



# Painting Together a Family (Starting Over #4)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Widower Devlin Marx has two girls who he adores. When his husband died, a grifter conned him and his girls out of every penny he had.

Bryan St-Vincent is a widower as well, with two boys he loves with his whole heart. He was also taken in by the same con man after his husband died, who stole everything from them.

Devlin is suing the grifter for every penny he stole, and he and Bryan meet through the lawyer, Bryan agreeing to join the suit to make it stronger. As they grow closer, they discover something far more precious than revenge.

Can Devlin and Bryan turn double tragedy into something beautiful?

**Total Pages (Source):** 15

## CHAPTER ONE

Bryan St-Vincent read Horton Hears a Who to a dozen or so kids ranging in age from about two to five. He did different voices and made faces, really putting his all into it. The kids giggled and laughed. God, he loved that sound. Happy kids made his soul sing.

Bryan volunteered at the community center a few times a week. It gave his kids friends to play with, and it let him give back to a place that had saved his ass big-time a couple years ago when Grant had left him high and dry, stealing all his money, including every penny in his boys' education funds. He'd been devastated, emotionally as well as financially, and the community center had been a place he could bring the boys and they could all have some normality for a few hours. At no cost, which had been extremely important at the time.

He finished the story and closed the book.

"More! More!" All the kids took up the cry, the cacophony filling the air for a moment. It died down when he raised his hands and shook his head. "It's nearly four, guys. Your parents or guardians will be here to get you soon so there just isn't time for another story. Besides, there are snacks over on the table at the back."

He chuckled as that ended the demands for more, the kids like a school of piranhas descending on the goodie table, his boys Dylan and Micah among them.

"You're so good with them." Jennie's voice was always a comfort, and she was an amazing friend, as well as the volunteer coordinator. They'd met when he'd started

coming in on a regular basis, and she'd dragged the story of how he'd been widowed and then conned out of him, and then she'd wormed her way into his heart with her genuine support. "They love you."

"Thanks, lady." He gave her a warm smile. "It's easy to be good to kids. More people should try it." He didn't growl; it wasn't Jennie's fault that there were some real grade-A assholes out there who didn't care who they hurt. And that's what upset him the most about the whole Grant affair. Yes, the man had made a fool of him and stolen from him, but worse, the man had hurt his boys. Maybe not physically, but definitely emotionally and certainly financially. Because of Grant, they'd already lost not just one but two father figures in the short span of their lives. Hard as it had been, at least Miller hadn't wanted to leave them; Grant had deliberately abandoned them. How did you explain that to a six- and four-year-old? How did you make sure they knew it wasn't their fault? Now that he could finally afford it, therapy was helping with that. For all of them.

"Being good to kids? Absolutely, more people should try it. Hell, everyone should. Speaking of, did you see that Devlin Marx is suing your mutual ex for fifty-five million dollars?"

His mouth dropped open. Had Grant really stolen fifty-five million dollars from someone? And the guy had enough on him to sue Grant for it? "I hadn't, but good for him! I hope he wins." If he could have had Grant arrested and or sued him for the money he'd stolen, Bry would have. But the chips had not fallen his way, and the money Grant had stolen was simply gone. Every penny of his husband's insurance, every penny in their savings account and every penny in the kids' education accounts. There was no money for a lawyer, and none of them would take it on contingency of winning, money-grubbing turds.

It had taken two years, but he was back on his feet now. Still, he didn't think he'd ever get those education accounts back to where they'd been. Miller had had a very

high-paying job, and they'd socked a lot of money away for their kids' educations as soon as they'd started the adoption process. Not to mention there had been a very generous payout on Miller's life insurance. It made him sick to think about, really. All that money and it was simply gone.

"Yeah, looks like he has gone through another husband, and he's engaged again, so husband number one is suing."

"Wait. You're telling me that Grant stole fifty-five million from someone, and it wasn't enough? He then stole from me, too, and he's back to grifting to steal from another widower?" He didn't know why he was surprised. The money Grant had stolen from him obviously hadn't been enough either if he'd not only gotten married again after him, but was also engaged again. How exactly did you spend that much money? Or was he one of those people who could never have enough money, no matter how much they socked away? Or maybe he simply enjoyed hurting people, and 'winning.'

Jennie made a face, her nose wrinkling and her lips curling in obvious contempt. "For some people there's never enough money, right?"

Which was just what he'd been thinking.

"Yeah, and I have a hunch Grant likes the game. Makes him feel clever and like he's winning." Okay, so Bry was still extremely bitter. He had a hunch that was never really going to go away. It was too bad the day here was over because he could sure use some more of that happy kids joy right about now.

"Did you ever meet the guy before you—Devlin?"

He shook his head. "Nope. By the time I got my head above water, it was nearly two years later and the last thing I wanted to do was look for any news of that as— turd."

He corrected himself before he let the curse word loose; he tried his hardest not to swear in front of anyone under twenty, which had not been an easy task in the months immediately after Grant had left them broke and devastated. “I didn’t even realize he was already married and divorced again, and once again engaged.” Maybe he’d buried his head in the sand a little too much if Jennie knew all this gossip off the top of her head. Still, it had been better for his mental health to just pretend a black hole had swallowed Grant up along with all his money. It hadn’t occurred to him the guy had not only already done it before him, but would do it again. And again. And now he was going to feel guilty he hadn’t done anything to make sure Grant didn’t take advantage of anyone else. God damn it.

“Well, he’s apparently an artist, and quite fierce, well-off, and he’d inherited quite a bit when his first husband died. They had a couple of kids, and that family? Had the guy’s back when things went south. Must be nice.”

Wow, Jennie really was a font of all gossip and knowledge. And it looked like he wasn’t the only widower who was taken in by Grant’s compassionate act. It meant he wasn’t the only blind idiot out there. He pushed that line of thinking away. He’d been vulnerable and alone with two kids, and he hadn’t had any family to back him up, and full of grief on top of everything, and Grant had taken advantage of that. He knew he needed to forgive himself for what had happened. However, that was so much easier to say than do. “Like I said, I hope he wins.” And he meant that with his whole heart. If someone managed to hold Grant accountable for his behavior, maybe it would get him to stop. Or at least maybe it would bring a little karmic balance to the jerkwad.

He took a deep breath and tried to shake it off. He didn’t need to be all up in arms again; it wasn’t good for him. So now he needed to find his boys and give them big hugs and take them out to Lucia’s Cantina for supper.

“I hope he does too. You know, you could maybe get in on the lawsuit...”

“I don’t know, the lawyer I talked to after it happened was pretty sure I didn’t have a winnable case. But maybe I could help with this guy’s. Like as a witness for Devlin or something. Another voice telling on Grant.” The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. It would be good to be able to actually do something about the whole situation. Maybe get the feeling of helplessness the whole thing had left him with to ease off.

“It couldn’t hurt and maybe it would make the pain and anger back off some, you know?” Looked like Jennie was on the same wavelength as him again.

He nodded, thoughts buzzing around his head. If he could do even one little thing to help take Grant down, he’d bet it would go a long way to help ease his feelings about himself and how much of a pathetic idiot he’d been to believe Grant’s lies. “I don’t suppose you know who’s representing him?”

She nodded and grinned, her dark curls bobbing. “My sister-in-law.”

Well, that explained a lot—of course Jennie would have all the gossip about this if she had family involved in the lawsuit.

Chuckling, he handed over his phone. “Put her number in my contacts, and I’ll get in touch, see if my story will help this guy with his case.” He’d call tomorrow and introduce himself, tell the woman his story, and hopefully they could use his testimony to help hold Grant accountable to at least one of his victims.

She winked at him, smiled. “I’d love to. I want this guy to go down, you know? For everything he’s done, especially to you.” She put the number in his phone and handed it back to him.

“Thanks, I appreciate the support.” He really did. It was people like Jennie who’d let him keep some faith in humanity and had kept him from going off the deep end,

especially in the early days.

Micah appeared at his side, grabbing his arm and yanking it. “Daddy! Daddy! There’s chocoberries and I had twenty-leven!”

Oh lord. He hoped that didn’t actually mean anything close to twenty. And that there were actually berries in whatever chocoberries were because he didn’t need both kids hopped up on sugar for the rest of the evening, but especially his four-year-old.

“Cho-co-la-te straw-ber-ries,” Dylan sounded out slowly like only a six-year-old older brother could. “And you had four.”

“Uh-uh. Twenty-leven,” Micah insisted.

“And how many is that?” Bry asked.

“Lots!” Micah let go of him and bounced in place. “Lots and lots.”

Bry was going to have to bring some chocolate-covered berries with him next time they came, given it sounded like his son had eaten more than his share. “I guess you’re stuffed then. Probably too full to eat tacos?”

“No! No, Daddy! I put the chocoberries in my dessert stomach. My taco stomach is empty.”

Bry had to bite the insides of his cheeks to keep from bursting out laughing.

Dylan gave his brother an arch stare. “You are always empty. All. Ways.”

“Uh-uh. My o-meal tummy gets filled up every morning!” Micah wasn’t going to let it go.

“Are we really having tacos?” Dylan asked, eyes wide with hope. “Can I have mine with no matos and extra smooshy beans?”

“You can have your tacos any way you want them.” He grabbed his bag and slung it over his shoulder, then held his hands out to his boys. They each grabbed one as they headed out.

“I want a s’mores one, Daddy,” Micah told him.

“I’m pretty sure Lucia’s Cantina doesn’t have s’mores tacos.”

“Gummi worms tacos?”

“They don’t have those either.”

“Ice cream tacos?”

“Maybe for dessert, but not for supper.”

“But you said we could have any tacos we wanted,” Micah insisted.

Damn, but you couldn’t get away with anything with a four-year-old.

“Any tacos as long as they have the ingredients for it and it’s not dessert,” he amended for his son.

Micah sighed in apparent disappointment, but Bry knew both Micah and Dylan were big fans of tacos and then they’d share some deep-fried ice cream for dessert. Even if Micah had had twenty-leven chocolate-covered strawberries.

“I loves you, Daddy.” Micah beamed at him. “This is the best day!”



“Me too! Me too!” Dylan bounced along next to him. “I love you too.”

“It is a good day, isn’t it? And I love you both.” He squeezed their hands in lieu of hugs, which were hard to accomplish as they were walking. Being with his sons was the best balm for his anger and upset, and he loved them both so hard. Especially when they had more ‘best days’ than not. It was a good reminder to enjoy each moment as it happened.

The restaurant was between the community center and their place, so they walked to it, the day beautiful. It wasn’t too hot today—he could feel autumn in the air, but the wind didn’t have that bite yet that it would come November. He kept tight hold of the boys’ hands so they didn’t get lost in the flow of people on the sidewalk, thinking again how wonderful it was to have them in his life.

So he figured he shouldn’t complain. Life was getting better every day.

And his boys were happy. Truly happy. In the end, that was what really mattered.

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### CHAPTER TWO

“Mr. Marx, you can’t?—”

Devlin turned on the lawyer, fury flooding him. “Excuse me? As much as we pay you? You make it happen.”

He’d been taken down to nothing, and he’d built himself back up. He was not going to let that smarmy con man get out of this life with a single penny to his name, and if Valerie Watson couldn’t get it done for him, he’d find another lawyer who could.

He hadn’t been able to create properly since he’d been taken for everything he had, the anger always right there beneath the surface, just waiting to come out, and he needed to put an end to it, to find some closure, which meant Grant needed his fucking comeuppance.

“We need more victims coming out. It will help our case,” she insisted.

“He’s had two more husbands that are both poor as church mice now!”

“Yes, that’s what the private detective has informed us of, but we need them to come forward and testify. The case just isn’t strong enough on its own.”

“Oh, for fuc—” He growled and stormed out of her office. He had to pick up Marly from dance class and Juniper from Judo, and this meeting was clearly not productive.

“Mr. Marx!” Valerie Watson called after him before he got to the main door.

Stopping, he turned back and glared. “What?”

“My assistant just gave me a telephone message. One of the other ex-husbands has called in regards to your case.”

“Oh? Which one? Two, or three?” Not that he really cared; what mattered was that one of them had come forward.

“Bryan St-Vincent. So, number two. He was married not that long after you.” She sighed. “He’s spending less and less time between fleecing one husband and finding the next. I am behind you that we need to get this guy, but there’s no use going after him if we don’t have enough ammunition and all of our ducks in a row. He can afford the most expensive lawyers.”

“Yeah, with my money. Worse, with my kids’ money!” He was going to lose his fucking shit.

She put a hand on his arm. “I know. And I know this is frustrating. Would you like me to arrange a meeting with Mr. St-Vincent for later today? Maybe we can all have a coffee together and see if he can help the case. How does that sound?”

“Uh—” He checked his schedule. He could afford a nanny, drivers, all sorts, but that wasn’t his style. He wanted to be a part of his girls’ lives, and at fourteen and ten, they needed a father who was present. “Can we meet at Violet Java?”

The coffee shop was at the base of his apartment building, and Marly and Juniper would be fine upstairs, or they could do their homework at a table next to them.

“Does 4:30 work?” she asked. When he nodded, she typed into her phone. Then she nodded. “4:30 at Violet Java it is. I’ll see you there.”

“I’m going to get my girls.” He didn’t slam the door on his way out, though it was a close thing. Taking a few breaths, he focused on where he was going. It was an easy walk—one door down for dance, one block over for Judo, then home. One of the best parts of living near downtown was that he was close to everything from grocery shopping to lawyers and from the art supply store to the dance studio.

He grabbed Marly first, her long red hair trapped in a heavy bun. Looking at her was like looking at his baby sister—she was a Marx to the bone. “How was ballet?”

“It was hard today. Madame says I need to practice more. She says I need to do it every day.” She handed him her backpack and put on her sweater before taking the bag back and swinging it over her shoulder.

“Well, you keep your grades up, and we’ll discuss it. Fair?” He didn’t have a problem with it, but he knew she wasn’t going to give up her piano lessons and he didn’t believe in filling every single second of his girls’ lives with activities. They needed time to just be kids too.

“I don’t know if I want to keep doing it. I don’t think I’m ever going to be good enough,” she admitted as they made their way down the street to pick up Juniper.

“Good enough for what? You’re fourteen. Does it make you happy? Dancing, I mean?”

“Yeah, but Madame says I’m never going to be a prima ballerina and I’m never going to get any of the main parts in the shows Madame puts on.” She shrugged, and he thought the move was designed to look more casual than she felt. “Madame doesn’t think I have the drive.”

“Screw her. Do you want to dance? You can try another teacher? You can try another style? You can do anything you want.” He wasn’t letting some hoity-toity ballet

teacher give Marly a complex or make her think she was less than. If she wanted to keep dancing, there were options and lots of them.

She looked up at him, her shoulders straightening a little. “Yeah? I... can I think about it?”

“Of course. You can think for as long as you need to.” He winked at her, bumped shoulders.

She grinned up at him, the happiness making it up to her eyes now. “Thanks, Da.”

They got to the dojo, Juniper already waiting for them in the front desk area, looking smart and tough in her gi.

“Da! I’m ready for you!”

“So you are!” He bent down and opened his arms, well-versed in what was about to happen. Sure enough, she launched herself at him, and he wrapped his arms around her and lifted her up. Her little face all lit up.

She was small and solid, so unlike her willowy sister.

“How was class?” Like he had to ask—the happiness rolled off her.

“Amazing. I kicked Harry in the butt.”

“And that’s a good thing?” he asked, managing to keep his laughter from spilling out as he set her back down on her feet. He could just picture it. His tough little girl kicking the much bigger Harry in the ass and sending him sprawling.

“Da! Yeah!” Her eyes danced with it. “It’s amazeballs!”

“So lame.” Marley rolled her eyes as she teased.

“Not lame!” Juniper shouted. “Da! Marley said Judo was lame!”

“I heard. I heard you both.” Jeez, Juniper always came out of Judo absolutely psyched. He wasn’t sure she’d be able to sit quietly and work on her homework at the coffee shop. So that made his decision simple, though he’d still give them the option.

“I have a meeting at the coffee shop in a few minutes. Would you like to stay upstairs or come down with me? You’ll have to sit and be quiet...” He knew that would have them making the right decision.

The girls looked at each other, a silent conversation passing between them, then Marley asked, “Can we watch TV when we’re finished homework if we stay upstairs?”

“Yes. Nothing scary, though. At all.” They were bad about daring each other... and he didn’t want to spend the next few nights with little girls sleeping in his bed.

Marley and Juniper shared a last look, then nodded together. “Okay. Upstairs, please,” Marley told him as they went in and headed for the elevator, passing by the guard at the front desk. Devlin gave him a nod.

“Sure. Did you want me to bring you up a treat for dessert? I’ve ordered soup from the deli—chicken soup and matza balls, but I didn’t get anything for dessert.” He wasn’t much of a cook so most of their meals were takeout, or leftover takeout. He loved his microwave and the girls were both old enough now to heat up their own food if they got hungry.

“Ice cream!” Juniper called out, jumping into the elevator as the doors popped open.

Dev took out his keys and popped the elevator one in the slot before pressing their floor.

“They don’t have ice cream at the coffee shop,” Marley informed her sister. “Besides, it would melt. I want a cinnamon roll.”

“Oh, me too!” Juniper bounced a few more times, clearly not upset about the fact she couldn’t have ice cream.

“Okay. I’ll get a half dozen, so we can have some for breakfast tomorrow, okay?” Go him, planning ahead so they wouldn’t need to scrounge around for their morning meal.

They both cheered and the elevator dinged, the doors opening on their floor. They tumbled out like the hooligans they were, running over to the door to their place and singing a song about cinnamon buns as they waited for him to let them in.

He loved Marley like this. She was such a teenager around her friends. Alone with her little sister, she could still be a girl.

He reminded them they needed to do their homework while he was gone before they ran into their rooms to change out of their dance and judo outfits.

“We will, Da,” Marley called back to him.

“There’s juice in the fridge if you’re thirsty. I’ll be right downstairs. Do not open the door, do you understand?”

“Yes, Da!” Marley could make two words say so much, like of course we won’t open the door, we’re not stupid.

Smiling and shaking his head, he made sure to lock up behind himself, then made his way down to Violet Java. His lawyer was there already, but she was on her own. The other ex wasn't there yet.

"Hey. I'm going to get some water." Coffee would just hype him up, and he knew he was going to get growly enough from the upcoming conversation. Talking about Grant made him want to kick things.

While he was waiting to pay for his drink, a hottie came in, the guy tall and well-built with dark hair curling over his ears. He looked around the place, glance skimming over all the tables.

The barista handed him the water bottle and he went and sat next to Valerie at the table she'd chosen near the windows.

"I think this is the one, Mr. Marx," she noted.

"Figures. Grant likes them pretty." He nodded, though, the guy was clearly looking for them.

She raised her hand to get the man's attention, and he looked over and nodded, heading their way.

"Ms. Watson?" At her nod, he held out his hand and continued, "Bryan St-Vincent."

She shook it, then nodded toward him. "Please, take a seat. And this is Devlin Marx."

Bryan thrust out his hand. "I'm so sorry he did this to you too."

"Yeah. I was the first idiot. Congratulations on being the second." He winked to keep the meanness from it.



“So I heard. Until today, I thought I was the first and you came second. I didn’t realize he’d already done it to someone else before he got to me.” Bryan shook his head. “How many of us are there?”

“Married to three, engaged to one more,” Valerie answered, the words clipped.

Bryan shook his head. “Jesus Christ.”

“Not quite, but he sure thinks so…” Dev had to grin.

Looking startled for a moment, Bryan blinked a couple times. Then he chuckled. “Yeah, you got that right. So. You’re suing him—good for you. I hope you win and it breaks him. What can I do help?”

“We need more victims to testify as to what he did to them,” Valerie told Bryan. It wasn’t difficult at all. Just tell the truth.

“I hate that word—victim—but I know it’s pretty damned accurate. And two’s not enough? Hell, one isn’t enough? How much proof do you need?” Bryan sat back, chewing on his lower lip. “This whole thing is fucked up.”

“It is, and I want him to pay. I have two daughters. He stole part of their future.”

Bryan nodded. “Two boys. My late husband’s insurance should have seen us set, instead we had over a year of genuine hardship. And I don’t know if we’ll ever be back to where we were.”

Motherfucker. Dev kept hating Grant more and more every day. “I hate that bastard. Let’s get it back. Let’s make him pay.”

“You know you might not get the money back…” Valerie warned. Lawyers.

“I might not.” And he could live with that. He’d built himself back up so that money wasn’t a worry. “But he’ll be bankrupt and embarrassed.” And that was something at least.

Bryan shook his head. “I don’t think the man has any shame in him. I mean, I was a widower mourning the loss of my husband for fuck’s sake. And he took that and used it to steal every last penny.”

“Then we’ll continue to plaster his name all over the earth to protect everyone else,” Dev suggested. He didn’t want Grant to be able to even show his face in public, let alone steal anyone else’s money.

“Whatever I can do to help make that happen, I’m ready to do.” The guy turned to him, eyes so blue staring into his own. “It’s not even the money—I mean, yes, that’s a part of it, but the worst of it is how it made me feel. Taken advantage of, like an all sorts of a fool.”

“I understand completely.” But he was pissed as fuck, and he intended to kick the son of a bitch’s ass.

“I’d like you to come into the office and give me an official statement,” Valerie told Bryan.

The man nodded slowly and grabbed his phone, bringing up a calendar. “I can do that.”

“Excellent. You busy tomorrow?”

Dev was glad she was on the ball with this, eager to get it done quickly. This whole ordeal seemed like it was dragging on forever and he wanted it done.

“I could come in sometime around ten, or eleven.”

“Let’s go with eleven, then.” She had her own phone open, and she made a notation before handing Bryan a card. “That’s the address. I’ll see you there.”

Bryan pocketed the card. “Thanks.”

She shook Bryan’s hand, then turned to Dev. “And I’ll call you as soon as I have any more news or movement on the case.” The case that was moving at a fucking glacial pace. He was not holding his breath.

“Thanks.” Now take your three-hundred-dollar suit and go. Argh .

At least he didn’t say the last bit out loud.

Bryan stood politely when she got up. She nodded and headed out, and then it was just him and ex-hubby number two.

“I wanted to say thank you for doing this,” Bryan told him once she was gone. “I went to a lawyer to see if I had any recourses when it first happened, but they were not hopeful and there was no way I could afford their fees at the time. I was lucky just to keep us all fed, clothed, and housed, but it’s always bothered me, that he got off scot-free, no accountability for what he did to my boys. So I’m grateful that you are pursuing it and sticking with it.”

“Please, have a seat. Would you like a pastry? I promised the girls I’d get them cinnamon rolls.” And Dev wanted to get this guy’s story.

Bryan sat back down and nodded. “I might have to try these cinnamon rolls you mentioned. If they’re good, I might have to bring a couple home to my boys. Thank you.”

“I’ll order a dozen. They’re huge. Coffee? Tea?”

Bryan looked at his watch. “Better make it a tea, please.”

“Green? Earl Grey?” He could have a cup of tea. It was more appealing than his bottle of water.

“Oh, Earl Grey would be great, thanks again.” Bryan’s smile lit his face up, making him even better looking, and he was already pretty studly.

Dev ordered the teas and the rolls, tipping well enough that Stacey would deliver them to the table, then he went to sit. “All ordered. Where are your little ones?”

“Micah and Dylan are at the community center doing an art class. If I’m not back before it’s over, Jennie will look after them. She’s the volunteer coordinator there, a total godsend. What about your—girls you said—where are they?”

“I live upstairs. They’re fourteen and ten, so they can be trusted alone long enough for me to have a cup of tea.” He winked. “Don’t get me wrong, Marley will have been on the phone with her girlfriends, and Juniper’s reading won’t be done, but...”

“How old were they when...” Bryan trailed off, and he made a face. “You don’t have to answer that.”

He got it, though. “Juniper was six-weeks-old when Mike died. I married the Fuck Monkey when she was two, so two and six.”

Bryan’s expression softened, sympathy and understanding right there, and he reached for Devlin’s hand, squeezed it. “Six weeks? Damn that must have been devastating.”

“If I hadn’t had his parents and Marley? I would have died.” The heart attack had

been early, unexpected, and immediately fatal. At least Mike hadn't suffered.

"I'm so sorry." Bryan sounded sincere, and like maybe he knew where Devlin was coming from. His hand was given another, longer squeeze. "And then this seemingly understanding, wonderful man came in and made you feel again, made you feel like you weren't so alone, and then turned around and took every penny you had. I could cheerfully kill him."

"Yes. Yes, exactly. I want him to hurt as bad as he hurt Marley."

Bryan nodded, head bobbing. "Yes! Bad enough he took us for fools, but the kids... they didn't deserve that. Only a true monster hurts kids."

"He's a narcissistic, self-absorbed prick." Monster was too good for him and an insult to monsters.

Bryan nodded. "You got that right. It bears repeating, too. I never considered myself a violent person, but I would cheerfully change that for him."

The teas and goodies came, and he raised his glass. "To vengeance."

Bryan copied his motion. "Yes. To vengeance. And to living our best lives in spite of his efforts."

"You know it—" His phone rang, and he grabbed it. Marley. "Hey, baby gir?—"

"Da! Da, there's someone knocking on the door. They say they're from the TV."

"Don't answer it. Keep it locked." Dev grabbed his tea and stood. "Want to come upstairs or leave? The media is here, and they're scaring my girls."

“I’ll come up with you. You might need the backup. Those guys can be vultures.” Bryan grabbed his own tea and the box of cinnamon buns. “Lead the way.”

“Sixth floor.” He started to growl before he even had his key out for the elevator.

Bryan followed him, staying close. “Is this related to the case?”

He glared at the front desk as he passed it, but the guard wasn’t there at the moment, which only made him want to growl all the more. “I’m sure. Reporters don’t really care about the art world.” He put his key in the slot and hit the button for the sixth floor.

“Someone must have let them in—you needed a key for the elevator,” Bryan pointed out. “And you said they don’t care about art, does that mean you’re an artist?”

“Yeah. I’m a painter. I tend to do multimedia type stuff.”

“Oh, that’s cool. I’d love to see your stuff when your apartment isn’t being held siege by TV people.” The elevator dinged, and Bryan followed him out into the hallway.

“I’d be happy to. There’s going to be cursing, fair warning.” Dev winked, then surged down the hall. “What the fuck are you doing on my floor? My daughter has called the police! This is a private residence!”

He could scream. He’d had plenty of practice in the last eight years.

“We’re just looking for a comment on a story we’re doing,” the reporter began, her cameraman swinging his camera around to focus on Dev.

“We don’t give you permission to film us,” Bryan told them. “And you’ve been told to leave.”

The reporter got all huffy. “We’re the news; we can film who we want.”

“We do not give you permission,” Bryan repeated.

“This is a private residence. The police are on their way!” Dev knew Marley would know what to do.

“Come on, Dana, let’s go before the cops show up.”

“He’s bluffing!”

“Dana,” the guy growled.

“He’s not bluffing!” That was Marley, inside. “Don’t you be mean to my daddy. Please hurry! Help!”

Bryan got himself between the reporters and Dev. “Go to your daughters. I’ll make sure they leave.” Then he handed the box of cinnamon rolls over and spread his arms wide, started advancing on the reporter and her cameraman, herding them toward the elevator.

Dev unlocked the door and slipped inside, manhandling the box of cinnamon rolls. “I’m fine. It’s okay. I’m right here.”

“Da!” Juniper was losing her shit.

Marley looked like she was about to cry, holding on by sheer will alone. His baby girl was so strong; he just wished she didn’t have to keep proving it.

“Take my tea. I have a friend out there. Juni, get the cinnamon rolls for me? Stop crying. You’re fine. I’m going to complain to the super. We pay for security.” The

reporter should never have been able to reach their floor.

A gentle knock sounded at the door and Bryan called out, “It’s Bryan. I got them on the elevator—made sure to press the button to the lobby before the doors closed. So it’s just me.”

Dev went to open the door. “Come on in. Thank you. Girls, this is Bryan. He’s a friend of mine.”

Marley blinked, and Juniper blurted out with, “A kissing friend?”

Bryan gave it a valiant try, Dev could see him trying hard not to laugh, but a snicker made its way out, the pretty lips twisting into a smile. Bryan followed up the sound with a “not yet.”

“See? Just friends. Come on in and have a seat.” He got a hug from Juniper, then a surprise one from Marley. “You’re okay, sweetheart. I promise.”

“Thanks.” Bryan went and sat on the end of one of the big couches, his tea in hand. “So did you guys get all your homework done?” he asked the girls.

Marley shook her head, but Juni nodded, so eager. “I did!”

“Good for you!” Bryan lifted his hand for a high-five, and she gave it to him, bumping her little hand up against his. “What did you have to do?” Bryan was clearly comfortable with kids.

“I had fractions, and I had to do social studies.” She tilted her head. “Are you a teacher?”

“No, I’m not, but I do read during story hour at the community center a few days a



week.”

“Oh, that’s nice. I don’t like reading a lot…”

“No? There are some amazing books out there. Such a huge variety. What don’t you like about reading?” Bryan asked before taking a sip of his tea.

Marley tugged Dev’s hand. “Where’d you meet him?”

“Through a lawyer. He was married to the evil one.”

Marley made a face. “Poor man.”

“Yes. He has kids too. Little ones.”

“That bites.”

It did. He knew exactly how much it did.

“So what have you got for homework?” Bryan asked Marley, turning his attention to Dev’s older daughter.

“I have a book report.” Marley frowned at him. “You’re sure you’re not a teacher?”

Bryan chuckled. “I’m very sure I’m not a teacher. But I do have two boys. They’re a lot younger than you guys, though. Is asking about homework a teacher thing?”

“I guess. I mean, a little.”

Juniper rolled her eyes. “Teachers give homework!”

“Okay. No more homework questions,” Bryan said solemnly.

“You have little boys? How old are they?” Juniper asked.

“Micah is four and Dylan is six. Dylan sometimes has homework,” Bryan told her with a wink.

Marley’s eyes lit up. “Oh, they’re little. I have my babysitting certification. I mean, if you ever need someone!”

“Oh, now, I could maybe use a babysitter. I don’t have one at the moment. You’ll have to meet my boys and see if you like them.”

“Oh, I will. I’m good with kids. I got an A in my class.”

“And you’re sure you’d be good with hanging out with two young boys?” Bryan asked.

“I would. I have my CPR, my first aid.”

“You’re so grown up,” Bryan told her. “I believe that my boys would be safe with you.” Bryan glanced over to him, met his gaze.

He smiled, nodded once. His girl was a sweetheart. “Decide what you want for supper, girls, and I’m going to sit with Bryan and chat.”

“You said we were having soup and matzo balls,” Juniper told him. It was one of her favorite meals.

“So I did. Well then, I guess you can go watch some TV.”

“Yes, Da!” Juniper bounded off, Marley moving more sedately, clearly too ‘grown-up’ to be rambunctious.

Bryan took another sip of his tea and shifted slightly, although there was plenty of room for him on the couch. “They seem like great girls. I’m glad you know who didn’t turn them evil.”

“Juniper doesn’t remember him. Marley went to therapy.” So had he. For years.

“I’m glad she doesn’t. Micah remembers a little bit—it’s more in the occasional nightmare than anything day-to-day. He goes to therapy too, though, because his big brother does. I mean, they go separately, but because Dylan goes, Micah wants to go too, and now that I can afford it, I figure there’s going to be something he needs to talk to a neutral party about, right? And it’s not like he has another parental figure he can talk to...”

“It’s tough to be a single dad. What happened to their first parent?” Real parent?

“Miller was in a car accident. It was pretty bad, actually. On the highway and a few dozen cars were involved when all was said and done and seven people died. The only saving grace was that he didn’t have the kids with him or they might have been gone, too.” Bryan shook his head as if trying to clear his thoughts from going in that direction.

“Oh, man. I’m sorry. That sucks so hard.”

“Yeah, it does. You know that too, though, eh? Your man...” Bryan let the words trail off, the question clear.

“Heart attack.” It had been fast, brutal, and the hardest thing he’d ever done.

“That’s awful. I’m sorry.”

Yeah, they both knew how much losing your husband sucked. Unfortunately, they also both knew how much getting conned and fleeced by one felt too.

“Yes, it’s been a while. I’m on my feet now.”

“Yeah, you’ve been recovering a little longer than I have. The first year after Gr—him, there were days I wasn’t sure where our next meal was coming from. This last year has been better.”

“Well, I was incredibly lucky that some of my husband’s money was tied up in the girls, and Mike’s parents are loaded and have been absolutely amazing, so... if you need help, please let me know.”

“That’s very generous of you, but we’re in a good place now, thank you. It’s just a lot harder than it was supposed to be. Miller and I both made sure that if one of us died the other would be set for life.” Bryan shook his head and barked out an unamused laugh. “All roads seem to lead back to you know who.”

“He’s an evil bastard, and I want to get him. I want to hurt him.”

Bryan nodded and took a long swallow of his tea. “Like I said earlier, I’ve never considered myself a violent person, but I’d cheerfully change that for him. My therapist said I should forgive him.” Bryan snorted. “I told him that wasn’t going to happen, even if hell froze over.”

“Fuck that,” he bit out. “Fuck forgiving him. He’s a habitual offender.”

“He sure is. You think we should find the guy he’s currently engaged to and warn him?” Bryan asked.

“I don’t know. I mean, the court case is public record. Maybe we should take an advertisement out. A billboard...”

“Those things are pretty fucking expensive, aren’t they? I mean, I otherwise endorse the idea. I don’t have a single picture that could be used for one, though. I destroyed any I had that he was in.”

“Good for you.” He actually found a smile for Bryan. “I feel like an idiot, for trusting him.”

“Yes.” Bryan nodded vigorously. “Like the world’s biggest fool. How could I be taken in by him? How could I let this con man and thief into my life and worse, my kids’ lives? I used to beat myself up daily over it. With the therapist’s help, it’s closer to weekly now.”

“It’ll ease.” In theory. His never had. Maybe it never would.

“I hope so. You’ve obviously been at it longer than I have.” Bryan sighed and relaxed back against the couch, and it looked like it took effort. He took a sip of his tea. “Let’s move onto a more interesting subject. Tell me about yourself.”

“I’m an artist, I love to travel and see new things. My girls are into dance and piano, robotics and Judo. I love music when I’m working...” And he was basically celibate. Go him.

“Do you get to do a lot of travel with the girls?” Bryan asked.

“I didn’t when they were young—it felt too difficult, but we’re starting to do more now that I can watch them both.”

“That’s pretty cool. At the moment, the boys consider any place with fair food or

food from another country as traveling. I have visions of them being a little more grown, and we go to Paris and I go look at the Eiffel Tower! and they say ‘in a minute, dad, we’re busy with the baguette and cheese’.” Bryan laughed softly, clearly not terribly upset by the prospect of his boys getting to know other countries by their food.

“I do love a baguette and good butter.” He winked over.

He’d bet the girls would love to go to Paris with him.

Bryan laughed, and the sound was awesome, deep and happy. He was a good-looking man, but smiling, laughing, he was even more handsome.

“Yeah, me too,” Bryan admitted. “The boys, now while they do like their bread and butter, are fiends for going to Mexico. AKA, going to Lucia’s Cantina and having tacos.” He chuckled again. “Last night, Micah tried to convince me to let him have a s’mores taco and, barring that, a gummi worms one.”

“Oh, I like that. I have one that only eats chicken and broccoli and one that only wants hamburgers.”

“Oh man, really? How do you work that out? ‘Cause they’re like diametrically opposed. And really? A kid who only wants chicken and broccoli?”

“She’s fourteen, a dancer, and obsessed with her body image. She’s worried about having boobs and hips.”

“Doesn’t that come with the territory?” Bryan asked. “I’m so glad I have boys. I wouldn’t know what to think if I had girls.”

“I ended up with two, and it’s been wild and wonderful. I’ve survived one first

period, one first leg shaving, and learning how to braid hair for class.”

“That’s impressive!” Bryan didn’t look like he was making fun of him. “And my youngest wanted nothing but hot dogs for a year and a half. Which I was grateful for as that was our first year and a half after you know who left us high and dry. Damn, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring him back up.”

“It’s okay. Seriously. Look, we’re going to order out for supper, would you like to stay? And if not, would you like to come over tomorrow evening with your boys? It’s a Friday...”

Bryan glanced at his watch. “Actually, I have to go pick them up soon, so tomorrow would work way better. Thanks so much for the offer. The boys will love to see people who live in an apartment.”

“Do you have a house in town, then?” He’d never thought about getting one, not really.

“It’s a duplex. We live on the ground floor and the owners live above us. I think they took pity on us because I got an amazing rent.”

“Oh, that’s good. I love to hear that.” He wasn’t going to mention that he owned this floor. All six bedrooms of it. Not to mention the studio space upstairs and the rooftop garden. He’d recovered from Grant stealing everything he could get his hands on, built everything back. But then he’d had longer than Bryan had so far.

“They’re awesome. Portuguese. I think they’ve all but adopted us. Mrs. Rosa brings us down supper at least once a week.”

“Oh, that’s amazing.” He’d had a housekeeper, but she’d retired recently, so he was hunting another. Someone who could cook so he could feed the girls a homemade

meal now and then.

“Yeah, there’s been enough angels in our lives that I’m not entirely soured by the whole thing. I should head off, though, collect my boys. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.” Bryan thrust out a hand.

“Of course. Oh! Wait, can I share my details? So we can text?”

“Good idea.” Bryan took out his phone and passed it over, watched as he put in his number, the address, and his and the girls’ names.

Then Bryan texted him with, “Hey, it’s Bry.”

He chuckled and texted back. “Hi, Bry. It’s Dev.”

Bryan grinned at him and reached out, shook his hand. “I’m glad to have met you, Dev. The circumstances kind of suck, but it’s how we go from here that counts, right?”

“That’s it. We’ll see you tomorrow. We can order when you get here.”

“Sounds good. Say five?”

“We’ll be here. I’ll have your name at security.” Which was how it was supposed to work. Strangers couldn’t just go wherever the fuck they wanted. Of course, the reporter may have talked whoever was on duty to let them up. He was going to have to report the issue and make sure it didn’t happen again.

“Thanks. See you tomorrow.” Bryan headed out, and Dev closed the door behind a very cute ass.



“He was nice, huh?” Marley said.

“He seems to be, yeah.”

“Too many homework questions,” Juni informed him, crossing her arms. “Are we having supper soon?”

“Yep. I told them to deliver it for six so it shouldn’t be long now.” One day, he’d hire another person to cook.

Until then, he’d continue to order.

### CHAPTER THREE

Bryan did not sigh. Instead, he counted to five and answered Micah's one thousandth question of the day. Everything was why and how come and from each answer sprang two more questions. He'd had issues chasing down payment from one of his clients this morning, and that made it feel like it had been a really long day, and the constant questions were making it longer.

"Where are we going?" Micah asked for about the eighth time.

"Asked and answered," Bryan told his boy, keeping his voice even. He was good. They were all good, and soon the boys would be distracted by a new place and new people. And while he was pretty sure that wouldn't put an end to the eternal questions, at least he wouldn't be the only one available to answer them.

"Daaaaady! I forgot!"

"Forgot," he corrected without even thinking about it. "We're going to visit my new friend and his girls."

"Do they really live here?" That was Dylan, eyes wide as he looked up at the building they now stood in front of.

"Yes, they really do."

"In a skyscraper? Really?"

Bryan chuckled—he wasn't sure eight or nine floors technically counted as a skyscraper but it was to his boys—and nodded. "Yes. Really." He could understand Dylan's awe—they didn't know anyone who lived in an apartment of any size so this was a very unique situation.

"That's so cool!"

"So cool!" Micah parroted.

They went in and he stopped at the security desk, keeping the boys' hands firmly in his. "Hi. I'm here to visit Devlin Marx."

"Name, sir?" the guy asked.

"Bryan St-Vincent."

The guard consulted his computer for a moment, then nodded. "The elevator bank on the left. Sixth floor."

"Thanks." He assumed the guard was able to trigger whatever he needed to so that Bryan and the boys could actually go up without a key, so he headed in that direction.

The moment they stepped away from the security guard, the boys started up again, just amazed by the whole experience so far.

"Was that a police, Daddy?"

"Why did he want to know your name?"

"What are all the buttons for?" That question included him having to keep Micah away from the panel so no extra buttons were pushed.

When the elevator arrived at the sixth floor and the doors slid open, their questions stopped, both of them simply taking it all in as they walked along the hall to Dev's place.

“Who wants to knock?”

“Me!”

“Me! Pick me!”

“How about you guys do it together,” he suggested.

Which they did, banging hard on the door. He grabbed their hands. “Okay, okay. I think they heard that.”

Marley answered the door with a grin. “Hey there! Come on in. Daddy was in the studio, so he's washing up.

The apartment was homey enough that he didn't worry too much about the boys making a mess.

“Hi, Marley. This is Dylan and Micah. Boys, this is Marley.”

Micah pressed against his leg, suddenly shy, but Dylan held out his hand and said, “pleased to meet you.”

“Hey guys. We have an art room—you want to come color?”

“Yes!” Micah grabbed hold of Dylan's hand. “An art room, D. Come on!”

Bryan grinned. If she was interviewing for the babysitting job, she was doing a good

job.

Juniper came over. “They can make all sorts of things. Daddy likes making things.”

“They like making things, too. What about you, are you not going to make art too?”  
She and her sister seemed so different. It was neat.

“I am, but it’s rude to leave a guest alone, so I’ll go when Daddy comes in.” So confident.

He was charmed. “Well aren’t you a very polite young lady! Thank you very much, I appreciate that.”

“You’re welcome. Would you like a drink? We have water and juice and soda, or there’s a kettle for tea.”

“I’m good for now, thanks.” He was about to ask how her day at school had been but stopped himself. He’d already committed some weird faux pas with her yesterday, asking about homework, which apparently was a teachers-only domain. “Are you looking forward to the weekend?” That should be neutral enough and not teacher-like.

“Yep! We’re going to the zoo tomorrow. Daddy has a new painting there.”

“A painting at the zoo? That’s pretty cool.” His boys loved the zoo.

“Yeah. At the penguin house. Would you all like to come? We have special tickets, and we get to stay after the zoo closes!”

“Oh wow! Well, we should maybe check with your dad, huh?” That sounded like so much fun, but he didn’t know how many special tickets Dev had, or if he’d even want

them to come.

“Daddy says he’s going to ask, because it’s so much fun. I’m bringing my best friend Victor, and Marley is bringing Hannah. Three and three and two is eight!”

“It is indeed. It sounds like fun,” he admitted. And it was Saturday and they hadn’t done something fun like the zoo in far too long.

“Cool.” A door opened, and Juniper jumped up. “Daddy! He says yes about the zoo!”

“Does he? Excellent!”

“If you’re sure it’s all right, we’d love to go.” He didn’t want to push Dev into it just because Juniper had asked.

“Oh, we wanted to invite you. We have eight tickets. It’s a whole day thing—we get to stay after the zoo closes and see the animals as it gets dark.”

“That sounds really cool. The boys will be excited, I’m sure.” He’d pack them sandwiches and juice boxes and snacks. Hopefully, they had what they needed. Maybe they would stop at the corner store on the way home and get bread.

“It should be. We’ll have food passes, drink passes, and amusement passes. It’ll be a perfect day of exhausted children.”

“Oh, wow, that’s very generous of you.” He wouldn’t have to say no to the boys when they asked for stuff. That never happened anymore.

“I have eight passes. It’s my pleasure. I can’t guarantee babysitting—Marley and Hannah tend to be somehow more teenaged together than they do apart.”

“Hannah?” Bryan figured babysitting wasn’t even a consideration—he’d be there with his boys after all and considering they were getting a lovely outing for free, they totally didn’t need babysitting on top of that.

“Her best friend on earth. They met in kindergarten. They are deep in each other’s pockets.”

“Ah. And they get up to no good together, eh?” That’s what best friends were for, right? Egg you on and have your back no matter what. Miller had been his best friend as well as his lover. Grant had never been a best friend. That should have been his first red flag.

“They do, and they are starting to pay attention to fashion and experiment with makeup and being on their phones. It’s... different.”

“I bet. Having boys has its own challenges, but it doesn’t sound like having girls is easy at all!” He knew he’d learn—the internet could be his best friend too—if he had girls, but it still seemed harder than boys.

“They’re unicorns, that’s for sure.”

Bryan laughed at that. “And boys are...? Rhinos?” They both had single horns, after all.

Dev’s laughter filled the living room, the sound bright and happy.

He loved that, almost as much as he loved hearing kids laugh. Joy was a good thing. He just grinned, pleased he’d amused Dev.

“Come on in. Would you like a drink? I figure we’d order whatever you guys ate. I don’t cook.”

Bryan blinked a few times, taking that in. “At all. Like not at all?”

Dev gave him a warm smile. “Nope. I had a housekeeper, but she had to move to be closer to her grandchildren. I’m interviewing for someone new, but for now, we’re just making do.”

There was a period of time when if Bry hadn’t been able to cook, and do so on an extreme budget, they wouldn’t have eaten at all. Hell, he’d frequented the food bank when Grant had first left them destitute. It had only been by the grace of God, and the Pereiras that they hadn’t been homeless. “We’ll have to have you over for a home-cooked meal then. As a thank-you for tonight and tomorrow’s adventure.”

“Oh, that’s very kind. We’d love to.”

“Awesome. Chicken, broccoli, and what was it your other daughter prefers again?” He had a few casseroles that might fit the bill. And he could always look something up on the internet. You name it and there was a recipe for it.

“She’ll eat anything, but she prefers for it to be terrible for her.”

Bryan chuckled. “We’ll come up with something for them.” His boys would want to ‘help’ cook for guests. “Maybe Sunday? Say, late afternoon?” That would let them sleep in a little bit, go to the market for food, and have everyone go to bed early enough for school Monday morning.

“Sounds amazing. Thank you.”

“Excellent.” He didn’t examine too closely how it made him happy that he would be spending the entire weekend with Dev and his girls. He knew he was lonely, but it was more than that—so far from what he knew of Dev, he liked the guy a lot. Handsome, fierce about his kids, a smile that lit up his face, and they had something



in common on top of that.

“So what do you guys want tonight?” Dev asked.

“Oh, right! What are our choices?”

“Basically, anything you want. You name it, I can have it delivered.” Devon grinned.

“I actually have a folder of menus, if you want to search through. She left two months ago, and we had to improvise.”

The temptation to say ‘oh poor baby’ was huge, but he didn’t, because he had no idea. Maybe Dev didn’t cook because he didn’t know how. Maybe he worked twelve-hour days.

He was going to have to reserve judgment, no matter how weird not cooking at all seemed to him.

“Well, my boys love anything Mexican. Especially tacos and flautas. Pretty much if it’s finger food, they’ll eat it. And there’s lots of other stuff they’ll eat—that was just off the top of my head.” He’d learned to make tacos at home, but he couldn’t do anything that got deep fried. He could probably learn how, but the hot oil thing was intimidating, and fryers weren’t cheap. “And I’ll eat anything. Pretty much literally.”

“Well then, let’s do tacos. My girls love tacos. We had chicken soup last night. I’d ordered it earlier in the day, but it wound up being the perfect choice. We all needed a little comfort food after our unexpected and unwelcome visitors. Not you of course.”

Bryan couldn’t imagine ordering chicken soup. Part of what made that comfort food for him was that it was homemade, but he wasn’t judging, right? Everyone was different.

“Tacos sounds good. Can we get a few flautas, too? They really do love munching on those.” And he maybe liked them even better than tacos himself.

“Absolutely. How do you feel about guacamole? I’m a chip and dip person, all the way.”

“I like a good guac. Especially if it’s mixed with some salsa and sour cream.” Hopefully Dev wasn’t a purist who would think that was gross. Bry liked all the flavors together on one chip.

“Ooh... okay. So, tacos, flautas, all the dips, chips.” Dev nodded and went to make an order.

He thought maybe Dev didn’t approve of the way he ate his guacamole. He chuckled and relaxed back on one of the couches. This was very comfy. He closed his eyes, just for a moment.

Before he knew it, he smelled food and heard his boys giggling.

Bry blinked. Shit, he’d fallen asleep. He looked around. “Oh man, sorry. Sorry.”

“Shh. You’re fine. We all made art.” Dev’s smile was so kind.

“Oh, that’s sounds nice.” He blinked a few more times, smiled at his boys.

“You was sleeping, Daddy,” Micah informed him, both he and Dylan giggling some more.

“I was. I guess I was more tired than I thought and your couch is so comfortable,” he told Dev. So many people had couches that looked great, were classy and such, but were not comfortable to sit on. Dev’s couch definitely fell into the comfy category.

At least the one he was on did.

“It’s amazing. I love it. It’s like puffy heaven. Both of them are.”

Bry nodded, amused. “Yes! That’s it exactly.”

“Daddy, are you awake enough to eat now? There’s tacos!” Dylan was always hungry these days. His boy was going through a growth spurt, he’d bet money on it.

“And fluties!” Micah added.

“And chips and guacamolly!” Juniper grinned, even as the eldest girl rolled her eyes.

“Well, I don’t want to keep anyone waiting if there’s fluties and guacamolly.” He got up and followed the kids as they trooped into the kitchen, which had a nice-sized table, already laid out with plates and the take-out food in the center. “It smells delicious.”

“Doesn’t it? I want to try guacamole with salsa in it.” Dev grinned at him, obviously trying to put him at ease. “What do your boys drink?”

“Milk or water. I try to keep the sugary drinks to a minimum, especially in the evenings.” He wasn’t a crazy no-sugar-at-all dad, but he had found that high-sugar content drinks had absolutely no nutrition and hyped the boys up. Hyped-up kids were the last thing you needed when bedtime rolled around.

“Yeah. I understand. I have milk. Juniper?”

“I’d like water, please, Daddy. Is there lemon?”

“There is.”

Bryan tilted his head. "Lemon juice in the water? Or a fancy slice on the side?" He nodded to the boys, letting them know they could take some food. He trusted they wouldn't fill their plates with three quarters of what was there, but would know they could go back for seconds.

"Just a fancy slice. I like lemon in my water. It makes it goes down easier," she informed him.

"Oh, that's cool." Bryan thought water went down just fine, but he also knew kids all had their foibles. He kept an eye on his boys, pleased to see them each take one taco and two flautas. He took two tacos of his own and one flauta, along with scoops of salsa, guac, and sour cream.

The girls each took tacos, and Dev took the dips and some chips.

Was that all he was going to eat? Was there not enough for everyone?

"Not hungry?" he asked, hoping it was that and not that he and his boys were taking more than their share, although there seemed to be plenty of food left. He bet there'd be leftovers, even if he and the boys went back for seconds.

"I'm a grazer. I'll eat this. Then a little more. Then a little more."

"Ah. That makes sense." No longer worried they were running out of food, he happily munched on his tacos. These were pretty good.

The kids all jabbered happily about art and cartoons and the zoo, eating like they were starving, comfortable around Dev.

This was clearly a good man, and, despite the circumstances of why they'd met, he was glad they had. So far, he more than liked what he saw, and he wanted to get to

know Dev better.

“So what kind of art did you do for the zoo?”

“I donated a painting for the new building. It’s a pair of penguins and their baby.”

“That sounds adorable. Did you use actual zoo penguins as the models?”

Dev smiled, the expression friendly. “I did. I went down, took some photos, and worked from them.”

“That’s awesome! I can’t wait to see the piece and then the penguins that inspired it.”

“Tomorrow, huh? They hung it today, and the unveiling is at three p.m.”

“So when and where are we meeting up?” He and the boys would be there with bells on. They hadn’t had an extensive outing like this before. An expedition to the zoo, behind the scenes stuff, and food? They were going to remember this for a long time.

“We can pick you up at one thirty? Does that sound like fun?”

“Have you got room for all of us? Both boys are still in car seats.”

“I’ll have a van pick us up.”

“Cool.” Bryan wasn’t used to having money for whatever anymore, even if they were doing so much better now, so it was surprising every time Dev casually said stuff like that.

“Yeah. It’s the easiest answer. We have to pick up the girls’ friends too.”

“Sounds awesome. Let me text you our address.” He grabbed his phone and typed it in, sent it off. “Now you’ll know where to go next week for Sunday supper, too.” He was going to be spoiled for company, what with being here tonight, doing the zoo with Dev and his family tomorrow, and them coming over next Sunday. “Hopefully, you won’t be sick of us by then.”

“We’re having a ball. Aren’t we, girls?”

Both girls nodded around their tacos.

“And so are we, eh, guys?”

“Balls!” Micah shouted, both hands in the air.

Bryan bit the side of his mouth, hard, to keep from bursting out laughing. He didn’t want to encourage them, though, and he knew laughing totally would.

The girls stared at each other, then started giggling.

Micah clearly didn’t know what the joke was, but he was happy to have made everyone laugh and so he did it again, shouting “Balls,” and enthusiastically throwing his hands in the air. Then Dylan joined him.

Bryan shook his head, then put it in his hands. Oye.

“Ah, boys. How is the food?” Dev chuckled, obviously trying to distract.

“It’s balls!” Micah said, clearly believing he was onto something.

“Micah…” Bryan gave his son a look. “It was funny the first time.”

“That means it’s really good, Daddy,” Micah insisted.

“Then say it’s really good.”

“Okay.” Micah shoved half a flauta into his mouth.

“Sometimes it’s like a... hiccup, saying something funny,” Juniper said, smiling at Micah.

Oh, that was so sweet. Bryan smiled at Juniper. Dev’s kids were good kids. It said so much about the man.

“So, what do you do for a living?” Dev asked him as the kids settled back down to finishing their food. “I don’t think we discussed it yesterday.”

“Nothing exciting like what you do. I’m an accountant.” It let him work from home. Let him set his own schedule; as long as he got people’s taxes done and their accounts settled, he was good. And it paid good money, too, which was a bonus given the lack of funds.

“Oh, that’s a great job, though. Solid. Stable.”

Assuming your ex doesn’t steal it all, of course...

“It pays the bills and because I’m working for myself, I can work as much extra as I want at tax season rather than mandatory overtime.” He’d put in his time with a company, and February to April, nobody saw their family.

“Oh, good for you. I appreciate that—sometimes my life gets a little nuts, to be honest.”

“That’s one thing I learned from the whole debacle—to make time for what’s important. Which in my case is my boys.”

“I understand that, bone deep. I have my girls and my arts.”

Bry held Dev’s gaze and nodded. They got each other.

“Is there sweets?” Micah asked.

“He means dessert,” Dylan clarified.

“Do you like pineapple? We have a tray of pineapple, mandarins, and strawberries.”

“Stawlberries!” Micah put his hand in the air as he said it, just like he’d cheered for ‘balls’. It was adorable.

“I love pineapple. You gotta love a fruit that eats you back.”

“I’ll get it, Daddy,” Marley said, hopping up.

“Pineapple eats you?” Micah asked, eyes huge.

“In a way, but don’t worry about it. You eat it more than it eats you,” Bry assured his boy.

“Okay. I’ll have stawlberries.”

Bryan chuckled. “Sounds good.”

“I want the mandarins. They’re my favs.” Juni snapped up the last of her taco.



“I am going to have a little bit of each one. Fruit is delicious. It’s like nature’s candy.” He preferred it to candy, actually, but Bry knew that put him in the minority, especially when it came to this particular table.

Cue his older boy. “It’s not as good as candy!”

“It’s better than some candy,” Juniper argued. “Not as good as others.”

“All candy is good,” Dylan insisted. Micah nodded his agreement with his older brother.

His boys were still at the age where they didn’t distinguish. If it was sweet and sugary, well then it was yummy and they were happy to eat it. Of course, that meant that they could have the cheap candy so it didn’t cost him the earth to treat them.

“I like peppermint and dark chocolate together the best,” Marley added.

“Mint is too spicy,” Dylan noted. “But chocolate is awesome!”

“I like squishy worms.” Micah started counting off on his fingers, and when he ran out, he just started back at the first one. “And choco bars, and squishy bears, and crunchy candy, and pixie sticks, and nerds, and sweetarts.”

“Basically, he’s saying if it’s candy, he likes it,” Bry noted, rubbing the hair on Dylan’s head. “Though he doesn’t get it that often.” Because the way Dylan was talking, it sounded like he ate candy all the time.

“It’s okay, man. This is a no-judgment zone, you know?”

“That’s good to know.” Man, he’d really become defensive about the boys, hadn’t he? He thought it was a result of what had happened. He was defensive because he

judged himself badly for losing all that money; he'd already let them down so badly.

Dev nodded and patted his hand. "It's hard. I get it. We're going to make him pay."

He nodded and turned his hand over to hold Dev's and squeeze it. "That sounds really good." It was also really good to not be in this alone. He hadn't realized how isolating being taken advantage of like that had been until he had someone else to talk to who got it. "Thank you."

"It's okay. No judgment." Dev winked at him, and Marley brought a plastic tray of fruits from the fridge and some plastic chopsticks over to the table.

"Skewers!" Juniper clapped and bounced.

"What's those?" Dylan asked.

Bryan figured he'd let Juniper answer as they seemed to be a favorite eating utensil of hers, and he was curious to see how she used them.

"We poke the fruit, and then munch." She skewered a piece of mandarin with the tip of one of her chopsticks, then ate it off the end. "Yum!"

Micah grabbed one of the chopsticks and stabbed it into a piece of pineapple, then ate it off the end of the stick and said, "Yum!"

And that was adorable.

Dylan also took a chopstick and used it to spear a piece of fruit—choosing a strawberry as he'd said he would—then ate it.

Micah looked at Dylan expectantly, and when Dylan didn't say anything, Micah

nudged him.

“You gotta say yum!”

“Oh! Yum!”

Marley giggled, then she stabbed a pineapple and ate it. The little boys stared at her as she paused. “YUM!”

They laughed, and Bry grinned and grabbed his own chopstick to get in on the action. There was more laughter when he said “Yum!” too after eating his slice of kiwi.

Then all five of them stared at Dev.

Dev wagged his eyebrows, then speared a pineapple and a strawberry, then ate them both, chewing and licking his lips. “Yum!”

That had his boys in conniptions, laughing so hard. Damn, that was a good sound anytime, but when it was his own boys, it was even better.

He knew that Dev wasn't a friend—not yet—but it was an absolute possibility. And God knew, he needed more friends in his life. Especially one who understood him the way that Dev did.

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### CHAPTER FOUR

The zoo had been so kind—feeding them, taking them behind the scenes, everything. They'd been treated like they were zoo royalty.

Dev was tickled he'd managed this for the kids.

The girls and their friends were in good moods, and Bry's boys were obviously in seventh heaven.

Bry looked pretty pleased, too. The guy hadn't stopped smiling since they'd picked him and the boys up earlier today.

"Daddy! The lady gave us balloons!" Micah came running up with an elephant balloon. His brother had a peacock.

"Wow! Look at those. They're amazing!" Bry checked them both out thoroughly, then tied the end of the strings around each of their wrists so they wouldn't fly away. Then the kids ran back to the activity table in the middle of the visitors center.

"So, are you having a good time, Bryan?" What did you think of my art?

"I'm having a wonderful time, and I haven't seen the boys this animated for a long time. Thanks so much for including us. I hope the zoo paid you for your piece as well as comping you the tickets and the food and stuff. Because they've got an amazing piece of art there."

“Oh, thank you. It was fun to do.” He’d had a ball.

“It’s adorable. And it was so cool, seeing the penguins that inspired you. Them and the art were my favorite part. So far, anyway.” Bry gave him a warm smile.

“I’m so glad you like it.” He was self-aware enough to know he needed his ego stroked. And when the stroking was being done by a good-looking guy, it was even better.

“I really do. You’re very talented. I’ve never known a famous artist before.”

“Well, I’m—I’m trying to keep myself relevant and happy.” It was a crazy situation—painting penguins to make your local zoo happy. But they’d rewarded him handsomely with all these activities and goodies for the kids, not to mention it was in a very public place with his name right there on it.

“Those are great goals.” Bry smiled at him again. It was a good look on the guy, and Dev had a hunch he was maybe out of practice a little.

Having your life’s savings stolen out from under you would do that to a guy, and it had happened more recently to Bryan than to him. They were going to get the asshole, though. And that would be very happy making. For both of them. They’d have to celebrate together when it happened.

The boys and Juniper and her friend Victor came back to them, with artwork this time, too. He and Bry admired and ooo ’d and aaa ’d over it, then Bry tucked the boys’ pieces—both of the penguins Dev had painted—into the souvenir bag the zoo had given each of them at the beginning of the day.

“Is there anything else you need to see?” Dev asked. He wasn’t sure where Marley and Hannah were, but they had forty-five minutes before they were meeting up with

the teenagers by the front reception area so that was cool.

Micah tugged on his pants, and he looked down at the little boy.

“I wanna see the shloths, Mr. Devlin.”

“Sloths—there’s no ‘h’ at the beginning,” Bry told his son.

“Soths,” Micah said.

Bryan bit his bottom lip. “Close enough for now.”

Dev found the zoo volunteer who’d been guiding them around and asked if they could see the sloths. She was happy to bring them to their habitat, chattering on about them as they went—their diet, where they lived in the wild, all the incredible facts that made them unique in the animal kingdom.

Micah seemed fascinated, and when they got their first glimpse of one, hanging off a tree, he squealed, “Soths, Daddy, soths!”

“I know, I see him.”

They watched for a while, and then Dylan asked to see the lemurs. Luckily, their enclosure was fairly close. The lemurs were far more active than the sloths, and they were soon all laughing at their antics.

“Okay, we need to go meet the girls. And then we can have one last trip to the cafeteria.” Because he’d promised Juniper she could try the hippo plate before they left. The zoo served several meals that adhered to what certain animals ate, and she’d wanted to try the bear meal and the hippo meal. So she’d had the bear plate at lunch with the promise of the other for dinner if they were still there, which they clearly

were.

The kids ran from enclosure to enclosure as he and Bry strolled toward the front reception, taking their time.

“It’s been a lovely day, thank you,” Bry said.

“You don’t have to keep thanking me, but you’re welcome.”

“My mother brought me up to not talk to strangers and always say thank you.”

“Good thing you didn’t follow her first piece of advice,” Dev noted, giving Bryan a wink.

It took a moment, but then the guy laughed. “Good one. And you’re not a stranger anymore.”

“No, I guess we’re not strangers, are we? I’m glad.”

“Yeah, me too. I’m looking forward to making you guys a home-cooked meal tomorrow.”

“And we’re looking forward to eating it.” Had he really said that? They needed their own enclosure. The Great North American Dork. Still, dorky as it might have been, it was the truth; he wanted to spend more time with Bry and that had nothing to do with their joint efforts to bring Grant to some sort of justice.

Marley and Hannah were sitting on a bench when they got to their meeting place, eating ice cream cones and deep in conversation.

Dylan and Micah ran over to the girls, talking over each other to tell Marley

everything they'd seen.

"They've really taken to your girls." Bry grabbed a couple of the brochures about the zoo and the animals from the rack, tucking them in his bag.

"That'll make it easier if you decide to let Marley babysit. Don't feel like you have to, though."

"I love the idea in theory. I'm just not sure how well it's going to work in practice. I don't go out all that much," Bry admitted.

"How about I take you out on a date sometime next week?" He found himself asking without having thought it out, but if things went awry Sunday, they didn't have to do the date after all, and if they went well, then good.

Bry blinked at him a few times before smiling, and nodding. "I think I'd like that."

"Good deal. Saturday evening sound good?" He'd have to check with Marley, of course, she might have plans he didn't know about. She wasn't quite at that age yet, though, where she made too many plans on her own.

"I'll put it in my calendar." Bryan did exactly that, opening his phone and putting in the date on his calendar.

"So does everyone still want to go back to the cafeteria before we leave?" It would make dinner nice and easy, and he had leftover chips and dip, and fruit if the girls were hungry later on.

There were a chorus of yeses, and the boys came to grab his hands, which made him smile. The girls and their friends went ahead, chattering together.



The cafeteria was right next to the reception area, which was just as well because the zoo took up a lot of acreage and they'd walked most of it already. Dev's feet were ready for him to sit, the boys had to be extra tired. He'd bet they'd sleep well for Bry tonight.

Juniper got her hippo plate, which turned out to be a plate full of vegetables. While she didn't look very impressed, she didn't pitch a fit, though she did look longingly at the burger her bestie Hannah got. Dev was going to let her get ice cream for dessert as a reward for gamely eating the veggies without complaining.

Bry's kids ordered the dino fingers with fries, while Bry himself had the spaghetti. Dev got a burger so when Juniper got tired of chewing greens, he could share with her.

The kids were thick as thieves, eating and nattering while he and Bry talked about the animals and how much fun it was to see them in their own habitats and how zoos had changed over the years. Each having their own habitat and more space was so much better than the caged animals of old.

By the time everyone was finished, Bry's boys were beginning to droop visibly. It had been a long and exciting day, and it was showing.

"Daddy, I want ice cream."

"Is that how we ask for things?" Bry asked.

"Pleeeeeeassseee." Dylan had the puppy-dog-eyes look down.

"We'll have to eat them here or the van is going to get covered in drips and sticky fingers," Bry warned him.

“That’s fine. We don’t have anywhere else to be.”

Of course once Juniper realized the boys were having ice cream, she wanted some too, which worked out well as it had been his plan. So they all trooped through the line at the cafeteria again.

Micah’s ice cream dropped out of his cone on their way back to their table and his face screwed up, and sure enough, he started wailing.

“Oh man.” Bry crouched next to his son. “We’ll get you another one, okay?”

Micah nodded, sniffing hard, and he and Bry went back through the line, but even though he had another ice cream, Micah still looked like the shine had gone off the day for him when they finally joined everyone back at their table.

“Overtired,” Bry murmured. “I probably should have said no to the ice creams.”

“I know they’re just tired, honey. If it wasn’t the ice cream, it would have been something else. Come on, let’s get them home. But you’re on your own for bedtime.” He gave Bry a wink.

The man snorted, but his shoulders weren’t up by his ears anymore, so Dev took it as a win. He found himself wanting to keep Bry happy.

Despite the last-minute meltdown, it had been a winner of a day.

### CHAPTER FIVE

The boys were up early as usual on Sunday morning—no sleeping in despite how busy a day they’d had the day before—and Bryan fed them cereal, then they walked over to the Farmer’s Market. He loved the market. All the different stalls, from food to goods like soap and yarn, flowers. The boys were always fascinated by everything, full of questions. They were early enough today that it wasn’t busy yet and the vendors were happy to explain things to them. And feed them samples. He wasn’t going to have to feed them lunch at this rate.

“What’s that?” Dylan asked, pointing at a round, white vegetable—at least Bryan assumed it was a vegetable—with a few stalks coming out of it.

He knew it wasn’t fennel, celery root, or cauliflower. While those were all white, they weren’t smooth like this one was. “I don’t know,” he admitted, looking to the farmer for the answer.

“That there is kohlrabi. It’s a little like an apple and a little like a radish.”

Dylan wrinkled his nose, and he shook his head. “I don’t like radish.”

“Ah, but this isn’t sharp like a radish,” the guy told them. “Would you like to try a bite?”

“I would, please.” Bryan was curious, even if the boys weren’t.

Micah made a face and closed his mouth, keeping his lips tight. Bryan didn’t laugh at

him, but it was adorably cute and he wanted to. There was a lot that Micah liked, but he was at the stage of being suspicious of anything he hadn't tried before.

Dylan looked unsure, but he finally nodded his head and held out his hand when the farmer cut a couple of pieces off the kohlrabi. He handed them over, and Bryan and Dylan tasted it. It was kind of like an apple and radish had a baby, but it wasn't a lot like either of apples or radishes. Definitely not sharp like a radish, or nearly as sweet as an apple.

"They're great in salads, or as snacks just like you're having now."

"I can see that. Can you cook them?"

"You can, but they lose a lot of the flavor if you do. Raw's the best way."

"Good to know. We'll take one." Bryan was planning on making a salad anyway, so he'd chop some of the kohlrabi up and add it in. He loved the name of the vegetable, unlike anything he'd ever heard of.

He also picked up broccoli, carrots, corn, and two kinds of lettuce, along with strawberries, pears, and apples. Then he grabbed a free-range chicken from one of the stalls with meat available. He didn't know exactly what he was making for supper tonight, but he knew it would involve chicken and broccoli so Dev's girls would be happy. The beef farmer had hamburger on special, so he grabbed some of that for tomorrow. If he made a macaroni and beef casserole, there would be leftovers for a couple nights and it was one of his boys' favorites. He also stopped to get a dozen eggs from the egg guy.

In the end, he'd spent more on a few days' food than he usually spent in a week, but it was all good quality, and he could afford it. He'd just been scrimping and trying to make ends meet for long enough that it had become habit, and his budget belt was

very tight. He imagined he was going to use the chicken leftovers to make soup, and he was going to stretch that ground beef to several meals, maybe even more, to make up for the spending.

The boys both had backpacks, and he put the strawberries and pears in Dylan's, while the apples went into Micah's. The rest of the food went into his own backpack.

He held his hands out to them. "Okay, let's get our treasures home."

"Look, there's a chocolate stall." Dylan pointed.

"So there is." He didn't think they needed any chocolate; yesterday had been a full-on treats day with slushies and candy and ice cream.

"Please, Daddy, can we have some?" Dylan asked, and his little brother took up the call.

"Please, Daddy. Please, Daddy. Please."

He was half considering it when he saw the price of just one little truffle. It looked like he was going to get to be the bad guy. "Not today, our bags are full."

"I carry more!" Micah told him, but he shook his head.

"Maybe the next time we come."

"Yay!" they celebrated together.

"I said maybe next time."

"Does that mean no?" Dylan asked.

“It means that we’re not getting any today, but there’s a possibility we will get some next time we come to the market. Okay?”

Even at just six years old, Dylan could make a sigh sound world-weary. “Okay, Daddy.” Still, he slipped his hand back into Bryan’s and didn’t keep bugging him to get them chocolate.

Bryan wasn’t averse to them having chocolate, but they didn’t need to spend three dollar and fifty cents for a small bite. No matter how good the chocolate was. Besides, it wasn’t like the boys were that discerning, and they’d be just as happy with the cheap chocolate you could get in the grocery store.

It was a lovely day, and the walk home was nice, Dylan and Micah talking about all the animals they’d seen at the zoo the day before. He loved hearing them being animated and happy.

“Can we stop at the park, Daddy?”

He pondered that for a moment. It wasn’t too warm yet and the chicken and ground meat would be okay not refrigerated for a short while. “Okay. For fifteen minutes. When I say it’s time to go, it’s time to go. Deal?”

“Deal!” The boys left him their backpacks and ran to the play structure in the middle of the park.

He checked his watch for the time, picked up the backpacks and followed along after them. They were pretty good about not complaining when he said it was time to go, but if he’d told them how long they had ahead of time and made them agree to the ‘deal,’ they were very good about adhering to it.

There were a few other kids there, some of them with both parents, and it gave him a

little pang, being there on his own, as he always was. That wasn't going to change any time soon, though. He didn't know when he'd be ready to trust someone again, but that certainly wasn't today.

He had a friend now, though. Someone who had been through the same experience as he had, and that made their friendship special. And if he yearned for Dev to be more than a friend, well, he could live with that, too.

He opened up his browser on his phone and looked up chicken recipes while the boys played.

Bryan roasted the chicken instead of doing a casserole, and made a cheese sauce for the broccoli, which was the only way his boys liked the 'trees'. He made a big salad, and a strawberry shortcake for dessert. The berries were so good, juicy and bursting with flavor. He also had made some biscuits with the Bisquick mix; he hoped he could be forgiven for using a ready-mix package to help with supper, but he just wasn't good at making biscuits, rolls would have taken too long, and he'd forgotten to get anything like that when they'd been out.

He had the shortcake in the fridge along with the salad, and the chicken was nearly done, the broccoli ready to be turned on as soon as it was, when the doorbell rang.

"I got it!" Dylan yelled, and he could hear both of his boys thundering down the hall like a herd of elephants.

"Check who it is first!" he called out. They were too ready to just fling open the door and he'd had to fend off a furnace salesman because of it. It had taken him ten minutes of insisting he wasn't in the market, no matter how good the deal was before he'd finally been rude and just shut the door in the man's face midsentence. No was a complete sentence and he'd resented the hard sell when he'd been more than clear. It also wasn't safe for them to open the door to just anyone; a salesman was the least of

the bad options.

“It’s Mr. Dev and Marley and Juniper,” Dylan called out.

“Then you can let them in.”

He dried his hands on the dishtowel and made his way out to the front hall. “Hi, guys, come on in.”

“They’re already in, Daddy!”

He rolled his eyes, and Dev laughed. The man had a great laugh, and it made him feel good inside. Not to mention Dev was as good-looking as he remembered. Maybe even better looking, in fact. He gave Dev a warm smile.

“Wanna see our room?” Dylan asked the girls, and the four kids took off down the hall just like that.

“Thanks for coming,” he said, leading Dev back to the kitchen.

“Hey, thanks for having us. It smells good.”

“Roasted chicken and cheesy broccoli. It shouldn’t be too much longer.”

“Oh, score on the meal. Marley will be over the moon at that.”

“I want you all to like it.” He wanted Dev and the girls to like him, and he figured feeding them the food they wanted would make a good start.

“I’m sure we will. I’m hopeless in the kitchen, but if there’s anything I can do to help...”



Bryan laughed. "It's pretty much all done. The table's even set." He'd wanted to get everything out of the way so he and Dev could spend time together without him being distracted by the details of setting the table or finishing off the meal. "So you've never learned to cook?" Bry's folks had made sure he could make fried eggs for breakfast, mac 'n cheese for lunch, and cook burgers and spaghetti for dinner. He'd learned to do more from there. And the internet was his best friend for everything from cooking times to recipes and step-by-step how-to videos. He loved that he didn't have to leave things to chance and hope for the best; if he wasn't sure, he looked it up.

"Never had to." Dev shrugged. "My mother was very traditional and always cooked, and then I was always more interested in my studio, in making art."

"That's cool. I have absolutely no artistic talent whatsoever." His brain was definitely of a pragmatic bent rather than artistic.

"Oh now, I don't believe that."

"No?"

"Nope. Everyone has some creativity in them." Dev said it like he really believed it.

"You say that now, but you haven't seen my attempts at drawing people." He really did have no talent in that area. And it wasn't just the stick figures he passed off as people that told him that. Any time he sat to draw with the boys, his efforts were... painful, really.

"Just because they don't look like people, doesn't make it noncreative," Dev insisted. "You'll have to join me in the studio one day and we'll create stuff. You'll see."

"Or you will."

Dev laughed. “Let’s put a pin in it until we can test each of our hypotheses.”

“I can do that.” Dev didn’t have to believe him. He’d see when Bry tried to actually paint or draw or whatever Dev wanted to throw at him. But he really liked the fact that Dev was talking like they were going to be seeing each other again. More than just the date for next weekend that he’d mentioned at the zoo yesterday.

His timer went off, and he grabbed the oven mitts and checked the chicken. The thermometer said it was over 185 so he knew it was ready.

He took it out and covered it, then turned the heat on under the broccoli and set the timer for ten minutes. Then he leaned against the counter and smiled at Dev.

“Did you want a tour of the place? We’ve got ten minutes before supper’s ready, but the tour won’t take that long.” Everything was on the same floor, and it wasn’t large by any means. It fit them perfectly, though. When the boys were older, he might need to find someplace with another bedroom so they didn’t have to share, but at the moment, they were happy together.

“Sure.”

“Well, this is the kitchen.” He waved his hand around, showing it off. It wasn’t huge, but there was a good amount of counter space and a teeny table, which had three chairs squeezed around it. He’d grown up eating at a formal dining table for every meal, and he’d made a choice not to do that when he had kids of his own. The table was small, but it kept their meals informal and fun.

“It’s bright and clean,” Dev noted, then winked at him. “I’m not worried we’ll get salmonella.”

Bry laughed and led Dev out across to the dining room. He had a large table there,

and usually it held his laptop at one end and a space for the boys to do homework, color, or other crafts at the other end. This evening, it had been cleared off and was now set for six. The four formal chairs would be augmented by two of the chairs from the kitchen table. There was an old sideboard that held all of the boys' craft supplies, Lego kits, puzzles, and the like.

"I usually use one end of the table as my office." He nodded at the short file folder drawer in the back corner of the room that held his clients' paperwork.

Dev ran his fingers along the table. "It's a lovely table. Beautiful wood."

"It is. I picked it up at a flea market and sanded it down, re-varnished it." It had been a great find that had been a fraction of the cost of a new one.

The dining room opened onto the living room at the front of the house. There was a couch and an easy chair and the wall behind the couch had two bookcases full of books, while the wall opposite the couch held the TV. He and the boys could sit together and watch, or they could sit on their own. He had a low coffee table with rounded corners to avoid too much pain if you bumped into it, which he seemed to do on a regular basis and his shins would testify to the accuracy of that statement.

"Oh, this is cozy." Dev looked around, smiling.

Bryan translated cozy as small, and yeah, it was. The whole house was—he'd bet the entire footprint would fit inside Dev's living room—but the price was right, the owners who were upstairs were amazing people, and it had been a godsend when he'd found it after Grant had stolen everything.

"The bedrooms and bathroom are down the hall." He didn't have a fancy en suite, but there was a shower and a bathtub in the bathroom along with the toilet and sink. "The boys have the master because it's bigger and they're sharing."

They peeked into the last three rooms, and he was glad he'd made his bed and made sure his little room was neat and tidy. Dev put a hand on his arm, squeezed. "It's a really cute place. Very homey."

He nodded. "It's home." And they'd been happy here, recovering financially and emotionally.

"So when do you work?" Dev asked as they made their way back to the kitchen.

"Well, I was just working at night, but this year, Micah started kindergarten, so I have time in the day to get things done. I usually put in four or five hours while they're not here, then add in a couple hours after they go to bed if I need to. I get a lot less sleep during tax season, but like I've said, I get to make my own hours even then, so it's ideal." He'd worked so much harder when he'd been with a firm, and now he was his own boss, too. "Do you have specific hours you work?"

Dev shook his head. "I mean, I try to make sure I get into the studio every day, but some days all I do is clean. But on the whole, I work when the spirit moves me. Luckily, I get inspired a lot."

"That's great. Was it hard to work right after... you know?"

"Oh, I worked. Angry, nasty pieces that were the antithesis of what I'd done in the past. My agent calls it my angry period. But it helped to get how I was feeling out."

Bryan nodded. "Yeah, I took up kick boxing at this tiny gym that didn't cost too much, so I get that."

"I imagine you would."

Yeah, they'd both been taken the same way. Nobody else understood exactly how it

felt. He was glad to have someone to share that with, but even more glad that he and Dev seemed to be finding other things in common and were enjoying each other's company. He had a feeling he'd really like to continue enjoying each other's company a whole lot more.

Once the five-cent tour was over, they only had a few more minutes 'til the broccoli was done, so he uncovered the chicken and started carving. Slicing up the breast and pulling off the legs and wings. He split the legs into drumstick and thigh. He was glad the chicken was as big as it was. Grocery store chickens were small compared to the ones you could get at the market and there was six of them after all. Usually, he'd say his boys didn't eat much anyway, but that suspected growth spurt had Dylan eating easily twice as much as he used to.

"That looks delicious. And you made it yourself, which is impressive." Dev's praise felt good.

"Thank you."

The timer went off and he checked the broccoli. He stabbed a fork in one to make sure it was soft enough, then transferred the florets to a bowl. He poured the cheese sauce over the green, not mixing it in at all. That way if the girls preferred theirs without cheese, they'd be able to pick some pieces out around what cheese was in there.

"Need any help?" Dev asked.

"If you could grab the broccoli, and the chicken, I'll bring the salad and biscuits and we're ready to go."

"Cool." Dev grabbed the bowl and the plate and headed for the dining room.

Bry uncovered the basket with the biscuits and grabbed the salad from the fridge. Once they had all the food on the table, he called out, “Hey, kids, supper is ready!”

“Coming!” They definitely sounded like a bigger than usual herd of elephants with all four of them running to the dining room.

“Oh damn, the extra chairs.” He hot-footed it back to the kitchen to grab two of the chairs and bring them back out. “Sorry.”

Dev touched his arm again. “No stress, we’re just happy to get a home-cooked meal.”

“Thanks.” He was enjoying the little touches Dev kept giving him. It felt... intimate. And he hadn’t had that in quite a while. Maybe he was a little more ready than he’d thought—to consider having a special friend. He gave Dev a warm, genuine smile and pointed at the table. “Everyone sit and help yourselves.” He hoped he hadn’t made a mistake, only getting one chicken, but there was lots of other stuff for people to eat if they were still hungry, and there was dessert, right?

His worry dissipated once everyone had filled their plates—there were leftovers of everything so if anyone needed seconds that would be fine. And for a few minutes, it was quiet as everyone dug in and had their first few bites.

“This is really good, Mr. Bryan,” Marley told him after she’d had a bite of both her chicken and her broccoli.

He beamed at her. Dev would tell him it was good whether it was or not, he was sure, but kids were far more likely to be honest, especially when it came to food. “Thank you, very much.”

“Daddy, butter my biscuit.” Micah passed his biscuit over.

“What’s the magic word?”

“I know! It’s please! Daddy, please butter my biscuit.”

“That is indeed the magic word.” Grinning, he cut Micah’s biscuit open and put butter on both sides before handing it back. Then he did the same for himself.

“What’s the little white rectangles in the salad?” Juniper asked, looking at them suspiciously.

“Dylan?” Bryan thought maybe his boy would like to tell them about the new vegetable they’d discovered at the market this morning.

“It’s a kol... korab...kolbaby?” Dylan looked to him.

“That was close—kohlrabi.”

“It’s a kolrabi! The man said it tasted like radish and apple, but it doesn’t because I don’t like radish and I know what apple tastes like. It tastes okay, though.” As if to prove the point, Dylan stabbed one of the little bites and put it in his mouth, munching on it.

“I’d never heard of it before this morning,” Bry admitted. “But the farmer suggested it would be good in a salad, and I think he’s right.”

Dev took a forkful of salad, making sure it had a piece of the kolrabi in it, and he nodded as he chewed. “It’s good. I like that the salad has all sorts of bits and pieces in it. It’s like a party.”

Juniper looked at Dev like he’d lost his mind. “Salads are not parties, Da.”

Bry bit the side of his cheek to keep from laughing.

Micah looked at his salad, then he nodded. "Salads not parties!"

"No, but they're good to eat," Bry suggested. "And I put some strawberries in this one, and some sliced almonds, so it's even got dessert-like ingredients in it."

Juniper looked through the very small portion of salad she'd taken and frowned. "I don't have strawberries."

Grabbing the tongs, Bryan carefully picked up a couple pieces of strawberries and set them on top of the lettuce on her plate. "There you go."

"Thank you, Mr. Bryan."

"Did you guys do anything fun today?" Dev asked, looking at the boys.

"We saw the market," Dylan told him, his older boy always likely to take everything in order.

"We made playdough and swung in the park," Micah added. His younger boy was more the in-order-of-best-to-least-best kind of guy.

"You made your own playdough?" Dev asked, looking to him this time.

"Oh yeah. It's super easy. We even made three different colors this time. And as long as you keep it in an airtight container, it lasts for months. Or you can cook it once you've made your shapes and it turns hard like a statue."

"How neat is that?" Dev looked so impressed.



“It really is easy.” He didn’t want to take credit where it wasn’t due.

“Don’t sell yourself short. I didn’t even know you could make it yourself.”

He shrugged, but he guessed he’d take it. Even if the only reason he knew how to make homemade playdough was because for a while there, he couldn’t afford the store-bought stuff.

Marley had a second piece of chicken breast and some more salad, confirming that she’d been honest about liking his food. His boys both had seconds on the biscuits, while Juniper chewed on a wing, attacking it to get all the bits of meat off the bone. When he offered Dev the chicken plate, the man waved him off.

“I really do graze through most of the time, so this is already a big meal for me.”

“Well, there’s leftovers then, if you need another bite in a while.”

“I just might take you up on that. I bet it tastes great sandwiched between two halves of a biscuit.”

Bryan had to grin. “I can confirm that it does indeed.” Leftover meat sandwiches were not only economical, they were one of his favorite things. He’d had many a midnight snack sandwich. “There’s also dessert, but maybe we should wait a bit, let dinner settle before we have that?”

“That sounds perfect.”

“Did you guys want to watch a movie?” he offered the kids.

“Marley said she’d read to us.” Micah adored being read to. Dylan was more into trying to read the books himself now, which worked out well because Micah would

happily sit and be his audience, but Bry imagined Dylan would be happy to listen to Marley read because she was someone new.

“I did. You have some great books to choose from, too. Can we be excused?” she asked.

“You can—boys wash your hands, please.” If they didn’t, everything they touched would need a cleaning.

“Everyone should wash their hands,” Dev suggested.

Marley sort of rolled her eyes, but she called out, “Okay!” and that stampede of elephants made their way down the hall to the bathroom. Bry was glad, as he always was, that the Pereisos lived above them and not beneath them.

“Let me help you clear the table and do the dishes,” Dev offered.

“That would be great, thanks.”

They got the table cleared, and he started putting the leftovers away. Dev grabbed a plate and rinsed it, then stood there, looking around, little frown drawing a line between his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Bryan asked.

“I can’t find the dishwasher.”

Bryan laughed. “That’s funny—you’re looking right at it.”

Dev looked around some more, then back to him, frown lines deeper.

He gave Dev a break and pointed his finger at himself. “Me. I’m the dishwasher.”

“You don’t have a dishwasher? I mean a mechanical, put the dishes in it and let the machine wash them dishwasher.”

“Nope. It’s an older house, and there isn’t really room for one in here.” Besides, most of the time there were dishes for just the three of them, and he usually cleaned up as he made food, so there was never all that many dishes to do at once. This was the first time he’d had guests over for supper—well the first time he’d had guests over, period, since Grant. It was funny—and not in the hahaha way—how having a spouse die and then all your money stolen really sent the people you’d called friends out of your life. Grant had helped with that, Bry knew that now, isolating him from the few friends who’d stuck around after Miller had passed.

He stuck the leftovers tupperware into the fridge and grabbed the shortcake out to put on the table and allow to come up to room temperature. Then he grabbed the plate from Dev’s hand and turned the tap back on. He had a scrub brush with soap in the handle that worked really well at cleaning, and he started washing the first plate.

“I guess I’ll dry?” Dev suggested.

Bryan reached over to one of the drawers and pulled out a dishcloth, tossing it at Dev. “You can stack the dishes on the counter next to the rack and I’ll put them away when you’re done.” It would save Dev from having to search out where everything went.

They did the dishes without talking much, but instead of awkward, the silence felt companionable. Bryan couldn’t remember the last time he’d shared quiet space with another adult. Usually, he felt like he needed to fill any silences, and he wasn’t the greatest at small talk, so it always felt awkward.

“Would you like a coffee or some tea?” The dishes were done, and he felt like something warm to go with their dessert, which he was sure the kids—or his boys at least—would come hunting soon enough.

“Oh, tea would be nice. What have you got?”

He opened the pantry. “Tea’s here on the eye-level shelf.” He had a box of orange pekoe, and several boxes of herbal stuff, mint, camomile for the nights he couldn’t sleep, along with some of the celestial seasoning zingers.

“What goes with our dessert?” Dev asked, eyes twinkling.

“You just want to know what dessert is.” Though Dev had seen him take it out to the dining room table.

“Maybe. It will probably impact my choice though.”

Chuckling, he pointed to the pekoe and the mint. “Either of those will go well. I’m having the mint. Oh, it’s strawberry shortcake. The berries looked amazing at the market this morning.”

“That sounds great, and I’ll go with the mint too.”

“I’ll make a potful then.” That way if they wanted second cups they were there.

He grabbed a couple of bags from the container and set them on the counter. Then he filled the kettle up and turned it on before grabbing the teapot out of the cupboard. He rinsed the inside with hot water before putting in the tea bags.

“Is that how you’re supposed to do it?” Dev asked.

Bryan shrugged. “It’s what my grandmother always used to do—warm up the teapot. She claimed the tea tasted better if the pot knew it was coming.”

“Oh, that’s neat. I love stuff like that, you know? The little historical details about stuff, people, places. The things that make them unique.”

“She was that.” Bryan remembered her fondly. She and his mom had fought a lot, but he’d spent time at her place every summer while both his parents worked. She’d been just far enough that it made more sense for him to spend the bulk of the summer staying with her while his folks would come spend either Saturday or Sunday visiting. He’d been only ten when she’d died, and it had been devastating. For a long time, he’d thought she’d abandoned him. Actually being abandoned had been reserved for his parents who’d disowned him when he’d come out. He’d tried reaching out when he’d married Miller, and then again when the kids were born, all to no avail. He had not reached out at all when Miller had died. For all he knew, they were both gone now, not that it mattered if they were or not—in a practical way, they were, by their own choice.

“You were close?” Dev asked softly, clearly picking up on his melancholy.

He nodded. “I stayed with her every summer until she died when I was ten.”

Dev reached out and squeezed his hand. “I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks. It was a long time ago.”

“But your love for her never goes away.”

“No, no it doesn’t. But it makes me happier than sad to remember her now.” He was pretty sure she would have stood by him when he’d come out. She’d been special.

He shook himself as the kettle whistled, and he poured the water into the pot and set the lid on it. Then he set the timer for six minutes. “The mint ones take longer to seep. Unless you prefer it weak.” He tried not to imply that weak tea was for wusses, but he may not have been successful given the way Dev laughed at him.

“I like it however you want to make it.”

Dylan came zooming in and Bry hid his smile. He knew what this was.

“Daddy—is dessert ready yet?”

“Are you already hungry after such a big dinner?”

“There’s always room for dessert.”

“I know, I know. You boys and your dessert stomachs.” He grinned over at Dev. “They apparently have a stomach dedicated to desserts, and it’s always empty.”

“Oh, is that how it works?”

“Apparently so.”

“Daddy!”

“Yes, Dylan?”

“Is dessert ready yet?”

“If you go get the others and come help set the table for it, then it can be ready.”

Dylan took off, and he grabbed six little plates from the cupboard and got six forks

out of the utensil drawer.

“Can I help?” Dev asked.

He nodded to the cupboard over the toaster. “Four glasses for milk or water—or whatever your girls want. The boys will have milk.”

All four kids were back before Dev had all the glasses down, and they dutifully grabbed everything and took it out into the dining room.

“The girls can have milk too,” Dev suggested, going to the fridge and pulling out the jug, which he gave to Juniper to take out into the dining room when she came back.

“Can you handle cutting the cake?” Bryan asked Marley. She nodded and he handed her the cake slicer.

The timer went off just then and he chuckled. “Not bad timing, eh?”

“No, I’d say perfect.”

“If you can grab a couple of mugs, I’ll bring out the tea.” He mentally went over what they needed, making sure he wasn’t forgetting anything. Then he grabbed the tea cozy Mrs. Pereiso had made him and the tea and brought them into the dining room.

“Dylan, I need a hot plate for the tea kettle.” So much for making sure he had everything.

“K, Daddy.” Dylan popped down from his chair and ran into the kitchen, coming back a moment later with the ceramic tile hot plate that he’d colored at the beginning of the summer.

“I made it,” Dylan said proudly as he put it down on the table.

Bryan gave everyone a moment to admire the abstract mess of colors before setting the teapot on it.

“Okay, who wants strawberry shortcake?”

There were a chorus of “me!”s and he helped Marley cut and hand out pieces of cake until everyone had a slice in front of them. The boys had been good, remembering to wait until everyone was served before eating. He nodded at them, and they grabbed their forks and dug in like they hadn’t just had supper twenty minutes ago. Juniper followed suit and Marley ate, too, but she was more delicate about it.

“This is delicious,” Dev informed him after a bite. “And good call on the strawberries, they’re stunning.”

“Thanks.” He poured tea out into their mugs before taking a bite of the cake. It had turned out nice, and the berries were exactly the right combination of sweet and tart, while the whipped cream melted on his tongue.

He and Dev were savoring theirs, so it was no surprise when all four kids were finished long before them.

“It’s not bedtime yet, is it?” Dylan asked.

Their usual schedule was bath and bedtime routine after dinner, even if they read in bed for a while, but they’d had supper a little earlier today and they had guests.

“Why don’t you guys pick a movie to watch?” he suggested, knowing that would at least have them calm by the time they did finally get to their bath.



Dylan knew how to get the TV on and get to the Disney app so he wasn't worried about letting them do it themselves.

"You think they'll be able to find something they all want to watch?" he asked Dev.

"It'll be interesting to see, given the age gap."

Bry wasn't surprised when Brave came up on the screen. "This is their favorite at the moment. I think it's the three little brothers."

"It's always been a favorite of the girls, so I'm not surprised it's what they landed on. Marley's branching out into older movies. All the stuff aimed at the younger teens, but also Marvel movies and stuff like that. She's good about watching younger stuff, too though, like the animated stuff. As long as it's not too young."

"So no Paw Patrol for her?"

"No. And Juniper's lost her taste for it, too."

That wasn't surprising given their ages. He was just happy there were movies they all could agree on.

"So what are you working on now?" he asked, grabbing his tea and checking to see if it was still too hot to drink. He took an experimental sip and didn't totally burn his lip off. So he took a bigger swallow.

"You mean besides making that asshole sorry he ever even thought about stealing our money?"

"Yeah. I meant more in the now that you're finished with the penguins way."

Dev nodded and told him about his most recent pieces.

Bryan listened, watching the way talking about his art lit Dev's eyes up, the way his lips curved as he spoke, teeth peeking through now and then.

He couldn't remember having a nicer evening or a nicer man to spend it with, and he hoped there would be more like it. Many more.

### CHAPTER SIX

Dev sat on the terrace at the Velvet Bean, drinking his double caramel oat milk latte and scrolling through his phone. He kept checking the time and looking around. Bryan was meeting him here at 12:30, which was now only a few minutes away. That he'd been waiting for twenty minutes was his own fault for coming down early, but he was excited.

Bryan was ostensibly meeting him so he could take the guy out for lunch, but that wasn't the real reason. Oh, he was taking Bryan out for lunch, that was true, after all, their date night plans for last Saturday had fallen through when Dylan had caught a stomach bug and gotten sick, but before they had lunch, he had something to show Bryan. A very big, very public something. And he couldn't wait to see Bryan's reaction.

He looked up from his phone again to see Bryan about halfway down the street and headed his way. Grinning, he jumped up and started wandering toward him. Bryan waved as soon as he saw Dev, and Dev waved back.

They hugged when they got to each other, and if it was a tiny bit longer than a simple hug between friends, Dev certainly wasn't going to complain. He liked Bryan. A lot. In fact, he was pretty sure that while he wanted to be friends with Bryan, he wanted a whole lot more as well.

"Thanks so much for the invitation. I don't think I've had a non-business meal out without kids in... well, maybe since I had the kids." Bryan laughed.

“It’s a little easier when they’re both in school, isn’t it?”

“It is nice to have some time every day to get stuff done,” Bryan admitted.

“I kind of brought you here under false pretenses.”

Bryan tilted his head, frown putting lines in his forehead. Dev wanted to smooth them away.

“So we’re not doing lunch?”

“Oh, I’m still buying you lunch, but there’s something important I have to show you first.”

“Okay...” Bryan looked confused, and Dev didn’t blame him. He was being all mysterious, but only because he wanted it to be a surprise.

He turned Bryan around, the man letting himself be manipulated into place. Then, standing behind Bryan, he put his hands on either side of Bryan’s head and tilted it upward.

“What are yo— Oh my god!” The words came with a gasp, Bryan’s jaw falling open.

“Wow. That’s... wow.”

“Do you like it?” Dev looked up to admire the it in question. A huge billboard had pride of place where two of the busier streets in the city met and on it were the words Beware of this man; he is a thief and will steal your money , alongside a picture of Grant’s face. An unflattering picture at that.

“I don’t know what to think. I mean, yes. I like it. That’s... bigger than life.” Bryan sounded rather awed, whether at the billboard itself or the fact that Dev had followed

through on the idea wasn't clear.

"I thought everyone should know."

"You aren't going to get in trouble for it, are you?"

"I don't care." And he didn't, but he had checked with his lawyer first. "But if he wants to claim it's libel or slander, he'll have to take me to court and that would open up a whole can of worms for him, given that he did steal. From me, from you, from husband number three. I'm hoping the new fiancé will see it and won't become husband number four."

"He's going to plotz when he sees it. If he sees it."

"There are two others up in the city; he's going to see it. And I wouldn't be upset if the shock of it led to a heart attack and death." Apparently, he was supposed to forgive and forget—for his own peace of mind. This seemed to be doing the job for him just fine. And he'd wanted to do it for Bry.

Bry turned around and grinned at him. "You're crazy."

"You love it," he countered.

Nodding, Bry looked back at the billboard. "I really do. You should tell him you'll have them taken down if he pays you back the money he stole from you."

"I might be willing to do that. If he pays me back with interest."

That made Bryan chuckle, his gaze still on the billboard.

"So, are you hungry, or do you want to stay here a little longer and admire it?"

“Tempting as lingering is, let’s go eat. All I had for breakfast was a piece of toast and some coffee, and that was a long time ago.”

“Okay.” He took one last look at his handiwork and hooked his hand around Bryan’s arm. “How does Lion in the Afternoon sound?”

“Oh, that’s too much,” Bryan protested when he mentioned the rather pricey restaurant.

“It’s my treat, so how much it costs shouldn’t matter. And promise me you won’t just pick the cheapest thing on the menu to save my money. I am fully recovered from the Grant devastation, and I want to treat us both to something special.” Just like he’d wanted to do the billboard for Bry, he wanted to treat the man to a delectable lunch.

“Well, if you put it like that—I wonder if they have lobster...” Bryan teased.

“I bet they do, and if that’s what you want, you should have it.” Thanks to Grant, he knew exactly what it was like to be counting pennies and looking at every purchase in a ‘do I really need this’ way. Luckily, he hadn’t been in that place for long, and now he could give Bry a lunch where he totally didn’t need to think about the price of the meal he was eating and what he should have spent the money on instead.

“This is really generous of you,” Bryan said as they went into the restaurant. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure.” And he meant it. He liked spending his money on people and not just stuff. And he liked Bry, so spending money on him seemed like a no-brainer.

The maitre ‘d saw them to a table for two, and Bryan looked around as they sat. “Am I dressed up enough for the place?”

“You’re fine, honey. I don’t stand on ceremony. Especially for lunch,” he added, giving Bry a wink.

That earned him a soft chuckle, and Bry finally relaxed.

A young waiter appeared at the table, bringing a basket of rolls with a bowl of caramelized butter, and two menus. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“I’ll have a spicy bloody mary, please.” He loved them, and they made a great one here.

“I think I’d like a mojito.” Bry gave him a little grin and when the waiter left, he leaned forward to murmur, “It feels naughty, having a cocktail in the middle of the day.”

“That’s why we’re doing it.”

Bry laughed again, and Dev decided he’d like to hear Bry doing that a lot. It was a great sound.

Bry looked at his menu. “Oh, they have scallops ceviche. I keep seeing it on Food Network shows, and I’ve always wanted to try it.”

“Oh, you should totally get it. I am craving the fried brussels sprouts. They’re stunning.” He’d had them once on a whim, and they were his absolute favorite. There was something about the crunch, the pomegranate seeds, the whole deal, that he loved.

“Oh that sounds interesting. Are you adverse to sharing appetizers?” Bryan gave him a hopeful look.

“Not at all.” He was a sharer, after all. “I’m happy to eat together.”

A sharer and a bit of a dork, obviously. But he did want to share specifically with Bry, so hopefully his dorkiness wasn’t off-putting.

“Awesome. Then I’ll have the scallops ceviche and the lobster roll.” Bry’s eyes flashed to meet his gaze. “If that’s okay?”

“Sounds good to me. I’m going to have the brussels and the fried haddock. I have a craving.” He didn’t eat fried food often when he was on his own, but it did happen.

“This is fun.” Bry grabbed a bun and cut it open before spreading butter over it.

“It is. Thank you for coming. I’ve been looking forward to this all day.”

“I have too,” Bryan admitted. “And your surprise out in the street? Oh my god, that was worth the price of admission. I’ve always said I never want to see him again, but I have to admit, I’d love to see his face when he first sees that billboard.”

“I can just imagine it.” He grinned, afraid the expression was wicked.

Bry grinned right back at him, though, so even if it was wicked, that was okay. “Yeah, I can too.”

Dev imagined he’d start getting phone calls, so he’d turned off his phone. He wasn’t letting anything ruin his lunch, especially a pissed-off, thieving ex.

Their waiter came back with their drinks, making Bryan grin again as his mojito was put in front of him.

“Are you guys ready to order?”



He nodded and looked to Bry to go first.

“I’d like the scallops ceviche and the lobster roll, please.”

“Side for the lobster roll?”

“I think I’ll go with the house salad.”

“Dressing?”

“Is there a balsamic?”

“Yes, we have two. A raspberry balsamic and a white balsamic with garlic.”

“The second one sounds yummy—I’ll have that, thanks.” Bry actually licked his lips, and Dev was fascinated by the way that left his lower lip shining in the light.

“Excellent, and for you, sir?” The waiter turned to Dev.

“You know me—brussels and fish fry, with fries and slaw.”

Chuckling, the waiter nodded. “I did let the kitchen know the brussels sprout man was here so they could start prepping. I’ll be back soon with your appetizers.”

“So you’re very much a regular here then?” Bry asked once the waiter had left.

“Only for the sprouts. The entree is a special occasion.” He let himself wink over.

“How are the boys? Are they still pleased with their zoo visit?”

“Between that and you guys coming over for supper, they’ve barely talking about anything else for over a week. I think you’ve made their year. The zoo people really

made them feel special.”

“Oh, excellent. If I have the opportunity to invite them again, I’d love to. They’re good boys.”

“They really are. And your girls are great. Even though it didn’t work out last weekend, I’d be happy to have Marley sit for them any time.” Bryan took a sip of his Mojito and hummed.

“She’s been working so hard to be trusted. I’m very proud of her.”

“They’re both great girls. Your Juniper is a hoot.”

“Juni is a firecracker. She is going to take over the world.”

“Yeah, I believe that. I also believe Dylan and Micah will be her right-hand men. They adore her.”

“She likes them. She calls them her posse. She misses having close friends.”

“Her posse. That’s great.” Bryan laughed for a moment before sobering to ask, “What happened to her friends?”

“Well, we moved a couple of times, of course, and then her big sister became a teenager.” And that was hard. His two best friend girls had become... just sisters.

“Ah, of course on the moving. Do you think your girls will ever be close like they were again, once the teenage years are over?”

“Of course. They don’t hate each other or anything. There’s just a huge difference between ten and fourteen, you know?” Marley was a ‘teenager, Daddy’.

“Ah yeah. I guess I’ll get to that eventually. Six and four aren’t as far apart as ten and fourteen, but I’m guessing at ten and twelve it will be.”

“Or thirteen and fifteen?” No matter what, growing up was a challenge.

Bry nodded. “Or fifteen and seventeen.” Then he shuddered. “I don’t want to think of them that old. I want to wrap them in cotton wool and make sure they grow up really slowly. I know it’s not realistic, but it would be nice.”

“Wouldn’t it? Although, it’s fun to have them grow into themselves, too. They’re so much more interesting.”

“I know. I love each change even as I feel nostalgic for who they used to be.” Bry chuckled. “Sometimes I feel like there’s something wrong with me.”

Dev tilted his head. “Why?”

“Because I want them to grow up, but I also don’t. One day, I think they’re perfect just the way they are, and the next, I can’t wait for them to be older. I know I should just take each day as it is.” Bry shrugged. “I’m probably overthinking things.”

“That’s just being a parent, I think. Like when you think time is crawling, and the next second, you think time is speeding like a freight train.”

“Yes, that’s it exactly. And it’s not just me, eh?” Bry took another sip of his mojito and licked his lips again.

“Not even. I’m always on that train where I’m spinning.”

“I’m glad. Well, not that you’re on the train, but that I’m not on it alone. If that made sense.”

Their waiter returned with their apps before he could reply to that, placing the plates in front of them.

“Oh, look at this. It smells perfect.” Dev smiled at the server, nodded.

“It really does,” Bryan added. “I’m salivating.”

The waiter beamed at them. “Enjoy.”

“I’m so looking forward to trying this,” Bry told him, licking his lips yet again as he checked out his plate. Dev wasn’t upset that it kept drawing his attention to Bry’s mouth.

“Go for it.” It was worth the money the meal cost, to have that excitement in Bryan’s eyes.

Bry forked a thin slice of scallop and dragged it through the sauce, then he put it in his mouth. His eyes went wide, and he smiled. “Oh my god. It melted on my tongue!”

“Oh, wow.” He grinned over at Bry, not only pleased that Bry was enjoying his food, but curious about the melting on his tongue thing. “Can I try?”

“Of course.” Bry speared another piece and brought it to his lips. He could smell the acid immediately, the ceviche sauce strong and making him salivate.

He took the bite, and it tasted amazing, but what was even better?

Having Bry feed him the bite. It was far more intimate than he would have thought, and he liked that.

“Isn’t that the most amazing bite of food ever?” Bry asked, spearing another slice and

putting it in his mouth. Bry closed his eyes and groaned. “I don’t think I’ve ever tasted anything like this.”

Dev grinned, but nodded, digging into the sprouts. “It’s amazing.”

Bry ate a couple more slices. “How are your sprouts?”

“Exceptional. Want to try? They’re a little spicy.”

“I really do. And I can handle a little... spice.” Bry’s eyes were heated, the innuendo obviously intended.

His cheeks heated, and he grinned, forking up a bite. “Open up.”

If it wasn’t his imagination, Bryan’s cheeks had pinked as well, and he opened his mouth like a baby bird.

He had picked a perfect bite, feeding it to Bryan. He hoped the man liked it.

Bryan nodded as he chewed. “That’s amazing. I am not a fan of brussels sprouts, but that is really good.”

“Isn’t it? I’m going to find someone to make them for me once a week.”

“I bet I could figure out how to do it.” Bry stole another bite off his plate, examining it before putting it in his mouth.

“Do you think so? I can’t cook at all. I never even tried.”

“Have you always had money then? I mean, not even like a peanut butter and jam sandwich?”

“Me? God, no. I came from the definition of starving artist.” He’d weighed less than one hundred pounds when he’d met his first husband. “I mean, I ate a lot of cereal. Crackers. Whatever was on sale.”

Bry blinked at him. “Wow.” Then he tilted his head. “Would you like to learn?”

“Sure. I mean, I’m not opposed. I like learning things.”

“I’m not a chef or anything, but I can cook. And I know I can teach you how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, if nothing else.” Then Bryan chuckled. “Unless you’re allergic to peanuts, and then it’s probably not a good idea.”

“I’m not allergic to peanuts. And I can put peanut butter on crackers.”

“Well then, peanut butter sandwiches are only a half a step up from that. But seriously, I’ll figure out the brussels sprouts. What else would you like to know how to cook?”

“I haven’t the foggiest. Pizza, I guess? Or chicken parm. The girls love those.”

“Sounds great. I bet we have a blast, even if you wind up hating cooking.” Bry pulled his phone out. “You wanna do this during the day while the kids are in school, or on the weekend, what works for you?”

“What’s best for your schedule? I’m weirdly flexible.”

“Weirdly?” Bry grinned at him. “That’s an odd way to put it. And when the kids are in school would probably be best. We can concentrate on the cooking that way.”

“Sure. Sounds good. You tell me what you need, food-wise, and I’ll have it delivered.”

Bry chuckled. “You don’t want to go shopping together for the stuff? Planning a recipe, doing the shopping, and prepping are all part of cooking.”

“Sure. I mean, you tell me what you want, and I’m in.” That was nice, right? And he wasn’t the least bit adverse to spending more time with the delicious Bry.

“You want to meet on Thursday at the grocery store at ten? Does that work for you?” Bry asked.

“Sure. Totally. Can the boys come over for supper that night? I want us all to enjoy together.”

“That sounds great. We’ll do our cooking while they’re in school, and then I’ll bring them over after school. Thank you.” Bry picked up his mojito and held it out to cheers with him.

“Thank you.” He liked having an excuse to hang out with this handsome, interesting man.

“I’m looking forward to it.” Bry speared his last scallop and closed his eyes as he put it in his mouth. Then he groaned. “Damn, that is so good. I’m going to have to look up how to make this, too.”

“Yeah? That feels crazy complicated.” Possibly even dangerous.

“I know, right? I’m going to look it up, though. Worse that happens is I see the recipe and go, nope.”

“There you go.” He liked that. He loved when someone was brave, interested.

“No matter where I am.” Bry gave him a wink.

He laughed, tickled pink. “You know it.”

Their waiter arrived with their mains, and Bryan groaned, clearly pleased by what he saw.

“Given how good the scallops were, I bet this is delicious, too.” Bryan licked his lips. “I can smell the vinaigrette. How cool is that?”

He grinned as their waiter put his fish and chips in front of him. “Thank you for hanging out. I’m... you’re fascinating.”

“Me? Fascinating?” Bryan shook his head. “You’re the interesting one. I’m just an accountant.”

“I’m allowed to find you fascinating, man.” He winked to prove there was no heat to his words.

Bry laughed, cheeks holding a delightful blush. “You are, you are. I just don’t feel like I am, I guess. You are, though. A bona fide artist. That’s super fascinating.”

“It’s a talent, sure, but so is having a way with numbers.”

“I guess.” Bry grinned. “That’s not a terrible thing, thinking each other is fascinating, is it?”

“No. No, in fact, it’s lovely.” He dared to reach out, touch Bryan’s wrist.

Bryan turned his hand so they were touching palm to palm. He smiled at Dev, the look warm.

Well, okay.



That was... welcome.

And it meant he wasn't alone in the attraction he felt for Bry that really had nothing to do with their shared ex, and everything to do with who they each were.

Some dishes clanked in the background, and Bry blinked and looked down at his plate. "I guess we should eat, eh? I would hate to waste all this yummy lobster."

He chuckled at himself. "Right? Time to indulge. No one likes cold fish and chips."

"Ew. No, that doesn't sound appetizing at all." Bry chuckled and grabbed his sandwich and took a big bite.

The food was exceptional, but he didn't really taste it. The company was better, more interesting, sexy.

"Did you want a bite?" Bry offered. "It's amazing."

"Oh, this is plenty, and it's lovely. Crunchy and perfectly cooked."

"Okay. The lobster is stunning." Bryan went back to eating, making lovely noises as he enjoyed his food.

"So... I don't suppose you'd like to get together again... maybe before Thursday?" Even if it was only a couple days away.

Bry's smile slowly bloomed across his face, eyes lighting up. "I'd like that. I'd like it a lot. What have you got in mind?"

"I have a media room. Movies and popcorn with the kids? I can't guarantee Mar will participate, but Juni will."

Bryan nodded. "That sounds perfect. Tomorrow evening?"

"I love it. Do your guys like the Despicable Me movies?"

"Oh god, yes." Bry laughed softly. "Micah is a minion."

"Cool. We'll watch one of those, then." He had them all for the big screen in the living room.

"It sounds like fun. Did you want me to bring something, or will your ordering finger get a workout?" Bry asked before stuffing the last of his lobster roll into his mouth.

"Hush, you. I was thinking pizza and movie snacks."

Bry chuckled. "I think that's a wonderful idea. I haven't had a good pizza in a while. Hell, maybe years."

"Really? That's a shame." And it was ridiculous. "What kind do you like?"

"I always liked a pepperoni and mushroom one. If I was going really ritzy, I like one with barbeque sauce instead of marinara with chicken and onions."

"Oh, that's cool. I'm a sausage and onion guy myself."

"That sounds good, too. I have to admit, when I think of a pizza, the part I think of the most fondly is the crust, so it's less important what the toppings are."

"What about the boys? Cheese?"

"Maybe pepperoni? And I do think they'd like the barbeque sauce and chicken one." Bryan shrugged. "I say go for a cheese, but they could like whatever else we get?"

“Sure. Sounds perfect to me. I’ll get a sampler of flavors.”

“That feels so decadent. I remember lots of pizza from my college years. Lots of cheap pizza with just a couple of toppings. And cold pizza in the morning? Breakfast of champions. And college students.” Bry laughed again, the sound happy, the look good on Bry’s face.

“And starving artists, trust me. We love our pizzas.”

“Noted. I’m actually looking forward to making pizza with you on Thursday. Picking out the ingredients, making the dough.”

“There you go. Would you rather have subs or something tomorrow?”

“I’m totally easy, Dev. It’s your dinner, you can order anything you want. I’m not the least bit picky and the boys are good eaters.”

“How about I let the girls choose? They can plan it out.” That might be exciting.

“I bet they’ll love that!” Bryan took the last sip of his mojito, licking his lips as he set his glass back down, bringing Dev’s attention back to them again.

“I think they will, and maybe Marley will join us.”

“She’s doing more and more with her friends instead of family, eh?” Bry’s gaze was warm, friendly.

“That’s the way it works, right? She’s starting to slowly disengage.” It was how it was supposed to work, putting everything into your kids so they could be independent.

Their waiter arrived before Bry had a chance to reply. “I hope everything was okay.”

“It was delicious, thank you.” Bry’s words encompassed both the waiter and Dev.

“That’s great. Do you guys want any dessert? There’s a salted caramel creme brulee today that is amazing.”

Dev didn’t miss the way Bry’s eyes lit up at the waiter’s words. “Did you want to try? I’m totally in.”

Bry beamed at him. “I’d love to. It sounds so good.”

“It is, I promise,” their waiter told them.

“Then bring it on. We’ll indulge.” He found he quite liked spoiling Bryan.

“I’ve had creme brulee before, but never a flavored one,” Bry told him when their waiter left. “And I admit it has been a while since I’ve been able to indulge in this kind of thing. This has been an awesome meal. Thank you so much.”

“Thank you for coming. I appreciate it, so much.” Bryan made him a little fluttery. Maybe more than a little. He hadn’t felt that in a long time; he hadn’t been sure he could after Grant, to be honest.

“And the sign. That is epic. I mean, seriously. Absolutely epic.” Bry laughed, all lit up.

“Thank you. I bet my phone is blowing up.”

“Are you going to reply to him if he’s texted?”

The waiter brought them their dessert, and it looked lovely.

Bry groaned, looking happy. “Oh, this looks great, as promised. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” The waiter left them with the desserts, the sugar all glossy.

“I will never speak to that bastard again. Ever.”

Bry nodded. “I can get behind that. I have him blocked. Not that I expect he’d ever call me. He disappeared entirely when all the money did.”

“Well, we’re going to ruin his fucking life. I’m going to hunt him like a dog.” And now he wanted it for Bry as much as for himself.

“Cheers to that.” Bry clinked spoons with him, then cracked the top of his creme brulee.

Dev focused back on the man in front of him, and their desserts. “I do love that sound.”

“I know, right?” Bry did it again, cracking more of his burned sugar top.

Dev cracked his own, grinning as the solid top splintered. Then he spooned up a little custard, a little sugar. It was so tasty.

Bry closed his eyes as he ate, and hummed a little. Damn, that was lovely.

The dessert was okay for sure, but... it wasn’t Bryan. The man ate the entire dessert like that, one spoonful after another until the entire bowl was empty.

He was about halfway done with his own, and he pushed it over with a smile. “Have

at it.”

“Are you sure?” Despite the words, Bryan was already picking up his bowl and putting his spoon in before Dev had a chance to answer. “Mmmm. I should probably have samples of this from other places before I say this is the best creme brulee ever, you know?” Bryan laughed at himself.

“I bet that’s a thing.” A creme brulee flight or some such.

“We could make it a thing. I could research all the places that do creme brulee and we could go out one evening and hit all the ones in the same area.” Bryan shook his head. “Here I am, planning to monopolize another of your days.”

“If I’m not working, I’m pretty open.” When he was working, he was in it, all the way.

“Well, I’ll do some research, see if there are clusters of restaurants that serve creme brulee and compile a couple of lists, and if you aren’t sick of me after our cooking day, maybe we can start comparisons sometime after that,” Bryan suggested.

“Sure. Why not?” Maybe they could hire a cook to deal with it. Either way, it would mean more time with Bryan, and he was all for that.

“It sounds delicious and fun.” Bryan sat back, smiling. “This has been an amazing afternoon. Thanks.”

“It has been. I agree. I hope you’re looking forward to doing it again.” Because he was.

“Absolutely. I’m so glad we’re getting together with the kids for dinner on Wednesday. And then our cooking date on Thursday. Oh, if it’s okay to call it a

date.”

“It’s perfectly fine, yes. It is. It’s a date.”

Bryan’s smile was part shyness, but all pleased. “Good.”

And it was.

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### CHAPTER SEVEN

Bryan walked over to Dev's place with the boys, one on either side of him, holding their hands. He was looking forward to seeing Dev again. Enjoying his time with the man more and more and, Bryan was not in the least bit put out they would be seeing each other at least three times this week.

"Are we there yet?" Dylan asked.

"Just another block."

"It's so far." Micah had been repeating that particular sentiment since the first block. And it was only eight blocks from their place to Dev's.

"I think you'll survive. And Mr. Dev is ordering something yummy for us to have for supper."

"Tacos?" Micah asked.

Bryan chuckled. His boy would do pretty much anything if he was promised a taco as a reward. "You'll have to ask him."

They got to Dev's building and went in. The security guard was the same guy as the last time they'd come, and he gave them a nod, clearly recognizing them. Bryan took the boys to the elevator, and up they went.

It felt ritzy and decadent somehow, living in a fancy apartment building like this. It



suited Dev somehow, too. He was so glad for Dev that Grant's thievery hadn't kept him down for long.

The elevator dinged and out they went, the boys running to Dev's door and knocking.

"Mr. Dev! We're here!"

Marley opened the door, and the teenager had been crying. "H-hey."

"Hey. Is everything okay?" Bryan asked without even thinking. Something was obviously wrong.

"I burned dinner." She held up a bandaged hand. "I burned my hand. Daddy says it's no big deal, and he ordered something, but I wanted to make tacos for you guys!"

"Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry you got hurt. And I love that you wanted to cook for us. That was really nice of you. You wanna show me what you were doing and how it went wrong?" He didn't want to overstep, but he could maybe help Marley some, if she was interested in learning how to cook.

"I'm no good at this part. I followed the instructions—I put the oil in, the chicken..."

Oil was splashed around the stove area and the whole bone-in chicken breast was incinerated.

"So you followed a written recipe, eh? Have you considered going with Youtube? They walk you through it, and often it's easier to understand when you have it being done right in front of you rather than having to figure out what they mean on the page, you know?"

"I guess? Daddy says it counts that I tried..."

“Hey, baby girl. How’s the hand? I ordered in tacos.” Dev smiled at him. “Hey, guys.”

He smiled right back at Dev but then made himself turn back to Marley—she deserved his full attention on this, and the last thing he wanted to do was discourage her in her cooking endeavors. “It totally counts that you tried. It’s amazing that you wanted to do that for us. Thank you. I’m serious. I can teach you if you want. I’m going to teach your dad some stuff.”

“You aren’t mad?”

“I told you no one was going to be mad,” Dev told her.

“You tried to do something special for me and my boys; why would I be mad? Besides,” he leaned in to whisper into Marley’s ear. “It’s not my kitchen you tried to burn down.”

“Yeah...” She offered him a crooked grin. “That was stinky.”

“I bet. I’ll help you clean up if you like, though.” The place was a huge mess.

“I’ll help.” That was little Juni. “Her hand hurts a lot.”

“Sounds great. Boys, you can help too. I bet we get the kitchen cleaned up before the food delivery gets here.” Bryan grabbed a bunch of paper towels and started soaking up the lake of oil before realizing this wasn’t his house, Marley wasn’t his girl, and maybe this was inappropriate. He’d kind of made an assumption or two here.

“I’m going to check Mar’s hand, and then I’ll be right back to help,” Dev offered him a warm little smile.

Oh, good. Dev wasn't offended or upset about him kind of just wading in like it was his place and like he could offer Marley comfort and support. "Cool. We'll try to have it done before you get back." He gave Dev a wink and turned back to the task at hand.

Juniper was flinging water and suds like a wild thing. "Stupid. Cooking is stupid and hard and nasty!"

"Oh, honey, it doesn't have to be. It can be fun and exciting, and you make really good things." Bryan had to wonder if she'd overheard her dad saying that at some point when he thought he was alone.

"We used to have help, but she left, and Daddy hasn't found someone he likes."

Well, he would totally be willing to volunteer to help in the kitchen. He actually liked cooking, and he had to make food for him and the boys anyway... He shook himself. That was not a discussion for now, he imagined.

"Well, I'm here to help now, and we've almost got it all done. You and the boys have done most of it—you wanna take them to your room and play?" They actually had helped, but the biggest thing now was clearing away the mess the cleaning up had made. Juniper had used too much soap and water and that needed to be cleared up. But then it would be done. It was just easier doing the 'finessing' without a ten-year-old, a six-year-old and a four-year-old 'helping out.'

"You want to come play Legos?" Juni asked, holding out her hands to the boys.

"Yes!" They grabbed onto her hands and the three of them took off, leaving Bryan chuckling. He was impressed actually, that Juniper had volunteered in the first place. The boys adored Dev's girls and thought they were both so cool, but he had to wonder if the older girls were as happy with two younger boys tagging along after

them.

He grabbed a bowl and used the dishcloth to push the water off the counter into the bowl. Then he poured the water into the sink before pushing more water into the bowl. He did that until all the water and soap were cleaned off the counter and the stove. Then he cleaned the last bit of grease off the far end of the stove where Juniper couldn't reach before setting about scrubbing the poor burned pot. He was surprised actually that Dev even had pots if he never cooked. On the other hand, Juniper had said something about help.

"How can I help?" Dev asked, reappearing at the entrance to the kitchen. "I put some Solarcaine on Marley's burn and she's resting until the food comes."

"I'm almost done. It was so sweet of her to try to make us something. I'm just sorry she got hurt. You know if she genuinely wants to cook, I'd be happy to teach her." He wrung out the cloth and set it in the sink.

"She downloaded a recipe; she was convinced she could do it." Dev shook his head. "Sorry you came into a mess."

"No problem. I told her to try YouTube next time. Visual step-by-steps are so much easier. Especially for someone who's never done it before. She's a sweetheart." He liked both of Dev's girls. They were so different, and yet they both reminded him of Dev, and not just in looks.

"She is. She wants to impress you, very much."

"She does?" He wasn't sure why. He was just a guy who'd started hanging out with her dad. Maybe it was the wanting-to-babysit thing.

"Sure. She knows I like your company."

Oh, that made him feel good, like warm-in-his-tummy good. “I like your company too.” In fact, he liked Dev a whole lot. He smiled at Dev, caught a little in his gaze.

“Well, that’s good to know.” Dev leaned against the counter. “Very good.”

“Yeah? Cool.” He leaned, too. God, he was a dork, right? He didn’t care, though. He was enjoying the moment.

“You’re a good man. Thank you for being nice to Mar.”

“She makes it easy. She’s a good kid. They both are. You’ve done a great job raising them.”

“I—Thanks. That’s kind to say.”

“It’s the truth.” Bryan knew how Dev felt, though. You wanted to raise good kids and yet, when they were good and did nice things, it was hard to take credit; they were their own people. On impulse, he moved in and gave Dev a hug.

Dev’s arms wrapped around him, and it was so sweet, and Dev’s body was firm and warm against him. He could have stood just like that for ages because he didn’t want this closeness to end, even if his cock was threatening to harden. but the door buzzer sounded, and he jumped a little, startled, and stepped back.

“Food. Sorry. I didn’t want to let go.”

No, Bryan hadn’t wanted to let go either, and it made him even warmer inside to know that Dev felt the same way.

Dev headed to the door, and Bryan heard it opening, and then Dev shouted, “Call security!”

Then there was the horrific sound of something hitting flesh.

“Dev!” He ran for the door, as he dialed 911—he didn’t even know how to call the building’s security, but if bad things were happening, the police was the right call.

Grant was there, at Dev’s door, the two men fighting brutally, exchanging blow after blow, punching each other.

What the fuck?

He froze for a moment, shock shorting him out for a second, then headed for them, determined to get Grant away from Dev. “Hey! Hey, you fucker. Stop it!” He was not letting Grant take anything else away from him.

“Protect the kids.” Dev took a hard blow to the belly.

He was torn between doing as Dev asked and helping Dev out, but Dev was right, the kids needed to be corralled and kept safe.

“911. How can I help you?” came from his phone.

He put it to his ear and headed for Juniper’s room. “There’s a home invasion. Send the cops now.” He rattled off Dev’s address, looking back down the hall.

He saw Dev hit a button on the wall, and an alarm started blaring. Then Grant hit Dev right across the temple and he went down.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

“Hurry! He’s knocked Dev out! You have to get here now!” He threw the phone down and looked around wildly for something to use as a weapon. He grabbed the

first thing he saw, a wooden chair that might have been an antique, but that didn't matter, he had to protect Dev and the kids.

Holding the chair up and screaming at the top of his lungs, he ran for Grant and smashed the chair over Grant's head.

God, it felt good when Grant went down, so Bryan hit him again. He didn't want Grant getting back up. Not with the kids in the other room, not with Dev down.

Someone appeared in the doorway, catching his attention. It wasn't the cops, but it was a security guard, holding a taser aimed at him.

"Put the chair down! Now!"

Bryan threw it down and held up his hands. "He's the intruder," he said, nodding at Grant. "He attacked Devlin. We need help."

"Get him out of here!" Marley screamed. "There is a restraining order for the man on the floor. He has to go!"

"Go to Juniper's room with the others and bar the door until your father or I come and get you," he called out to her. Then he turned back to the security guard. "You heard her. Restrain him before he gets up again!" He needed to get to Dev, make sure he was okay. And where the hell was security when Grant had gained access to the elevators in the first place?

"He had food. Mr. Marx said he'd ordered!"

"Fine! Just arrest him already!" Goddamn it, Grant was stirring and Dev wasn't, and Bryan was about to lose his shit.

“I’m not a police officer!”

“Get him out of here!” Bryan started shoving at Grant’s body, wanting a closed door between them and him before he woke, and the security guy grabbed Grant’s legs and started pulling and that was when the police showed up.

Thank God. He shouted over the sound of the alarm bells. “Grant Hubbard has a restraining order against him. He’s hurt Dev. Arrest him!” Trusting that if nothing else, Grant wouldn’t hurt anyone else with the cops right there, Bryan went to his knees next to Dev. “Dev. Dev. You’ve got to wake up. Please. The girls need you.”

Dev frowned. “We have a restraining order. Marley knows where it is.”

“Okay. It’s okay the cops are here now. I’ll get her to show me. Are you okay?” Was Dev going to need an ambulance?

“I don’t know. My head hurts.”

“He needs an ambulance,” Bryan told the cops.

“On its way. We’re going to need that restraining order.”

Marley had clearly been watching because she came flying out of Juniper’s bedroom and went to a credenza, pulling paperwork out of a drawer. She came over, tears on her cheeks, looking scared, but she bravely handed it over to the police officer. Bryan opened his arms, and she flew into them.

“I have the radio up loud, and we’re having a dance party with the boys.”

“Smart girl. Can you go back to them? Keep everyone safe until we get this sorted?” He didn’t want her to have to deal with any of this.



“Is Daddy okay?”

“He’s going to be fine. I’m going to call my friend Jennie to come help you guys out while I head to the hospital, okay?” Because he was not letting Dev have to deal with the cops and the hospital all on his own, but no way was he leaving the kids alone, either. This was not the time for Marley to start her babysitting career.

She looked hesitant, gaze going to her dad.

“The boys know her,” he added. “She’s looked after them before. I know you can handle them, but it’s been a rough day.”

She still looked torn, and he put everything else out of his head and met her eyes, concentrating on her. “I’ll make sure your father is okay, I promise. You look after your sister and my boys; I’ll look after your dad. Deal?”

“Uh-huh. Jennie is her name?”

“Yes, but I’ll wait until she gets her to leave. Fair?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Her face was a twist of relief and worry, and he squeezed her tight in another hug.

“Okay. Go make sure they’re okay.” He waited until she’d gone back to the room the kids were in and grabbed his phone, texting Jennie.

need you to look after boys +2. long story. Then he gave her Dev’s address.

The alarm finally stopped sounding, and that helped him calm down a little. The couple of deep breaths he took didn’t hurt, either.

The paramedics started leaving, Dev on a stretcher.

Bryan called out to him, “I’ll get there as soon as I can. I’ve got someone coming for the kids.”

He wasn’t sure Dev had heard him, but he hoped so.

“I’m so sorry about the tacos...” Dev murmured.

He shook his head. That was the least of their worries, although the kids still needed to eat.

bring tacos? I’ll owe you forever.

no prob. be there in 15-20 She was a great friend.

One of the officers approached him. “We need your statement, sir.”

He nodded. He couldn’t go anywhere until Jennie showed up anyway, so he led the man over to the couch in the living room. “What do you need to know?”

“Mr. Marx assured us that you are a guest of his and not involved in the attack against him.”

Jesus, if Dev hadn’t said anything, would he have been a suspect? Both Dev and Grant had been on the ground by the time the guard had shown up.

“What happened? Do you know this man?” The officer nodded toward Grant, who was being examined by a different paramedic than the ones who’d helped Dev.

“I do. His name is Grant Hubbard. He’s Dev’s—the owner of this apartment—and

my ex-husband. We weren't married at the same time. Dev has a restraining order against him. As you can see—with good reason. He just showed up and started beating on Dev.” Bryan shuddered. It had been awful, and he'd felt helpless, worried, until he'd finally waded in with the chair.

“So... he's both yours and the victim's ex-husband? Seriously?”

“Yes. It's a long and sordid story.” Which he could tell the guy if he had to, but it was embarrassing to admit to having been taken so badly.

“All right.” The cop made some notes.

“You fucker!” Grant hissed. “I'm going to kill both of you!”

Bryan stood, his hands balling into fists—not on his watch. Then he looked at the officer. “Did you hear that? I want it added to the charges.” If they were lucky, Grant was going to be in jail for a long time. If he couldn't get his money back, he'd could live with that as a consolation prize.

“I did. Please, sir. Wait here and let me get him downstairs and away from the children.”

Bryan nodded, furious. “Once their sitter is here, I'll be at the hospital. That man better still be in jail.”

“Yes, sir. Absolutely.” The police officer hurried away, shaking his head.

Bryan was fuming and worried and feeling like he was going crazy. He waited until the paramedic and the police officer walked Grant out, and then he immediately closed and locked the door before going back to see how the kids were doing. He knocked first, not wanting to worry them by just walking in.

“It’s Daddy—Bryan,” he called loudly. “I’m coming in now.”

The music was turned down, and Marley cracked the door, obviously ready to defend the little ones. “Are you alone?”

“I am. Everyone is gone and the front door is locked. I just need to come see that you’re all okay in here.” And to tell them it was all over and it was going to be okay. They didn’t need to be worrying about this; they needed to be kids.

“Okay. Thank you.” Marley stepped back and opened the door the rest of the way.

“Daddy!” His boys came over to him.

“Daddy, who was that?”

“Daddy, are you okay?”

“Where’s my dad?!?” Juniper demanded.

“I’ll answer all your questions, but first.” He wrapped his boys in his arms and then opened them again for the girls. “If you need a hug…”

Juni ran right to him, and it took Marley a second to join them. He held all four of them tight, the hug giving him what he needed as well, the comfort and knowledge they were safe.

“I’m fine. And your daddy is okay, too. They just took him to the hospital to make sure of that. The police have arrested the man who hurt him, and security is not going to let anyone else up here. Jennie is coming to look after you guys—and she’s bringing tacos with her. When she gets here, I’m going to go to the hospital and check on Dev. Okay?”

“Okay. I’m good. I can watch the boys.” Marley was shaking so badly that he knew better.

“I know you can, but I won’t go until Jennie gets here. In fact, because she’s coming, do you want to come with me to look out for your dad?” That way, he could keep a close eye on her, help her deal so she didn’t have to keep being strong for everyone else.

“I—Can I?”

“No. No, Marley. Please! I don’t know the other person! I need you here in case someone comes back!” Juni was melting down.

He took her back into his arms and held her tight. “I’m not going anywhere until Jennie gets here and then you can meet her and we can decide then, okay?” He was just trying to do the right thing for all of them.

His boys were just sitting there wide-eyed, clearly not sure at all what was happening, but picking up on the girls’ moods.

“There you go. Let’s—” Marley took a shaky breath. “Let’s go watch a movie. Something fun.”

“Wonderful idea.” He tried to remember if the front hall looked okay, decided it would be good enough and led the kids out to the living room with its huge couches and the big TV. “What do you guys all want to watch?”

The boys were wide-eyed, but Marley smiled. “Have you guys seen Robin Hood ? It’s an old movie from when my granny was a kid.”

Bless her, Marley was a trooper.

“Okay,” Dylan said and Micah nodded, willing to go along with whatever his big brother wanted.

Juni grabbed hold of his hand, squeezing tight.

He smiled at her and held on, sitting with the four of them on one of the couches as Marley got the movie going. It took the attention of his boys and Juni well enough. He sighed inwardly and tried not to worry too hard about Dev, but now that he knew the kids were as okay as they could be, his thoughts kept going to Dev and the bruise coming up on his face, the paleness of the skin around it.

The house phone rang, and Marley answered it. “Your friend is here, I think, but you should answer it.”

He nodded and took the phone from her. “Hello?”

“Bryan. It’s me. I’m here. With tacos, as promised.”

“Jennie. Thank goodness. Come on up.” He looked to Marley. “Is there a button I press or something?”

“You tell the security guy it’s cool.”

“Okay.” He spoke back into the phone. “Jennie, put security on the line, please.”

“Yes, sir?”

“It’s cool. Send her up.”

“Yes, sir.”

Okay, that was handy as hell. Honestly. It was just too bad the security guard had let Grant up without calling up first.

He slid off the couch and went to the door to let Jennie in.

She was like a breath of fresh air, honestly, flowing in with bags of tacos and cookies. “I’m here!”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you. I owe you big-time, lady. Come in and meet the girls.” He led her back to the living room. “Hey, girls, this is Jennie. Jennie—Marley and Juniper.”

“Hey, ladies. Thanks for letting me come over. I was craving tacos.”

“Marley burned the tacos, and Daddy went to the hospital,” Juni said, and Marley’s eyes went wide.

“The two were not related,” he assured Jennie. “We had an unwanted visitor who spoke with his fists.” He leaned in and whispered, “Grant,” to her.

It was Jennie’s turn to go wide-eyed. “Oh, hell no.”

“Yeah. Dev got hurt.” He sighed. “Come to the kitchen, and we’ll get the tacos out.”

“Sure.” She followed, looking shocked.

“The kids are a little freaked.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

He snorted. He did love Jennie and her say-it-like-it-is attitude. “So I’m going to go

to the hospital and check on Dev. Hopefully bring him home.”

“Okay. I’ll stay here until you get back. No stress. I’ll just hang out and be social. What did he want?”

“To beat the shit out of Dev, it seems. He threatened to kill us as the cops dragged him off.” Bryan shuddered. He was trying very hard not to fall apart here; he had to be strong for everyone. They needed him.

“But Dev’s not—in danger... right?”

“I’m pretty sure the cops are going to have someone at his room at the hospital. At least they’d better. Plus, Grant was arrested, so he’s going to be in jail for the foreseeable future. I hope. At least until tomorrow anyway.” He hated not having all the answers. And he needed to get to see Dev. “Let’s get the kids in to eat, and I’ll go if they’re comfortable with you.”

“Sure. You don’t stress it. I am well-trained.”

“You’re a rockstar.” He went back to the living room. “Tacos are ready in the kitchen. How about we pause the movie and eat, yeah?”

“Tacos!” Micah shouted, immediately running for the kitchen. Dylan nodded, too, and followed after his brother.

The girls were a little slower, both of them having a little discussion before coming to the table.

“Is everything all right, girls?”

Marley nodded. “I’m staying with Juni and the boys. It’s what Daddy would expect



me to do. To stay and help.”

“If you’re sure.”

She nodded again.

“Okay. You want to give me your cellphone number and I’ll text you as soon as I’ve seen your father to tell you that he’s doing fine, okay?”

“Does Daddy have his phone? Do you need to take him a charger?”

“A charger would be great. But once you get it for me, I need you to sit and eat and relax, sweetie.” She needed to decompress and let someone else be the adult.

She wasn’t responsible for the whole world, and she needed to let that burden go.

He grabbed a taco and wolfed it down, figuring he wasn’t going to get anything at the hospital. Then he pocketed the charger Marley gave him and gave his boys a hug and a kiss. Then he gave each of the girls a quick hug for support. “I will text as soon as I know anything, okay? You guys don’t have to worry about a thing. And thanks, Jennie, I appreciate this so much.” He’d learned to lean on people in the aftermath of Grant stealing every last penny he had, and while he still didn’t like having to do it, he knew it was necessary at times like this.

“I’ve got this. Marley and I are going to be fine. Maybe we’ll make some peanut butter cookies together.”

“I bet she’d love that. Bye all.” He was on his phone as soon as he closed the door behind him, arranging for an Uber to the hospital. He only hoped that Dev was okay and he was just making the trip to bring Dev home again.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

“Come on, guys. I need to go to my girls! I need my phone!”

Dev needed his head to stop pounding.

“We need to make sure you don’t have a concussion,” the doctor insisted. “You stay put, and I’ll come back and see how you’re doing in a bit.”

The nurse came around the curtain right after the doctor left. “Mr. Marx? There’s a Bryan St-Vincent here to see you?”

“Bryan? Let him in. Please.” Maybe Bryan could help him get out of here.

It took a few minutes, but then the nurse held back the curtain again and let Bryan in. “Dev. Oh, man, you’re awake. Are you okay?”

“Headache. I want to go home. Did you bring the kids?” He needed to know his girls were okay.

“No, I left them at the apartment with Jennie. My friend from the community center. She brought tacos for them to eat. They’re safe. Did they say you could go home?”

“Not yet. Can you talk to them?”

“The doctors? And tell them what? I give you permission?” Bryan pulled the chair over next to his bed. “Seriously, are you okay?”

“They think my arm is broken. They did X-rays.” He wanted to cry.

“Oh my god!” Bryan put a hand on his side. “Does it hurt bad?”

“Only when I move or breathe.”

“You’re not going anywhere until they get you fixed up. I can’t believe he showed up and did that!” Bryan took a deep breath and stroked his side. “It’s going to be okay.”

“What happened? Did he get away?”

“He did not. Your security guard showed up in time to watch me bash him over the head with one of your chairs. It didn’t survive—I’m sorry about that. Anyway, the cops were close behind him and they arrested him. And he threatened to come back and kill the two of us, so they sure as hell had better keep him. The kids are good. They’re freaking a little bit. I think if you could give your girls a call, they’d really appreciate it.”

“Did you bring my phone?” Could you dial it?

“Shit, I didn’t see it so I thought you had it with you. We’ll call on my phone then.” Bryan pulled it out of his back pocket and dialed the newly entered number for Marley’s phone. “Hey, Marley. I have your dad here. He wants to talk to you.” Bryan handed him the phone.

“Daddy! Daddy, are you okay? Are you hurt? Everyone’s watching a movie. Are you okay?”

“Hey. Hey, I’m fine. Seriously. I’m going to come home with a cast, and I have a bump on the head.”

“You’re hurt, Daddy!” Marley sounded like she was only just holding it together.

“Just a little. I’ll be home tonight, no question.”

“Promise?”

“I do.”

Marley sniffed, and he heard her take a deep breath. “O-okay.”

“There you go. You breathe, and tomorrow, we’ll have a pajama day.” He thought a day off school was probably more than reasonable.

“Pajama day tomorrow!” Marley called out, and he heard Juni cheering in the background. “Thanks, Daddy. See you soon?”

“Soon. Be good for—” He glanced at Bryan, who mouthed ‘Jennie’. “—Jennie, okay?”

“Yes, Daddy. She seems nice so far. Love you, bye!”

“I guess I’d better get them in here to get you a cast if you’re going to go home tonight,” Bryan said, pocketing his phone.

“I’m going to. Dammit. They just need to get on the ball.”

“Let me go see if I can’t rustle someone up to get this happening. No leaving without me.” Bryan looked him in the eye. “I mean it. The kids are okay, and a trustworthy adult is with them. You can wait until they get your broken bones set. I’ve heard stories about bad things happening because people’s bones didn’t set properly, and I don’t want that happening to you.”

“No. I have to have my arm to work.” He suddenly felt intensely queasy. “Water?”

Bryan looked around. “Back in a sec.” And good as his word, he wasn’t gone long at all, coming back with a plastic glass with a straw in it. “Here you go.” Bryan held the straw to his lips.

“Thank you.” Dev could hear the water hitting his belly.

“Do you think you could manage some food if I go get you something? You never got supper in the end, and that can’t be helping anything.” Bryan touched his cheek gently, his face a little tender from Grant’s punches.

“Something easy? Just—come back, please.” He was a little wiggled out, and Bryan’s presence made him feel better.

“You want me to stay until the doc gets back instead? I totally can. There’s a vending machine out there. I can grab you some chips or something.”

“Just stay. I don’t think I’m hungry. I’m just tired.” And the adrenaline was fading. Again.

“Okay, I’m not going anywhere. Wait, let me just...” Bryan went to the curtain and pulled it open. “Hey, can we get someone in here to tell us what’s going on? We really don’t want to leave AMA, but if someone doesn’t get this cast thing happening, we will.”

Okay, that was pretty hot.

Seriously.

He was grinning when Bryan came back in.

“Someone is coming to talk to us,” Bryan told him, returning his smile. “We will get you out of here tonight. Hopefully with something to stabilize that wrist.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I hope so.” He tried to smile; he really did feel better now that Bryan was here with him. It grounded him somehow. “That was scary as hell.”

“It was! I can’t believe he got up there. I can’t believe he showed up at all. He was always so sweet. Aside from the whole stealing all our money thing of course.” Bryan shook his head. “Sorry. Sorry. This is about you, not me.”

“No. No, it’s about us. I mean, you were there. Your kids were there too.” He was pretty sure Grant would have been happy to beat down Bryan next if he’d had the chance.

Bryan nodded, shuddered slightly. “It was horrifying. I’m worried they’re not going to keep him in jail, despite the fact that even after he’d been arrested, he threatened to come back and do worse.”

“How safe is your house?”

Bryan paled. “Oh god.”

“Okay. While he’s in custody, go get things for the boys, get clothes, computers. Do you have friends that can help? You can stay with me until things cool down.” This was all his fault. Besides, he could think of worse things than having Bryan living with him.

“That’s an awful lot to ask of you. Three extra people?” Bryan shook his head. “We couldn’t.”

“I have tons of room. The boys know me. I have security, and they’re going to be

psychotically careful now.” He tried to reach for Bryan, crying out at the pain. “Please. Let me help. Stay with me.”

“Okay, okay. Just don’t hurt yourself anymore, okay?” Bryan put a hand on his good arm. “We’ll stay. You’re going to need my help anyway until that wrist heals.”

“Do you have friends you can call? I’ll be okay here until they cast me up.”

Bryan frowned. “No, I’ll stay until I can get you home. We’ll figure out what I need to get from my place tomorrow. The boys can sleep in their underwear. Hell, so can I.”

“Well, then, let’s get this cast on. I want you and your special things over at the flat so you’re safe.”

“Thanks, Dev. You don’t know what it means to me to know there’ll be a layer of security between us and Grant.”

“Yes, I do. I care about you, and this is all my fault.”

“All your fault? I seem to remember it was Grant’s fists that were flying—you were just defending yourself.”

“Yeah, but I did the billboard.”

“Oh... I guess that’s why he attacked now.” Bryan shook his head. “He deserved that, though. He deserved that and more. This is still his fault and not yours.”

“He’s insane. I’m so sorry, but his new guy deserved to know.”

“I agree and I don’t blame you. This is all on Grant. He’s the one who ripped us off.

He's the one who chose to come into your home and hurt you when he got called out."

The curtain shifted and the doctor came in. "Not interrupting, am I?"

"No," Bryan said immediately. "We've been waiting for you to come and fix his wrist. He needs to get home, we both do—there's kids."

"Yes. And there's the guy that did this." Dev waved his arm carefully. "I need to get home."

"Well, to be honest, we'd like to officially sign you in and keep you overnight."

"No," Bryan spoke up before he could say anything. "He needs the cast on and he needs to go home. I'll be there. I can wake him up every hour or whatever it is you need me to do, but his girls need him. So how long is this going to take?"

"A couple of hours, minimum."

Dev nodded. "Do you want to go back to the house?"

"Do you need me here?" Bryan asked.

Yes. But he made himself shake his head. "No. No, I'm a big boy. Go grab clothes and your laptops, the boys' favorite toys, you know."

Bryan nodded slowly. "While we know he's still in jail. You got it. I'll do that and get back to the apartment. You get that wrist taken care of and come home to us."

"Sounds perfect. I'll be there as soon as I am released. Promise." He needed to get home to his girls, to Bryan and his boys, to know they were all safe. All of them.



“We’ll hold you to that, but until you get there, I’ll hold the fort down.” Bryan leaned in and kissed him real quick on the lips, his eyes going wide as he stood back. “I, uh. Yeah.” Then he turned tail and left.

Dev touched his lips with his good hand.

Oh.

Oh, wow.

### CHAPTER NINE

Bryan arrived back at Dev's apartment around ten thirty with two huge suitcases full of clothes, all their important documents, his work, and some of the boys' toys. Jennie let him in, eyes wide when she saw all the stuff he had with him.

"We thought it would be safest if we stayed here with Dev for a while. He has security, and I don't."

She nodded and helped him get everything in. "Of course. The kids are all in the living room still. They're all asleep, but I wasn't sure if I should send anyone to bed or just let them be."

"That's cool. We didn't really have a plan until I got with Dev at the hospital and he insisted we stay. You need me to call you a cab or anything?"

She glanced at her watch and shook her head. "No, it's not that late, I can get myself home. You call if you need anything, though, okay?"

"Thanks, Jennie. You're a lifesaver. Really." He gave her a hug, then she left, waving. He locked the door and put the chain on once she was gone. He wasn't letting anyone who didn't belong in.

He glanced at his watch—Jennie was right, it wasn't really that late, just 10:45. It seemed surreal given all that had happened. It felt like more time should have passed. Kind of like his whole relationship with Dev to date, really.

Shaking his head, he left everything in the hall and made his way to the living room to see the kids.

Marley smiled at him, mouthing, “Daddy?”

“He’s getting a cast,” Bryan whispered as the other three were fast asleep. “He’ll be here as soon as it’s on.” He hoped that wasn’t too long from now. He wasn’t sure Marley would really go to sleep until Dev made it home.

“Okay. Are you okay? Do you need help?” She slipped out of the living room. “Are you staying? I think it would be nice if you did.”

He followed her, waving at the stuff he’d brought from his place. “I’m glad you do because yes, your dad asked if we would stay until all of this is sorted. So we’re all together. And I heard we’re having a pajama day tomorrow.”

“Yes. Pajama day it is.” She stepped closer and looked up at him. “That man... he’s evil.”

“Yeah, that’s a good word for it. I’m really sorry you had to see him come here and do that. The police took him away, and I hope they put him in jail for a long time. But the security guards here know who he is now, and they will never let him past the front desk again. You are safe here in your home.” He didn’t want her to be frightened; this needed to be a safe place.

“Yes. And you and daddy and the others are safe too. Juni’s ready to kick some butt.”

“I bet she could kick a lot of butt.” She was a pint-sized karate champ. “Where do you think the boys and I should sleep? We’re going to be here for a little while.” He had no clue how long, really. It would depend on what happened with Grant and his charges.

“We have two guest rooms, and they have a connecting door. This is a big, big place. So I’m going to put you in there. It’s clean and nice, and there’s a bathroom.”

“Oh, that sounds wonderful. Thank you so much.” He grabbed the duffel bags and Marley grabbed the boys’ backpacks, leading the way to the two connecting rooms at the end of the hallway. The rooms were a nice size and both boasted king-sized beds, which meant he could easily put both boys in the same bed. “This is awesome.” Hell, the two rooms with the ensuite were almost as big as his entire place.

“Good deal. I’m so glad it works.” Marley teared up, wringing her hands.

“Hey, hey.” He put down the duffels in favor of tugging her close and holding her. “It’s okay. I’m here now and your daddy is going to be home soon.” She didn’t need to keep being strong.

“I’m so glad you’re safe. Now we need Daddy home.” She began to cry, gasping when the house phone rang.

“I’ve got it, honey.” He went out to the hall and grabbed it. “Hello?”

“Hey. Can you open the door? I don’t have my keys or my phone or my wallet. The hospital got me a cab, but…”

“Dev! Good to hear your voice! Hey, Marley—your dad is home. He needs to be let in,” he called out.

“Okay. Tell him to come on.” She headed for the door.

“Your girl is getting the door for you. She is so glad you’re home. Me, too. Come on in.” He hung up and headed after Marley, eager to give Dev a hand.

Marley threw open the door in time for them to see Dev handing the security guy his phone back. “Thank you.”

The security guy nodded. “Anything you need, sir, just say the word.” Yeah, Bryan bet they had some serious sucking up to do after letting Grant in like that.

Dev had a bright blue cast, and he looked exhausted.

“Jesus. Let’s get you sitting. Or do you want to go straight to bed?” he asked as he slipped under Dev’s good arm, helping to keep him upright.

“I’m starving. Is there any food?”

Bryan glanced at Marley, who nodded.

“There were leftovers.”

“Can you put a few into the microwave for your dad and me?” Because now that food had been mentioned, his stomach was reminding him that he’d only had a single taco, and that had been hours ago.

Marley took off for the kitchen, and he led Dev to the living room where Juni and the boys were still dozing in front of the TV.

“Oh, sweet babies. Look at them.” Dev sat hard in the big La-Z-Boy next to the couches.

Bryan grabbed a cushion and carefully tucked it on the arm of the chair, under Dev’s bad hand.

“Yeah. I only got home a bit ago. Marley was showing me the guest suite—it’ll be

perfect for us. Thanks again for letting us stay.” He was so relieved, knowing that Grant couldn’t get up here again. His home was way easier to invade.

“Thank you for coming up. There’s room, and the boys should have tons of space.”

“Yeah. I’ll carry ’em to bed in a bit. I’ll just make sure you get fed and comfortable first. Did they give you pain meds?” He could hear Marley working the microwave in the kitchen, so he knew food wouldn’t be much longer.

“They did, but they want me to stay awake until midnight. Then I can take them.”

He checked his watch—a bit over an hour. They could do this. “Okay. Midnight it is. I’ll help you stay up, get all the kids into bed. All that stuff.”

Marley came in holding two plates with tacos on them. She’d even put the sauces on the side for them to dip into it.

“You rock,” Bryan told her. “Thank you so much.”

“Great job, sweetheart. You were so brave.” Dev looked like he was trying not to cry, and Bryan knew how he felt. They were all a little fragile right now, emotionally if not physically.

“I think you should give your dad a careful hug before you give him his plate. I bet hugging you does way more for him than anything they did at the hospital.” Bryan knew she badly needed a hug from her father, but he was pretty sure Dev could use the love from his daughter as well. As long as she didn’t disturb his casted arm.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. It’s casted. It’s solid as a rock.” Dev opened his arms to her.

She flew into them, making him wince just a bit, but he hid it quickly and held her close.

“I was so worried, Daddy. That man is evil!”

“Yes, but he’s in jail, and I’m going to have a camera put in the hallway too.”

“That’s a great idea. That way, you can check before you open the door so even if they’ve made it past security, you know who you’re letting in.” Bryan gave him an encouraging smile before grabbing a taco and munching on it. This place was already pretty well guarded, but by the time Dev was finished, it was going to be Fort Knox. Bryan approved.

“I showed Mr. Bryan the connected guest rooms.” Marley curled up in Dev’s lap, clearly needing the cuddle time.

“Good deal. We’ll get everyone really settled tomorrow. There’s a good office space off the playroom, too. I used to use it when Juni was little.”

“Oh, that would be amazing. Thank you. At this rate, we’re never going to want to leave.”

“We’ll have to discuss your options tomorrow, when we’re both less exhausted, but you don’t have to worry, okay? You are safe here.”

Bryan nodded, giving Dev a warm smile. “Hey, let me help you get some food.” Bryan nodded at Marley, who was fast asleep, curled in his lap.

Grabbing Dev’s plate from the coffee table, Bryan set it carefully on the arm of his chair so he could reach the tacos.

“Thank you. I hope you feel comfortable here. I’m so glad to be home.” Dev looked exhausted, but the tightness that had been in his frame and the worry lines around his eyes had eased.

“I’m good. And I’ll carry the kids to bed in a minute. I just need to sit a moment in the knowledge that we’re all okay.” He couldn’t sit too long. He had a feeling he’d sleep hard once he closed his eyes, and he had stuff to do before that happened.

“Yes. We’re all okay, and together.”

“And you only have to stay awake another forty-five minutes before you can take your pain pills and go to sleep,” Bryan noted.

“I’m glad the boys are safe. I was so worried.”

“We’re all fine, Dev. Every single one of us.” Bryan sighed and finished his last couple bites of taco. “Man, I have a hunch that the second I lie down, it’ll all really hit me.” Not just the relief, but what had happened, what could have happened. Oh, he was cognizant of all that now, but he had a feeling he’d have to work through it some before long.

“Yeah. I hear you. I might just sleep here, both sides of the sofas recline.”

“Yeah? I might have to join you, then.” Bryan gave him a wry grin. “That way, I’m close by if you need help in the night.”

“Let’s just all hang out, then. That way, if the boys wake up, they see you.”

“Okay, sure.” Bryan felt a touch freaked at not putting the boys to bed, and then he chuckled wryly at himself and shook his head. “Sorry. We have such a routine going that it seems really strange to just let it go and throw it to the wind.”



“I bet it does. I’m happy to have you close, though. This is a safe place, and it’s going to be safer now.” Dev was determined as hell.

Bryan nodded. “Never again, right? And it says something evil about Grant that he’s the source of so many never-agains.”

“He is, but—we can face this one together.”

He liked how that sounded. Together. Dev had said that a lot tonight, and Bryan was beginning to believe it was real and to recognize how good that made him feel.

Bryan smiled, and really, it was the first natural smile he’d managed since before everything had gone off. “I like the sound of that. I think that’s been the hardest thing—is doing it all alone. Even knowing you’re in my corner is more than enough to make me feel so much more capable.”

Dev lifted Bryan’s hand, kissed his fingers. Dev’s lips were super hot against them. “Always. I mean it.”

“Thank you. Are you okay? Your lips are like fire. You think you have a fever? Can I get you anything?”

Dev smiled at him. “I just want to be here with all of us together, you know?”

“I do. I’ll get you a big glass of water when it’s time to take your pills.” Bryan nodded at his plate. “Try to eat some more, yeah? Your body needs the fuel.”

“Yeah. They’re pretty good, even reheated.”

“Jennie brought them from our favorite little Mexican restaurant. It’s cheap enough we can treat ourselves once every couple of weeks, and the boys just love it.” Bryan

ate more as well, cleaning his plate.

“We’ll have to put it on the rotation. My girls love tacos. Marley wanted to cook for you so badly.”

“Now that I’m staying here for a while, we’ll have plenty of time to cook together. Her heart was in the right place, but without any foundation, it all seems hard and confusing. Just wait, she’ll be cooking us dinners in no time.”

“We can all help. The boys can do easy things like set the table and stuff. I know that from when you had us over.”

“Yep, absolutely. And they are great at helping with the parts that don’t involve knives or the stove. They love measuring and dumping in ingredients.” He was going to teach his boys to be self-sufficient while they were eager to help and learn now so it never became a chore.

“They’re good boys. We’ll do what we need to so that the place is more friendly. I also own rights for the roof, so there’s a play area up there.”

“Holy cow. You really did recover from Grant’s theft, eh?” It sounded like a dream come true. A safe place, somewhere for the boys to be able to play on top of that.

“I was lucky—the girls’ father? My husband that died? He came from an incredibly wealthy family, and they floated me until I could recover.”

“Oh wow. That is so kind of them. For every person like Grant, there’s at least one like your late husband’s family, eh? The Pereisos? The couple who live above us who own the duplex have been so kind to us. And I needed that very badly at the time.” It had been people like them, like Jennie—they’d made such a huge difference in their lives.

“Right? There’s a good world out there. It just doesn’t feel like it right this second.”

“No, no, it doesn’t. At least we’ve got a high, safe place to hide and lick our wounds until we’re ready to face it again.” Bryan hadn’t even considered what it was going to be like, going home to his little, not terribly secure, house before Dev invited them to stay until it was safe, and he was so thankful. In fact, “Thanks again for taking us in. It really is a relief.”

“For me too. You saved my life.”

He went to shake his head, but then he remembered Grant’s face and his words—that he was going to kill them—and he didn’t shake his head after all. Dev was right—if he hadn’t been there, Grant would have finished the job once Dev was down. The man wasn’t just a con man—he’d been ready to commit murder. Marley was right—Grant was pure evil. “I’m glad I was here. I don’t even want to think about what would have happened if I wasn’t. I just found you and I’m not ready to lose you.” No, he wanted to explore what was between him and Dev, what had been starting before Grant punched his way back into their lives.

“No. No, we deserve each other.” Dev met his gaze, eyes as serious as a heart attack. “We deserve to try, right?”

“Sounds like your mind is headed in the same direction as mine.” He was looking forward to Dev no longer being on the injured list, actually. To give things a try.

“We’ll start figuring things out, tomorrow.”

“Oh yeah. Tomorrow is a good day for a lot of things. Tonight is for making it to your meds and then sleeping.” He could already feel the pull of sleep himself, and he forced himself to sit upright. He had to stay awake ’til midnight.

“Here’s the remote. Find something easy, huh?”

He took the remote and turned the system on. “That’s something we haven’t talked about—what kind of TV do you like?”

“I watch things that aren’t violent. There’s too much violence, especially against women.”

Everything he learned about Dev made him like the man more. “I love all the baking shows. The British Bake-Off is my favorite. Oh, and they’ve got a pottery-off too that’s awesome.” He chose Netflix, and sure enough, there was the Great British Bake-Off. He hadn’t seen it in a while, so he put it on the very first episode.

“Perfect. I love the cadence of the voices.” Dev beamed at him. “There’s a glass-blowing one too, for when we’re done.”

“Oh, I haven’t seen that one—sounds neat!” He beamed over at Dev, then glanced at his watch. Dev was supposed to take his pills in fifteen minutes. Bryan grabbed his phone and set an alarm for midnight. “How often are you supposed to take the pills?”

“Once every eight hours if I need them. Make sure you put them up out of reach of the kids, please.”

“Will do. You’ve got about fifteen minutes to the first one. I’ve set an alarm.” He set another one for eight a.m.

“Cool.” Dev finally finished his taco. “I’m starting to get a headache again, so yeah.”

“Close your eyes. I’ll make sure you get ’em at midnight.” Even as he watched, Dev’s eyelids were drooping hard.

“Uh-huh. Glad you’re here.”

“Me, too, man. Me, too.” For all the reasons.

### CHAPTER TEN

Dev woke up to barely muffled giggles and whispers, and a pounding headache.

He'd been up and down all night, but about five a.m., he'd crashed hard, just finally giving up.

"Hey," Bryan said quietly. "I bet you're hurting. It's nearly eleven a.m. I didn't have the heart to wake you at eight."

"It's okay. How are the kids?" Are they all getting along?

"They're great. My boys are loving this pajama day thing. Let me get you your pills, yeah?"

"Just one, not two. I want to be awake for the day." Dev was already fuzzy enough.

"Okay, but if it gets to be too much for you, let me know and I'll give you the other one. I'll be right back." Bryan was as good as his word popping into the kitchen and coming back with a glass of water with a straw. Bryan handed him a pill and the glass.

"Thanks. I appreciate your help. Really."

"It's no problem. Honestly. The kids are having a blast. And Marley and I put in a grocery order—we're going to do cooking lessons and you all get to eat whatever we manage to cook." Bryan looked pretty amused at that.

“Perfect. I texted my lawyer last night—she’s having security cameras installed, and we can have movers get the rest of your things, if that is something you want to discuss.”

“Like everything?” Bryan looked a little stunned.

“It’s totally up to you, and we can discuss things in a few days if you want. He’s going to get bail. He’s going to be free. So maybe you have things you want for a few days, a few weeks?” He didn’t mind the idea of being roommates, to be honest. It was good to have another adult around, and he liked Bryan. In fact, he liked Bryan a whole lot more than you liked a simple roommate.

The guilt of knowing he had put Bryan in this situation was also a factor.

“Yeah, you’ve got a point.” Bryan nodded. “After the boys are in bed tonight, I’ll go back with the duffel bags empty and make sure we have everything that can’t be replaced. Just in case.”

“We’ll talk about it, okay? When everyone else is busy.”

“Or asleep,” Bryan suggested. “They are having a blast by the way. I hope it’s okay, I told them they didn’t have to do any schoolwork. I figured pajama day meant full-on day off.”

“Absolutely. I figure the periodic mental health day is necessary.”

“After yesterday, I’d agree.” Bryan shivered. “Okay. Breakfast—do you want any? Or do you just want some of whatever we have for lunch? Which is going to depend on whether or not our grocery order arrives.”

“Whatever. I’m easy. I just want to?—”

“Daddy!” Juni jumped right in the middle of him.

“Careful!” Bryan cried out. “Remember how we talked about being gentle with your father?”

“Oh! Oh, sorry. How’s your hand, Daddy?”

“Broken, but it’s going to heal.” He hugged her close.

“Is this okay?” Juni asked, curling into him. It felt so good to hold her.

“Absolutely. I missed you yesterday evening. Did you like Jennie?”

“Uh-huh. She was cool. She can crotch-et.”

“Crotch-et?”

“Uh-huh. With yarn and a stick.”

“She makes some amazing things with that stick,” Bryan noted. “Did she teach you how to do it?”

“She tried, but I kept crying.” Juni winced. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize, honey. You were upset. It’s hard to learn new things when you’re upset,” Bryan assured her. He was good with the girls, from what Dev could see. Gentle, helpful, caring, but not a pushover, he didn’t think.

“I bet she’ll come back for another lesson, hmm?” He stroked her hair, loving on her.

“Not if it means you’ll get hurt.”



“I think we’re going to invite her for an afternoon soon, so you guys can get to know her better. She’s a very nice lady who is a friend.” Bryan smiled. “Or we could all go down to the community center where she works—they’ve got lots of great activities for kids. For instance, I read books out loud.”

“I can do that. Read out loud. I read a lot for my age. The teacher says so.”

Dev smiled and nodded. Juni had been a slow reader, unlike her sister, and was fighting to catch up.

“Good for you! And maybe you could help me with the reading hour sometimes.”

“If Daddy says yes, sure.” She glanced up at him, and he nodded. “Daddy says yes.”

Bryan chuckled. “Excellent. Next time that the boys and I go, we’ll bring you along. Meanwhile,” Bryan glanced at his watch. “Looks like the groceries aren’t going to get here in time for lunch. What do you think we should feed your daddy?”

“Bacon sandwiches.” That was immediate.

“Is there a place you can order that from? The bacon is coming, as is the bread, but there isn’t any in the fridge right now.” Bryan looked to him.

“I can?—”

“Murphy’s Deli! Can I have a turkey with provolone and pickles, Daddy?” Marley hollered.

Bryan chuckled. “I’ll get everyone’s order and call it in. You going to have a bacon sandwich like Juni?”

“Yes, please. No cheese for me, and tomato and lettuce.”

“Got it. Juni—how do you want yours?”

“Just like Daddy, please!”

“You got it. And turkey with provolone and pickles for Marley. What kind of bread?”  
Bryan called out.

“Ciabatta, please.”

“Daddy,” Micah whispered. “I want what Marley haves.”

Micah was in love.

“Okay, you got it. What about you, Dylan?”

“The bacon sandwich sounds good. But I just want bacon on it.”

“No lettuce?”

Dylan gave it due consideration. “Yeah, I’ll try it. I can take it off if I don’t like it, right?”

“You can indeed. And I’ll have a bacon sandwich as well. That’s all of us.” Bryan started typing on his phone.

Dev leaned back against the sofa. “How are you boys doing? Are you liking your room?”

“It’s huge,” Dylan told him. “Like ginormous!”

“I like sharing with Dylan, like our room at home.” Micah sat next to Marley.

“We’re going to be so spoiled,” Bryan noted. “And lunch is on the way.”

“Daddy likes having someone to spoil. He says that a lot.”

Bryan’s cheeks reddened. “Well, that’s a nice quality.”

“I think so.” She smiled at him. “But if you’re staying, we need little boy stuff.”

“Dev, you have a very, very smart daughter.” Bryan grinned, looking pleased.

“I have two.” Dev winked at him, but he did think, absolutely, that Bry and the boys needed to stay here where they could relax and be safe.

“You do indeed. I just hope my boys take after them and can be smart, too. Eh, guys? You gonna use your brains in school and stuff?”

“I’m not,” Micah announced, making them all laugh.

“I will!” Dylan said. “Marley says that we can have books and read together. Like big books.”

“She’s right. I’m going to head back to our house after lunch and pick up the rest of our stuff, including all your books, okay?”

“Let me send movers. I can have your things packed today, put on a truck, and delivered tomorrow.”

“Do you really have room for everything?” Bryan asked, worrying his bottom lip.

“I do. You deserve your things. We can cohabitate for as long as you feel happy here.”

“Thank you again. I need to get that tattooed across my forehead or something, so you can see I’m always saying it.”

“We’ll talk later. Should I send the movers?”

Bryan nodded slowly. “Yeah, let’s do it. I don’t know when I’m going to feel safe there again. And it would be good to know he can’t do anything to our stuff, either.”

“All right. We’ll bring you home, make this place your own. You and the boys are welcome.”

“Did you hear that, guys? We’re going to be living here—isn’t that exciting?”

“With Marley and Juni? Are you coming too?” Micah asked.

“Of course—I meant all three of us. You’re not going anywhere without me, I promise.” Bryan gave little Micah a hug.

“Good. Then yay! We get to be in a big room! Hooray!”

The boys started jumping and dancing.

Bryan laughed and gave chase, giving them random hugs.

“This is going to be an adventure, huh, Daddy?” Juni asked, and he nodded.

“I think so.”

“Hopefully, we won’t get in the way,” Bryan murmured, looking worried.

“Listen. Let me give you a tour.” He stood up. “Don’t answer the door,” he told the girls. “Only me, fair?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Come on. You’ve seen the bedrooms. This used to be two large condos. So there are two ensuites, six bedrooms, plus the playroom and the office. And that doesn’t count my studio upstairs or the roof.”

“That is a lot of room,” Bryan admitted. “Do you need to take my arm or are you okay?”

“I’m good. So the door to the second floor is always locked. I’ll get you a key, but there are dangerous chemicals and paints worth a small fortune in there. Please never leave it unlocked.”

Bryan nodded. “No problem. I don’t know why I’d need to go up to your studio, but if I do, I won’t leave the door unlocked.”

“Thank you. This is the door.” The door was locked way up where little fingers couldn’t reach it. “The door to the roof is here. It’s alarmed, just in case. I never set it anymore, but when my kids were smaller, I worried.”

“Oh, I bet. I’d hate to have littles accidentally get up there without supervision. That’s too high.” It looked like Bryan got it. Of course, he was a dad, so that wasn’t surprising.

“You want to come up and see?”

“I’d love to.” Bryan closed the door behind himself and followed Dev up the stairs.

The roof was open and nice, with a little area for a garden that had gone to seed, an empty sand box, a shed, and a lovely swing set.

“Oh, this is nice. You ever use the garden?” Bryan looked longingly at the space.

“I don’t have time, but if you’re a gardener, that would be amazing.”

“Yeah, I’d like to play in the dirt if it’s an option. I helped Mrs. Pereiso with hers in the backyard, but it’s not the same as doing it all yourself.”

“Absolutely. This space—” he waved his arms at the garden patch. “Consider it yours.”

“Like I said, I’m going to get it tattooed on my forehead—thank you.” Bryan circled the fallow garden, checking out the plants there and poking his fingers into the soil. “This looks good, and it’s big enough to do more than just some tomatoes. There could be beans, carrots, potatoes even, and maybe beets. Stuff that’s ready at different times.”

It was going to be glorious to teach the kids about growing their own food, flowers. Bryan might keep thanking him, but he thought that he and the girls were going to get a lot out of having Bryan and the boys living with them, too.

Bryan grinned at him. “I have plans already, so you’d better have meant it.”

“Absolutely. This place could be amazing with some work.”

“It’s pretty damn amazing already. Have you ever thought about putting in a gazebo or something that would shelter you from the rain? I bet it would be fun to sit out here

and listen to it hitting the roof, watching a storm lightning and thunder its way through the sky.” Bryan looked out over the city, like he was envisioning it.

“You choose one, and we’ll have it built. It would be a good place for picnics.”

“Thank y—” Bryan stopped himself, took a deep breath and instead of finishing his thank-you, said, “Yeah, I think it would be a great addition up here. I’ll look into it.”

“Sounds great. This way, the boys have an outside space that’s not the park.” Not that the park was a huge walk, but this was close and easy. And safe.

“Somewhere out of the sun and rain if necessary.” Bryan took a last look around. “It really is a beautiful spot.”

“I’m glad it’ll get more use. It needs a loving hand.”

“Show me the rest of the place?” Bryan asked. “I mean back downstairs in the main house, so to speak. If you’re feeling up to it.”

“Absolutely. Anything you’d like to see.” He led Bryan back down the stairs.

“I’m enjoying you sharing your home with me, and I’ve yet to see the playroom or the office...”

“I’m glad. We need to make the boys comfortable. Give them a place to play.”

“Yeah. I’m going to get them to school tomorrow. I think going back to the school routine will help get them settled here. I don’t think they really got what was going on when Grant showed up. Marley did an amazing job of shielding them. I was impressed.”

“She’s a beast when it comes to defending little ones. And everyone needs to get back to all their lessons.”

They returned to the living floor, and he led Bryan to the place the man could set up his office.

“There’s everything an office could need here.” There was a lovely window, tons of outlets, and a closet.

“It’s a beautiful space,” Bryan told him. “I love the natural light coming in.”

“I used it as a studio, years ago.”

“So you’ve been here a long time, then?”

“Twenty years. I mean, I had a quarter of this space. Now I have this floor, the floor above, and the roof.”

“That’s very cool. I’m glad your work is doing so well. I’m going to be very good too and not start talking finances with you—I’m sure you’ve got someone looking after that for you.”

“If you see mistakes, please holler. I want to have enough for the future.”

“No, I don’t see any obvious mistakes, but my first instinct when I realize you have a lot of money is to make sure you have a good investment scheme.”

“Good. Please do. My sister is my accountant. She’ll love to meet you.”

“Okay, I’d be happy to take a look and make some suggestions.” Bryan really did look pleased about it.



“Good deal. I’ll get you in touch with Angela.”

“Excellent. We just need a desk in here, and maybe a file cabinet?” Bryan gave him an apologetic look. “I know it seems a bit boring, but I am an accountant after all.”

“Do you have a desk you want to bring over?”

“I’ve been working on the dining room table. I’d love an actual desk. If that’s okay.”

“Of course. Do you like the color? What about art?” Art was important in Dev’s opinion.

“I wasn’t sure how much I should try to change,” Bryan admitted. “This is your house after all.”

“Well, I know it’s stupidly fast...” And it was, and maybe he was insane, because what did he know about Bryan? He’d only been to the man’s house once, but it was his fault Bryan was in danger now, so... “But if you’re going to be here, you should be comfortable.”

And paint could be painted over.

“I really appreciate that. And I am going to be so spoiled. An actual office with an actual desk. I did bring all my files—I sacrificed some clothing room in one of my bags. They were in a locked filing cabinet, but I didn’t want to risk my clients’ financial information getting into the wrong hands if Grant broke in. Once the kids are in school tomorrow, I’ll figure out what I’d liked moved here and what needs to go to a storage locker. And I guess to put in my notice. There’s no point in paying rent if I’m not going to be there for months. And given how these things work, I’m guessing it’s going to be a while before Grant’s no longer a threat...”

“It’s not just Grant. I mean, I’m not making a huge sacrifice. I like you, Bryan.” He might as well tell the truth, right? They weren’t lovers, but they were more than friends. And the them-not-being-lovers was a yet thing, not a never-gonna-happen thing. It had been brewing from the start if he was honest with himself.

Bryan’s smile lit up his eyes in a way that made them seem extra bright. “I like you, too. I didn’t kiss you by mistake at the hospital.”

“I didn’t mind that at all.” He stepped a little closer. “We could try it again, if you want.”

“I think I would.” Bryan closed the little distance between them.

“I think I would too.” He leaned in, resting their lips together.

Bryan moved his lips against Dev’s, the glide smooth and warm, and it sent little tingles dancing along his lips.

“Daddy! Daddy, the sammiches are here!” Juni came bounding down the hall.

“Dammit,” he whispered.

Bryan stepped away, a wry little grin on his face. “Why do I think this is going to be a recurring theme?”

“Because there are four—count them—four children here?”

“Oh yeah, exactly.” Bryan chuckled. “Come on, let’s get you and those four kids fed.”

“And you. You have someone to take care of you now.”

“I haven’t had that in a very long time.”

He squeezed Bryan’s hand. “You do now.”

“Thank you,” Bryan said quietly. “I’m definitely getting spoiled.”

“Daddy! Time for food! Marley says our new room is ours for realsies!”

“We’re coming, Dylan. And yes. you guys get to keep the room. We’re going to move in here for real, not just a few days.”

Micah’s eyes went wide. “We get sisters?”

Bryan bit his lip, but then he nodded. “Yeah. No matter what else happens, you’ve got sisters.” Then Bryan turned to him. “Right?”

“What do you say, girls? Do you want brothers?”

Marley chuckled. “Of course. No going in my room, though. That’s off limits unless I say.”

Bryan nodded. “I think everyone’s bedroom should have that rule. We all need space that’s just ours, where we can expect privacy.”

“What’s priacy?” Micah asked, eyes wide.

“Pri-va-cy,” Bryan repeated slowly. “It’s having stuff that’s just yours, that other people have to ask about. Like my work files. I keep those private.”

“Oh. Like don’t touch my crayons, but share my Legos?”

“Exactly like that. So Marley, Juniper, and Mr. Dev’s rooms are all private. That means you don’t go in there unless invited, okay?”

“Okay. And they don’t come in ours? Right?”

“That’s right. Everyone has privacy. How about we get our sandwiches, and if anyone has any questions, we can talk over lunch.” Bryan started herding everyone into the kitchen.

Dev was glad to have Bryan here, because he was wearing down, starting to hurt.

Bryan got everyone sitting and eating their sandwiches, even cajoling him into a few bites.

The sandwich was delicious, and Marley watched him like a hawk. He knew if he wasn’t going to get a lecture, he’d have to manage to eat more than just a few bites of his sandwich.

A glance at Bryan confirmed that the lecture would be coming from two sources.

“It’s good, huh?” he said, hoping to distract Marley at least.

“Yeah, Daddy. Eat, eat, eat.” Marley did not seem in the least distracted; in fact, she seemed very focused.

Bryan chuckled, nodded. “She’s right. You need to eat all your food so you can get better. Your body can’t heal without fuel.”

“Listen to you.”

Actually, he was listening to the boys and Juni, who were laughing and telling silly

stories. It was lovely, how the kids were being together.

Bryan was looking at the kids too, a small smile on his face.

“They’re going to be fine, Daddy. They like each other,” Marley told him.

God, his girl was so grown-up sometimes.

Bryan nodded. “They’re doing well, together. She’s a good sister, huh?”

Marley nodded. “Mostly, yeah?”

That had Bryan chuckling. “Are you ready to go back to school tomorrow?”

“No, but we need to. I have a math test in second period.” She rolled her eyes, so dramatic.

“Are you ready for it? Done all your studying?” Bryan asked.

Juni shot him a look. “Are you sure you’re not a teacher?”

Bryan just laughed.

“I did. I’m good at school. It’s dance I suck at.”

“Marley! You do not!” She loved dancing and threw herself into it wholeheartedly.

“I do too—Madame says so.”

Dev’s lips tightened. “You know, baby, I’ve already told you, we have options, and that old bat isn’t the end all and be all of dance.”

Marley was way farther ahead in her piano lessons, but she had loved to dance.

“How about trying hip-hop or jazz or something totally new?” While he went and bit that old biddy. It was one thing not to believe a kid was ever going to be at the top of the game, quite another to dash their dreams like that.

“I’ve always liked square dancing,” Bryan said, glancing at Marley out of the corner of his eyes.

Marley glared. “No stupid folk dances, I don’t think. I want to be good at it.”

“I was teasing you, honey,” Bryan told her. “I don’t expect you to want to do square dancing. But there’s all kinds of dancing out there, you know? Have you watched that So You Think You Can Dance show? They do all kinds of dancing on that, and you could see if any of them appeal to you.”

“I just—I like to dance, but I can’t give up piano. I can’t.”

No, his girl felt about her piano like he felt about his paint. “You should show Bryan the music room. We hadn’t gotten there yet.” It was technically one of the six bedrooms, but they didn’t need it for that, and it had been easy to turn it into a conservatory, even if that was an old-fashioned name for it.

“Oh? I’d love to hear you play. Maybe after we’ve finished our sandwiches?”

“Sure. I’m working on a Vivaldi piece.”

“Oh, that’s impressive. There’s a lot of notes in Vivaldi, isn’t there?” Bryan really did look impressed, bless him.

“There are! Are you a musician?”

Bryan shook his head. “But I enjoy music. Especially classical. I love putting it on while I’m working.”

“Yeah? Daddy likes to listen to rock when he paints, right?”

“I do. I like it to drive.”

Bryan chuckled at that. “I like rock music, but it and working on numbers do not go together for me.”

“There is a lot of math in music, did you know that? It’s really half math, half art,” Marley informed them.

“No way. Seriously?” Bryan asked.

Marley nodded.

“That is so cool.”

Marley’s smile was beautiful, stunning, even, and so pleased.

“So are you good at math then, too?” Bryan asked.

“I am. I like math a lot. I like things that make sense.”

That was his practical baby.

Bryan nodded. “Yes. Yes, exactly. I know exactly what you mean.”

“Bryan is a math whiz. Finally, there will be help with your math questions!” He cheered and winked. “I can help with color theory.”

“I don’t know if I’m a whiz, but I get numbers. They make sense.”

Marley grinned and rolled her eyes. “See, Daddy? They make sense.”

Bryan laughed and held his fist out to Marley. Still grinning, she bumped it with her own.

“Okay, do I need to do anything, or can I go video chat with Kari?” Marley asked.

“School’s still in, goofy girl. Come watch a movie with me.”

“Movie!” Juni called out, and the boys took up the call, the three of them chanting the word over and over.

They all settled on the biggest couch, cuddling together with blankets and pillows. “Despicable Me ?”

“There’s a new one we haven’t seen yet,” Bryan noted. “Number 4, I think?”

“Let’s do it. I’m sure we can download it somewhere.”

“All right guys, we’re gonna watch Despicable Me 4 !” Bryan laughed as his boys jumped on him and he started tickling them.

“This is the best day, Daddy! The best day!” Dylan called out.

“I’m glad you think so.” Bryan gave them both kisses and hugs, and then they settled in, the boys curled up against Bryan while he and the girls sat close, next to them.

It was, weirdly, a quite good day, after a terrible day.



Hopefully, each one would just get better and better.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

It didn't take long to get settled into a routine at Dev's. Bryan would get the kids breakfast and take them to school. Then he'd come back and spend a few hours working. He loved his new setup. Having a dedicated place to work and only work was awesome. It was so nice to shut the door to the office and leave work behind at the end of the day. And it hadn't even been a week before he and the boys were all moved in. He thought they could live here happily. Even if there wasn't anything between him and Dev. But he thought just maybe there was. Maybe more than just 'thought it.'

Not that they'd done anything about it. Dev was still healing, taking the good stuff for the pain, and he didn't feel right starting something under those circumstances. They had time, right?

Dev watched him, though, and kept wandering around the house, because he couldn't paint without his dominant hand. Bryan knew it had to be driving him nuts not to be able to do any painting.

He finished up for the day, early because he'd been able to dedicate so much time to it over the last few days. Having that designated office space really made things easier. It was a couple hours before he had to go get the kids, so he sought out Dev. Maybe they could start the cooking lessons he was going to give Dev before all hell broke loose. It would be an excuse to spend some time together, anyway.

Dev was wandering around the house, two televisions on, watching a minute of one, another minute of the other. Oh yeah, not being able to paint was definitely affecting

Dev.

“Hey. How about we turn off the TVs and go learn how to make pizza?” They had the dough in the fridge and all the fixings; he knew this because he’d been the one to put in the grocery order. He knew how to make the dough from scratch, but it was more time-consuming and he’d thought having the ready-made dough in the fridge meant they could make pizza on a whim. And he’d been right, hadn’t he, because here they were, about to make pizza.

“Do you want to?” Dev gave him a desperate look. “I’m so fucking bored.”

“Oh, you should have said something. Yes, I’d love to. And the kids will be pleased with homemade pizza for supper tonight, I bet.” Bryan gave Dev a grin. “Come on, let’s go explore the kitchen.” He wanted this to be enjoyable for Dev as he hoped to make homemade meals the norm over ordering. He just thought it was a waste of money, and it didn’t taste as good and there was less fat and salt if they made it themselves.

Not that Dev had to be involved. Bryan was perfectly capable of making homemade meals; he and the boys had rarely ordered or eaten out and upping the quantities to making meals for six instead of three was mostly a matter of making sure they had the extra ingredients to start with. Still, he thought it would be nice if Dev knew how to make stuff so he had the option, and as he’d thought earlier, it was an excuse for them to spend time together.

“So we’ve got store-bought dough, but you can even make it yourself. Getting a bread machine would make that easier. We could make all sorts of bread, really.” He actually liked making bread. Occasionally he’d do it all on his own—there was something meditative about kneading dough—but he’d splurged on a bread machine and that made things so easy, and as a result, he didn’t often have to buy bread. “Anyway. That’s for another day. Today, we’re using the ready-made dough.” He put

it on the counter and pulled it out of the plastic bag.

“If you want a bread machine, you just pick one. I love bread, and Juni would be over the moon.” Dev poked the dough gingerly. “Cool.”

He laughed and grabbed a knife and a handful of flour. He spread the flour on the counter.

“Uh... you just put flour all over the counter.”

“I did. It’s so the dough doesn’t stick.” He put the dough down onto the counter and lifted it again, demonstrating its unstickiness. “See?”

“But...” Dev waved his good hand at the floured countertop.

He chuckled. “The counters are marble-top, and they’re super easy to clean. When we’re done with the pizzas, I’ll just take a damp cloth and wipe them down.”

“I would never have been so brave,” Dev told him.

Bryan snorted. He was not brave for messing up Dev’s countertops.

He put his hands on the counter to get some flour on them too, then shaped the hunk of dough to make it roundish so he could cut it evenly. Grabbing a knife, he cut the dough like a pie, splitting it into six. “We’ll do a personal pizza each. Hence the five pieces.”

“There’s six pieces, my dear accountant. Six.”

He looked down at the separated dough and chuckled. “Did I actually say five? There’s six of us so I cut six pieces.” He shook his head. “You’ve got me all aflutter.”

“That’s not bad.” Dev leaned in and took a hard kiss, making his head spin.

He groaned and swayed toward Dev, suddenly way more than just aflutter. “Oh…” he said softly as the kiss ended. He blinked at Dev a time or two, then brought their lips back together again for another kiss.

“Mmm… you taste good.” Dev’s eyes were intense this close up.

“Yeah?” Bryan felt suddenly shy for some reason. Maybe because he liked Dev so much. He didn’t want to screw anything up.

“Yes. I won’t push, that’s not nice, but I want you. Maybe… after pizza?”

“You mean once the kids are in bed?” He wasn’t going to say no to that offer.

“I do mean that. Very much.”

“Well okay, then. Can we send them to bed as soon as we pick them up from school?”

Dev started chuckling. “Can you imagine? Besides, today is piano and robotics for the girls, swimming for the boys.”

“Right.” He sighed, but there was no heat in it. Anticipation wouldn’t kill him. He hoped. Still, he leaned in and took another kiss. “It’s a date.”

“Meet you in my bed at nine, then. I’ll be the one with the erection.”

His cheeks heated at that. “Dev!” He didn’t know why he was shocked, but he was.

“What? It’s true.” Dev winked at him.

“Yeah, but I have to go get the kids in a bit and I don’t want to have an erection when I do that.” He had a hunch he’d have at the very least a warm tingly feeling in his belly when he went out. Hell, he guessed he was going to have that feeling until tonight. Especially if Dev kept looking at him like that.

“I understand completely. What do we do with the pizza crusts?” Dev’s words were at odds with that look, but Bryan appreciated the distraction.

“So I’ll have to do it this time because you’ve got one wing clipped and stretching out the dough is definitely a two-handed job.”

“I’ll be a supervisor then. Pizza management are me.” Dev plopped on a barstool and watched.

He chuckled. “That works. Next time, I’ll supervise, and you can make them.” He grabbed the first of six crusts. “So this is the part where you see them tossing the crust in the air in the movies. And the guys who do this for a living can do that. Hell, they can do all sorts. I saw this cooking competition show once where there were like a dozen people all working on their dough and it was like those cocktail bartenders who do the tricks, only with pizza dough. It was pretty cool. I’m not going to do any tossing, though, because I don’t want it landing on the floor. So, the easiest way to stretch it out is to hold it by the edges and turn it between your fingers. Like so.” He demonstrated, the dough slowly stretching out as he worked it.

“Look at you! Are you going to put the toppings on them and then cook them when the kids are home?”

“That’s what I was thinking. You can be topping master. Why don’t you pull out everything we’ll need from the fridge while I get the rest of these stretched out?”

“What do you like on yours? Juni wants pepperoni, Marley will want olives.”

“Just olives?” That was kind of horrifying to him.

“Olives are her favorite things. Have been since she tried them when she was ten. Silly girl.”

He shook his head. “But she wants like chicken and peppers or something on it too, right?” He moved on to the next pizza crust.

“She’ll eat anything else. She loves chicken and onions. Sausage.”

“Oh good.” He pushed the thought of an olives-only pizza out of his head. “My boys like cheese and pepperoni if it isn’t too strong. I like lots of veggies on mine, but I also subscribe to the anything on a pizza crust is good theory. What about you?” He knew they’d discussed this when they’d first made their pizza date, but he couldn’t quite remember all the details. Maybe meat lovers?

“My favorite is a sausage and onion pie, but I’ll eat whatever there is. And at the moment, I’m kind of feeling Greek.”

“You don’t look Greek,” he teased.

Dev snorted, but it turned into a laugh. “Dork.”

Bryan nodded. That sounded about right. “So chicken with some Greek spices, some olives, tomatoes, and feta?” he asked. He knew they had olives and chicken and tomatoes, but he wasn’t sure about the spices and the feta. He hadn’t thought to order those. He’d learn what Dev and the girls enjoyed best over time, though, and then he’d be able to order more effectively.

“Mmm... hell yes. I do like that, but honestly, pizza is good.”

“Yeah. The answer to ‘do you want pizza’ is always yes. Although I’m guessing if you had it every night, you’d soon get bored of it, even if you changed up the toppings.” He had all but one crust left to stretch out. “There’s a bottle of pizza sauce in the cupboard with the canned soups.”

“I’m on it. I love all the groceries, by the way. It looks so homey.” Dev got the sauce down. “What next?”

Bryan laughed. “Most homes do have groceries,” he teased. “There’s a big bag of shredded mozzarella in the fridge. I think you’ve already taken out everything else we need.” He was going to show Dev how to make one, and then he was going to let Dev make the ones for his girls and himself. It was totally doable one-handed.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Don’t bother me with most.”

“I’m going to teach your girls to cook, and I can’t speak for Juni, but Marley is going to love it.”

“I am enjoying this with you.” Dev grinned at him. “Marley was so embarrassed about the tacos. Poor baby.”

“Her heart was in the right place, and she only made one mistake.” Of course it had been a rather monumental one, but that was okay—it was her very first attempt and she’d had no guidance. “She’ll get better.” He was sure of it. “Okay, so we put some pizza sauce on the bottom and spread it out with a spoon. My boys only like a little bit of sauce, so I’m going to keep it sparse on theirs. Then you just add the toppings, as thick or thin as you want, depending on what the person wants, and you top everything with cheese.” He made the pizza as he narrated it, so when he was done telling Dev about it, he was done actually making Micah’s cheese pizza with a couple of pepperonis dotting it.



“Juni doesn’t want soggy, so I’ll do light sauce on that one.”

“Good idea. Too much cheese can make it soggy too,” he warned. He’d learned that one the hard way. He made Dylan’s much more pepperoni and cheese pizza, then his own veggie heavy one. “You need any help?” he asked, watching Dev, admiring the lean body.

“Nope. I don’t think so. I think I’m good.”

“Yeah, you are....” He licked his lips. Man, now that he was letting himself think about it, now that they had made a date, so to speak. Yeah. Now that he could really look, he was looking and liking what he saw. A lot.

“Yeah? So... are you a pitcher, a catcher, both?”

“I’ve kind of always been a catcher, though I pitched sometimes. But I like all of it.” He could feel his cheeks were going red, but he continued on. “Hands, mouths, rubbing. You know?” All physical contact with a lover was good. Hell, he loved just cuddling when orgasms weren’t feasible. Grant hadn’t been a cuddler. It should have been a red flag for him.

“I do. I’m an all-around type of guy. I just like contact.”

He beamed at Dev. “That’s exactly what I wanted to hear.” He moved in close and snuck his arms around Dev’s middle, giving him a full-body hug.

“Mmm... damn, babe. I like that. You make me hungry.”

“I can make you a snack before I go get the kids,” he offered. The pizzas would go into the fridge until suppertime.

“That’s not the kind of hungry I mean...”

“Oh!” His cheeks went hot. “I guess I might be hungry too.” He pressed closer.

Dev chuckled softly, casted hand pressing against his lower back.

“Careful you don’t hurt yourself,” he warned before kissing Dev’s neck, the skin there warm and fragrant, smelling strongly of Dev. He liked the scent.

“We’re just necking. We’re not getting acrobatic.”

“Necking. God, I haven’t heard that word since high school.” He grinned up at Dev. “I love it.”

Dev waggled his eyebrows at Bryan. “I’m sort of classic, you know? Deliberately old-school.”

“Does that include no sex before marriage?” he asked, wriggling against Dev, making it clear that his body was ready for there to be sex without any marriage. And soon.

Dev snorted softly. “Absolutely fucking not. I am pro-premarital sex.”

“Thank god for that.” He put his hand behind Dev’s neck and gently tugged him down so they could kiss. He could spend forever kissing Dev, he really could. He didn’t have the time to actually do that—too many other responsibilities and stuff—but if he could, he would.

Dev hummed into his lips, the sound happy, warm, and he loved the way it felt. He slid his tongue along Dev’s lips and slipped it in between them when they opened for him.

God, this felt so good, so amazing that all he could do was hold on.

His tongue danced with Dev's, the pleasure of doing this moving all through him, making him feel alive.

"Mmm... You taste good. Do you know that?" Dev asked softly.

"Me? I bet I don't taste as good as you do." He licked Dev's lips. "I could become addicted to you."

"We'll just be addicted to each other, okay? I mean, we already live together."

He chuckled and rested his cheek against Dev's. "Yeah, that's gonna work." He really wished he didn't have to wait until the kids were in bed.

Still, there was something amazing about the anticipation. About knowing this was important.

He didn't want to just do a quick fuck now before the kids got home. He wanted to wait until they could share a bed and really be together.

He gave Dev another kiss. "Let me get you that something to eat."

"I'm good. Do we need to go pick up kids and truck them around soon?"

"We do. And no, you need to eat something before we do that." He grabbed some bread and sandwich meat. Dev didn't eat nearly enough, and his body was trying to heal. Haphazard meals were not optimal.

"You spoil me." Dev acted like no one had ever done that before. Besides, Dev was the one doing most of the spoiling. He was just playing catchup.

“I’m gonna try.” He finished the sandwich and handed it over. “Eat. You need the energy to heal. And if not that, you need it for all the trucking around of the kids we need to do.”

“Right? Four busy beasts. At least yours pretty much do the same things right now.”

“They are at a pretty good age.” Of course, he’d loved his boys at each age, and he was pretty sure that would just continue.

“Yeah, but it’s nice when they know exactly what they want, too.” Dev’s girls were both extremely determined about what extracurriculars they wanted to do.

“Let’s just say that so far, all the ages have good things about them.” Bryan didn’t want to get into a ‘my kids are more fill-in-the-blank than yours.’ They didn’t need that kind of stress, and the kids were so different anyway. Comparisons just weren’t necessary.

“They so do.” Dev seemed to be more than happy to agree to that, to relax and breathe into that idea.

Bryan looked at his watch. “Okay. We’ve got about fifteen minutes before we have to grab an uber and get everyone everywhere.” When it had just been him and the boys, he’d walked everywhere, but that wasn’t as feasible with four, and Dev had insisted he could afford the uber. “You wanna go cuddle on the couch?”

“I do. I want to enjoy being adults a little longer before we become dads again.”

“Come on, then.” He took Dev’s good hand and led him to his own living room.

“Is there anything in here we ought to change to make it nicer for you guys?”

“You know you have the world’s comfiest couches, right?”

“God, yes.” Dev plopped down and snuggled into the huge amazing sofa. “I love this thing.”

Chuckling, Bryan joined him, sitting close, the cushions shifting and leaning him into Dev. Perfect.

“I think I could fall in love with you too, you know...” Dev noted softly.

Warmth filled his belly. “Yeah, I know.” He knew because he was feeling the same way.

### CHAPTER TWELVE

Dev was listening to Juni tell him about her day, and honestly, all he wanted was for her to go to sleep so that he could head to the master bedroom. It wasn't like him unless he was full-on in the middle of painting, but...

He wanted... Bryan.

He wanted Bryan.

He knew Bryan's boys were down because it had gone quiet. More than a half hour ago. And he knew Bryan was waiting for him. In his bedroom. Waiting for him so they could get naked together.

Marley was at the age where she wanted TV and reading and her phone. She had to put her phone in the dining room at nine thirty, but he didn't need to supervise that, so they could be in bed by then.

If Juni would finally stop telling him about her day, he could go see if Bryan was waiting, dressed or not dressed. He took a breath and forced himself to focus; she deserved to have his attention as she did every night.

“—and then I gave him my lunch, because he was hungry!”

Wait, what? “Who was hungry?”

“Jakob!”

“He didn’t have his own lunch?”

“No, Daddy I told you—weren’t you listening?”

Busted. But he couldn’t tell her that.

“I got confused. Tell me again?”

“He forgot his lunch and his mommy said she couldn’t leave work.”

“Well, it was nice of you to give him your lunch, but maybe next time you can just share your lunch with him? Because that way you won’t be hungry, too.” Sweet girl, but she needed her food as much as anyone else in her class did.

“I didn’t want to be mean...”

“You are a sweet girl, but you need your lunch. It’s important.”

“Okay, Daddy. I’ll share next time.” She sighed and settled in the bed, finally.

“Maybe I’ll send a little extra, in case?” That way there would be plenty for two people to share.

“Oh, would you?”

Such a giving girl. He loved that about her.

“Of course. I’ll let Bryan know too for when he’s the one to pack your lunch, okay?” He thought she was finally going to be able to sleep, winding down now that her lunch problem was being solved.

“Uh-huh. Night, Daddy. Love you so much.”

“Love you so much too.”

He kissed her cheek and headed out, eager to get to the master. He was pretty sure Bryan should already be there—the boys had been quiet for ages.

He peeked under Marley’s door; the light was on, but she was fine. Then he peeked in on the boys, both snoring to beat the band. It was adorable.

So he made his way to the master.

He closed the door behind him, locked it. “Babe? You in here?”

“Yeah. Here by the window.” Bryan turned around and smiled at him.

“Juni and the boys are asleep.” And he wanted more kisses.

“Yeah, the boys went down ages ago. Ages.” Bryan drew out the last word, then grinned at him. “And I’ve been here waiting and waiting.”

“My youngest had a crisis.” He met Bryan’s eyes, winked. “Dads first, right?”

“Absolutely. Is everything okay with Juni?”

“One of her friends didn’t have lunch, so Juni gave hers away.”

“Oh, bless her. We’ll have to make sure we pack her an extra big lunch in case it happens again.”

“That’s what I said.” He stepped up to Bryan.



“Look at us, coming at the problem together, if separately. If you know what I mean.” Bryan rolled his eyes, then wrapped his arms around Dev’s waist. “Hey there.”

“Hey there.” He cupped Bryan’s face and drew him in for a kiss.

Bryan met him with passion, pressing his body closer and sliding their lips together. Warmth spread out from his lips, moving through his body.

Oh, he was going to burn up.

This was what he’d needed.

Everything else faded into the background, the whole shitshow with Grant, the kids, there was nothing but him and Bryan and the way their lips moved together.

He reached between them with his good hand, fingers stroking Bryan’s prick through his pants. Bryan shuddered for him, a cry filling his mouth.

Oh, that was good. Damn good. He approved.

Bryan’s arms tightened around him, then his hands slid down to cup Dev’s ass.

Dev stepped in close, resting his cast over Bryan’s shoulder. Fuck him, yes. Bryan hummed into his mouth before breaking from the kiss.

“You think we should get undressed before we get too far gone?” Bryan asked.

Bryan was a brilliant man, and he nodded, all over that idea. It was going to be awkward because of his cast, so it would be much better to have it done before he was totally distracted. And now that the kids were in bed and they were both here and it was going to happen, he could afford to step back for a minute to get bed-ready.

Standing back a little, Bryan worked at the buttons on Dev's shirt, slowly opening one after the other.

His hand stayed where it was, working Bryan through the cloth.

Bryan's fingers stuttered. "Making me crazy."

"Good. I want to make you come."

"Not until we're both naked," Bryan insisted, fingers sliding beneath the open front of his shirt and pushing it to the sides, brushing his skin.

He shivered, his nipples hardening as if seeking Bryan's attention, but Bryan was busy trying to get his shirt off his casted arm without hurting him. Finally, it drifted down to the floor, leaving him topless.

Then Bryan popped the top button of his jeans and Dev sucked in his belly so Bryan could loosen them.

"Oh god, that's so pretty." Bryan stroked his abs. "You're so pretty." Leaning down, Bryan kissed his belly, lips warm, soft. Speaking of pretty—that was sexy as hell, Bryan's head down near his middle.

"Thank you, love. It's been a few years..." More than a few, but it had been worth the wait. Bryan had been worth the wait.

"Since Grant?" Bryan asked, eyes going wide. "Because that's how long it's been for me, but that was just a couple years ago. You..."

"I've had a few random encounters, but I have two girls, you know?" And he would protect them forever. Part of that meant no random sexcapades.

“Oh yeah.” Bryan nodded. “Kids make everything more complicated. And if you were like me, you’re gun-shy. If you know what I mean.”

“I do. I was embarrassed and devastated.”

“Yeah.” Bryan hugged him hard, just holding on in commiseration and comfort.

And he wasn’t disparaging that, but it was not the sexy feelings they were supposed to be having here.

Of course, the way they fit together helped a lot.

Bryan must have thought so too because the nature of the hug changed, Bryan rubbing against him now, too. “We were uh... taking off clothes?”

“We were. We should do it some more, hmm?” He was all over that especially with Bryan still fully dressed—that wasn’t fair at all.

“Yeah. Sorry. I’ll try not to get distracted by stupid shit again.” Bryan slid his fingers around Dev’s waistband, fingertips pushing slightly beneath it.

“It’s not stupid. We’re not stupid.”

“I know. I’d just rather be able to leave all that stuff behind. Especially now that you’re in my life.”

“Yes. And in my bed. In my arms.” He pulled Bryan closer.

Bryan brought their mouths together, giving him a hard, focused kiss.

He tried to undo Bryan’s slacks with his good hand, but it was a challenge. Bryan

laughed and pushed his hand away.

“How about I do the undressing and you do the keeping your hurt hand safe?”

“Do I get to do the licking and sucking?”

Bryan’s fingers stuttered against his zipper. “Uh, yes. Is anyone going to say no to that?”

He met Bryan’s eyes. “So long as you don’t, I don’t care.”

Bryan laughed. “Yes. Yes. Yes. Please.” He gave Dev another hard kiss, then focused on getting the zipper of Dev’s jeans down, the jeans themselves off his hips and down his legs. Dev stepped out of them and settled in the sheets, watching as Bryan undressed himself.

It wasn’t a slow striptease, more a perfunctory removal of clothing, but it was still seductive, watching as Bryan’s body came into view; little pink nipples with a bare dusting of hair around them, the gentle slopes of abs and the dip of navel. There was a hint of love handles at Bryan’s hips, and Dev appreciated the dad-bod. When Bryan stepped out of his pants and stood there in all his glory, cock gradually filling as he watched, Dev knew exactly what he wanted.

He beckoned Bryan onto the bed and then motioned him up to fuck his lips.

Bryan’s eyes went wide. “Seriously?” He was already moving, though, knees on either side of Dev as he sort of crawled upward.

“Mmhmm.” He encouraged Bryan to come closer, sliding his hand along Bryan’s thigh and then around to cup his ass. “I want you.”

“It’s good to be wanted.” Bryan kept moving until the tip of his cock bumped along Dev’s lips.

“Uh-huh.” He opened up, moaning deep in his chest.

Bryan slid the top of his cock in between Dev’s lips. It was hot and silky, the tip slightly damp with pre-come, and it was the easiest thing ever to open up wider and take Bryan in.

He closed his lips around the shaft and began to suck, sweet and slow.

“Oh, fuck.” Bryan said the words like they were a prayer, and he fell forward, his hands on either side of Dev’s head as he propped himself up. “Such a sweet mouth.”

He moaned, letting the sound vibrate around Bryan’s cock.

“Dev!” Bryan cried out and then whimpered. “I haven’t felt anything like this in so long.”

He hoped so, and he took Bryan in deeper and deeper, his hand on Bryan’s ass cheek, tugging, encouraging Bryan to move and take his mouth.

“Maybe ever,” Bryan groaned. “Fuck. Fuck.” Bryan fucked his mouth, cock sliding gradually deeper, pulling back, pushing forward again.

Dev focused, lapping and licking, sucking hard enough to make Bryan’s eyes cross. It had been so long since he’d had this, and that it was with Bryan made it even better.

“Gonna soon,” Bryan warned him, hips jerking, moving faster as he got closer to his orgasm.

Oh hell yes. Dev sucked harder, faster, demanding more. He wanted to taste Bryan's pleasure. The little drops falling on his tongue weren't enough; he wanted more. He wanted everything Bryan could give him.

Bryan whimpered and covered his mouth with a hand, muffling his sounds.

He arched, knocking Bryan deep into his throat as he swallowed.

"Dev!" His name was muffled, but that was clearly what Bryan had said as spunk poured down his throat.

Dev swallowed Bryan down, loving on his new lover as best he could.

Bryan collapsed down onto him, cock pulling out from between his lips, sliding along his tongue all the way.

"Mmm... that was amazing," he whispered. His own cock was throbbing, but with the taste of Bryan in his mouth, he could be patient.

"No arguments here. I can't remember the last time—no, I can't remember ever feeling that." Bryan slid down along his body so they were face-to-face, and kissed him, long and slow. "Thank you."

"Mmm... You're welcome. You taste good, lover."

"Yeah? That's a good thing. You can taste me any time. Like really." Bryan kissed him again, then wriggled against him. "I should return the favor."

"Mmm... touch me. I'm aching for it. You." His gut was tight with his need.

"You want my hand? My mouth? My ass?" Bryan slipped a hand between them,

sliding it along his flesh, tracing him.

“Uhn... Touch me. Please, love. Now.” He was going to lose his mind, no question.

Bryan chuckled, the sound low and husky, sexy. Then that hand slid around his cock properly, jacking him slowly.

He spread, rocking up into the touch. “Yes...”

“Mmm. You’re so hot. Gonna burn me up.” Bryan started dropping kisses over his face.

He chased the soft kisses, his lips parted and hungry. Bryan’s lips finally landed on his, hand squeezing the head of his cock hard as Bryan tongue-fucked his mouth.

He wasn’t going to last, so he didn’t bother to try. All he could do was buck and drive into Bry’s hand and shoot.

Bryan’s touch gentled, slowed after he came, easing him down from his orgasm before Bryan settled in next to him, pressing close.

“Whoa.” He kissed Bryan’s temple. “Good for you?”

“Hell, yes. I want a nap. And then I want to do it again.”

“Mmm... I love how you think.” He swallowed and stretched, his back cracking.

“We oughta get our undies back on in case one of the kids comes in.” Bryan didn’t move, though, not even an inch.

“Mmhmm.” His body was so heavy, and he felt so good.

“Give me a minute and I’ll get up and get our undies. Maybe even a cloth to clean you up.” Bryan sounded half asleep already.

“Uh-huh. Minute.” He was out like a light.



### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Bryan woke around two a.m., startled right awake by movement next to him. Where was he? Oh right, Dev's house. Oh yeah—also in Dev's bed. Wow. Crazy. And kind of wonderful, too.

He needed to pee. And he wanted to check on the boys, just in case they'd looked for him and he wasn't where they expected him to be.

He'd managed earlier to get up and drag on his underwear, as well as work Dev's onto him too, the guy sleeping solidly after their make-out session. It was his first orgasm not by his own hand since shit had gone down, and he sure hoped it wasn't the last. He didn't think he'd ever had such an enthusiastic blow job. Dev clearly loved sucking, which made Bryan a super lucky guy.

He did his business in Dev's bathroom—which was huge and stunning and he wanted a bath, or even just a shower but he resisted—then he went to the suite of rooms where the boys were sleeping and peeked in on them. Oh good, both still sleeping. He spent a moment just looking; he loved them so much he could stare for ages.

A soft touch came to his back, startling him badly. "Everything okay, babe? Come back to bed."

"Oh, I hope I didn't wake you. I just had to pee, and then I wanted to check on the boys, you know? New space and I'm not where they'd be expecting me, so I needed to make sure they were okay." He was pretty sure he was babbling.

“Sure. Come back to bed where it’s warm.”

“Yeah, of course.” He took one last look at the boys, then followed Dev. Look at that ass. Maybe as they were both awake, they could share another orgasm, some more snuggling. At this rate, night was going to become his favorite time of day. And possibly the most exhausting. His thoughts had him grinning, and he shook his head at himself.

Dev led him back into the bedroom, pulling him into the covers. “You a little wigged out?”

He considered that and then shook his head. “About us? I don’t think so.”

“Oh good. I’m loving having you in here, with me.”

“Yeah, I was just thinking I could get used to being awake with you at night.”

“Yes. We can learn to nap during the day...”

Bryan laughed, totally tickled by visions of Dev fast asleep on his feet, paintbrush in hand while his head nodded over his clients’ files. “That’s a great idea.” He leaned into Dev and brought their lips together. God, kissing Dev was like magic.

Dev pulled him close, wrapping around him and holding on tight. Humming, he rubbed them together, loving the way a wave of need washed over him immediately, making his cock go hard. And he was going to be able to do something about it.

“Mmm... hungry again, are you?” Dev teased.

“I am. I think you might be too.” He could feel an answering hardness against his own.

“Me?” Dev nuzzled his neck. “Maybe a little.”

“Only a little?” He reached for Dev’s erection. “Are you sure it’s only a little? Feels pretty big to me.”

“Oh, listen to you.” Dev pulled him on top, smiling wide.

“Just calling it like I see it. Or feel it, as the case might be.” Dev made him want to flirt, to be playful. Made him daring. It had been so long since he’d felt this way.

He hadn’t understood the weight he’d still been carrying around until Dev had helped ease it off.

He rubbed and pressed their lips together again and again. He could do this all night long.

Dev’s tongue slid against his, fucking him nice and slow, moans shared between them. Dev felt like silk against him, skin hot, warm, smooth.

Letting go of Dev’s lips, he wrapped them around Dev’s right nipple, playing the little nub with his tongue.

“Oh!” Dev’s eyes went wide, the casted hand bouncing on the mattress.

“Careful,” he muttered, before sucking all the harder.

“Uhn. Uh-huh. Fuck, man. That’s sweet.”

That made him feel like a million bucks. Like he was in bed with someone who liked him, who liked what he was doing. And that was sexy as hell.

Dev kissed his temple, then dropped his head back on the pillows. “Making me so hard.”

“Good.” He wanted to make Dev feel good. He wanted to love all over him and make him come.

Dev nodded, hand sliding up and down his back.

He stayed with the right nipple for a while before moving over to find the left nub, then gave it the same treatment, sucking, flicking it with his tongue, trying to drive Dev wild.

Dev made the best sounds for him, calling out his name, over and over. It encouraged him to keep going, to keep finding new hot spots. He licked his way down to Dev’s belly button, tongue sliding along that skin all the way.

“Babe, please. I’m so hard for you.”

Bryan looked up to find Dev’s eyes crossed as he moaned.

“We were so quick off the mark the first time. I kind of want to make this one last,” he admitted. He wanted to make Dev fly.

“Oh.” Dev cupped his jaw. “Every time I think I couldn’t be more in love...”

Bryan felt his cheeks heat, his belly fill with warmth and his heart start thumping hard, and he turned to kiss Dev’s hand. “Yeah? With me?”

“Yes, babe. With you.” Dev rubbed his thumb with those warm lips. “With you.”

That had him smiling. “Cool. I mean, me too. But not with me—with you.” God,

could he be any bigger of a dork?

“Right on. Me. You. Us. Loving on each other.”

“Yeah. I think that’s what I was doing, wasn’t it?” he teased, rubbing his chin against Dev’s belly.

“Yes. Loving on each other. Enjoying each other. Coming together.”

He turned his head downward, finding Dev’s cock right there, waiting for him, the tip glistening. He flicked out this tongue, moaning as the flavor of Dev’s pleasure exploded across his tongue.

Dev whimpered but stayed still for him, panting softly.

As a reward, he took the head of Dev’s cock in, licking at Dev’s slit as he tightened his lips around the head. Then he circled the whole head with his tongue, sliding it around and around.

Dev panted, licking his lips and staring down at him. He loved the fire and passion he saw in Dev’s eyes, loved that he was getting to see this other side of Dev.

Then he focused back down onto the cock in his mouth, tightening his lips around it and taking it in as far as he could.

Dev covered his mouth with his hands, his soft cries muffled. That encouraged him to keep going. He increased his suction and sped the bobbing of his head, going up and down on the rigid pole of flesh.

Dev made the sweetest, softest sounds that wrapped around him, almost holding him.

He felt like a real stud, making Dev need and want, and he didn't want it to end, but he knew it couldn't last so he simply closed his eyes and gave it his all.

"Love you. Fuck, baby. I love you..." Dev's cast hit the mattress.

"Careful." He said the word around Dev's cock, so it came out super muffled.

Dev chuckled softly, hips beginning to rock.

He slid one hand beneath Dev's ass to encourage the movements. He wanted Dev to come in his mouth; he wanted to taste Dev's pleasure.

"Making me crazy, love." Dev moved faster, harder, thrusts going wild.

That was the point, so he just sucked as hard as he could and let Dev do what he needed to do.

Dev's cock swelled, spreading his lips wider, and bitter drops hit his tongue. It wasn't going to be long; he could tell, and he slid a hand between Dev's legs, fondling the sensitive balls.

Dev shot, crying out as he did so. Bryan looked up in time to see Dev's eye go wide as his mouth was filled.

Bryan swallowed the flood of come down, the flavor filling his mouth. This was what Dev's pleasure tasted like.

This was what his new lover tasted like.

He slowly pulled off, then spent a moment licking all over Dev's cock, and his balls. Such soft skin, and so hot. And it smelled like Dev. So good.

“Jesus, you make me feel like I’m flying.” Dev spread for him. “Do you want me?”

He groaned at the thought of being inside Dev, of the tight heat of Dev’s body holding his cock. He’d never been much of a top, but he wanted to do it all with Dev, feel it all, and right this moment, he wanted to be buried inside Dev. “Fuck, yes.”

“I’m all yours. Just get me ready. It’s been a long time.”

“Yeah, for me, too.” Topping and bottoming and anything that involved sex with someone else. He’d been practically celibate. Until tonight. He kissed the tip of Dev’s cock. Then pressed a finger against Dev’s hole, just once, not breeching. “You got lube?”

“I do. In the bedside table drawer, under the book, in the box that looks like a book.”

“Oh, that’s ingenious.” Grinning, he opened the drawer, moved the top book, and opened the book box. Bingo. He kissed the tip of Dev’s cock again, then opened the tube and splooched some out onto his fingers.

Then he went back to stroking Dev’s little hole. Hot and wrinkled, and he knew it was very sensitive.

Dev began to pant for him, his spent cock trying to fill.

He played for a little, just stroking and gently pressing against it. Then he pressed his finger right in, loving the way Dev’s body gripped him immediately.

Dev didn’t tense, didn’t pull away, in fact, he moaned, sweet and low.

He pushed his finger deeper, then brought it back out so he could push it in again, then again and again, fingerfucking slowly, gently, watching Dev’s face.

“Oh damn. Don’t stop. Please, love...”

Like he was going to stop. To answer, he moved his finger faster, loving the way it glided inside Dev’s body. “More?” He was pretty sure Dev was ready for another finger, but he was prepared to take as much time as Dev needed.

“Yes. Yes, please. Another finger. Please.”

He was more than happy to oblige, withdrawing his index finger and adding more lube to it, and to his middle finger. He admired Dev’s body as Dev writhed, then pressed his two slick fingers against Dev’s hole and pushed in once again.

That was going to feel so good around his prick. Tight, silky, he couldn’t think of anything better.

Groaning, he spread his fingers a little, stretching Dev farther.

“Need you, Bry. Need your cock.”

“When you’re stretched.” After all, Dev had been the one to warn him it had been a long time, so Bry was going to make sure there was lots and lots of stretching.

“So good to me,” Dev whispered. “No one’s ever cared so much.”

He placed a kiss on Dev’s cock, licked at the tip to collect some of that flavor. “You deserve it.” Dev had been so good to him and the boys, and he knew Dev wouldn’t betray him or take from him or hurt him.

He pulled his fingers away, added yet more lube, and then started again with three.

Dev rocked into Bryan’s touch, tongue licking his own lips, chest heaving.



Bryan loved seeing the effect his touches had on Dev, the way it made his skin go rosy with the blood rushing through his body, the way it brought up drops of sweat beneath Dev's nose. He pressed his fingers deeper, curling them, searching for that special spot.

"More..." Dev shook his head side to side, swallowing hard.

He pushed his fingers even deeper at that and Dev nearly levitated off the bed. Oh, right there. That was the spot. He hit it again.

Dev was clearly flying, cock fully hard again.

It wouldn't be long, and he couldn't wait to bury himself inside Dev's body. He just wanted to really make sure Dev was ready for him. This was going to be a one hundred percent pleasurable experience, for them both. He pushed in deep once more, knowing he'd got the right spot again by how Dev's body jerked and tightened around his fingers.

They moaned, both of them in concert.

"I think you're ready, babe." He drew his fingers out. "You got condoms?" God, what if Dev didn't have condoms? Bryan didn't.

"I do. I keep them, just in case of emergency."

"There are sex emergencies?"

Dev shrugged. "I'm sure there are."

He giggled, then decided to look in the same drawer where the lube was, figuring it was as good a place as any to start looking for them. "If I can't find them, it might

become a sex emergency.” Because he wanted Dev so much he ached with it.

“I’m not worried. Not at all. They’re in a box.”

He felt around and came in contact with the book box again. He opened it and found the little box of condoms right there. Pulling it out, he was pleased to find they were unopened. Not that he didn’t believe what Dev had said about how long it had been, but the proof of it made him feel special.

“We’re good!” He was going to make love to Dev.

“Excellent. Now we should be wicked—incredibly wicked.”

He laughed softly but nodded too. “That’s the plan, babe.” His hands were shaking a little as he pulled open the box and got one of the condoms out. Then he had to deal with the outside wrapper without tearing the condom at the same time.

Dev reached out, helping him. “I’ve had my first and second orgasm, babe. You’re still one behind.”

“We don’t need to keep score. Even if we don’t do anything else, I’ll be happy.” And he meant it, too. He’d loved making Dev come, loved having the flavor of Dev in his mouth.

“I just meant my hands—my hand—is a touch more steady.”

“Oh.” He chuckled and handed over the condom, still in its wrapper. “Thanks.”

Dev opened it with one hand and his teeth. Impressive.

“Ooo, you’ve got skills.” He took the condom and worked it onto his cock, his hand

still a little shaky, his need riding him hard. He had enough brain left to get some slick spread over the condom before he lined up with Dev's hole.

"That's the rumor. Now show me yours, hmm?" Dev tugged him down and stole a hard kiss.

Groaning into the kiss, he pressed his hips forward, breaching Dev's body. Oh fuck, so hot, so tight. Dev let him in, a soft cry ringing out, filling his lips, as he rocked in, deeper and deeper.

He broke the kiss as he shifted slightly so he could thrust better, filling Dev up as best as he could, reveling in the tight heat.

Dev was right there with him, crying out, moaning happily as they moved into each other. He lost himself in it, in Dev, and just kept thrusting, filling his lover over and over.

It was perfect, so he didn't have to think about it anymore. He just let himself feel and fall deeper in love.

At some point, the sensations changed, need riding him hard. It wouldn't be long now. He grabbed hold of Dev's cock, hoping to bring him over with his orgasm.

Dev's ass clenched around him, milking him.

He bit his lower lip to keep from crying out and slammed into Dev, coming hard.

Dev's spunk coated his fingers, his lover joining him in pleasure. Oh good. Good. That made him so happy that he'd brought Dev over the edge with him.

He collapsed down onto Dev, panting hard, and still buried deep in the wonderful,

tight heat of Dev's body. He'd forgotten somehow just how good this could be.

"Thank you." Dev hummed and slid his hand over Bryan's ass. "That was amazing, lover."

Lover.

He was Dev's lover.

"It was. Thank you ." He was going to have to make sure it wasn't as long a time span as it had been before he did it again. "Let me get us cleaned up and I'll find where our undies wound up." Much as he'd love to have just fallen asleep instead, they had four kids they did not want walking in on their naked asses.

"Mmhmm... need help?"

He wasn't sure Dev could stand up, let alone help.

"No, you're good, babe. I've got this." This was the easy part. At least it would be once he managed to make himself pull out of Dev and get up.

"kay. Love you." Dev kissed his nose, blinking at him.

He froze, the words going straight to his gut. Then he nodded and smiled. "Me, too," he whispered before fleeing the room to wet a cloth to clean them both up. Dev loved him. Bry wasn't sure he was ever going to stop smiling.

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Daddy! Daddy, I need to practice. Please. Can everyone be quiet for half an hour?” Marley was in tears. “I have a recital in three weeks! I need to practice!”

“Okay. Okay, I’ll deal with it.” Dev’s head was pounding, but that was mostly because he wanted to work, and he couldn’t. “Hey, guys. Marley needs to practice. Do you want to go up to the roof?”

“Daddy says we can’t go unless a grown-up is with us,” Dylan informed him.

“Guess what. I am a grown-up!” He winked and started gathering kiddos. “Let’s go upstairs.”

“I wanna watch cartoons,” Juni complained.

“Cartoons!” Micah parroted, predictably.

“But the swings are up on the roof,” Dylan pointed out. “I wanna swing. C’mon, Micah.”

Micah looked from Juni to his brother, and back, then shrugged. “I do swings.”

Juni crossed her arms defiantly. “Fine. I’ll watch cartoons all by myself.”

“Get your sweaters,” he told the boys. It wasn’t warm enough up there without them. Hell, they wouldn’t be able to play up there for too much longer. When they ran off

to get them, he turned to Juni. “If I find out you played the TV loud enough to bother your sister, you lose television privileges for a week, understand?”

“No fair!”

“Juniper.”

She pouted and glared, but he waited her out until she finally sighed and nodded.

“I need you to say it.”

Juni rolled her eyes, but did say, “I understand.” Then she headed to the living room.

The boys came back, Dylan in a sweater, Micah in a hoodie, and they each took one of his hands, but he waited until he heard the TV go on, and the volume get turned down before he turned to them.

“Let’s go upstairs, quiet as little mice.” He unlocked the door to the stairs up to the roof.

The boys tried hard to be quiet, going on tiptoes and pretending to be mice. They would have been successful too if not for the giggles, but at least those were fairly soft. They made it up to the roof where the last of the day’s sunlight shone down on them.

Dylan ran for the swings, his brother following in his footsteps, copying each move he made as they played.

He sat on the bench and kept an eye on them, chuckling as they swung and slid and swung again.

“Is this our playground?” Micah asked after going down the slide again. “Our own?”

“It is! Your dad’s got lots of plans.”

“Like what?” Dylan asked.

“Like filling the sandbox and planting a garden,” Bry’s voice sounded from behind him.

He turned and smiled. “Hey, you. Marley’s practicing, and she needs to focus, so we’re playing.”

“Ah. That makes sense. You know you can tell the boys to go play in their room if they’re in the way or being too noisy. Or come and get me to deal with them. It’s going to be too cold to play up here soon. And we’re losing daylight earlier and earlier.” Bry sat next to him, hand coming to rest on his leg.

“Well, her recital is coming up, so she’s stressed, you know?” And she’d had some worry lately, with all the changes. He thought she’d been managing pretty well actually.

“And now she’s got two little boys who are rambunctious and noisy and curious and all up in her business to contend with,” Bry noted, meeting his eyes. “I don’t want our being here to be a negative thing for her. For any of you.”

“There are going to be growing pains. She asked for quiet, and we’re giving it. That’s reasonable.” And he was proud of her for asking for what she needed instead of being a martyr.

“Okay. I guess I’m feeling a little guilty,” Bryan admitted. “We’ve known each other for barely over a month and I’m already moved in with my boys, making myself at

home. I really do love you, though. I didn't think I would ever feel this way about anyone ever again, and then I met you and started having feelings and..." Bryan's gaze was intense, holding his the entire time Bry spoke. "I swear it's not because of your money. It's because of you and your girls, who you are, not what you can give us."

"I know." If it had been about the money, Bry wouldn't have been so worried, so stressed. He knew how badly Bry's ego had been hit, and he knew that they didn't have all the answers, but they had a little family forming here that was good, really, really good.

Hell, two dads and four kids wasn't even a little family.

"Okay." Bryan smiled at him, squeezed his leg, and took a deep breath. Clearly, the matter had been stressing him. "We never talked about rent or anything. I want to contribute, but I don't need it to be monetarily, 'cause I know I can never match what you're offering us in that arena. I enjoy cooking, so I can make us meals. I can teach the girls how to cook. I can be the drop-off and pickup king so you can work. Whatever. I just want to make a significant contribution." Bryan was so dear, so earnest.

"Good deal. We have our hands full with the kids, all the activities. That's four full-time jobs, for sure."

Bryan laughed, the sound bright. "You just might be right at that."

The boys came running over at Bryan's laughter.

"What's funny, Daddy?" Dylan asked.

"Why laughs?" Micah added.



“Because I’m happy.”

“Me too! We have a park!” Dylan’s eyes were shining with his joy. “Our own park!”

Bryan hugged them to him and nodded. “We do. We are so lucky that Dev invited us to live in his wonderful home.” Bry smiled over their heads, heart in his eyes.

“Is he a daddy too?”

Bry nodded. “He’s Marley and?—”

Micah cheered and launched into Dev’s arms. “Daddy Devvy!”

He grabbed the little boy and held on, touched and pleased.

“Oh...” Bryan smiled. “Is that okay, Dev?”

“Absolutely. I’m honored.”

Dylan watched Micah with Dev for a minute, before moving to stand by Dev. “Me too?”

“Of course?” He drew Dylan into the hug as well, snuggling the little boys close.

“Daddy? Can I come up too? I’m bored.” Juni was staring from the door at the top of the stairway, pouting just a little bit.

“Sure. Come on.”

“Come swinging,” Dylan said, pulling out of his arms and running over to grab her hand. “We’re sisters now.”

“We are? Cool. I always wanted to be somebody’s big sister.” Her pout was completely gone, her mood improving drastically.

Micah slid out of his hold and went running over to join them on the play structure. “Me too! Me too! I a sister, too!”

Bryan laughed. “That is the most adorable thing ever. You think we should tell him he’s not actually a sister?”

“Nah. He’ll figure it out or Marley will explain it. She’s good at that.” As far as Dev was concerned, they should all just swing and be kids.

“Yeah, she’s so grown up sometimes. So, a big recital, huh?” Bryan shifted a little closer, leaning against him.

“It is. Her last one before high school. Crazy, huh?”

“Very crazy. I’m not old enough to be dating a guy with a kid in high school. Hell, you’re not old enough to have a kid in high school.” Bryan grinned up at him.

“I know. I’m an old man, but I’m cute.” He hoped he was still cute...

“You’re not cute. Puppies are cute. You’re good-looking and hot and sexy. And you’re not old, either. I was teasing.”

“I’m old enough to have a teenager.” He winked and stole a kiss.

Humming, Bryan kept the kiss going a moment longer. “Yeah, but I think you’re just the right age for a sexy, hot, handsome lover.” Bryan’s cheeks went red as he said the words, but he didn’t drop Dev’s gaze.

“Well, that’s what matters, right?” He leaned in, rubbed their noses together. “You, me, and the kiddos.”

“Uh-huh. We make a good family, don’t we?”

Marley came up, looking calmer. She came to sit with them.

“How was the practice?” Bryan asked.

“Good. Good. It’s fine.” She smiled at them, relaxing back against the bench. “Thank you all for letting me have practice time. I hate being embarrassed.”

“I’ll talk to the boys about being quiet, or noisy in their room whenever you’re at the piano so they don’t bother you in the future,” Bryan promised.

“It’s not always a big deal, but it’s kind of a deal now.” Marley winced and shrugged. “You know?”

“You’ll do fine, honey,” Dev told her. “I promise.” He hated that she stressed over tests and recitals, but he figured that was part of why she did so well; she was motivated to study and practice.

“Is this a recital we can all come to and watch?” Bryan asked.

“If you want to. Daddy and Juni always come.”

“She’ll be the last one to play this year, since she is graduating.”

“Wow. That’s impressive, and the boys and I would love to come.” Bryan looked over to where the kids were playing. “You wanna go play with them?”

“I—” She went a bright pink. “I sorta do.”

“I won’t tell. I promise,” Dev teased.

She went running. “I’ll push you, Micah.”

“It’s hard being fourteen,” Bryan noted. “One minute, you want to be a grown-up and the next, you still want to be a kid. Hell, I still want to be a kid sometimes.”

“So let’s go and play. I promise not to break my arm any worse.”

Bryan gave him a look and then laughed. “I’ll race you!”

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After Bryan dropped the kids off at school, he tried to work, but he couldn't concentrate. Every little noise had him jumping up and going to the front door to see if Dev was back. He finally locked his files away and settled for pacing. The apartment was big enough he could wander for a while before he was going over the same territory.

Grant's trial had finally wrapped up—the trial itself hadn't been that long, really, but it had taken ages before it had happened in the first place—and they were expecting a verdict today. Dev had gone down to see for himself that Grant was punished. He'd been charged with violating his court order and aggravated assault. For some reason, he'd pled not guilty. Bryan still couldn't wrap his head around that. The case against him had been strong, almost iron-clad, and he hoped they not only found Grant guilty but threw the fucking book at him—whatever the maximum was. He'd be happy with any jailtime, though.

He circled the playroom and headed back out to walk the living room. A part of him couldn't believe this was his home now. It was such a stark contrast to the situation he'd been in when Grant had stolen everything. They'd gone from almost homeless and visiting the foodbank to the lap of luxury.

They were settled in here now—they had a rhythm, for the kids, for work, for each other. He'd never been so happy. Who would have thought that bonding over the thing that nearly broke them would lead to happy families?

He continued on to the kitchen, the scene of so many cooking lessons. Mostly for

Marley, some for Juniper and the boy, almost none for Dev. His lover enjoyed hanging out with him while he cooked, keeping him company, but Dev just wasn't into learning. That was cool, Bryan was happy to be the main cook. And anytime he didn't feel like it, for whatever reason, Dev was more than happy to order anything they wanted. He was so spoiled and so in love that it was a physical feeling inside him.

Heading into the bedroom next, he smiled at the sight of his pillows next to Dev's, at the sight of both their books on the nightstands, the heavy comforter they shared. He leaned over and buried his face in Dev's pillow, breathing in Dev's scent. He should have done it earlier, the smell calmed him down, eased his tension some. It was almost like a hug from Dev, so he pushed his face into the pillow again, taking deep breaths through his nose.

He felt something hard under the pillow and pulled it out. It was a ring box. A ring box with a beautiful sapphire men's ring in it.

Oh god. Dev was going to propose. His eyes prickled with happy tears, and he shoved the ring box back under the pillow where he'd found it. He couldn't contain his grin as he headed back out. Maybe he'd make something fun for supper, or dessert. Maybe both. If he put in a grocery order now, it would be here in plenty of time for him to cook.

Going back into the kitchen, he opened the fridge to check what they had, dishes he could make running through his head. If he went with a surf and turf meal, he'd have to order basically everything except for potatoes and salad fixings, but they already had pork chops and he could do like balsamic chops or something...

The key card beeped in the lock, heralding Dev's arrival, and his nerves ramped back up again. Bryan went to the hall to meet Dev.

His lover didn't tease or make him wait. "He's in jail for two years. By then, the civil

suit for his theft will be in full swing. Life is good.”

Relief flooded through him, and he went over to Dev, throwing his arms around Dev’s neck. “Yay! Oh, thank goodness.”

“I know. Good news, and we can just breathe easy for a bit. All of us.” Dev gave him a warm, gentle kiss.

“I was so worried they’d let him off with just probation or vacate the restraining order or something.” He could admit that now that it had resulted in jailtime and Dev was here safely in his arms, kissing him.

“Yeah, but we’re solid—we have everything in place to keep us safe from him. Regardless, I have an amazing family here now.”

“We have an amazing family.” Bryan shook his head as it occurred to him that Grant was actually why they’d met. As awful as that had been, something special and wonderful had come out of it. The best silver lining ever.

“Yes. Absolutely.” Dev kissed him again, and he closed his eyes and let himself get lost in it, in Dev.

When the kiss ended, Dev gave him a happy, easy grin. “I don’t suppose you’d like to go out for lunch?”

“I would love to go out for lunch with you. Where are we going?” Not that it mattered, he’d happily eat at a food truck if that’s what Dev had in mind, as long as he was with Dev.

“Let’s go to Lion in the Afternoon. I have a reservation for us. Let me go change shirts and we can head over.”

Bryan's stomach growled, and he chuckled. "Well, part of me is very interested. That sounds wonderful." The food there had been delicious, and he'd love a chance to try some of the other dishes he'd seen on the menu.

"Perfect. Be right back."

He watched Dev go to change his shirt. There was nothing wrong with the shirt he was wearing. And that made him think about the ring he'd found, about what it meant, about how Dev was actually going to get the ring and going to ask him the big question.

Suddenly, he wanted this to be about them, not about a public declaration.

He'd had that with Grant.

He ran into the bedroom as Dev was tucking the ring into his pocket. "I found the ring by accident, and yes, I'll marry you. Absolutely."

Dev blinked at him, obviously surprised, then shook his head and chuckled, drew Bryan in close. "Oh, good. Marry me? Did you see the inscription?"

No, he hadn't. "It really was an accidental discovery, and I didn't take the ring out of the box or anything."

Dev opened the box and handed the ring over. Bryan looked on the inside to read the inscription.

"Forever. I mean it. D."

That was so Dev and so dear, and he threw his arms around Dev and kissed him hard. "Yes. Yes. I will marry you forever. I mean it, too. B."



Dev laughed and kissed him back, holding him tightly.

“Good. Good. Now, put your engagement ring on, and we’ll go eat a long lunch before we pick the kids up and tell them the good news.” Dev winked at him, playful as anything. “They all get to be sisters, for real.”