

Fuck. He was a grown man, on his way towards forty. Why was it still so hard to let himself lean on someone?

Then he thought of that moment with Mario at the restaurant, the easy way Mario had taken over, and how good it felt.

"I'll try," Clay finally said, staring at his mug.

There was a stretch of silence, and then...

"Fine, I'll take that." Jake slid down until he was half-lying on the couch in a familiar way Clay had seen hundreds of times in the past. "Let's start now. Tell me everything that's been going on with you."

Oh, boy, that was going to take a while.

On the other hand, Clay had nowhere else to be.

He shifted into a more comfortable position.

"Okay, so..."

* * *

Clay hadn't planned on visiting his mom this week, but he was terrible at saying no to

her, so when she texted to invite him over for dinner Thursday night and he hadn't had anything planned, he agreed. Ben should be at work, which was a relief, especially since Mario was going to tell him about the two of them the next day. Angering Ben on the eve of that conversation wouldn't help matters at all, and Clay and Mario already needed all the luck they could get.

Luck didn't seem to be on Clay's side tonight, however, because as soon as Mom let Clay in, he saw Ben there, sitting on the couch in the living room.

"His boss made him cut his hours," she whispered as she tugged his jacket out of his hands as if he couldn't hang it himself. "Don't ask about work."

Great. There went the one topic that could bring up a whiff of a smile out of Ben while in his presence.

"Hi," Clay greeted him, and when Ben responded in kind but didn't even turn towards him, Clay followed his mom to the kitchen and moved to the sink to wash his hands.

"How is he doing? Did he have any problems?"

Clay had asked her the same thing in various texts throughout the week, and thankfully, the answers so far had all been the same—Ben was fine.

"No problems that I'm aware of," Mom said now, reaching for pasta in the cabinet next to the sink. She'd bribed Clay to come over tonight with her macaroni and cheese, one thing she knew he couldn't resist. "But he could be fainting every day and I wouldn't know."

"Hey, hey." Clay pulled her into a hug. She was only tall enough to fit under his chin for a long time now, but it hadn't always been the case. Clay remembered trying to comfort her as best he could after his and Ben's father had left, and she'd never said

no to a hug, not even when he was still shorter than her. "They said it happened because he was working too much," he reminded her as he inhaled the familiar scent of her mint shampoo. "And now they're regulating his hours. He's going to be fine."

She sagged into his arms. "I hope you're right. This boy doesn't know how to stop."

"That sounds like someone else I know," he teased, hoping to improve her mood a bit.

"Does it?" She pulled back to raise his eyebrows at him. "Is it you?"

He snorted. "It is not, and you know it. You've increased your shifts again, have you?"

She waved him off, turning back to the stove. "Temporarily. Nadine called in sick, and we're short-staffed as it is."

"Sure." He made his disbelief clear in his voice but let it go for now. She had cut her hours by a lot comparing to how much she'd used to work. The rest was her choice.

He pulled his phone out for a quick check as he took a seat at the table. He and Mario had been texting a lot, anything from random things at work to long discussions about the best shows on television in recent years. It had been nice, even when their opinions differed. Mario was quick and funny, and knew a bunch of trivia Clay had never even heard of.

"Put the damn thing away, Clay," his mom warned. "You know the rule."

No phones at the table unless you need to call 911. She'd come up with that the moment he and Ben had gotten theirs and nothing had changed over the years.

"We're not eating yet," he pointed out but put the phone away at the small shelf beneath the window sill right next to where he was sitting. He'd let Mario know earlier that he was coming here but hadn't received a response yet, so he wanted to keep it close. With any luck, he'd be able to check it from time to time without his mom knowing.

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"You're still at the table," she recited her part of the years-old argument with a sigh.
"Talk to your mother."

He told her about people at work and some of the more interesting stories—at least those appropriate for one's mother. Without thinking, he also shared that there was a big number of queer people at KRK, and she zeroed in on that right away.

"Oh? Anyone single, perhaps?"

She might have thought she sounded innocent, but Clay knew better.

"Don't go there, Mom. Wasn't it you who told us time and time again not to go searching for love at work?"

"And that's the one time you actually listen to me? Besides, where else are you going to find someone when you're always at work?"

To be fair, Clay had met Mario while they were both on the clock, but he wasn't going to admit it now.

He looked up at the sudden silence, belatedly realizing he hadn't responded to her. Now she was staring at him, eyebrows raised and a wooden spatula in her hand.

Fuck.

"Working hard is in our DNA, apparently," he tried, but he had to admit, it wasn't his best attempt at distracting her.

He was already screwed and he knew it.

"You've met someone." She didn't ask. She didn't have to. Somehow, she could always read him better than he'd prefer.

Lying now wouldn't get him very far anyway, so he nodded.

"We're in the early stages, still figuring things out."

Clay could see she wasn't convinced, but before she said anything else, Ben came in, which put a stop to that particular conversation.

They went through dinner without anyone storming off and Ben's jabs were few and far between, which Clay counted as a win. He kept catching his brother's glances, though, so he wondered what that was about. He debated asking after they were done eating, but Mom needed him to check out a box she'd found in the garage, so he followed her out.

It turned out to be his high school mementos, stuff he'd thought was long gone. He put it in the passenger seat of his car, intending to sort through it at home, and headed back towards the house.

He paused when Ben stormed out of it.

"What's—" he started, heartbeat already going up as he pictured something happening to their mom. He stopped when Ben shoved his phone at him.

"Mario?!" He shouted as Clay tumbled to catch his phone before it fell—the phone he'd forgotten from the kitchen. "You're sleeping with Mario?" Ben gritted through his teeth now, maybe remembering they were outside.

Fuck. Fuck it all to hell.

Clay searched for something to say, but Ben wasn't interested in waiting.

"I thought it was my phone going off so I took it out and what do I see when I glance at the screen?" Ben waived his hands around. "Mario's texts. Only nothing like the texts he sends me." He snorted without humor. "I can't believe this."

Clay slid his phone into his pocket without checking.

"Let's get inside and—"

"No," Ben cut him off and actually shoulder-checked him on his way to his car. "I have nothing to say to you."

"Come on, it's not—" Clay tried again, and Ben whirled around.

"Are you really going to tell me it's not what it looks like? Huh?" he growled and Clay resisted to take a step back. At this point he hoped it wouldn't come to blows, but he was starting to get frustrated as well. "Tell me," Ben insisted. "Are you going to deny you're fucking my best friend?"

Clay clenched his jaw, because anything he could say would escalate the situation further. He narrowed his eyes and counted to ten in his head.

"That's what I thought." Ben stepped back and headed to his car. "That's what I fucking thought."

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Clay watched him get behind the wheel and pull out of his spot too fast, barely avoiding rear-ending Clay's car. There was no doubt about where he was going.

Damn it. Clay closed his eyes for a second and breathed in and out, then slowly pulled out his phone. When he turned around, he saw his mother there, standing on the porch. As he met her gaze, she shook her head before tilting it towards the house.

She clearly had some things to tell him about himself.

He nodded even as his shoulders slumped. He was going to follow her inside, but first, he had a call to make.

He hit Mario's number.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

There went all the best-laid plans, Mario thought as he stared at the phone in his hand.

Clay had just given him the heads up about Ben, and now Mario couldn't get himself to move. He stayed on the couch, with his elbows on his knees, waiting for the inevitable.

He'd seen Ben angry numerous times, but rarely angry at him and never to the degree Clay had described. Usually, Mario would help Ben calm down—either by ranting with him if he was pissed off as well, or by listening to him go off until Ben had enough.

This time, though, neither was going to work.

Mario rubbed his hand over his face. They shouldn't have waited. He shouldn't have waited. He should've told Ben about Clay way sooner. It wouldn't have been pretty, sure, but it would've still been better than the shitshow that was happening right now.

It was a struggle to get up, but he finally dragged himself to Roberto's room, warning him to put his headphones on if he didn't want to be an accidental witness to his fight with Ben.

"You're going to have a fight—" Roberto sounded disbelieving, but whatever he saw on Mario's face shut him up. "Never mind. I'll put them on, so come straight in later, if you want to talk."

Mario gave him what had to be the weakest excuse for a smile he'd ever managed and muttered thanks before closing the door again.

All he could do was wait, now.

He busied himself with cleaning the kitchen, but there was only so many times he could polish the counter before he risked destroying it.

Finally, the intercom buzzed.

"It's me," was all Ben said, but Mario knew that tone. All the best case scenarios took a hike right then and there.

He hovered at the door as he waited for his friend to come up and then opened it as soon as he heard him.

"Come in," he said quietly, but from the way Ben walked past him, the invitation

wasn't needed.

Sighing, Mario closed the door before following him to the living room and perching on the edge of the couch. Ben was pacing back and forth in front of the TV.

Mario waited for him to speak first, and he didn't have to wait long.

"What the fuck? What the actual fuck, Mario? How—" Ben ran both hands through his hair. "I can't believe this."

"I was going to tell you tomorrow," Mario offered.

Ben snorted. "Yeah, I figured. But it obviously hadn't just happened yesterday, so, enlighten me. How the fuck did that even start?"

"I saw him at work." Mario sat back, keeping his gaze on Ben. "I got assigned to show the security team for the upcoming gala around, and it turned out Clay was on that team. We met at the museum a couple of times, then agreed to grab drinks. Things kind of... spiraled from there."

"That sounds nice." Ben's tone was mocking. "Really. One for the books. It's a shame it includes lying to me and—"

"I didn't lie!" Mario protested. "I knew you weren't going to be happy about this, so I wanted to wait until there was something real to tell you, something solid."

Ben paused and looked at him as if he was the stupidest person to ever live.

"Solid? You've seen him a few times—probably fucked him a few times, too—and now it's solid? Please."

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Mario's nostrils flared as his own anger woke up somewhere deep inside.

"It's new, yes, but it's not a one-night stand, either. It's different."

"It's different. Oh, God." Ben flopped on the chair by the other side of the couch.

"You always say it, you know. It's always 'this time's going to be different' with you."

That hit harder than Mario expected it to. He was bracing himself for the attacks on Clay and for anger over the secrecy, but Ben went right to where it hurt.

Mario swallowed hard against the lump in his throat.

"Maybe I always say it, but it doesn't change the situation right now." He fought to keep his voice even. "We both want to give this relationship a real shot."

Ben stared at him. "A—A relationship? Forget keeping it a secret. You went and started a relationship with my damn brother of all people, and what? I'm supposed to be happy for you?" He snorted again. "To hell with everything else, huh?"

"It would be nice if you were happy for me, but I knew—we both knew—that you wouldn't be a fan of the idea. Hopefully," Mario added before Ben could say anything else, "you'll change your mind one day."

"Yeah, don't hold your breath." Ben sprang from his seat and started pacing again. "I can't believe this. I can't believe you."

Mario tangled his fingers in his lap.

"I like him," he admitted quietly before looking up to catch Ben's gaze again. "I like him a lot. I know you and him have your issues, and I'm not—"

"He's an asshole. Why do you always go for the assholes?"

Mario tightened the grip on his hands. "Clay's not an asshole."

"Oh, here we go." Ben waved his hands. "Revisionist history starts now."

"Listen, I'm not saying he's some perfect guy, okay? I'm not saying you can't be upset with him about stuff. I'm only saying he's not an asshole."

"To you, maybe," Ben said, and it sounded like an accusation.

Mario nodded. "To me, yes, but also to your mother, and you, and—"

"Are you out of your mind? Is he that good of a lay that the last decade and a half went puff, and disappeared from your memory?" Ben huffed. "Unbelievable."

He's hurt, Mario told himself. He's hurt and he's lashing out, and you knew it was going to happen.

"I didn't forget," he said out loud. "We just saw it differently—"

"Apparently!"

"—and you know this," Mario went on despite the interruption. "At least you knew it, back then, because you seem to have forgotten it over the years."

"What, you mean you defending him when we were teenagers? I thought that was your crush talking! You were basically building shrines for the guy back then!"

Mario could feel his face heat, but he couldn't deny that part.

"Yeah, maybe, but that doesn't mean I was completely clueless." He lifted his hands in a peaceful gesture. "Again, you don't need to like him, or want to hang out with him, or whatever. I hope you may want to, one day, but probably not anytime soon. As far as I'm concerned, though, I met the guy that I really like and we seem to fit well together. And yes, it's your brother, but that doesn't change—"

"If you tell me it doesn't change things, I swear to God..." Ben curled his hands into fists.

"It doesn't change how I feel about him, and it doesn't change how I feel about you and me," Mario said. "You've been my best friend most of my life, and it's not going to change. Ever."

Ben would never admit out loud he had abandonment issues, but Mario hadn't exaggerated a thing about their long history, which meant he knew how scared of being left behind Ben really was.

Luckily, Mario had no intention of going anywhere.

And yet his words, designed to reassure Ben, seemed to have an opposite effect.

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"Sure, yeah." Ben snorted. "You're sleeping with the guy I can't stand, and yet you still want us to go on like nothing happened?"

Mario rubbed his forehead.

"Please, listen to me. Whatever happens between me and Clay has nothing to do with you. And it's the other way around, too. What's between me and you has nothing to do with Clay."

"That's not how it works!" Ben shouted before pressing his mouth shut for a bit, visibly fighting to calm himself down. "You can't draw lines in the sand in whatever way you wish. 'Yeah, sure, the guy's been an asshole to you, but that's fine, because the fact that I choose to sleep with him has nothing to do with you.' Unbelievable." He clenched his jaw. "I wonder if you'd feel the same if I announced I'm suddenly buddies with Kevin the Dick."

Kevin was the worst of Mario's exes, one who had been cheating on him throughout their entire relationship and then laughed about it behind Mario's back. Ben had been the one to give him that nickname, but apparently had no problem throwing him in Mario's face now.

Fuck you, Mario wanted to say, but on the other hand, he really, really didn't. It would just go downhill from there.

"That's not the same thing," he said slowly, curling his hands together again.

"That's exactly—"

"No!"

Mario was the one who raised his voice this time and it seemed to shock Ben into silence. Out of the two of them, Mario was always the calm one.

Well, not anymore.

He stood up. "That's not the same at all. Kevin was a lying, cheating bastard who made a mockery out of me. He's an asshole and you always thought so, even before I did. Clay's a good, honest guy, who—"

"Who left!" Ben shouted, the tension in the room shattering into pieces.

"Yeah," Mario said quietly, dropping back onto the couch. "Yeah, he did leave. He took a job and left for a long time, and I get that you didn't want him to go—"

"He chose to go—"

"—but he's not your father."

The silence that fell was louder than any screams, and Mario's stomach clenched tight as he stared at Ben who seemed frozen in place, but there was no going back now.

It had been long-time coming, anyway.

"Your father was the asshole who left and didn't look back," Mario went on. "Clay had taken it upon himself to make it right and help out. From the moment he could, he'd started working as much as he was able to, because he'd known your mother would work herself to the ground otherwise. And yeah, it sucked that he wasn't around so much, I get it. One day he was there a lot, and then he was only there when he needed to take you—us—somewhere or to drive us home. That was tough. But he

wasn't out there partying and having a great time without you. He was either working or babysitting us, with practically no time to do anything else. Then he was home less and less, and then he packed up and moved overseas, which sucked even more. But, once again, he didn't do it to backpack his way through Europe or whatever. He was working. He'd been working all this time."

Ben was silent throughout Mario's speech and now shoved his hands into his pockets before half-turning towards the window.

"He told you all that?" he finally asked, sounding more tired than angry at this point. "That's the story he's going with?"

Mario slumped against the cushions.

"He didn't tell me any of this. Not back then and not now. But I watched him. Like you said, I had a crush, so I watched him, and I tried to talk to you about it, but you were so angry at him by then that you didn't want to listen." Exactly like you're doing right now, he thought but didn't say. "He's made choices that you may not like, but he's never abandoned you or your mom. He's been supporting you through all these years—"

"Okay, now you're just reaching," Ben interrupted, turning to face him again. "I know he'd helped Mom over the years, but it's not like—"

"Who do you think paid for your school?"

That was a low-blow, something Mario hadn't wanted to ever use, but, on the other hand, maybe he should've done it years ago.

Ben froze. "What?"

"You heard me." Mario leaned forward to rest his elbows on his thighs without taking his gaze off of Ben. "Who do you think paid for your medical school?"

"I had a... My mom had a college fund set up..." Ben didn't seem so sure any longer, more like he'd taken a hit to the head and tried to get back to the reality.

"What little she had, it wouldn't have put you through the undergrad, let alone the rest, even with your scholarship."

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"How do you know that?" Ben demanded.

Mario sighed. "I overheard her once, by accident."

It had been years ago, when he'd been leaving Ben's house late one night and walked carefully in order not to wake Ben's mom up. She wasn't asleep, though. She was on the phone with Clay, arguing with him about the money.

She noticed Mario right away, because he was too surprised to be careful, but it was already too late for him to unlearn this. And so she'd told him the rest—that Clay had been largely responsible for Ben's college fund but made her swear to never mention it to Ben.

Only now did Mario realize that maybe she'd shared it with him so willingly, because she thought he would be the one to tell Ben about it.

Well, he told him now.

The silence stretched for a long time, and then, Ben turned to the door.

"I need to go."

Mario stood up at that. "Wait—"

"I can't." Ben shook his head and barely glanced at Mario as he passed him. "I can't talk to you right now. I need to go."

And so Mario watched him leave, not knowing what else to do.

What could he hope for, now? That it wasn't the end? That the truth wasn't what messed this whole thing up beyond fixing? That—

He swallowed hard, pressing his hands against his eyes.

All he could hope for was a miracle, really.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

After calling Mario to let him know Ben was likely on his way to him, Clay didn't give himself time to think.

Mario was about to face the music for them both, so the least Clay could do was to go talk to his mother.

As he finally reentered the house, he found her in the kitchen, cleaning after dinner.

She shook her head when he offered to help.

"Sit down and talk to me, how about that?" She glanced over her shoulder. "And start from the beginning."

So he did. He told her about meeting Mario at the museum and reconnecting with him. He admitted it was turning into something serious, since she always worried about him being alone.

"You sure?" she asked, by then sitting on the opposite side of the table, two steaming mugs between them. "Because this is a hell of a risk to take for a maybe."

Clay stared at his tea for a long moment before meeting her gaze again.

"As sure as I can be, at this point. It's not like I'm picking out rings or anything, we're just getting started. But we both want to make it work, so I hope it turns out okay. After the dust settles, at least," he added, gesturing towards the window to indicate Ben storming off.

"You should've told him."

Clay nodded. "Mario was supposed to do that tomorrow. We didn't expect... this."

"Of course you didn't," she muttered. "Listen, if this works out, I'll be very happy for you. I've wanted you to find someone wonderful, and Lord knows Mario's high up there with the best of the best. But you need to be careful, because Ben and Mario? These two are like..." She sighed. "These two are thick as thieves, willing to go to bat for each other, no matter what. Coming between them—"

"I'm not coming between them," Clay protested, ignoring how that slight pause in her speech hit him right in the stomach. Like brothers. That was what she was about to say, he'd bet money on it. "I'm not trying to put a wedge between them, I'm not asking anyone to choose, or whatever you think is going on. I fell for the guy, I can't undo it because it might inconvenience my brother."

She watched him with her head tilted to the side, in that particular way of hers when she was trying to figure something out.

Finally, she nodded.

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"No, you can't."

That made him blink. "Huh?"

"You're right." She reached out to put a hand on top of his. "You can't keep making sacrifices for your brother."

He inhaled sharply. "That's—"

"You need to listen to me," she cut him off. "You don't owe him your life. You don't owe anyone your life. I'm sorry I've put you in a position—"

"No! Stop that. You didn't put me anywhere."

"You took on too much too early—"

"Mom," he interrupted again. "Everything I did was my choice, okay? Let it go." He didn't want to get into it with her, ever, so he decided to redirect with a distraction. "Besides, we're all adults now, I'm back stateside, and I'm dating a cute guy. Everything's good."

He offered her a smile that made her roll her eyes, but she still patted his hand.

"Mario has to be over the moon." Her smile grew bigger. "That boy could never take his eyes off of you."

"Wait, what?" Clay frowned. "When?"

She gave him a look clearly stating she thought he was clueless.

"Please. Don't tell me you were the one person who didn't notice Mario had had the biggest crush on you ever since he was a kid."

Clay stared at her, trying to make sense of what she was telling him as he recalled his memories of Mario from back then. He remembered him always being around, but that was because Ben and Mario were inseparable. And sure, Clay caught Mario watching him more than once, but that could've been—

Well. Apparently not.

"Oh."

"'Oh', he says." His mom snorted. "You're hopeless."

He shrugged, sheepish. "I've been told."

Mario had been harboring a crush on him all those years ago.

Clay would need some time to get used to the idea, but it wasn't like he hated it or anything. It was just... unexpected. Clay had been a mess back then, between school, and work, and trying to help out with Ben's care. He hadn't been any type of a catch, even—or especially—for a teenager.

"So, be careful, okay?" his mom went on. "It's not only about Ben, but Mario as well."

"I don't want to hurt anyone, Mom." Clay leaned harder against the table. "I simply want to—"live my life. Be happy. Stop worrying about everyone else first.

All of the above, if he was lucky.

And maybe something translated onto his face, because she slumped in her seat and hung her head for a second.

"I did it again, didn't I?" she said when she met his gaze again. "Here I am, telling you not to put Ben, or anyone, really, ahead of you and to start living for yourself, and then I turn around and tell you to do the opposite. I'm sorry."

"It's fine."

"It's not fine." She slid her hand over his and held on. "I want you to be happy. And if you think you can be happy with Mario, I'm glad for the two of you."

He turned his palm around and caught her hand in his. "Thanks, Mom."

They sat there in silence for a minute, and Clay looked out towards the window again, wondering what was happening back at Mario's.

Various what-ifs flew through his head, one more depressing than the other. Before tonight, he'd figured that Ben and Mario would get through this fairly unscathed, but now...

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What if Ben forced Mario to choose?

Suddenly, Clay's stomach felt so heavy he wasn't sure he'd be able to stand up.

"They're grown men," his mom said quietly, drawing his attention. "Hopefully, Ben remembers that."

Yeah, Clay thought, turning away again. Hopefully.

* * *

His tea was cold by the time Mario called. Clay couldn't pick up fast enough and this time, his mom didn't say anything about phones at the table. She stared at him instead, waiting.

"Hey, how did it go?"

Mario sighed, which made Clay wince.

"It wasn't pretty, but I guess it could've gone worse, too. There was a lot of shouting at the beginning, but we managed to have a normal conversation at the end there. I might have been too honest, though."

Clay frowned. "Oh?"

"I said a few things that were a long time coming and now they're finally out there."

"I hope I didn't—"

"This was between me and Ben," Mario told him. "I should've said some things a while ago and I was correcting my mistake. He left, and I think it will take him a while to digest it, but... At least he heard me out."

"Any idea where he went to?" Clay asked.

"Probably home, but I'm not sure." Mario paused, and then, "God, it was awful."

At the sound of Mario's voice on the brink of breaking, Clay stood up from the table and went outside onto the porch.

"I'm sorry," he offered quietly, resting his weight against the railing.

"I'm sorry, too," Mario whispered. "I hate fighting with him, it feels... wrong. But it needed to happen, as awful as that sounds."

"I wish—" Clay paused, not sure how to finish that. He could take the blame, like always, or he could just... "I wish I could help you feel better."

There. That felt right.

"You still at the house?" Mario asked, a shadow of a smile in his voice.

"Yeah, I wanted to be here in case... Well, in case he came back and wanted to talk." Clay shrugged. "It won't do much good, but it's all I have."

"It may work, when he's ready to see everything that you're doing. And have done." There was something soft in Mario's voice, as if he was hesitating, but then he said, "Once you leave there, my door is open."

Clay closed his eyes, wishing he was with Mario right now.

"You sure? Because it may be late—"

"We can survive a late night, old man," Mario said, and the tease made his voice sound happier. "It won't kill us."

"Okay. That's—I'd love that."

"Good." Mario was obviously smiling now. "Let me know when, okay?"

"I will."

For a while, they listened to each other breathe, not saying anything but also not wanting to get off the phone.

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Somehow, that simple contact went a long way to soothe Clay's nerves. There was no telling how this thing with Ben was going to shake out, but Clay still had this, right here.

And he was going to do his best to keep it.

Then, he heard a familiar engine and straightened up.

"He's here. I'll call you as soon as I can, okay?"

"Good luck."

Clay disconnected and put his phone away, feeling his heartbeat pick up as he watched his brother park the car. Was he being confrontational, waiting for Ben like this? Should he have given him space instead of sticking around? Something had told him he should stay and wait, but were his instincts ever correct when it came to his brother?

Ben didn't meet his gaze as he came up the driveway, so Clay leaned back against the railing and rested his hands over it to appear as not-threatening as possible.

No training had prepared him for confrontations with his own brother and none ever could, but he would use whatever he had.

Finally, Ben walked up onto the porch and turned to Clay. For a moment, neither of them spoke and the air was heavy with the weight of everything they weren't saying.

And then...

"Were you the one who paid for my school?"

Clay hadn't expected that, and it had taken him a back enough that all he managed in response was a weak, "What?"

"Were you. The one. Who paid. For my school?" Ben repeated the question through his clenched teeth as he crossed his arms against his chest.

There was barely a few feet of space between them, and yet it felt like a mile.

"I sent Mom money throughout the years—" Clay started, but Ben shook his head.

"You can't even give me one straight answer, can you?"

Clay crossed his arms over his chest as well. He'd never wanted this to come up, but he guessed it was too late now.

"Fine. Yes, I was."

"And you didn't think I should know about this?"

"Honestly? No," Clay told him, suddenly tired. He would never have the right answer for Ben anyway, so why bother? "I thought it would be better if you didn't know."

"Wow," Ben muttered.

"Would you have accepted it, if you knew?" Clay asked and the silence that fell was an answer in itself. "That's why," he added quietly.

"So it's my fault you were lying to me?"

And what was the right answer to that? Yes? No? How about you accept at least partial responsibility for how things are between us, instead of always putting it all on me?

"I didn't want you to know, because I wanted you to use that money," Clay said in the end. "That's it."

"What else are you not telling me?" Ben narrowed his eyes. "The money, Mario, what else?"

There were many things he could say to that, but most would escalate the situation even further, which Clay desperately tried to avoid.

He apparently stayed silent too long for his brother's liking, though, because Ben huffed and looked down the street before meeting his gaze.

"It's like I don't know you at all."

The words hit hard—exactly like they were intended to—but Clay didn't dodge them. They were true, after all, weren't they?

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He watched Ben turn around and disappear inside the house, and all he could think of was that it went both ways.

It wasn't a shock, with their history, but it still hurt.

He dragged himself to the car and drove off.

CHAPTER TWENTY

One glance at Clay when he arrived was enough for Mario to pull him into a hug and drop a kiss onto his jaw. Clay leaned into the embrace, circled his arms around Mario's waist, and held on, his head resting heavily on Mario's shoulder.

Any hope that the reality check Mario had served Ben earlier would change anything between the brothers for the better had been in vain, apparently.

They stood like this for who knew how long, and when they parted, Mario did it with a heavy heart as the entire evening hit him with full force.

"Come to bed," he said quietly, tugging at Clay's hand. Earlier, he'd thought that maybe they'd talk, but he was all out of words, and from the looks of it, so was Clay, who followed him without protest.

It wasn't about sex but about the need to be close, to comfort each other. They shed their clothes quickly and lay down, pressed together, with Clay's chest against Mario's back and their legs tangled.

Within minutes, their breathing fell into the same rhythm.

Mario couldn't tell when he fell asleep, but the next time he opened his eyes, there was light coming from outside, barely breaking into dawn. Clay was still behind him, tucked against his body, his arm around Mario's waist a welcomed, comforting weight.

It was incredible how quickly, how easily Mario had grown used to sleeping with Clay. Going to bed alone wasn't the same anymore, as if his body had recognized what was best and didn't want to settle for less any longer.

Now, he let himself enjoy this feeling for a little bit, half-awake and half-asleep, but then the memories of last night came rushing back, his fight with Ben replaying itself in flashes, and Mario knew his peace was over.

He slowly rolled to face Clay, hoping he wouldn't disturb him, but Clay opened his eyes right away.

"Sorry," Mario whispered. "Didn't mean to wake you."

Clay glanced behind him towards the window and back.

"S okay," he murmured, his voice low and a bit raspy. "My alarm would've done it soon, anyway, in a much less pleasant way." He ran a hand over Mario's side. "How are you feeling?"

Mario pressed his face into Clay's neck and inhaled deeply, catching the already familiar scent of him.

"That bad, huh?" Clay whispered before kissing the top of Mario's head.

Mario hummed something close to an agreement, sneaked his arms around Clay's waist, and snuggled closer. A part of him recognized that they were both almost naked and it would be easy to turn this into sex, but he needed closeness and reassurance more than he needed an orgasm.

And it seemed he wasn't the only one.

"Yeah," Clay breathed out, as if he was hearing Mario's thoughts, or maybe answering his own question. Whichever it was, they stayed like that for a while longer, and Mario tried to quiet his overactive brain, but it didn't work.

"I don't know what to do now," he whispered into the small, damp space of the crook of Clay's neck, where his beard gave way to smooth skin.

Clay ran a hand between Mario's shoulder blades back and forth in a slow caress.

"It's going to be fine between you two," he murmured. "Maybe not today, but it will."

Mario had thought that, too, before last night. Now, he wasn't so sure.

"How?"

Clay sighed. "I don't know. But it's you two, so you'll figure it out. No one knows him like you do."

"Well, we both said things last night..." Mario trailed off, not sure how to finish the sentence.

Yeah, they hurt each other, but neither of them had said anything unforgivable, had they?

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"I'm sure you did." Clay's thumb was running little circles at the top of Mario's spine. "But whatever had been said, you're still best friends. You're like f—"

Maybe if Mario wasn't so close, he wouldn't have caught that stutter in Clay's breath. But he did. He heard it, along with the hurt underneath it Clay was still trying to hide.

However, before Mario could react, Clay continued.

"You're closer than family, for him. That counts for a lot."

Mario sucked in his lower lip. "Maybe."

"You'll see."

"You're his family, too," Mario whispered, needing to reassure Clay as well, but his words fell flat.

"It's different," Clay said after a while. "You've been here for all these years, and I wasn't. No matter the reasons, good or bad, I wasn't here, and I can't change that. I thought we could meet each other on a different level once we were both grown men, but..." He breathed out slowly. "I wish I understood how I became the bad guy of his story, but I can't pinpoint it. At first, I thought he was acting out because of our father and because he was simply a teenager, but people grow out of their teenage anger, most of the time. His anger towards me seemed to have gotten bigger, instead."

Mario hesitated, once again unsure how much he should or shouldn't say. Finally, he decided he wasn't breaking any confidences if he nudged Clay a little.

He propped himself up on his elbow, leaning against Clay, who rolled onto his back.

"I think you're looking at the reasons, but not seeing them right." Mario pressed his hand over Clay's heart. "It was mainly because of your father, back then, but it was easier to take it out on you, who stayed and who made him do stuff. And then he was having less and less of you, until you left. Logically, there's an explanation, of course. You needed to work, and you needed to have your own life, too, but for Ben..."

"The only thing that counts is that I left," Clay murmured, staring at the ceiling, and Mario wished that was the end of it—it was more than enough, after all.

Yet there was still a crucial part Clay was missing.

"That was the biggest one, yes," Mario told him. "But it did matter that you left with Jake."

Clay dropped the arm he'd lifted to rub his nose back onto the mattress with a dull thud.

"Why? I don't get it! They hadn't even met and he hates Jake's guts."

"Yeah," Mario whispered. "Because Jake got what Ben wanted. You."

Clay froze and for a long while it seemed like he wasn't even breathing.

Then, he gently disentangled Mario and sat up against the headboard, still appearing shell-shocked.

"So it's not..." He stared at the opposite wall. "So it's not just that I left, like our father, but I also found himself another little brother? Is that what he thinks?"

Mario bit his lip, sitting up with his legs crossed next to Clay.

It had felt like a good idea, earlier, but now, watching the man he cared about struggling with the truth, made him question everything.

Too late now, though.

"I'm not sure he's aware of it," Mario said quietly. "But that's what's underneath all that anger, yeah. He doesn't really hate you, whether he realizes it or not. Mostly, he's acting out because he feels like he lost his brother and he's been missing him a lot."

Clay moved as if he'd been hit, his shoulders rolling forward.

"Fuck," he muttered, covering his eyes with his hand and pressing his fingers over them. "Fuck."

Mario shifted closer until he was sitting up against the headboard next to Clay, their bodies pressed together.

"It sucks," he offered, putting his hand on Clay's knee and squeezing gently.

Clay snorted wetly, but covered Mario's hand with his.

"Yeah, it does. It explains things, though, so I'm glad you told me. Thank you."

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Mario shook his head, ready to dismiss it, but Clay didn't let him.

"Seriously, thank you. And also? While the Ben thing definitely sucks, this—" he indicated between them "—is up there with the absolute best things that happened to me in a long time."

Mario beamed at him.

"I agree." He leaned in for a kiss. "The absolute best."

He pulled back to rest his forehead against Clay's and closed his eyes. He had no idea how they were going to sort out this mess, but he couldn't lose either of the Jackson brothers.

He wouldn't.

The rest... The rest would have to figure itself out.

* * *

Fridays could be a drag to get through at work, since everyone wanted to start the weekend already, but this one was among the slowest ones Mario could remember.

He went through the motions with all his tasks, sent Ben a text with an offer to talk whenever he was ready, and even managed to muster up some enthusiasm for a school trip group that was testing the trivia game his team had been working on.

And yet, when he checked the time afterwards, it turned out to be barely eleven thirty.

By the time he met up with Andie for lunch, he was ready to crawl out of his skin.

"What's with you today?" she finally asked, when he couldn't stop fidgeting in his chair.

"Friday," he told her, not wanting to get into the whole Ben mess. "I want the weekend to get here already."

"From your lips..." Andie saluted him with her cup. "Any exciting plans?"

"Clay has the gala tonight, but we'll see each other tomorrow."

"Lucky you." Andie smiled. "This guy of yours sounds seriously dreamy."

That made him grin. "Can't argue with that."

"You should bring him with you on Monday at some point."

Mario raised his eyebrows. Hardly anyone was ever invited to their Monday outings since the three of them wanted to have some dedicated time for each other.

It felt good that at least some of his friends were giving Clay a chance.

"What will Carina say?" he asked to distract himself.

Andie shrugged. "She'll grumble beforehand, but she knows it's the best chance for us to get to know him and make sure he's good for you."

"Trust me, he's good for me."

"He seems to be," Andie admitted. "But friends' approval can't hurt, can it?"

Ouch.

He tried to hide a wince, but she caught it. "What is it?"

"Nothing, don't worry about it. I'm actually quite worried you'll team up against me."

She was clearly unconvinced about his misdirection, but let them move on to her weekend plans, which included a pottery lesson, a protest, and a friend's wedding.

By the time their break was over, he'd forgotten about his bad mood, at least temporarily. It made it easier to get back to work now, even if he was still counting down the hours.

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Finally, the time had come. He left the office quickly and as he walked through the corridors, he caught glimpses of the gala preparations but, unfortunately, no Clay.

Then, when Mario was almost by the exit door, he saw him.

Clay was standing in a group of other guys in formal wear, but Mario didn't care about any of them. What he cared about was Clay and how good—how absolutely drop-deadgorgeous—he looked in his tuxedo.

Mario had thought he'd be prepared, after regularly seeing Clay in suits, but no. Definitely not.

He didn't realize that he'd paused in his tracks completely until he heard Andie's laugh next to him. Before he could turn to her, though, the group of men dispersed and Clay glanced up, meeting his gaze right away.

Mario wasn't going anywhere now.

He wasn't even sure he could if he tried, since apparently the "weak at the knees" expression was more literal than he'd thought.

Then Clay started walking towards him and, somehow, Mario found himself meeting him half-way, dragging him behind the gigantic roll-up banner, away from view.

"Hello to you, too," Clay teased but Mario simply stared, trying and failing to take this absolutevisionin.

"No, you don't understand." He raised his hands to run them over the lapels, but he hesitated right before he was about to touch. "You look. God."

Clay leaned closer, the movement enough for Mario's hands to land when he desperately wanted them to. The smooth texture of satin under his palms was nothing compared to what he'd thought about the body underneath it.

"I'm glad you approve," Clay murmured right against his ear, and Mario shivered, closing his eyes.

They were in public. Anyone could appear any moment now and—

And he didn't care.

He tilted his head and caught Clay's lips in a kiss that should've been a peck, a brief hello, but Mario couldn't help himself. He licked into Clay's mouth, drew his teeth along Clay's lower lip, and did his best to convey all his frustrated desires in those thirty second he allowed himself to have.

Judging from the strength of Clay's grip on Mario's hips and the way Clay's gaze immediately dropped to his mouth when they parted, he definitely got Mario's message loud and clear.

"The things I'd do to you if we were alone," Clay whispered before closing his eyes and shaking his head.

Mario barely resisted the urge to drag him somewhere private and demand he did all those things to Mario's more-than-willing bodyright now.

Sadly, only one of them wasn't on the clock anymore.

"Tomorrow," Clay told him, and it sounded both like a promise to Mario and a way to convince himself to pull back.

They stepped away from each other and Mario shoved his hands in his pockets in order not to reach out again.

He nodded. "Tomorrow."

Watching Clay walk away was a particular kind of torture.

Tomorrow. Mario could make it this far.

But no longer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

As it turned out, securing political galas was like riding a bike. He'd done enough of them back in the Secret Service to have a feel of them down pat.

Which was good, because after the emotional roller coaster from yesterday, he was trying to be at his best but felt far from it.

"We've got this." Martinez clapped him on the shoulder as they met up in the middle of the evening for a quick sit-rep. "Relax a bit before steam comes out of your ears, would you?"

The man talked a big game but didn't seem particularly relaxed himself. On the job, Martinez was far from the happy go-lucky guy Clay had gotten used to. He was focused and mostly quiet, offering bits of colorful commentary on some of the guests merely a few times throughout the night on the private comm channel with Clay and Eddie.

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"Don't worry about me, worry about Jeremy," Clay said dryly. "He looks like he's going to murder somebody before the night is over."

Martinez smirked. "I reminded him we'd be tasked with taking him down if he tried anything and that wouldn't end well."

"Who do you think would be more pissed, Pascal or Kalei?"

"It would be Jeremy's funeral either way, and he knows it."

Clay hummed in agreement, although he hadn't had a chance to meet Pascal officially yet. He'd heard a lot about him by now, but mostly through the good-natured ribbing Martinez was constantly giving Jeremy.

The atmosphere at KRK resembled the best parts of being in the Secret Service—the camaraderie, joking around, having each other's back—and Clay found working with these people almost too easy at times. He'd spent the majority of his time so far with Martinez, but since the guy seemed especially skilled at bringing people together, Clay got to know Jeremy better, too, as well as James and his work partner Ryan, among others. He also hung out at the comm center with Eddie a bit, which made James watch him warily.

Maybe James was finally getting a clue, like Martinez hoped when he'd given Clay that rundown of who's lusting after who at the company.

Now, the two of them continued their back-and-forth as they moved to their new positions. Clay was going to be out there, canvassing the crowd, and Martinez would

be in the security office, watching the party through the feeds of various cameras and coordinating through the channels with the rest of their team. For the last few hours, it had been the other way around.

Wandering around, Clay kept to the sidelines for the most part, taking in the crowd and the murmurs of conversations, looking for anything that suggested trouble.

The evening was going smoothly, though. The atmosphere was joyful, as if the success of the education bill finally passing and being signed into law have put everyone in a great mood.

Even the speeches were more interesting than the usual ones Clay had been forced to hear numerous times in the past. He briefly wondered if Troy had written any of them, but he dismissed the idea. Troy had done a lot for the bill as it was—Clay wouldn't be surprised if he was here, frankly, celebrating the success, but maybe making the public appearance like that was the line he didn't want to cross.

Pascal's speech was the best one, in Clay's opinion, enough so that even Martinez held back any commentary in his earpiece throughout the whole thing. Clay couldn't join in the applause, of course, but he still appreciated the well-crafted and brief speech, and he was looking forward to meeting Pascal even more now.

A few hours later, when the party was over and the team tied up everything they needed to, they all dispersed, leaving for the night—and for the weekend. Since there had been no incident worth noting, they agreed to debrief early on Monday before the company-wide meeting. Martinez needed to get back to the headquarters to drop off all the equipment, but he waved off Clay's offer to go with him.

With the adrenaline buzzing inside him, making it hard to focus on any one thing, it still took Clay a while to even start the car to head out, but as he drove through the empty streets, he felt the tension leak out of him slowly, replaced by the deep

satisfaction of a job well done.

Tonight went as good as it could have, which was perfect for the first assignment at the new job.

Now, he was free to enjoy his weekend—and with another date with Mario scheduled for tomorrow night, Clay planned to enjoy it thoroughly.

* * *

Someone was going to die.

Clay had gone to bed around four in the morning, and now someone was out there, abusing his intercom by leaning on it without a break.

He almost fell off the bed as he got up, but he managed to stumble through the hall towards the door in one piece. A glance at the clock told him it was eight thirty.

On a Saturday morning. What the fuck.

"What?" he growled through the speaker, rubbing the sleep through his eyes. He'd be embarrassed later, but right now, he didn't care. Whoever it was, deserved the attitude.

"It's me," came through the speaker and Clay froze. "Ben. Open up, will you?"

Clay pulled himself up to his full weight. This, he did not expect.

He buzzed his brother in and unlocked the door as he went to the kitchen to make himself tea. He might be wide awake now, but he definitely wasn't at his best, so he needed a boost. With the kettle on, he returned right in time to hear a knock.

Running a hand through his hair, he took a deep breath. There was no use dragging it out, was there?

He opened the door.

Ben had his backpack with him and a big cup of coffee in hand. He looked pretty tired, so he was likely coming here right from the hospital.

Or not. It was eight thirty on a Saturday morning, after all. Who wouldn't need a little help with staying awake?

Clay moved to the side and gestured him in without a word, but Ben hesitated.

"You alone?"

As far as greetings went, this one was terrible.

Clay bit back the cutting reply. "Yes. Coming in or not?"

Okay, so maybe he was a bit rude. Still, it made Ben go inside and head to the couch after Clay pointed him towards it.

"Sit down, I need five minutes."

He went to the bathroom to try and fix the sleep-deprived disaster look he was sporting, then came back out and poured himself tea before joining Ben on the couch.

Neither of them said anything for a while. Clay sipped his earl grey and waited, because everything that came to his mind was either too antagonistic or too apologetic.

He still hadn't dealt with the latest revelations from his conversation with Mario. He didn't know how.

"I don't get you," Ben finally broke the silence, gripping his cup hard enough the plastic cover squeaked a little.

Clay slumped against the cushions, swallowing down a sigh.

"Yeah, I know. You told me."

Ben stared down at his cup.

"No, I said I felt like I don't know you, that's—" He grimaced. "Different."

"How?"

Clay wasn't trying to be an asshole, here. He honestly didn't see the difference—it still hurt. While pain was a bit muted this time around, it could be blamed on the early hour.

Ben turned in his seat to face him.

"That other thing was about me being pissed off about all the secrets. This is..." He waved his hand. "I'm confused."

Clay raised his eyebrows. Confused sounded better than pissed off, sure, but that was still too little to go on.

"About?" he prompted when it didn't seem like Ben would say anything else.

"We were fighting all the time back then. You thought I hated you. Why fund my school?"

Clay frowned. "Why wouldn't I? I was working to make money, but I never planned to keep all of it to myself. I wanted to help out Mom and you, and I barely needed to spend anything over there."

"I had no idea you were helping out so much." Ben stared at his cup and Clay was left wondering how much their mother had told him now that the secret was out of the bag.

"I didn't want you to know," he admitted after taking a slow sip of his tea.

"Why not?"

Clay hoped his incredulity showed on his face.

"I told you why. You acted like anything I did was the worst thing possible. You would've rejected the money because they came from a source you didn't approve of, and neither you nor Mom could afford med school, so you'd be screwing yourself over to spite me." He shrugged. "I didn't want that."

"You could've told me afterwards," Ben pointed out. "It's been a while since I've finished school and a while since you've been back. We could've had that conversation a long time ago."

"And how do you imagine it would've gone? With you being so angry and not really wanting to talk to me about anything, I was supposed to be like, 'hey, just so you know, I've helped put you through med school'?" Clay snorted. "I'm pretty sure that wouldn't go over well."

"You don't know—"

"Ben, seriously. You'd have thought I was an asshole for rubbing it in your face and you would've hated me even more." Clay pinched the base of his nose. "I honestly try to avoid making you angry at me. Or I did," he added with a shrug. "I knew you'd be pissed about Mario."

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"So you knew and did it anyway?"

Clay met his brother's gaze straight on. "Yeah. It's—It's Mario. I'm not joking around, I'm not with him to piss you off. I want him. I want a real thing with him. I'm sorry that it does piss you off, but that's not something I'm going to apologize for. We're all grown-ups, we should start acting like it."

Ben huffed, but it didn't sound as angry as usual. "You mean me. I should start acting like a grown man."

Duh, Clay thought but didn't say.

"I know you have your issues with me, and I'm sure me being with Mario doesn't help. But you and Mario..." He shook his head. "You've had each other's backs for almost twenty years. Who he dates should not be something that makes or breaks you."

"It's easy for you to say," Ben said into the cup in his hands.

Clay thought about his friendship with Jake and how hard it was to figure themselves out.

"Nothing about this is easy," he told his brother. "Grown-up friendships, and relationships in general, aren't always easy, at least from my experience."

"What, you and Jake had problems like that?"

Clay immediately tensed, but then realized Ben wasn't antagonizing him this time. He was genuinely asking.

"Yeah," Clay finally admitted, trying to choose words carefully. "Not about who we date or anything, but... Yeah, we've had our issues. We worked through some and we're working through others. Just like you and Mario, I'm sure. It's not all sunshine and rainbows, but it doesn't mean it's bad." He paused and forced himself to meet Ben's gaze. "And you and me... I know it's far from easy, but I think we could get to 'easier', you know? If you ever want to talk to me—not antagonize me, like you've been doing—but actually talk to me, I'm here. I'll listen. I'll do my part. I promise you that."

"Why?"

The question came out so quiet that Clay wasn't sure he was supposed to hear it, but he did.

He swallowed hard, wishing this whole thing didn't hurt so much.

But at least he knew, now, how they'd ended up here.

"Because you're my brother and I love you." Clay stared at Ben's bent head as he forced the rest out. "I know I made mistakes with you, I know I messed up, but I was trying my best, you know? I was trying to keep my head above water and help out Mom as much as I could. I guess somewhere along the line I became the annoying, unwanted quasi-parent. That wasn't my intention. All I ever wanted from you was to be your brother. Not your father, not your warden, definitely not your enemy."

Ben ran a hand over his face, but didn't look up.

"You left, though. You chose—" He cut himself off. "You left for over a decade."

Clay sighed. "Yeah. Yeah, I did. We can talk about that at some point, too, if you want, but that's a longer conversation, and we can't do that, honestly, if you're not ready to accept two things. One, I wasn't choosing Jake over you—or Mom, for that matter. That had never been a competition. And two, our relationship was messed up before I left. Me taking that job wasn't what caused the mess—it made it worse, I'll give you that one, but it didn't cause it. And I didn't know it would go like that."

He'd actually thought it might do them some good, but Ben wasn't ready to hear it, and Clay needed to think it over, too. Apparently, he hadn't noticed things that were right under his nose, so he had his own work to do, here, as well.

"How could you not—" Ben started, glancing up, then paused as their gazes met. His eyes were obviously red, but Clay knew he had to pretend not to notice it or Ben would clam up again. "It's hard to see it from your perspective," he finally said with a huff, sagging against the cushions.

"Yeah." Clay straightened in his seat. "I bet. It's been hard trying to see it from your perspective, too, actually, so I know the feeling. I'm not expecting you to agree with me on everything, by the way. I'm honestly willing to have a real conversation about this whole thing. But I need you to meet me half-way, otherwise we'll be both shouting into the void."

When Ben didn't say anything to that, Clay went on.

"You could start with believing that I'm not out to get you, and that I'm not trying to steal Mario from you—I couldn't if I tried, but I wouldn't, period."

Ben made a face, then squared his shoulders.

"It's not easy to be a grown-up when my impulse is to shout 'Go away, he's mine, he's all mine!'," Ben admitted with a sour expression that lightened up a bit when Clay

laughed.

Years ago, when they were kids and only fought about regular kid stuff, Clay tried to fend off his younger brother exactly like that every time Ben wanted to take his toys right when Clay was playing with them.

Now, that little joke was enough to ease up some tension, and Clay found himself relaxing a bit. He appreciated Ben making an effort, too.

"You're a doctor now, man. I'm sure you can pull off a grown-up act from time to time."

Ben chuckled and ran a hand through his hair. "With anyone but you, it looks like."

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Clay dropped his smile, his gut twisting.

"No, no," Ben protested, leaning closer. "I didn't mean it's your fault. It's something I have to figure out, especially now."

Afraid to hope but hoping nonetheless, Clay nodded.

"Okay. Like I said, I'm willing to talk more, whenever you're ready."

"I think I need some time to process what I've already learned," Ben told him and got up.

Clay followed suit.

What now? he wanted to ask, but before he could, Ben spoke up as if he'd already heard the question.

"It's still weird, but—I guess I don't really hate the idea of the two of you together. I'm not a fan, yet, but I don't hate it."

"I'll take it." Clay shoved his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants as they walked towards the door. "And I'm sure Mario will be glad to hear that, too."

Ben lowered his gaze again. "We had a bad fight. He may not be happy with anything I say."

"He'll be about that part," Clay insisted. "You'll see."

Ben paused at the door, obviously unsure what to say. Finally, he settled on, "See you around. And, you know, thanks."

"Thanks for coming," Clay told him and then stood there after his brother left, gaping at the closed door. He wasn't sure what Ben was thanking him for, or what prompted him to come over this morning, but for the first time in a long, long time, the two of them had parted on a good note.

It had to be a good sign, right?

It had to.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I'm sorry about the shit I said. If you want to talk, today, or whenever, I'm in.

Mario sat up in his bed, staring at the new text from Ben.

The fact that he was reaching out so soon and apologizing? That was huge.

Are you free now? I could call, he replied.

Sure, it would be better to do this face to face, but Mario also didn't want to wait.

I'm a few minutes away from your place, so I could stop by, actually.

His eyebrows shot up. Had Ben made the trip in order to casually drop by?

Mario's answer was the same either way.

Great, come on over.

After jumping out of bed, Mario quickly went through his morning routine. He tried not to hope for too much, but it felt like Ben really wanted to talk and make up, which Mario was all for.

When he opened the door, they both smiled, which was already a much better start than their last meeting. The smiles started off a little unsure and small, but they grew before they even settled in the living room.

"Roberto's out?" Ben asked.

"Yeah, he's helping a friend move. Did you come here straight from the hospital?" Mario took in his tired expression and redness around the eyes. "Do you want coffee?"

"No, I just finished another one, thanks. And yeah, I was at work. There was a last minute switch. But I went over to talk to Clay, actually, before coming here."

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Mario stilled in his seat. "Oh."

Multiple scenarios ran through his head at rapid speed, one worse than the other.

"It was... I'm not sure if 'good' is the correct description, but it wasn't bad, at least."
Ben shrugged. "Nobody shouted or stormed off."

"That's an improvement, then," Mario said before he could stop himself.

"Yeah."

Then there was a long beat of silence, and Mario wondered whether he should be the one to break it or—

"I'm sorry for how I acted last time," Ben finally spoke up, gaze fixed right at him.
"I'm sorry for shouting and storming off, but especially for the things I said. I was surprised and hurt, but they were uncalled for."

Mario pressed his lips together and nodded.

"Thank you, I appreciate that. I'm sorry, too, for slapping you with the med school thing. I shouldn't have used it in an argument."

"No, I—" Ben paused and sighed. "I needed to hear this. I should've heard it a long time ago, but that's not on you."

"I could've picked a better moment."

"Clay pointed out that if I learned about it while I was still at school, I'd end up doing something stupid. I wish I could argue with that, but I can't. Mom is the one who should've told me after."

"Yeah, she should have." Mario respected Mrs. Jackson a great deal, but she'd definitely messed up there. "I'm glad you know, now."

"I'm glad, too. And it did force me to face other things I might have been wrong about, so. I'm working on it."

Mario smiled at him again. "Good."

"Thanks for the kick in the ass."

Mario's smile turned into a grin. "Oh, you're welcome. Anytime, really."

"Don't get too ahead of yourself, huh? You're still dating my brother, which means you have no taste."

Ben grimaced as he said it, but it was different, this time. It was a normal "eww" reaction one could have to the news of his brother dating.

"My taste has definitely improved," Mario countered with a laugh. "Or, it returned to its initial settings before I dropped my expectations way to low."

"Gross."

"But hey, I was serious when I said it didn't change how I felt about you and me," Mario told him, serious this time. "You're still one of the most important people in my life and you'll remain so. I'm not trading you in or anything."

Ben ran a hand over his hair. "Yeah, yeah, okay," he muttered, but Mario could tell he was pleased.

God, it may actually work, Mario realized, and his breath got stuck in his chest.

Please, let it work.

* * *

He wasn't even fully inside the apartment yet and Clay was already pulling him in for a kiss.

Mario had no complaints.

There was a click of the door behind him and then he was pushed against it as Clay licked into his mouth with urgency that appeared to be rivaling his own.

Because Mario couldn't get the sight of Clay in that tuxedo out of his head since yesterday. He'd jerked off to the memory after getting home from work last night and then again this morning, but having Clay's body pressed against his now amplified the want—the need.

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And when Clay moved his hands between Mario and the door to slip them under his sweater, Mario moaned into the kiss and bucked his hips.

Fuck, yes.

The kiss broke and they inhaled sharply at the way their groins slid against each other.

"Bed," Mario murmured, because as tempting as it was to just rut their way to an orgasm right then and there, he needed to feel Clay inside him.

And a wooden floor was not a place for that, at all.

Thankfully, Clay seemed to be in agreement, because he caught his hand and pulled him towards the bedroom without a word.

Once they were naked, Mario stretched on the bed and breathlessly watched as Clay followed him with a predatory glint in his eyes.

He paused to run his tongue over Mario's nipple and dragged his teeth over it lightly, which made Mario shiver from the top of his head to his toes.

"Fuck," Mario gasped, putting his hands on both sides of Clay's head. He couldn't decide whether to keep him where he was or pull him up for another kiss, so he ran his fingertips over the shells of Clay's ears instead.

It earned him a slightly harder bite on the other nipple, and Mario arched his back,

trying to stifle a loud moan.

By the time Clay moved up to his lips, Mario was a shivering mess of want, and need, and incoherent demands, but apparently not so incoherent Clay couldn't figure out what they were.

"I've got you," he murmured, brushing his nose against Mario's before pulling back briefly to get the supplies he needed.

Mario had already learned that stretching wasn't simply the means to an end for Clay but could very well be the main event on its own. And whether he was taking his time, or doing it in quick, demanding pushes and strokes over Mario's prostate, like right now, it always drove Mario right to the brink.

Or over it, in fact, since his orgasm erupted out of him now, without much of a warning and with his cock untouched.

He shook through it, out of breath and with fireworks going off behind his eyelids, and Clay busied himself with leaving kisses all over his thigh as Mario came down from the high.

Damn.

He opened his eyes to see Clay's head dangerously close to his cock and it looked like he was about to lick it clean, which, on one hand, hot, but on the other...

"No-oh," Mario protested and, wow, his voice was shot to hell. He pulled at Clay's hair a bit, too, to underscore his point. "Too sens'tive. Come're."

This time, the kiss was different. He was mellow and gentle, inviting, while Clay was more aggressive and demanding.

Mario let him do whatever he wanted—welcomed it, even.

"How about you fuck me now," he whispered against Clay's lips, because, yeah, he could play dirty, too.

He laughed when Clay pulled back and started tugging at him, but he turned willingly, pushing his legs under him for a better position.

"Fuck." Clay ran his hands over Mario's back, then lower—to his ass and thighs, before slipping one hand between Mario's legs to encourage him to make room.

Mario spread his legs, pushing his face into the pillow that smelled so much like Clay. He was still flying high on the endorphins, and Clay made it even better, pressing his fingers in all the right places and dropping kisses over Mario's lower back in a blatant attempt to make him hard again, which, damn him, was actually working.

By the time Clay slid his cock into him, Mario was pushing back to meet his thrusts, demanding more, and faster, and harder. He wanted Clay to come inside him before his orgasm hit again.

He wanted Clay to lose it.

"Come on," he whispered, tightening his muscles around Clay's cock and making him swear. "Let me feel it, come on."

And so Clay did, pressing into him one last time and gripping Mario's hips hard enough to hurt in the best of ways.

Mario only needed one tug on his cock to follow right after, seconds before Clay slumped onto him, pinning him to the bed.

They breathed harshly, both tired and slick with sweat, but, God, it was everything Mario wanted.

Better, even.

It was real.

They were forced to move after a while, but they were in no hurry as they showered and dressed, seemingly unable to stop touching each other. Mario was grinning so hard he half-expected his cheeks would start hurting.

While they'd already checked many of his relationship boxes, he was also looking forward to slowing down now that they managed to survive the Ben thing. Mario couldn't wait to do a bunch of things with Clay—learn more things about each other, meet each other's friends, go on more fun dates—but he also could wait, because...

Because they had time. They had all night, and tomorrow, too. And the next week, and the next—

"What are you thinking about?" Clay nudged him with his knee.

They were sitting at the table, working their way through the Vietnamese takeout, and Mario had gotten lost in his head while holding a dumpling halfway to his mouth.

Feeling his face heat, he dropped the dumpling and took a sip of his water.

Clay kept his gaze on him, patiently waiting.

"I was thinking about us," Mario finally admitted.

"Anything specific?"

"I'm happy that we have so much ahead of us, I guess." Mario's face was definitely red now, but Clay's smile encouraged him to go on. "Ben knows and he's dealing with it, so it feels like... Like we can breathe a bit easier?"

"Yeah, it does." Clay reached out and squeezed his wrist gently. "I wasn't going to let him dictate who I can and cannot date, but it's definitely a relief that he's not so antagonistic anymore."

"And not just about us, right? He seemed... calmer when he came over after seeing you this morning."

They'd texted each other earlier about the surprise Ben visits, but they hadn't discussed the details, leaving that for a face-to-face conversation.

"He was definitely calmer," Clay said. "Thanks to you, I was able to understand him better and I told him some things I think he needed to hear. We still have a long way to go, of course, but it's... I don't want to jinx it, but I'm hopeful."

Mario beamed at him.

"I'm glad," he said after swallowing the dumpling.

Clay rubbed his thumb over Mario's pulse point, sending a flash of heat down his arm.

"It wouldn't happen without you, so, once again, thank you."

Mario opened his mouth to protest that it was nothing, but one look at Clay made him close it. Fine, it wasn't nothing. But it was selfish, too, since he really, really wanted

his best friend and his boyfriend not to be at odds.

His boyfriend.

He squinted at his plate. Could he call a thirty-seven-year-old man his boyfriend?

"What is it?" Clay rubbed his pulse point again, and when Mario glanced up, he had a small frown on his forehead.

Mario could shrug it off and change the subject.

Or, he could act like a grown-up and say what was on his mind.

"I was wondering what I should call you. I thought about 'boyfriend', but I know some people hate that, after they hit a certain age—"

Clay snorted and withdrew his hand.

"'Certain age', thanks a lot. Way to make me feel old."

"Please, you could pass for thirty."

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"I wish." Clay rubbed his forehead. "We'll talk when you have wrinkles. But," he added, "going back to the issue at hand, I'm good with being a boyfriend. I like partners best, but I think that's for later, you know?"

Mario nodded, trying to keep his grin at bay.

Later. He liked the sound of that.

And, judging from Clay's smile, he wasn't all that successful at containing his joy.

"Partners sound good for later on," Mario agreed. "I like that."

"Perfect," Clay murmured.

Then, in a fluid motion that made Mario's throat dry, he slid out of his seat and circled the table to hover over him.

"Perfect," he repeated quietly as he looked into Mario's eyes.

Jesus. This man would be the death of him.

Mario wound his arms around Clay's neck and pulled him in for a kiss.

"Perfect," he agreed right before their lips met.

Sure, the world outside of them was less than that. And they definitely had stuff to work through, and talk about, and settle on, because no matter how long they'd

technically known each other, this, right here, was brand new and exciting.

Uncharted territory they'd barely started to map out.

But for now, for tonight, and hopefully for tomorrow—it was perfect. They were perfect.

They would work on the rest in their own time.

EPILOGUE

Four months later

Clay lifted his head up from the pillow to watch Mario stumble towards the door.

"What?" he asked, frowning at the clock on his nightstand.

"Nothing." Mario waved him off as he walked away. "Too much energy, can't sleep, gonna bug Ben."

Okay, then. Clay closed his eyes and pushed Mario's pillow closer to himself, inhaling deeply and drifting off again.

Next time he opened his eyes, Mario was back, trying—and failing—to sneak up on him.

"I know you're there," Clay told him, glancing over his shoulder to see Mario smiling at him.

Damn, that smile was never going to get old, was it?

"It's almost ten," Mario announced.

So, not early, but not the latest they'd ever slept in.

"And?" Clay rolled onto his back and spread his legs in a clear invitation for Mario to settle in on top of him.

Which he did, with a different kind of smile tugging at one corner of his mouth.

Clay settled his hands on Mario's hips as their bodies pressed together, igniting the heat in his stomach.

"And I've been awake for three hours." Mario rubbed his thumb over Clay's beard. "I ate, I had coffee, I talked to Ben on his way out of work. Now it's your turn to entertain me."

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The demand at the end made Clay laugh, which in turn made Mario glare at him, although without any real ire.

Clay tightened his grip on Mario's hips. "You're freaking out again, aren't you?"

Most of the time, the blunt approach worked best between the two of them.

Mario grimaced but didn't deny it.

"There's nothing to freak out about," Clay told him yet again. In the two weeks since he had mentioned the company-wide BBQ at Kalei's house, Mario had brought it up no less than six times, and they'd had the same conversation every time.

"It's easy for you to say," Mario mumbled, hiding his face in Clay's neck.

"It's easy for me to say because it's true." Clay rubbed Mario's sides now. "You've met some of those guys already."

"Yeah, a few, but now it's all of them."

Clay shrugged, as much as he could with Mario's weight keeping him down.

"We don't have to talk with all of them. We can stick with the usual suspects."

"Isn't it supposed to be about team-building for all of you, and not merely people you're close to as it is?"

"We're not going to do trust exercises, Mario," Clay told him dryly. "I'm going to hang out with people I'd hang out with anyway, not someone I have almost nothing in common with."

"So, what? Martinez and Jeremy?"

Clay sighed. "And Eddie, and James, and you know they—"

"Okay, okay, fine," Mario cut him off, wriggling in place, and, oh yeah, that was a much better way to spend their time.

He put his arms around Mario and rolled them over until he was looking down at his partner.

"How about some distraction?" he suggested, grinding his hips against Mario's.

"Ah, well." There was that familiar heat in Mario's eyes. "Don't mind if I do."

Clay chuckled and leaned in for a kiss. "Any special requests?"

"Well, you've given me quite a ride last night." Mario tilted his head back when Clay moved to nuzzle his neck. "I wouldn't mind returning the favor."

"You wouldn't, would you?" Clay secured his hold and rolled the two of them until Mario was pressing him down against the mattress again. "Have at it, then."

As he watched Mario huff a laugh and sit up to pull out the lube, Clay marveled—for about a hundredth time—how easy it was. How fun.

Relationships had never seemed easy for him, before. Among the ones he'd known, there'd been more failed ones than those that were solid and happy. He'd always

hoped he could get lucky one day, sure, but he'd kept putting it off.

Then he met Mario again, and soon enough, he didn't want to wait anymore. Why would he, when things just... worked between them.

They talked, and laughed, and fucked whenever they felt like it—which was often. They both found comfort in taking care of each other, but also learned to lean on the other person, too.

And for Clay, who was so used to shouldering responsibility that he'd needed to actively unlearn it, that was a gamechanger.

Amazing and thrilling—and sometimes terrifying—gamechanger.

Blunt nails sliding down his stomach brought him back to the present with sharp burst of pleasure.

"Back with me?" Mario asked right before curling his fingers around Clay's cock.

Clay grasped Mario's thighs on both sides of his hips. "Always."

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He smiled at the sudden brightness in Mario's eyes.

Then Mario mouthed, I love you, and Clay's grip tightened at the same time as his heart stopped and restarted in a matter of seconds.

This was still new, so it took him by surprise every time.

Love you, too, he mouthed back and watched Mario's eyes brighten even more.

Easy. Perfect.

Theirs.

THE END