

His
Instant
Family

RHELAND RICHMOND

HIS INSTANT FAMILY

Stories Of Us Book 2

RHELAND RICHMOND

CONTENTS

1. [Teo](#)
2. [Michael](#)
3. [Teo](#)
4. [Michael](#)
5. [Teo](#)
6. [Michael](#)
7. [Teo](#)
8. [Michael](#)
9. [Teo](#)
10. [Michael](#)
11. [Teo](#)
12. [Michael](#)
13. [Teo](#)
14. [Michael](#)
15. [Teo](#)
16. [Michael](#)
17. [Teo](#)
18. [Michael](#)
19. [Teo](#)
20. [Michael](#)
21. [Teo](#)
22. [Michael](#)
23. [Teo](#)
24. [Michael](#)
25. [Teo](#)
26. [Michael](#)
27. [Teo](#)
28. [Michael](#)
29. [Teo](#)
30. [Michael](#)
31. [Teo](#)
32. [Michael](#)

33. [Teo](#)

34. [Michael](#)

35. [Teo](#)

36. [Michael](#)

37. [Teo](#)

38. [Michael](#)

39. [Teo](#)

40. [Michael](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[THANKS FOR READING!](#)

[Also by Rheland Richmond](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

Copyright © 2018 Rheland Richmond

All rights reserved.

Cover Art: Jay Aheer, Simply Defined Art

Edited by Ann Attwood Editing and Proofreading Service

Proofreading: Theresa Preston, Tanja Ongkiehong

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This e-book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This e-book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

His Instant Family is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

 Created with Vellum

To the other two R's (Rhema & Roland)

Thanks for letting me borrow your names...

Oh! And for being the Best Sibling a girl could ask for...

*Four was never meant to be three... (Rest in Peace to the 3rd 'R'
Richmond. Gone but never forgotten)*

Well, fuck a duck! He couldn't believe he was late again. Mariana was going to kill him for being late, even after she'd sent a reminder, or fifty. The girl didn't do subtle.

Then again, it was a running family joke that he was born early, and it was the last time he'd ever achieved that feat. It wasn't that he didn't try, he legit did, but he just got so wrapped up in his work, more often than not. Either he was writing, sketching, or painting. He knew Mariana would not be *'mad-mad,'* but she wouldn't let him hear the end of it either. She would give him hell for it because well, sisters.

His brother-in-law, Ri's husband, was an international corporate lawyer, and he was gone more than he was home. It was the deciding factor for her move back from New York to Los Angeles. She wanted to be closer to their Mom and Dad. And him too, of course. They'd always been an extremely close family, and apart from going away to college in New Haven, he'd always lived close to his parents.

Ri's husband was damn good at his job. The man was licensed for the bar in three states and was also licensed to practice in several EU countries. Which meant he was always traveling back and forth for his job. Mariana was a photographer, a very sought-after one too. So, she could set her schedule to suit her needs. She would travel with her husband as much as she could, but her pregnancy changed all that. She decided that after the success of her last show, and with the baby on the way, she would take some

time off from traveling and come home. Mainly working in and around LA. Focusing on photoshoots for magazines, and certain high-end companies he couldn't wait to get swag bags from.

What was the point of having a connected sister if she couldn't get him designer swag from photoshoots? Like, really? It was a no-brainer.

Luckily for him getting a parking space wasn't proving difficult today. He quickly parked, and ran towards the elevators while trying to text Mariana, and tell her he was there. God, who would have figured that he would be doing the whole OB/GYN thing at this point in his life? He'd known he was gay since he was eleven years old, but he kind of always figured the whole OB/GYN appointments would be skipped in the process of getting his kids. Well, not skipped, he just always imagined him and his husband tagging along with the surrogate, or bio mom who chose them.

He'd always known that he wanted to be a Papa, but for now, being an uncle again was the next best thing while he waited for Mr. Right. Although with the state of his love life, maybe he should have taken a page out of his best friend Tristan's fiancé's book, and got the kid while hoping for Mr. Right.

His best friend, and brother in everything but blood, Tristan, had made him an uncle when he was twenty-two. His sister, Shannon, had died unexpectedly, never even having met her baby. She left Tris as the guardian, and he'd adopted the baby, his niece, Samantha, or should he say Emma, and made Teo an uncle right after graduation from college.

Then the most epically, crazy, 'ABC made a series out of it' thing happened. A few months ago, Tristan found out that there had been a mix-up at the hospital. He actually took someone else's baby home and not his sister Shannon's. Oh! And if that wasn't horrible enough, he found out the baby that was actually Shannon's biological child was sick, and needed a liver transplant. Her daddy, Nathaniel, tracked Tristan down. Well, anyway, after a lot of craziness, they lived happily ever after. Tristan and Nathaniel were getting married and had made him an uncle of three. Although knowing those two, there was no way he wasn't getting another niece or nephew soon.

Walking into the medical practice where Mariana was registered certainly wasn't what he had expected. The posh suites so did not scream hospital. He'd thought it would be like a normal hospital, but, hey, what did he know about female parts and their doctors? He honestly couldn't say he spent much time imagining what the inside of a gynecologist's office would look like.

"You're late, Teo," Mariana said, louder than was strictly necessary. He let out a much put-upon sigh. He knew she couldn't or rather wouldn't wait till they left to threaten bodily harm to his person or maybe hide his favorite art supplies like she did when they were kids. Patience and subtlety so wasn't her style. In some ways, they had gotten their mom's temperament. She was Cuban albeit mixed with other things, but she always joked that the Latin temperament was alive, strong, and kicking in her. She said it overtook any part of the British upper lip she should have had.

"I know, Mariana." He sighed. "Gosh, say it louder. They didn't hear you in the next room."

"Well, you are late. I called you this morning and again when I left the house. Honestly, what is your excuse, Teo? Give it your best shot." He knew she was feigning outrage to torture him, but what else was new?

"Ri, you know I have a new idea for a novel I've been trying to figure out, *and* a book about to be released, too. I'll make it up to you, big sister."

"*Whatever*, Teo. I swear I knew you would be late. You're lucky I gave you the wrong time."

"Wait! Hold on. If I'm on time, why are you bitching at me like I stole the last Oreo in the pack?"

"Well, you didn't know you were on time, now did you?"

"That's not the point, Ri. You lied, and Ma would be so disappointed."

"Ha! Really, squirt? That's the best you got? Threatening me with Ma. Oh puh-lease, even she knows you are incapable of being early, or even on time. Then again, you got it from her, so she'd probably support you."

"Whatever. When does the appointment start? I can't wait to meet my niece."

"It could be a boy, Tee."

"Nah, I know it's a girl. You know psychic and all."

"Ha! Yeah, right, psychic like Cousin Rafe?" she mocked.

"Oh! Please! You insult me. Let's not even go there." He snorted.

We heard Mariana's name called out by the bored-looking, but immaculately dressed receptionist, "Mrs. Preston, they are ready for you."

"You ready, Ri? You sure you don't want to wait till Bastian gets back from his trip this weekend to find out the sex of the tomato?"

Ri looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Tomato? Really, Tee?"

He nodded emphatically. "Yup!" Popping his "p." "According to my little app here. It says my niece is the size of a beefsteak tomato today," he told her, waving his phone around excitedly.

"Oh God, Tee. You're so *extra*," Mariana said with a laugh, "but I love you for being so involved."

"Anyways, Bastian and I agreed we would find out at the twenty-weeks ultrasound. Regardless of if he was here or not. Plus, we want to get started on the nursery while he's here for the weekend. You still doing the murals for us?"

"Come on, Sis. Do you even have to ask? Just tell me when. Even Queen Bey couldn't keep me away."

"I'm not going to touch that one. Even I would ditch you for the Queen," Mariana said.

"You traitor. Just get naked, and get on the table."

"Ha! Oh my God. I bet that's the first time you ever said that to a girl," Mariana said, trying not to laugh hysterically.

"You, a girl? Puh-lease! Big sister, you haven't been a girl as long as Kesha hasn't had a hit single," he said with enough snark to rival any teenager.

"That was mean, Tee. Damn. Sheath the claws, tiger. You're literally four years younger than me," Mariana bitched as she got on the examination table. "And bitch Kesha just had a number one single... so, *in your face*."

"Yeah! Yeah! Whatever. You're still four whole years older, and don't forget the nine months. It's basically five years."

"I would say I can't wait till you're thirty, but then I would be going on thirty-five already, so that seems counterproductive on my part."

“Awww, Ri. You know I’m teasing. You look stunning. You’re five months pregnant and barely showing. You still fit into your size 8s, so stop pouting.”

Apparently, we had to see the ultrasound technician first before the doctor. So, while they spread some gloopy-looking substance on Ri’s belly, he looked around the room. *It was really quite soothing for a doctor’s office*, he thought. All pale colors, and no garish hospital yellow, and absolutely no fluorescent lighting.

Then he heard the coolest thump, thump, sound ever, and Rina said, “Uncle Teo, meet your niece or nephew.”

He really wasn’t a crier. Well, okay yeah, he was. And seeing that little alien-like picture made him tear up. And then the tech switched to 3D imaging, and it was like a real person. He could actually see the head and the feet, and *everything*.

He moved closer to Ri, wanting to get a better look. He hadn’t realized he was full on crying until he felt her wiping tears from his face. When had he started crying? Because he could feel the huge smile on his face.

The tech printed out a couple of pictures and told Ri she would have the DVD ready for her to take home before she left.

She looked up at him with the most content smile ever and said, “For Bastian, he hates missing all these, but you know how it is.”

“Can I have one too?”

He saw Ri nod towards the tech. “Of course you can, Tee. I wouldn’t have it any other way,” she said. After she put herself back together, and he had stopped blubbering, they crossed the hall into an office. He finally answered her statement from before about her husband missing appointments, “I know he does, sis. I know how it is.” He was giving her a kiss on the cheek when the most strikingly handsome man walked in. He couldn’t even call him beautiful. He was way too much man for that word... fuckin’ hell.

He had a stethoscope around his neck, and he wore a long white lab coat over impeccably cut trousers that hugged lean muscular thighs, with a pristine white shirt that clung to broad shoulders and a nice wide chest he imagined resting on at the end of a long day.

He had deep chestnut-brown hair that almost looked black with slight hints of gray. Must be early grays because Doctor Hottie

McHottie could not have been a day over forty. If that.

But damn if those silver fox highlights weren't working for him right now. Teo's hands were itching to sketch that strong square jaw, with the hint of stubble, and that face. Lord help him. That face. His face had character, which sounded absurdly cliché, but the laugh lines around his eyes, and those plump lips he just wanted to bite into. The doctor could so get it. Get him.

He looked like a hotter, more refined version of Eric Bana. Which really should not be humanly possible. At just under six feet he was no slouch in the height department. But the man was broader and taller than he was. If that wasn't the hottest thing ever, he really didn't know what was.

Teo was no twink. Never had been. Never would be. So far from it in fact, but damn, did he like a guy who could pin him down, and ravage him or hold him up with his legs wrapped around that lean waist while he pounded into his needy hole. His mind was flashing him some very filthy images in high definition.

Teo heard his name being called by Ri, ruining a perfectly hot fantasy. Fucking Ri! Such a cock-blocker.

Shaking himself free of those errant thoughts, he sat up straight then and tuned back in to hear his sister introducing him. He stretched his hand out to shake the doc's.

Legit, he always scoffed at anything seemingly mystical, but he could swear he felt a shiver go down his spine.

Although it looked like it was just him because Dr. McLickable clearly didn't feel anything.

All he said was, "Nice to meet you, Matteo. I'm Dr. Ashworth, but you can call me Michael, if you prefer, or Dr. Ashworth. Whatever makes you feel comfortable."

He may have held on to the other man's hand for a couple of seconds strictly longer than necessary while staring into those intense green eyes.

Ri cleared her throat, making him swivel to look at her. He swore he nearly gave himself whiplash.

Teo couldn't help but catch the annoying all-knowing smirk on Ri's face before it disappeared. Teo knew he was in for the Spanish inquisition once the appointment ended. He heard Ri say, "Good to

see you, Dr. Ashworth. So how are we doing today?" she said, pointing at her barely noticeable bump.

The little shit knew her doctor was exactly his type. Could a guy get a little bit of a warning the next time? He was so going to get Mariana back for that. Helluva soon too. Honestly, he felt like the room suddenly got a little too warm for his comfort. He had to focus, or he would turn out to be the worst birthing partner ever. How was he supposed to help his sister when all he could think about was how her doctor looked naked?

While Dr. Dimplelicious was talking, he was watching the man's mouth move, but not really hearing the words coming out. All he could imagine was his lips wrapped around Teo's cock. His now aching cock.

Teo finally looked around the office and spotted a few framed photos of kids and a younger version of Michael as he called the Doc in his head. He noticed that in a few of the pictures he was with a stunningly beautiful blonde woman. He had to sigh inwardly. Of course, Dr. Fucking Perfect was married. They must be his family. Why were all the good ones straight and married, or simply married? The struggle was real. The thoughts he had going through his head of the things he could do to the doc, or rather have the Doc do to him had no room for the picture-perfect blonde.

He knew he had to pay attention, but damn it, his mind was trying to take Michael's clothes off, starting with...

Before he could even go anywhere with that fantasy, he heard his annoying sister's voice. "Teo, did you hear that it's a girl. We are having a girl. You were right, Tee," Mariana said, taking Teo's hand in hers and giving it a squeeze.

MICHAEL

Michael wasn't sure what just happened, but thankfully years of galas and fundraisers had given him a world-class poker face. Unless he was losing his mind... he was apparently attracted to the husband of one of his patients. He knew that was exactly what it was. He knew that feeling. That spark of attraction and that sense of potential. He had only ever really felt that once before, with Sierra. His late wife.

That flash, and those tingles of fierce attraction that made goose bumps pop out all over your skin. But that wasn't... couldn't be possible? He wasn't gay. Not that he had any problem with being gay, far from it, but he just had never been attracted to a man before. Sure, in college, he'd noticed some guys were attractive, but he'd been married to his wife, Sierra, for eleven years before she passed away. Damn it, here came the crushing guilt. He couldn't even think of her without the guilt and regret overshadowing everything.

He hadn't thought about anyone in that way since he'd met her. He did not want to think of anybody in that way, either. He'd not had that feeling since forever ago. And, truthfully, he was shaken to the core. He'd been seeing Mrs. Preston since she transferred into his practice. But, this was the first time he was meeting Mr. Preston. Michael put on his most blank look to conceal what he was feeling. He couldn't very well tell the expectant parents they were having a daughter while imagining what the father looked like under his clothes.

Matteo was a beautiful man, and those were the only words to describe him. With the slightly too long dark locks, and the stormy gray eyes that made him even more striking to look at. With his coloring, they just stood out in contrast. He was shorter than Michael. All-around leaner too, with a body he would describe as fit without being overly muscled. Maybe he just needed to get laid. It had been almost a year, maybe longer, since he had ended his liaison with Addison. She was a lovely woman. Stunning in fact, but she'd started making comments like, "Where is this going?" and, "Why haven't I met your children?" Immediately he had known that it was time to end things.

He just knew that she could never compete with Sierra. It was unfair, and he shouldn't even be comparing them. He knew this, but he couldn't stop. Once she'd mentioned meeting his kids, he'd known their time together was up. He ended things so fast he may have left blazing skid marks while leaving her apartment, like the DeLorean in *Back to the Future*. It was unfortunate, honestly, because she would have made a lovely wife, just not for him.

Focus, Michael. Finish this appointment and leave this room as quickly as possible without being impolite or unprofessional.

"So, Mrs. Preston,"

"Please call me Mariana," she interrupted him, smiling.

"Okay, Mariana, everything looks right on track. Your baby girl looks healthy and strong, and just the right size for this stage of your pregnancy. Just keep doing what you're doing. You're young, fit, and healthy. Also, your weight is right on target for your build."

"Hear that, Teo. I'm young," she emphasized, "and healthy. There's nothing to worry about."

He wasn't sure what that was about. Must be some sort of inside joke because the man kissed her on the cheek and said, "Yes, Ri. I heard him say young."

The voice was definitely male, but Michael felt an imperceptible shiver go down his spine. His voice sounded like a perfectly aged whiskey, smooth and decadent. There was no doubt in his mind that, under just the right circumstances, *like this* his mind a little too helpfully supplied, a voice like that could have easily enthralled a man. And then those gray eyes looked stunning lit up with mirth.

Michael had to avert his eyes quickly, so that he wouldn't be caught staring, and he reminded himself this wasn't the right circumstance. In spite of all the thoughts running wild through his head, he sternly told himself to get a grip. He hadn't thought nor wanted to think of a woman, or in this case a man, in quite this way in so long, he wasn't sure what to do with the emotions he was experiencing.

So, he ignored them and did his job.

"We have no concerns. Just make another appointment with my nurse for two weeks from now, and I'll see you then."

He really hoped he didn't sound brusque or anywhere near as flustered as he felt, but he really had to end this appointment and gather his wits.

As Teo—he tested the man's name out in his head—stood up, he caught himself doing a discreet sweep of the younger man's body. He was all fine lines, and compact muscle in the dark jeans and the black shirt he was wearing. Why did it look like he had more buttons open than was strictly necessary? Michael sighed. Then again, maybe he was just being a prude. He couldn't exactly blame the guy for him noticing. All he could focus on were the inches of tanned, honeyed skin on display. *Holy fuck!* He wondered if the man tasted as good as he looked. Where the hell did that thought come from?

Sure, he could objectively say if a guy was handsome, but this was something else entirely.

In that moment, he chose to ignore the way something pulled deep and hard inside of him. He knew what it was. Arousal. Hot, fierce, and all-consuming. His eyes traveled up and down the younger man's firm, muscular body. His heart was beating wildly. Jesus H Christ! He hadn't felt like this in a long time.

He looked young to Michael. Possibly not even thirty, he found himself musing. He remembered how old he was when Sierra had their son Lucas; they were so young, and both trying to balance new and budding careers. Seemed like a lifetime ago now.

What was he doing looking at a man's chest, for Christ's sake? he thought, mentally castigating himself. He had no business noticing those long legs encased in denim. He most definitely shouldn't notice this in a man whose child he was meant to bring into

the world in four months. Michael realized that he couldn't even convince himself the reason he found him attractive was that he had feminine features and qualities. Nope! Matteo was all man, and he still found him to be very beautiful. His mind was screaming at him, and his traitorous cock seemed to agree.

As they left, he felt like he could finally let out the breath he'd been holding. Thinking about Sierra made him feel guilty. If it wasn't for him, she would be alive. But he wasn't going to go down that pointless road that led to nothing but endless bouts of misery and self-recrimination. That box was locked tight, and the key dumped deep in an ocean, never to be revisited.

He was honestly self-aware enough to know that it wasn't healthy, but he couldn't think about his late wife without feeling like all the air was being sucked out of his lungs. There were too many if onlies, shouldas, couldas, wouldas to make it a losing battle.

Besides, with three children, two of them being teenagers, and a very busy, highly successful practice, when did he have time to wallow in his feelings? He knew that was an excuse and a piss-poor one at that. He had very capable and competent partners, but he chose to keep his patient roster full. With the exception of his children, he had no life outside of work, and that was just how he liked it, he reminded himself.

Maybe if he said it enough times, he would actually start believing it. If he was being honest, it was not a good way to live.

He was lonely. It wasn't even the sex he missed; he could get that. It was the easy companionship. It was someone who made him take life a little less seriously. He missed having a partner to hold in bed at night, and talk about mundane things with. Or, maybe not even talk at all. Suddenly, the way it had so many times in the past, pain engulfed him. Pain and an aching loneliness. He closed his eyes. He still missed her, but it was the loneliness he felt now more than anything.

A part of him felt like he was in a self-imposed purgatory, and the other part felt like he deserved it. The doctor and logical side of himself knew he was being irrational, and besides, all this reflection would do him no good. He was trying to gain forgiveness from a dead woman, and apparently, he was attracted to a married man.

Wasn't he just a stellar human being all around? The feeling of self-flagellation was about to take over, so he made the conscious effort to shut it down. *Wonderful. More self-loathing, Michael.* If there was an Olympic medal to be won for that, he would take the gold.

He knew there was a joke lurking somewhere in there. But for the life of him, he couldn't bring himself to find the humor with the path his life was taking.

He knew if Sierra was alive, she would have rained down hellfire on him for the almost six-year-long pity party he seemed to be throwing. She was never one to wallow or indulge in self-pity and had never been a fan of anyone who did.

He just needed to get home and put this day behind him. Then maybe he would realize that he was simply horny and tired, and not lusting after someone's husband.

Teo couldn't stop thinking about Dr. Green Eyes. His dreams had some decidedly playing-doctor-type fantasies, and he could honestly say that it was a first. But he would certainly let Dr. Ass of the Year give him a thorough checkup. Maybe take his temperature the old-fashioned way. Bottoms up.

Hell, he would even bend over and cough, without much prompting.

He knew he was fixating, but couldn't seem to stop himself from fantasizing about what the Hot Doc could do to him.

He could just hear Mariana's voice saying, "See something you like, Tee?" In that smug voice, sisters must be given at birth, as soon as they got in the elevator.

"Don't know what you're talking about, Ri," he replied, trying to stop himself from blushing.

"Oh? So, you weren't stripping my doctor's clothes off piece by piece mentally? What was he wearing? Andrew Christian's or Calvin Klein's?"

He responded to that question in his head. The doc would be wearing Polo Ralph Lauren black boxer briefs that cupped his junk just right.

"Do you want to be his boyfriend?" she asked in that annoying singsong voice she had perfected over the years of torturing him. The one she used when she wanted to needle information out of him. He remembered a blush trying to peek through, but he shut that

down with all the strength in his body. He was so not giving her the satisfaction of being right.

For one, no way in hell was he telling Mariana that he was crushing on a straight guy. The lecture alone was not worth the trouble, talking more of the sisterly ribbing that would surely follow.

God, sisters. If he could trade her in, well, he wouldn't, but a guy could dream. Couldn't he?

He really needed to stop daydreaming though. He had so much work to do. Instead of sketching for his new graphic novel, he had sketched Dr. I'm Really a Model.

He felt like he couldn't get his features right, though.

There seemed to be so much banked passion beneath all that "proper with a hint of sadness" Then again, maybe he was just seeing what he wanted to see.

For some reason, the doctor was on his mind. Okay, maybe not for some reason; he knew the exact reason. He was wildly attracted to the man on a physical level and maybe a little worse, because he was fixated artistically.

He also knew from experience that until he felt like he had captured him on canvas, he would not be satisfied. God... the man had a face and body that was made to be sketched. At that moment, he wished sculpting was his medium. All those chiseled features forever etched in marble or clay would be utterly drool-worthy. His phone ringing and vibrating jarred him out of his daydream. *Damn it!* Who was calling? Actually, he knew who it was. He'd been nonresponsive via text, so the call wasn't much of a surprise.

"You have the reading on Saturday to raise money for the new pediatric oncology wing. A meeting to pitch the graphic novel later in the week, and have you finished the draft of the next book?"

He heard Alain's, or Lain as they called him, rapid-fire questions and orders without taking a pause for breath. The man didn't even bother with, "Hello."

Hell, he didn't even let Teo get a word in.

Lain was his manager/agent/personal assistant/nanny, and one of his best friends, all rolled into one.

They'd met at Yale and immediately hit it off. He was the realist to Teo's artistic personality. He made sure Teo was where he needed to

be when he needed to be there.

Lain hadn't laughed at him when he'd told him he wanted to write and illustrate children's books. Instead, he'd figured out how to get them published. When he told him, he had created a graphic novel and wanted to publish that too. He made that happen as well.

Without him, Teo was basically a guy who could draw. But he took Matteo Benjamin Julien Wright and made Benjamin Wright & Matteo Romero. Benjamin for his children's books and Matteo for his graphic novels.

He went on and on about his two brands needing separation, or distinction. Honestly, he listened to every fifth word out of Lain's mouth, and nodded because he trusted him implicitly with his career.

When he illustrated his first children's book, he had no idea anyone would be interested in making it into an animated movie. He didn't even think that was a possibility.

But then his Adventures of Julien and Duke became so popular that the studios came calling to make it into a movie. Who would have thought that his books about a geeky ten-year-old who turned into a Prince when he slept and ruled a magical kingdom, filled with elves, fairies, trolls, and dragons like his dog, Duke, who was really his pet dragon magically cloaked, so he couldn't be seen in the human world, would become so popular?

"Teo, are you paying attention?" He heard Lain sigh in exasperation.

"Yeah. Yeah. Meeting, and signing. I heard you. You know I hate doing public appearances. I mean, why on earth would a bunch of parents pay for their kids to meet me?" he whined, unattractively if he did say so himself.

"We've been over this, Tee. You can't hide forever, and I know you prefer to help your charities in the background, but this is a huge deal. Tickets sold out really fast, and a lot of money was raised for the new pediatric ward. I know that means a lot to your mom."

"You know I will come over there, and drag your ass out of the house kicking and screaming if I have to," Lain added in his no-nonsense voice.

Teo had stopped paying attention though, and his mind wandered back to Dr. Green Eyes while Lain kept on threatening him. "He's

straight,” he said out loud.

“Who is?” Lain asked, pausing mid-rant.

“What?” Teo replied, confused.

“You said he's straight, Tee. Who's straight?”

“Uhh. Never mind. Carry on. I'm listening,” he replied, trying to deflect.

He had to look at his phone to double-check if Lain was still on the line, because the guy had literally gone silent.

Clearing his throat, he admitted, “Ri's doctor. I met him the other day at her ultrasound.”

Fucking Lain! he thought while the other man laughed. He knew him so well. He knew that the silence would make him cave, and speak. Teo so didn't do awkward.

“Okay, so he's straight. You know that's not a crime, right? Not everyone can understand the power of the D,” Lain added in that mocking voice Teo hated.

“Oh, shut up! I know that.” He sighed before taking a beat to gather his thoughts before continuing. “He's absolutely gorgeous, tall, beautifully proportioned, and muscled, but not in that overly gym-rat bulky way. His hair was a rich chestnut with sprinkles of gray coming in. And his eyes... his eyes were an incredible shade of green. The irises appeared jade with flecks of gold, maybe.”

He needed to study the man closer, he thought to himself privately.

“Wow, crushing hard, huh?” Lain said, interrupting his thoughts on how to get a closer look at the doctor without being super-obvious.

Teo was blushing hard, but wouldn't give Lain the satisfaction of knowing he was right. To save face for no one but himself, because Lain wouldn't believe him. His friend knew him too well. “Please... you know I appreciate beauty. He just inspired a character for the new book, that's all,” he said, trying to play it off as simple artistic curiosity.

Lain knew him better than that, and just hmmm'd Teo into silence.

What could he say? He was fixating on a married, straight guy. If that didn't have heartache and binge eating written all over it, he didn't know what did.

“Keep telling yourself that, dude,” his friend replied with a snort.

The man was back in business mode three seconds later. “Don't make me come over and drag you out, Teo. I know where you live.” Lain threatened.

“Ha! Please, we are neighbors. We all know you're going to show up for dinner anyway,” he pointed out to Lain before hanging up and going back to his doctor daydreams.

MICHAEL

Well, Michael certainly knew the answer. Clearly, it was not just him being horny. He was actually lusting after a too-young-for-him, married guy, whose wife was a patient. He wasn't quite sure which one should worry him more, the married or the guy part. Definitely, the married part... the more functional parts of his brain, especially the parts not connected to his dick supplied.

Clearly, his subconscious and his libido had no such moral quandaries if the state of his dick and the very vivid, very *explicit* dreams he'd been having every day this week were anything to go by. Waking up hard and aching over Teo had become his new reality since the day of the appointment. He'd had these vivid dreams, seeing himself looking down into those haunting gray eyes, and seeing those plump, pink, luscious lips wrapped around his cock, with his hand buried in those gorgeous dark locks. He wanted to find out if Teo's hair felt as soft as he'd dreamed. Would Teo let him pull it adding just a little bit of pain? Would he let Michael hold his head just the way he liked so he could fuck Teo's mouth?

Michael hadn't seen the man in over a week, but he found that he couldn't deny that what he felt was physical attraction. Overwhelming, wake up sweating, wet dream-inducing attraction. It was definitely more than just a passing interest. But nothing could come of it, so he would simply bury it until he didn't feel it anymore.

Although, with his shitty luck, it probably wasn't going away anytime soon. And didn't that just pile on more guilt? To be honest,

his guilt was a living thing now, like a roommate he couldn't get rid of. So, what was a little more added on top?

Fortunately, his life did not lend itself to pity parties, or wallowing in self-loathing while hiding in bed with the blankets pulled over his head. He had three children between the ages of seven, and fifteen. Yup. He definitely had his hands full. No time to think of hot, young, unattainable guys.

Before even completing the thought, he heard his youngest daughter's laughter as she ran from their end of the house down the stairs shouting, "Daddy! Daddy! Wake up. I'm going to meet Julien today. Get up." She never called the author by his name. Instead, she referred to him by his character. It was completely endearing and made him see the seven-year-old behind the IQ.

He knew his pity party, and self-reproach-athon would have to wait. After Sierra died, he'd promised himself that he would always put his children first. He had failed her, and he couldn't fail them, too. He wouldn't be able to live with himself if he did. Not that he didn't fuck things up more often than he should after single parenting going on for six years.

Somehow during the past few years, they'd become almost strangers to each other. He'd found himself coming home later and later, knowing they would already be in bed, avoiding contact beyond asking about how their day had gone. When he was actually home for dinner, he tried to have a conversation with them, but unless he asked direct questions, they were almost silent, and on whatever device they had with them. He didn't know how to breach the gap that had formed, to get them to open up and talk to him.

He sighed, reluctantly dragging himself out of bed, and into the shower. *Fuck!* It was going to be a long day. Marlowe, his youngest, had been talking about meeting her favorite author for weeks. She was so excited about possibly ending up with one of his drawings for her room. So, she wanted to get there on time to make sure she actually ended up with one.

Luckily for Michael, he'd heard about the reading and auction through a friend and colleague who was on the board of the hospital, and had bought the tickets immediately. Not only was it a great cause, but it made him father of the year to his youngest. Since he

had told his baby girl, it had been a countdown to meeting Benjamin Wright from that day forward.

At least one child still vibrated with excitement at the prospect of spending the day with him. Then again, he had a feeling it was more meeting her favorite author than a day spent with Dad. Still, he would bask in still being his little girl's hero, seeing as his other daughter was all teenage snark and hormones at the best of times.

While getting ready, he found himself thinking about Benjamin Wright. Apparently, he was as reclusive as he was popular, which he found interesting in this social media age. Who had a bestseller or even a series of bestsellers without some intense publicity, and scrutiny? But apparently, the guy had managed to do just that, even after selling the rights of his books to a film studio, and having his fame skyrocket.

His daughter had all the books in the series, and although they were marketed from ten years and up, Marlowe had been reading at that level since she was four. She had gotten obsessed with the series from the very first book. His little genius just loved her fairies, dragons, and trolls. It served to remind him that she was still a typical little girl, no matter how intelligent she was. He enjoyed the stories as well. Although they were marketed towards kids, they weren't half bad for adults either. He'd read them to be sure they were suitable for Marlowe.

Even if he hadn't, he would know all about the adventures of Julien and Duke, courtesy of his daughter. It probably also helped that the book was full of pictures of the world Benjamin Wright had created. Incredibly amazing pictures, too. It said the man did all his own illustrations, and Michael had to say he was impressed. That was one talented individual.

He rushed through showering and getting dressed, not because he was going to be late, but because it was a habit he'd yet to break from his residency and on-call years. He got dressed just as quickly and made his way downstairs. As he walked into the kitchen, he heard his kids say, "Morning, Dad."

Michael looked up from the phone in his hands and the emails he was going through to see his three kids, Luc, Reagan, and Marlowe having breakfast while their chef, Frederick, was tidying up.

"Morning, guys," he replied.

"So, what do you have planned for today?" he directed at his two oldest.

"Leslie, Mason, and Maddie are coming over. We're gonna use the music room to practice for the recital. And then probably get in the pool or hot tub, and maybe some sauna time. I asked Frederick to leave us snacks, and stuff," Reagan replied while doing Lord knows what on her iPad.

"I'm going over to Gio's to study for the PSATs. Then we're going to the movies later, and we'll probably get something to eat while we're out," Luc said without looking up from his phone.

Jesus, what happened to eye contact. "Well, it goes without saying I'm on my phone all day if you need to reach me. Your sister and I have the reading and auction. Then we'll probably make a day of it. Won't we, baby girl?"

Marlowe looked at him over her book, with that exasperated grown-up look a seven-year-old really shouldn't be able to pull off. "Dad, I'm not a baby. Please don't call me that while we are out in public. It would just be soooooo... embarrassing."

Seven years old and already embarrassed by her dad. Sounds about right, Michael thought. He was fixing himself a plate from the spread Frederick had laid out when his daughter Reagan said, "You know Maddie's mom is getting married again."

"That's nice, honey," he replied distractedly. "Did you need a new dress or anything for the ceremony?" he added while thumbing through his emails to make sure there was nothing urgent that needed his attention, even though he had taken the weekend off.

He heard Reagan huff. It was her *"how are you so slow, Dad?"* huff. He knew it well. Since she hit the age of thirteen he had barely done anything right. What else was new? Since his wife's death, he felt like most days he was just winging it and trying to keep everyone happy, healthy, and alive. On a good day, he managed the last two.

She finally decided to help dumb ol' Dad out and said, "No, Dad, what I'm saying is, we all talked about it, and we wouldn't mind if you decided to get married again, you know?"

Michael's head snapped up in shock at the turn the conversation had just taken. He must have swallowed his food wrong because he

was nearly choking. He couldn't do anything but stare dumbly at his children. What in the world had led them down this road?

"What? Why? When?" He coughed, trying to clear the bacon trapped in his throat before saying, "What... When did you talk about this?"

His kids looked at him like he was a bit slow, and patiently replied, "Well, Mom's been gone a while now, and you never date. Luc is off to college in three years, I'm gone in, like, four, and Marlowe is, like, barely a kid since she acts thirty most of the time. What I'm saying... What we are all saying... is we don't want you to be alone. So, if you wanted to get married again, you know, we would be cool with it."

He saw Luc and Marlowe nodding in agreement. *For Christ's sake, what did his seven-year-old know about any of this?*

"Uhm," he stuttered. "Thanks for the permission, guys, but I'm fine," he replied weakly. "Let's talk about this later, okay."

"Yeah, that means never, guys," Luc said, still not looking up from his phone.

"Marlowe, are you ready?" he asked, quickly changing the subject. He hastily handed his half-eaten plate over to Frederick, who seemed to be doing his best not to laugh at his apparent discomfort. If the man hadn't been with them since he was a teenager, Michael would have sacked him on the spot.

"Meet me in the garage, baby girl," he told Marlowe while dashing away with more haste than grace from his kids. Sometimes he still felt like he was as inept at being a single parent now as he was when he had to assume the responsibility of being a single father after Sierra's death.

Suzy Homemaker he was not, and never would be. Sure, he had come a long way, but talking to his kids about his dating life, or lack thereof, wasn't something he had prepared for when he had started his day... or ever really.

It wasn't that he didn't want to be here. It was just that he had never really done well in crowds. It probably had a lot to do with him feeling like he had never really fit in. So today, being the center of attention was like his own personal version of hell. Lain always said that was why he did so well with his books. Apparently, he created his own world because he felt like he never totally fit in this one. He had a mantra going for today. "*It's for a good cause.*" He kept chanting it over and over in his head.

He really hoped he could escape at some point after the reading. It wasn't like he had to stay for the auction. *If only Lain didn't have a Teo-dar*, he thought with a sigh. He swore the guy had him chipped. How else could he always know where Teo was in a room? It was like Lain's superpower. He would totally get on Teo's case if he left before Lain thought it was proper.

Still, he was counting down the time till he could go back to his lair. Honestly, it wasn't that he didn't socialize... he actually did, quite often. Just within the small circle of friends he'd had since high school and college. Although circle was a generous term. It was Lain, Tris, Cristian, and him. And they had added Tris's fiancé, Nathaniel, to the group now. He had other friends too, of course. But none as close as Tristan, Lain, and Cris.

He'd known Tristan forever. In fact, after Tristan's sperm and womb donors—as his friend liked to call his parents—had kicked him out before their senior year of high school, Tristan had moved in with

Teo and his family while his sister was off at law school. And they had both applied and, thankfully, ended up at Yale together, too.

He met Cristian on his first day at Yale. This shy, younger guy with gorgeous dark red hair was already in the room when he got to the dorms. Ironically, they had bonded over the fact that both of them were the shy loner types. Teo had felt like he had to protect Cris from the moment they met. It wasn't that he thought him weak, but his friend saw the good in the world. He didn't realize it was more like shark-infested waters than swimming with dolphins.

Lain, he'd met on his first day of class. He was a year older but had spent a year in France with relatives there. He was all worldly and smart and somehow took to Teo. And with Teo came Tristan and Cristian. By the second year of college, they had all gotten a house together off campus. That was nine years ago, and he was still stuck with them.

Not that he would have it any other way.

Although, Cris had been scarce, thanks to his douche of a boyfriend. They saw him so infrequently nowadays. He remembered Tristan mentioning how worried he was about him. And to be honest, he had noticed Cris was acting strangely recently. He'd added it to his mental to-do list to check up on him. But with his deadline looming, he'd been super absent himself. Once everything wrapped up, he had a chunk of time before starting work on his next project. He would have to get all up in his friend's business.

He knew he was being all sappy about the guys because they had all agreed to come to the event without him even having to beg. Although he probably had his nieces, Samantha, and Emma, to thank for getting their daddies here. They definitely wouldn't have let their fathers have a moment of peace till they said yes.

He was always happy to see his nieces and nephew. But he had to admit there was a part of him that was jealous of what his friend had found. He wasn't jealous of Tristan or even the happiness he'd attained. He wanted everything good for him. There was no one who deserved it more. But he wanted it for himself too. He wanted to meet his forever man. He was ready for the family, kids, and maybe a dog and a cat. He'd never been one to play the field. He didn't really know how. He was the definition of a monogamist, having only

ever dated two people in his life. He knew at almost twenty-seven that was weird to most people.

But, he'd grown up with parents who were insanely in love with each other. They had met while in college. His mom had been twenty, and his dad had been twenty-two. They'd fallen in love and married less than a year later, even though his mom hadn't graduated, and his dad had been just starting law school. Both his grandparents had been furious, saying they were going to ruin their lives. But his parents had just known they were it for each other. And to this day, his dad looked at his mom like he couldn't believe she was his, and his mom treated his dad like he was her king. Teo wanted that for himself. A love that only got better with age, like fine wine.

He wasn't naïve—he was sure his parents had their problems over the years, but he was twenty-seven this year and had still never seen them have any huge explosive fights. It was possible they'd kept it away from him and his sister. But still, after thirty-four years, they were together and, it seemed, very happy. Hell, they were currently in Manchester on a little holiday visiting his mom's brother and her family. Then they were off to Paris for their anniversary. He wanted that. A relationship that still had the spark, even after the kids were gone.

He wanted a man who would treat him like he was the most important person in his universe. He wanted someone he could hand his heart over to for safe-keeping and would know that it would never be taken for granted. Was he asking for too much? He didn't think he was. He was willing to be that person for someone. It wasn't like he was selfish.

Teo was so lost in thought he didn't notice Lain come in with Tristan, Nathaniel, Samantha, Emma, and little Wyatt, who had turned one earlier in the year and was giving his dads a run for their money since he had mastered the whole walking thing.

“Hey, Tee,” Tristan said, coming in for a hug and jarring him back to reality.

“Oh my God. When did you guys get here?” he asked, taking his nephew from Tristan.

“We just did. I called Lain, and he brought us back here,” Tristan replied while walking back towards Nathaniel and pulling him into the nearest chair on his lap, planting a quick kiss on his lips. They were so adorable. Teo had to look away. The kiss wasn't much as kisses went. Just a quick peck on the lips. It was the kind of kiss that said I love you, and I just can't help kissing you. I don't care if we are in public. Still, it was painful to watch, because Teo worried he would never have someone to share that kind of kiss with.

Teo just wanted what Tristan had found with Nathaniel. He wanted someone who couldn't even stand to be away from him when they inhabited the same space. Whenever he spent time with Tristan and Nathaniel, he noticed how they couldn't stay apart for any significant amount of time. It was like some sort of gravitational pull, constantly drawing them together. He didn't even think they realized it was happening. It was more like their bodies, minds, or hearts instinctively sought the other person out and had to be close.

MICHAEL

Michael was so happy to be spending the day with Marlowe. One thing he'd promised himself after his wife's death was that he would get to know his kids. He would be more present in their lives, and he wouldn't spend so much time at work that they weren't even sure who he was. Michael knew that some of the things came a little too late. He felt like even though things were better now, he would always feel like he had deprived his children of their mother. He knew that Sierra's death wasn't his fault, but if he hadn't been working late again, maybe she wouldn't have been alone after the charity benefit, and maybe he would have been able to stop the mugger who had made him a widower and his children motherless.

He knew he had an important job and he really loved it. He wasn't only a gynecologist. He was a neonatal surgeon with board certifications in Obstetrics, Gynecology, and Maternal and Fetal Medicine. He saved babies and their mothers. He brought life into the world, and it was something he never took for granted. But, for a moment, he'd lost sight of what was truly important. And forgot that as important as his job was, his family was still number one.

In his pursuit of becoming the best, he'd neglected what should have been his first priority, and he felt like it had cost him his wife. There was a part of him that felt like maybe if he never fell in love again, it would make up for the mistakes he had made with Sierra in their marriage. He knew it was crazy and she would kick his ass, but

he felt like it was his version of atonement. He just wasn't sure who he was atoning to and if it was even helping.

His daughter interrupted his morose train of thought from her seat. "Daddy, I forgot one of the books for Julien to sign."

He looked over to the pile of books she had brought with her and laughed inwardly. She had at the very least ten books for the guy to sign already. He didn't want to tell her that she probably wasn't going to get all of them signed. Instead, he told her, "I'm sure they will have some on display for sale when we get there, sweetie. We can get you a replacement."

That seemed to appease her because she went back to reading the book she had in her hands. He had no idea how she realized she had forgotten one of the books since she was up front with him and the books were in the back seat. But he had stopped underestimating her mind. She had an eidetic memory with genius-level intellect, and was completely brilliant, and that wasn't him being biased because she was his child.

He was so glad she was still interested in these books. He didn't want her to grow up too fast because of her mind. She was still just a kid at the end of the day. And Julien and Duke were part of the reason. She had skipped several grades and already mastered three languages fluently. And was starting on another. Her proficiency was in mathematics, but she was also a gifted artist. Michael really wasn't sure where the hell she got it all from.

Sure, Sierra had been a lawyer, and he was a doctor at the top of his field—one of twelve in the world for fetal surgery. But he worked hard for it. He wasn't blessed with perfect recall. Not that his daughter didn't work hard, because she did. But he knew she had an advantage most kids didn't. His older kids both had fantastic GPAs, and he knew they were intelligent, but nowhere close to what Marlowe was IQ-wise. Not that he ever compared them. If he wasn't so sure she was his child, he would have thought maybe Sierra had had an affair or something along those lines.

The car ride to the hall where the reading and auction would take place was uneventful. His daughter was lost in her own world and ignoring dear old Dad. While he was thinking about a certain out-of-bounds man who shouldn't even be on his mind. Images of Teo

flashed in his mind despite all his efforts to stop them. Never had he been in a situation quite like this one.

The fact that it was a man he was lusting after had stopped bothering him. Not that it really ever had. He could admit that while in college, he'd found his lab partner from gross anatomy attractive, but had never gotten the chance to pursue it. Sierra had come along, and that was it. He hadn't been interested in anyone else. Male or female. It was quite possible he had missed out on his experimentation years, and there were parts of himself he had never explored. His intense attraction and connection to Teo would suggest that was the case.

His best friend from childhood, Reid, was bi and had dated both men and women over the years. Now he was in a very happy, very committed throuple relationship with Steven and Alexis, and had been for close to seven years. It would be hypocritical of him to suddenly feel some kind of way about being attracted to a guy. He always told his children love was love. And his daughter Reagan had come out as pansexual. So, flying a rainbow flag himself wouldn't be a shock to them—he hoped.

His main worry, well, one of them, was they would question his relationship with their mother. He would need them to know that it wasn't a beard situation. Then again, he was sure his kids got the whole sexuality being fluid situation. Their generation seemed to know better than his in that aspect, that was for damn sure. They seemed more at peace with living their truths. He hoped they would give their dad the same respect.

Michael wasn't even sure why he was worrying. The guy he was lusting after was married and expecting a child. And Michael wasn't one to break up a happy home. Not that he thought Teo was even interested. Although he could have sworn the guy had held on to his hands a bit longer than was absolutely necessary, or maybe that was just his imagination and wishful thinking. The fact that Teo was in a committed relationship should have made it a moot point. But the jealousy snaking through his heart at the thought told him it wasn't.

And what the hell was that about? He didn't even know how to process that. Was it truly jealousy? It wasn't a feeling he was accustomed to at all.

As he pulled into the parking lot of the event center, he decided to put Teo out of his mind. Nothing good would come out of the thoughts he was having. Even if the man was interested, he was too old and believed too much in the sanctity of marriage to carry on some sort of sordid, secret affair. Not that his dick agreed with him. The traitorous bastard.

Putting aside the jealousy, his semi-permanent hard-on, and him possibly being bisexual, the man clearly wasn't interested. Being married to a woman couldn't be any more of an indication. So he would leave it alone. He had gotten used to taking care of the bulge between his legs solo. That didn't have to change. He certainly wasn't going to look too closely at the sense of loss that overtook him. Because he couldn't lose something he never had, right?

He looked over at his daughter, knowing she would be too engrossed in her book to realize they had reached their destination. "We're here, honey."

Marlowe looked up, taking in her surroundings while unbuckling her seatbelt.

"Finally," she said in a huff.

Michael wasn't sure whether to laugh or scold her for being rude. He decided on neither, not wanting to spoil their day. Instead, he got out of the car and walked to the passenger's side to help his daughter out. Not that she acknowledged him. Her nose was back in the book again as she stood waiting for him to get her other books out of the back seat.

He realized a little too late that she had forgotten to bring a backpack to put all the books in, so he told her to stay where she was while he checked the trunk for something. Luckily, he found one of the reusable bags filled with pamphlets and a copy of *"What to Expect When You're Expecting"* alongside a few other things new mothers might need. His clinic gave them to every expectant mother. He emptied the bag and put all the books into it. He didn't even bother checking to see if his daughter had moved, because he knew as long as she had that book in her hands, that wouldn't happen.

He finally took the book from her and added it to the others he was carrying in the bag. He could see she was about to protest, so he quickly said, "You don't want to be late meeting Julien, now do

you?" He loved it that when he took her hand in his, she held on and didn't try to shy away from holding her father's hand in public. He knew his older two would never be caught dead doing that in a million years.

They walked from the parking lot to the entrance of the event center with his daughter chattering on and on about the last Julien book. He tuned her out, having heard it all before, while trying to remember which hall was booked for the event. He figured following the other parents with kids was a safe bet. They climbed up a set of stairs at the Bridgewater Event Center before coming to a stop outside the room where a security guard was checking tickets.

He got out the envelope containing the embossed tickets, showed it to the guard, and they were let in immediately. He looked around the room and could tell no expense had been spared. They had turned the place into something out of one of Benjamin Wright's paintings.

He wasn't sure what he was expecting, but walking into what looked like the set of a movie on one side and an art gallery on the other was definitely surprising. His daughter, immediately recognizing the recreation of the set, said, "Daddy, look, it's Worsley Woods. That's where Julien and Duke go on adventures."

She pulled his arm, making sure she had his attention and pointed out. "Over there is Ellesmere Castle. That's where Julien's parents live, but he can't see them, because the evil dragons cast a spell on the castle, so he can't get in. They're trapped there. Julien and Duke are trying to save them. That's why he goes on the adventures. The last book had him looking for the warlock that helped the dragons cast the spell."

Michael smiled indulgently at his daughter. She was so excited to be here. He felt the excitement too. Before he could say anything to her, he heard a man say behind them, "Wow, we have a Julien superfan here, don't we?"

Michael turned towards the voice and found a very attractive man. He was one of those men who could only be described as racially ambiguous. But he was stunning. Michael mentally noted that he was now checking men out in public. But, he realized that even this model-looking man didn't have the effect that Teo had on

him. It was good to know his dick didn't stand to attention for every attractive male he came into contact with.

The man introduced himself, "My name is Lain. I'm Benjamin's agent." He put his hand out for a handshake. Michael obliged him.

"I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but we are looking for some superfans to sit up front during the reading." He looked down at Marlowe with a smile. "Would you like that, princess?"

Marlowe looked up at him with a pleading look little girls must be taught in utero to make sure their fathers never said no. And he was no exception.

"Of course, you can, sweetie. Just make sure you can see me at all times. And don't go anywhere without me."

She sighed like he was exasperating her. "I know, Dad. I told you I'm not a baby."

Lain laughed before adding, "Where have I heard that before?"

Michael shared a commiserating look with him before asking if he had kids.

Lain replied, "Nope. I have nieces who are five going on fifty. They run their dads ragged, those two."

He smiled before adding they were around here somewhere. He looked around a second before pointing at two little girls, one blonde and one brunette.

"Would you like to meet them?" Lain asked Marlowe. She nodded excitedly, almost dragging Michael along with her. His daughter was not shy at all. She'd definitely gotten that from her mother.

As they got closer, Michael realized that one of the men standing with the girls kind of reminded him of Teo. Even though he couldn't see the man's face, his body was giving him the same reactions from when he was around the younger man the last time. He chalked it up to his mild obsession with Teo and gave his dick a stern talking to mentally.

As they got closer, Lain called out to the guys standing around chatting while the girls played. He heard him say, "Tristan, Nathaniel, Benjamin."

Michael immediately realized Lain had brought them to meet Benjamin Wright. But when the men turned towards them, he felt like

he had been sucker-punched. Before he knew what he was doing, "Teo" came out of his mouth.

Michael wanted to rip away the man's arms from around Teo, and tuck him into his side. If any man should be touching Teo, it was Michael. No one else. He wasn't sure where the caveman attitude came from, but he didn't care.

"Dr. Ashworth, what are you doing here?" Teo asked him, looking flustered.

Michael couldn't concentrate with the tall brunet's arms around Teo. He wanted to growl at him to take his hands off. He looked the man straight in the eye, not answering Teo's question. The man, whoever he was, must have gotten the hint and moved away from Teo towards the blond and put his arms around him, before giving him a kiss on the cheek while shooting Michael a knowing look. His eyes dancing with mirth.

He heard Teo call his name again and realized he'd been acting like an idiot. Michael looked at Teo before answering, "My daughter loves the Julien books, so I brought her to meet him and hopefully get a painting of his for her."

The other guys laughed, and Michael thought he might have missed a joke until Teo knelt down in front of his daughter and said, "Hi, I'm Benjamin. Nice to meet you."

Michael was too stunned. His Teo was Benjamin Wright? Michael sighed. *When had he become his Teo?* Michael wondered, and just because he was Benjamin Wright didn't mean he wasn't still married.

He looked around for Mariana, his patient and Teo's wife, but didn't spot her anywhere. Before he drove himself crazy wondering, he asked, "So is your wife here?"

The question seemed to make all the men burst out laughing.

Michael wasn't sure what was funny and felt like the butt of some joke. He was about to take his daughter, and leave these guys, but before he could, he heard Teo say in a stunned and confused voice, "Wife? I don't have a wife."

Before Michael could digest that statement, Lain dragged Teo away to begin the event.

The very last thing Teo wanted to be doing right now was talk to anyone who wasn't Dr. Do Me. But Lain dragged Teo away before he could even ask the doctor why on earth he thought he had a wife. That was the most absurd thing he had ever heard. The doctor thinking Ri was his wife was laughable. Then again, it didn't matter. The fact that he didn't have a wife didn't mean that the Doc didn't—he'd seen the family pictures all over the man's office, and let's not forget the adorable kid attached to him.

But he couldn't help but wonder *why* the doc would care if he had a wife. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but he had seen a spark of interest. *Or maybe you're just projecting*, his mind so helpfully supplied. He hesitated to say the guy had straight written all over him because he could honestly say his gaydar was on the fritz around the fuckable doc. That wasn't the only thing on the fritz. It seemed his self-control had all but vanished too. He was back to his teenage years when a stiff breeze could make him pop wood.

And of course Michael looked gorgeous in the dark fitted chinos and the tailored Oxford shirt he wore today. His clothes were showing off that gorgeous body that Teo just wanted to climb like Michael was a tree and Teo was the monkey. He wanted to know how it felt to be held in those strong masculine arms. He imagined himself with Dr. Hot and Sexy, his head on that wide chest. He knew it was not possible, but he could see that being his life. The man was everything Teo imagined his forever man would be.

Teo could see he appreciated family. Not every father who was also a busy doctor would take the time to bring their daughter to a book reading. He was also charitable. *Sigh*. The thought of Michael being married made his heart hurt. Why in the hell was the person he chose as his forever man for a long-term relationship a straight man? Like, how fucked up was that?

More than ever Teo wanted to go back to his house and hide in his studio and pour out all the frustration he was feeling onto a canvas.

Married, with children. Teo had to keep repeating that to himself before he did anything stupid. Granted, Michael wasn't wearing a wedding ring, but lots of people didn't wear rings. Lord knows if Michael was his, the doc wouldn't go anywhere without proof to the world that he was taken. He loved saying his name, but he purposely used it sporadically. It felt way too intimate somehow.

Teo knew he wanted a long-term commitment or marriage. But then again, maybe picking a married straight guy meant he wasn't ready. Like, who started getting moony-eyed over the one guy they couldn't have.

Not for the first time a sense of restlessness came over him, making him tired. Like, deep in his bones tired. He rubbed his hands over his face before pushing them through his hair. He felt like he was missing out on the life he had wanted for as long as he could remember.

Thankfully Lain nudged him before he could spiral further. Teo knew what he had to do. He would focus on the event, do the reading, and then he would disappear for a few weeks to just wallow in pain and get the doctor out of his system. Hell, maybe he could use the man as a villain in his new book. Maybe make him an ogre or something. That would definitely make him smile.

After doing the rounds and meeting the board of the hospital, as well as some of the pediatric doctors, Teo got ready to do his reading to the children present. Teo loved this charity. Their goal was to update and add more staff to the pediatric wing. It had started as something his mom and dad did, but after Emma had gotten ill, he had decided to become more than just a donor. As usual, Lain executed his ideas and made this day happen.

Finally, it was time for him to do his part. Teo didn't find this a hardship. He loved kids. He took a seat on what looked like a tree that had been cut down in the recreation of Worsley Woods. All the kids rushed to get a seat close enough to hear him. He spotted Emma and Samantha with Michael's daughter, whose name he hadn't caught. They all got spaces in front of Teo and sat down in anticipation for the reading. He looked around, spotting Michael almost immediately. He didn't want to sound crazy, but it was almost like he could sense him. Like they had a mental connection. But of course, that wasn't possible. You couldn't have a mental connection with someone else's husband. Could you?

Fuck, he was losing his mind.

It didn't help that when he finally had the courage to look the man in the eye, he caught Michael staring intently, as if he was trying to figure Teo out. Michael didn't even look away when their gazes met. He kept staring, holding Teo in some sort of trance with just his gaze. Teo finally had to look away and start what he was here for before he made a fool of himself in front of all these parents and their kids. Lain would kill him if he sprung word in this setting. He so didn't need that crapstorm in his life. So, he would not look in the Doc's direction anymore.

MICHAEL

Michael's gaze immediately settled on Teo who stood talking with his agent and some other people, a few he recognized as members of the board of the hospital where he had surgical privileges. Michael couldn't take his gaze off the man. His eyes seemed to find and follow him no matter where he was in the room. He tried to look busy, checking his email while keeping track of Marlowe, but found himself scanning the room looking for Teo instead.

Finally, the reading was about to begin, and the children were seated on what looked like grass. They were all looking enthralled at Teo while he told them a story. The man brought everything to life. Michael was captivated just looking at him. It was like he glowed from within with pure light. Michael wanted to get close enough to bask in it. He wanted it only for himself.

During Teo's reading, Michael stood at the side of the room, settling on a spot at the side of the faux grass area where he had an unobstructed view of Teo and his daughter too. He was still next to Teo's friends. He couldn't help but still want to clock the smirky dude who had his hands all over Teo earlier. But he buried the inclination and acted like a civilized soul.

From where he stood, he could watch and listen to this beautiful man come to life while storytelling. He held his daughter's books and listened, enthralled.

Teo's face was full of animation, very watchable. He also had a voice worth listening to. It lilted beautifully as he read the charming

story about a prince and his dragon trying to save his home and parents.

Of course, there was the villain. A fairy who was really a rat, who set out to make sure that Julien never made it to the good warlock's castle on the other side of Worsley Woods.

But Duke didn't fall for the rat's trickery for long and breathed fire, exposing the rat for what he really was. The story was about friendship, perseverance, and the usual good versus evil, with good winning out.

Michael was completely captivated by the story and the perfectly pitched emotional delivery. The children were listening fervently to every word. He could see his daughter come in on some lines because she knew much of the story by heart.

Michael could see why the stories had gotten studio attention. It would be beautiful when animated. Also, it had tremendous appeal, as was evident by the number of one-percenters who had brought their children for the reading, and were already eyeing the one-of-a-kind pieces on display. Once the last line had been read, the children clapped and jumped up trying to get to Teo—or Benjamin, he guessed—first.

Luckily there were people to help them get into a straight line while a table was set up for the signing. He saw his daughter looking for him. Probably needing her books for the signing.

Michael knew it had to be his imagination, but Teo's eyes seemed to fall on him regardless of who the man was talking to. It was almost like Teo kept seeking him out to make sure he was still present. Michael didn't know what it meant, but it made his throat go dry.

Michael was already plotting how to get Teo alone after the signing. He wished he could hang back at the end of the line. But Marlowe would never agree to that. Not that he knew what he'd say, or even if Teo would be a bit interested. But Michael knew he had to talk to him after the comment he made before he got dragged away. Before he could even focus on the fact that Teo might not have a wife, he worried about the man accepting the fact that he had three kids. It didn't hurt that it looked like he was great with the children, all of whom clearly adored him. Michael noticed Teo took his time listening to what they had to say before signing the books. The hired

ushers seemed to be the ones hurrying up the line. That was a good sign, he hoped. Although teenagers were a whole other beast compared to the younger ones.

It took him a moment to realize that Marlowe wasn't in the line, but was playing with the kids she had been introduced to earlier. He was about to prompt her to get in line, but was stopped by "handsy" as he thought of the guy now.

"Hi, I'm Tristan, Teo's brother. If you just wait a little bit, Teo will sign her books when he's done over there. She can keep playing with my kids while you wait."

Michael realized he was in deep shit when he breathed a sigh of relief at the man who was introducing himself. Not that they looked anything alike. Then again, they could be stepbrothers or something along those lines. He also realized that meant he had an in with Teo. He could talk to the guy without having to rush.

He was feeling very attracted to Teo, and not just on a physical level, though his sexual appeal was certainly getting stronger by the moment. Michael imagined coming home to Teo in his bed, and knew he'd like that. Very much. And wasn't that just a crazy thought when Michael knew next to nothing about the man? His heart argued that he did. That it was the same way when he'd met Sierra. He'd just known. And he did again. Wasn't that all that mattered?

Michael knew he was rusty in his flirting/dating game. Sure, he'd had the odd dalliance. But he'd known from the start those weren't going anywhere. This was... this was important; it was everything. He felt like his future depended on this moment.

Michael had to think of what tactic would give him the result he wanted. Because failure wasn't an option. There was only one way this could end, and that was Teo being his. He knew it down to his bones it was what was meant to happen.

There was something in him telling him not to miss out on what he could have with this man. Michael didn't even know he had been searching, but somehow this man fit what he'd been waiting for.

His instincts were telling him that Teo might be the one. Could he be so lucky to get two people as soulmates? Michael knew he had done nothing to deserve it and a better man would not be so selfish.

But if having Teo meant he wasn't a better man, then he was okay with that.

He knew he couldn't walk away, shutting a door that might lead to something good, something better than the lonely nights he'd had the last few years.

So not looking hadn't worked. Teo had known exactly where the handsome Doc was standing because he hadn't been able to take his eyes from him for more than a moment or two. At every point during the reading, Teo could sense Michael's eyes on him. And he couldn't help but sneak a peek every now and again. Dr. Droolworthy was tilting his world on its axis. It was like being in his vicinity heightened Teo's senses.

He wished he could blame it on his starving libido, but he knew it was more than that. Sure, he couldn't remember the last time he got laid, which meant it was quite a while ago. It was probably going on a year now. But still, somehow, he knew not just anyone would be able to scratch the itch he had. Not anymore. Although it just wouldn't do for him to be out in public reacting like this. He needed to get a handle on the situation. Whatever the fuck it might be.

He was happy to see that his friends had found a way to get the good doctor to hang back. Which meant one way or another, he would figure out if all this chemistry and heat was all for nothing. If he was going to have to lock himself in his house and ride his dildo while calling out Dr. Do Me's name till he got the man out his system.

He had never been one for the life of random, meaningless sex. But if Michael was married, he might have to see what it was all about until he got the man out of his system. *Yeah, right*, his inner voice mocked.

Teo had done the dating thing. It made perfect sense in his mind. He wanted to find a committed relationship, so dating was the way to

go. But he had his self-imposed sex restrictions for dates. He needed at least four dates before allowing himself release. There were never random one-night stands. And he'd stuck to it. Probably why he hadn't gotten any in ages. Lain always called him a picky bitch. And he wasn't wrong. For Teo, it wasn't even about the looks of a man—attraction was more than that for him. He just needed that connection, that made you know, *Yes, this is your person.*

He blamed his mom and dad. They always talked about feeling the buzz with each other. And knowing they had found their one. But what happened when he found his buzz and the man was taken? What then? Teo managed to get through the signing without making a fool of himself. As he finished signing the last book from the child in line, he glanced over, making sure Michael was still around.

He knew he was, because Teo knew he would have felt it if Michael had left the room. It sounded crazy, but deep down in his bones, he knew he wasn't wrong. He finally got his chance after all the kids were back with their parents, so he walked up to Michael.

Standing this close, he saw that Michael's green eyes looked even deeper and more intense, twisting his insides in a good way. "I love your books," Michael said, almost in a whisper, like he didn't want to break the spell they'd created with their proximity.

It had been impossible to resist the impulse to show off to him, pouring much more vitality into his performance. Which was really silly because it wasn't like Michael was his target audience. Teo was conscious of his pulse leaping into a gallop as he met the steady gaze of the delicious doc. His skin tingled as though hit by an electric charge.

He'd met a lot of different men since he'd come out. Not that he'd really had to come out. But none of them ever had this kind of impact on him. He wanted to say, "Don't walk out of my life," but that would be stupid since he wasn't even in his life in any significant way.

"Your name is Teo, right, or should I call you Benjamin?" Michael asked softly.

"Yes," Teo replied. "I mean Teo. I mean, yes, my name is Benjamin, but you can call me Teo. All my friends do."

Stupid, stupid, you sound like an idiot.

Teo didn't want this man calling him by his published author name and all it now stood for.

"Teo," Michael repeated, rolling it off his tongue as though tasting it.

Teo realized Michael had somehow gotten a step closer to him, or maybe he had moved—he wasn't even sure at this point. Everything in his surroundings disappeared, goosebumps prickled up Teo's arms, and his heart picked up several beats, beginning a slow, steady thumping in his chest.

He was sure he was about to be kissed, and his body was humming in approval. But before anything could happen, three giggling girls ran towards them, two of them chanting, "Uncle Teo, Uncle Teo." He loved his nieces, but right then and there, he wanted to scream at kiddus-interruptus. Until he realized that he'd been about to kiss a man who might have a wife. In front of God and half of California's elite.

Teo took a step back like he had been scalded, and put some distance between them, using his nieces as a barrier. He needed to regroup because Dr. Ashworth pushed his senses into overdrive. He knew calling him Dr. Ashworth, even mentally, was his way of erecting walls between them. He needed to keep things on a platonic footing. He wasn't a homewrecker. And he wouldn't become one, not even for the man of his dreams.

He felt one of his nieces pulling on his shirt to get his attention. He looked down and saw that it was Emma. "Yes, sweetie, what's wrong?"

"We made a new friend," she said, pointing at Dr. Ashworth's daughter. "Her name is Marlowe. She said you were going to sign her books."

No matter how he felt about the cheating doctor, he couldn't break a little girl's heart. He just didn't have it in him. He looked over at the pretty little girl standing next to her father and smiled. She responded with one of her own.

"What would you like me to sign, honey?"

She excitedly pulled the bag Michael was holding in his hands, forcing him to release it.

Teo made the conscious effort not to look at Michael, focusing on Marlowe instead. Marlowe—what a lovely name. It was definitely a name he would have chosen for his daughter. Teo had to laugh as Marlowe handed him a bag full of books. He took them from her and decided sitting would be prudent to get the lot signed. As he sat cross-legged on the floor, the girls all sat down in front of him, watching what he was doing.

“Uncle Teo, how come you never write in my books?” Samantha asked.

Teo looked at her and smiled before answering, “Well, sweetie, you can see me anytime. I sign books for kids who can't see me that often.”

He wasn't sure she understood what he was saying, but Tristan and Nathaniel were all about talking to the kids like they were adults. No baby talk. Sure, you had to explain some stuff a few times, but he didn't mind at all.

As he made his way through all the titles, the girls were talking among themselves again. He mostly tuned out the chatter until Samantha tapped his knees to get his attention again. “Marlowe's mommy is in heaven like mine, Uncle Teo.”

Teo did his best to hide his surprise but wasn't sure he completely succeeded. He glanced quickly at Michael and caught the man looking directly at him. He looked away just as quickly, breaking eye contact.

The girls were still chatting, not realizing the significance of the information they had just given him, but Michael sure did. The man seemed relieved like he'd been trying to work it into the conversation but didn't know how. Teo was sure they would be talking about it soon. He was about to go back to signing when Emma said, “If she doesn't have a mommy, how come she doesn't have two daddies like us?”

Teo felt his cheeks flame at that question and instead of replying, tossed it over to Michael. “I think that's a question for her daddy, sweetheart.” Teo smirked. Looking at Michael, he was feeling smart for putting the ball in his court. “Why doesn't she have two daddies?”

“Yeah, Dad. Seriously, can I have two dads too?” Marlowe chimed in supportively.

Teo could have hugged that child for asking that question.

Michael, however, didn't get flustered as Teo expected. Instead, he looked Teo straight in the eyes and said, "I'm working on it."

MICHAEL

Michael knew Teo had expected him to get all flustered by that question, but he was a man who knew what he wanted and went for it. He hadn't been sure Teo was single, but the hopeful look he masked with a smirk was indication enough that he was both available and interested. He would have to buy something special for the girls because he couldn't have done better if he had set that up himself.

He knew without a doubt that Teo wasn't a stop along the way for him; he was the bloody destination. He definitely didn't look like the kind of guy who did one-night stands and casual dating, and somehow, Michael was okay with that.

There was still the lingering guilt because of Sierra, but he knew that this was his second chance at a family, with a partner he didn't have to settle for. He knew that Teo was the real deal when there wasn't even a moment of him comparing the other man to his late wife. Teo looked like the first ray of sunshine after years of cloudy days. The man exuded light, and Michael realized that was what had been missing from his life for the longest time. He wasn't sure if it had gotten buried in the grief and the guilt, but he was just happy to feel it again.

At least Michael knew that Marlowe approved of Teo, and her maybe having two daddies. If it were any other child, he might have taken the time to explain it to her, but he garnered that she had been introduced to Samantha and Emma's daddies. Hence the curiosity, he was sure. All he had to do was find a way to spend more time

with Teo today. He knew it was daddy/daughter day. But somehow, Michael knew his daughter wouldn't object to having her precious Julien around with them for the day. It seemed his daughter was enthralled. She had been peppering the poor guy with questions. Although, Teo didn't seem to mind as he patiently answered all of them, even after he was done signing the mountain of books she had brought.

Michael could see that Teo's nieces loved him. It was in the way they asked him questions and how he teased them. You couldn't fake that with children. They would blow your cover if they didn't like you. He just needed to find a way to get the man out of the public setting into somewhere more private. Because before the end of today, he was going to have a date with Teo—that was non-negotiable.

For the first time since burying his wife, Michael could see himself finally settling down in a relationship. It definitely wasn't something he'd thought about before meeting Teo. A grin spread across his face, and he realized he wasn't just content with his life anymore. He wasn't just waiting out his days. He was back in the mix, and he was ready to live again. And hopefully love again.

Before he could even ask Teo to join him and Marlowe for lunch or something along those lines, the guys he had met with Teo earlier joined them where they stood. Tristan, he remembered the handsy one's name, looked at Teo and said, "Tee, have you invited your friends for the barbecue over at our place?" Before Teo even had a chance to answer, the guy looked at Michael and said, "We are all going back to my house to celebrate Teo's success. I know it seems ridiculous celebrating a charity event, but this is a huge step for him. It's also his first public appearance. You and your daughter should come."

Michael couldn't help but notice how the man couldn't seem to keep his hands off his partner. Even in the presence of a total stranger. He was still holding on to his boyfriend like they were attached at the hip. It was nothing over the top, just a connection to each other. He had noticed the same behavior earlier.

He was surprised by the curl of envy forming. Michael didn't do jealous; he could honestly not remember a time in his life when he

was jealous of anyone. And suddenly, he was jealous of the intimacy between these two men. He didn't know their story, but you could see how in love they were. It wasn't even in the way Tristan held his boyfriend's hands; it was in the synchronicity of their bodies. It was like one person moved and the other moved with him. It was a beautiful sight.

He'd loved Sierra with everything in him, and sure, like any other couple, they had their issues. But he tried to remember a time when they had been perfectly in sync. Maybe time had dulled the memories, but for the life of him, he didn't think they ever had been. They had been happy, and their lives had been full. But could he truly say that he couldn't live without her? Well, the past few years were proof that he could. He would never, ever negate the feelings he had, but they had been so young when they'd met he had to wonder if they would have grown and lasted over the years.

He put those thoughts on the back burner, and focused on the invitation from Teo's friends. Michael had no intention of declining, but he would never drag his daughter anywhere she didn't want to go. "Marlowe, sweetie, how about it? Would you like to spend the rest of the day with your new friends?"

"Yes, Daddy, that sounds awesome. Samantha and Emma said that sometimes Teo... did you know that is Julien's real name? Well, Teo lets them paint on canvas, like real artists. Can we do that, please?"

Michael laughed at the excitement from his usually quiet daughter. It wasn't that she didn't have friends, but most of the kids she knew were so serious he was sure it had more to do with overeager parents overscheduling their kids. But it meant there weren't a lot of playdates in Marlowe's life. He could see why she didn't even mind that she was older than the other kids. Not that you could tell with the way they were getting along.

He looked at Teo who had stayed silent all through the invitation. As much as he wanted to spend time with the man, he wouldn't force himself on him. If Teo gave any indication of being uncomfortable, Michael would back off. He didn't want the man to feel pressured or uncomfortable. That wasn't what this was about.

Teo must have been looking at him waiting for his answer too. When Michael said yes, he could have sworn the other man let out a relieved breath. But maybe that was just wishful thinking on his part.

"Awesome," Tristan replied. "If you give Teo your number, he'll text you the address. We can all leave together, but just in case we get separated on the way. Right, Tee?"

If looks could kill, Teo's brother would have been six feet under, but Michael didn't hate the pink staining Teo's cheeks. He minded even less when Teo walked up to him close enough to touch to get his phone. Again, maybe it was his imagination, but did the man come a little too close? And did Michael just see Teo draw in a deep breath like he was taking in Michael's scent?

Michael should have been disturbed by that, but he honestly wasn't. Instead, his body reacted with a jolt, hardening so fast it was almost painful. He closed his eyes for a long moment, trying to center himself. When he opened them, it was to see Teo still standing where he was... those lush, kissable, pink lips so close.

Fuck, he needed a taste. Just one taste, but with this being Teo's event, he didn't want to draw unnecessary attention to them. But Michael couldn't help himself when Teo stepped even closer. The bulge he felt standing this close had him reconsidering his earlier decision. Teo's hard cock grazing his almost had him losing his resolve, but he held firm. He said in a low voice, for just Teo's ears, "Later. I promise you we'll finish this later."

Michael took a deep breath too, taking in the younger man's scent, saying, "You smell delicious too." Before stepping back and giving him a wink.

When Teo stepped away, it was like a spell was broken and Michael could suddenly hear the other sounds in the room. Teo handed the phone back to Michael with a dazed look in his eyes. He was about to remind him to put the address in his phone when Lain materialized out of nowhere.

"Tristan said you're coming for the barbecue at his house. Awesome. Well, Tee can ride with you. I have a few things to handle here before I leave. Oh, and they said I should tell you your daughter is riding with them. If that's okay with you, of course. Don't worry.

They have an extra booster seat, for when they take the kids and their friends out.”

Michael didn't even get a chance to reply before Lain disappeared as quickly as he had appeared.

TEO

Teo would kill his friends the first chance he got. Okay sure, so they got him riding in the car with Michael for some private grown-up time, but fuck, they had no subtlety. Why not just put a sign on his forehead that said, “Open for business?” Fucking assholes. He could just kiss them.

Shit! He was a sucker for a man who smelled good. And Michael smelled fucking awesome, clean, but with a hint of musk and sandalwood, leaving Teo with the urge to cuddle up in those arms, block out the world, and forget about everything else in existence, but this moment. He thought he was subtle when he took in the man's scent, but apparently, he wasn't. It was a good thing Michael didn't think he was a weirdo for sniffing him. There would have been no coming back from that.

Michael was a man, in every sense of the word, and was ticking all of Teo's boxes. He was smart, clearly. Ri had spouted all his qualifications to him. Successful, responsible. He looked like he was a good father. He had that “confidence in his masculinity without being brutish” thing down pat. He was a grown-up, and what was sexier than a man who had his act together?

He was everything Teo wanted, so it was also wonderful to know that Michael had popped wood for him. He knew sexuality was fluid and that Michael would likely fall into the bi box, going off his previous marriage. But he assumed that he was Michael's first walk on the cock side, and he wouldn't lie that had him worried. He didn't want to be the man's experiment before he found another woman to

settle down with. He knew he was probably already infatuated with Michael—falling in love would be easy.

It would destroy him if he fell in love with Michael only to be cast aside because he didn't have the “right parts.” He was already in deep. Teo knew he had to be careful because he couldn't give the man the power to hurt him until he knew it would never be used.

“So, should we leave, or did you want to say goodbye to some people?” Michael asked.

“No, we can leave. I already made the rounds at the beginning. The rest is up to Lain,” Teo replied and started walking towards the exit, knowing Michael would follow.

Teo had to have words with his fucking dick. He was still half aroused from simply being in the same space as Michael. That just wouldn't do. Teo was a grown man. He couldn't be walking around with a stiffy all day.

He cursed his friends again for this. He found himself wishing Cris was around because he knew that his friend would have made sure Teo was okay with being left alone to ride with Michael. Not that Teo should be thinking about riding and Michael in the same sentence. Cris had called at the last minute, saying he was going out of town with his boyfriend. He'd been seeing the guy for almost nine months, but somehow, none of them had met him. That was unheard of with their group. To be honest, Teo found it all very suspicious, especially because every time they set something up to meet the guy, he was mysteriously out of town or running so late that he canceled.

“Do you want to wait while I get the car, or would you rather we walked over to where I parked?” Michael asked, interrupting Teo's mental murder of all his friends.

“Of course, I'll walk with you. Why would you even ask that?” he replied, looking strangely at the other man.

Michael laughed awkwardly. “Guess I'm just used to my dates wearing heels and not wanting to walk far.”

Teo couldn't even appreciate being called Michael's date as he took in everything the man had just said and stopped dead. He needed to be up front about this. There could be no beating around the bush for this situation. Michael needed to know that he was

dating/seeing/walking, or whatever the hell they were doing, with another man.

“Look, if this is weird for you, I have a room inside I can wait in till Lain is done. Or I could just call an Uber.”

Michael looked at him quizzically, clearly unaware of what he said that might have upset Teo. Even though it wasn't intentional, he knew it wasn't something he could let slip without addressing. Teo was sure that Michael hadn't meant anything by it, but they both needed to have their cards on the table.

Teo needed to make sure that Michael knew what he was getting into, that he was dating Teo, because he was Teo, not just because he was his daughter's favorite children's author, or because he suddenly felt like experimenting.

He also needed to make sure he would not become the man's dirty secret. He wasn't about that life. No man was worth that. Never again.

He looked around before pulling Michael into a corner and, in a low voice that nobody but him could hear—he hoped, said,

“In case you haven't noticed, I'm a man. Penis and all. If you're going to gloss over that fact, this won't work. Sure, there are times I like the door opened for me, but that's gentlemanly and just good manners. It doesn't make me weak, or a woman in this thing between us.” He took a deep breath before carrying on, “Also, I noticed you took a step back when we almost kissed earlier. I guess, okay, fine, your daughter was there, and this is barely started, but if you can't kiss me in public or hold my hand, then this isn't going to work.”

He found himself holding his breath, waiting for Michael's reaction. These were things he wouldn't budge on. Still, he wanted the man. But more than that, he wanted the man to be okay with him.

He wasn't sure what to expect, but he certainly hadn't expected Michael to drag him into his body, every part of them touching. He definitely wasn't expecting the kiss the man planted on him.

He gasped as Michael's lips made contact with his, a deep moan rumbling in his chest. It felt so good to kiss him. He knew this was where things between them had been leading. The attraction and

chemistry. This step was inevitable. But it was the time and place that made it seem even more perfect. Sure, he had pulled them aside, but anyone walking by could spot them, and Teo knew that some of the people at the event were Michael's peers.

Teo heard the man loud and clear. He was reassuring Teo that he was safe. His heart swelled almost painfully. God, he hoped he was right. He hoped everything would be okay. He hoped for happily ever after.

Michael pressed up against him, the warmth of his body seeping deep into his bones. Almost like he was trying to eradicate every doubt Teo had. It was working. Damn his gullible heart... but it was working.

Michael pressed him up against the wall. Putting his hands on either side of Teo's head, holding him in place. If he hadn't guessed yet Teo wasn't going anywhere. He was exactly where he was supposed to be right now. Michael nibbled on his lower lip, coercing Teo's mouth open. Teo used his free hands to pull Michael's hips into his, his stomach swooping as he felt the erection stirring in Michael's pants brushing his, making him moan.

Thankfully one of them had some self-control. Because Michael stopped the kiss, looked him in the eyes. "I am not a child trying to find myself. I know my feelings, and I know what they mean. I acted out of habit, not malice. It will probably happen again. Give me a second to catch up, okay? And please feel free to call me on it. I really want to see where this thing between us goes, and I definitely don't want to mess it up because of a stupid mistake like that. Forgive me?"

Teo nodded without saying a word before planting a quick kiss on Michael's lips again.

"Oh, and I will kiss you anytime and anywhere. I could never make you a dirty little secret. Although, I do hope we have *some* dirty secrets between us," Michael added before taking Teo's hand and leading him down the stairs towards the parking lot.

MICHAEL

Michael hadn't meant to fuck Teo, practically in public, but the man should have come with a warning sign. The moment his lips had touched Teo's, he'd known he was a goner. Teo didn't know it yet, but Michael didn't have an impulsive bone in his body. Yeah, sure, Michael hadn't known the man wasn't single before today, but there was always a part of him that had hoped he was and had prepared for this outcome.

What were the odds he would run into Teo today? Michael had woken this morning, berating himself for lusting after a married man. But finally, fate was smiling down on him. Teo *wasn't* married. He would take it, and he promised himself never to take this man for granted. Because he knew how hard it was to find someone that you simply fit with.

And that was how it felt. Like a puzzle piece had been missing and someone finally slotted it back into place. It wasn't anything as trite as love at first sight. No, he wasn't quite in love with the man yet. But he knew he could be. He knew the groundwork had been set already by some higher universal power.

Right now, it was lust mixed with a crazy sense of chemistry and fascination. Michael wanted to know everything there was to know about the man. He wanted to know how Teo liked his eggs in the morning. Did he sleep on the right side of the bed or the left? Was he cranky before coffee, or did he wake up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed? Did he have a favorite flower?

Michael might not have known much about dating a guy, but the basics had to be the same— Pay attention to what your partner wants and says. Do your best to make them happy and never ever intentionally hurt them—The rest he could figure out.

He knew once today with Teo and his family ended, he needed a Reid day. He needed to ask his best friend all there was to know about gay dating. Was he even supposed to call it gay dating?

The memory of that kiss had him hard and aching in no time flat. Not that his dick had ever fully gone down. Michael wanted to do it again and again. His skin tingled at the thought of getting to touch Teo again. He wanted to kiss him until they were both breathless and panting with need. He wanted the man naked and begging.

His mind couldn't help but wonder how Teo would feel under him, what it would feel like to explore that long, lithe body. He knew that Teo was more than he deserved, but by some miracle, the younger man wanted him too.

Michael looked over at Teo sitting in the passenger's seat; it was quiet in the car, but not the awkward silence that you sometimes had on first dates. No, this was the comfortable silence people searched for and sometimes never found. He had always said that the way to know if you were compatible with someone was to see how you fared in silence. If it was awkward and one person did their best to fill in the silence, then he felt like you probably shouldn't spend a lifetime together.

It sounded basic, but he believed it completely. He knew this had nothing to do with being lonely. Because he knew you could be with someone and still feel lonely. No, this was something completely different. This was finding *magic*.

Michael imagined how this beautiful man would fit into his life, and not just his but his children's lives too. He hoped the older kids warmed up to him because there was a part of him that feared he wouldn't be able to give the man up. What kind of father did that make him?

No, Michael. No guilt today, not when you're with this man. Save that for the four walls of your bedroom.

"So," he said, breaking the silence.

Teo looked over at him and smiled. Michael hated to admit it, but his heart skipped a beat like some high schooler in the middle of his first crush.

“So?” Teo replied.

Michael wasn't sure what he was supposed to lead with, so he went for the first thing that came to his mind.

“I'm guessing that since you're not married, then Mariana isn't your wife and Preston isn't your last name.”

Teo laughed, making a sound that sounded like a snort. Michael found it so adorable. He found everything the man did adorable. He was such a goner.

“Not my wife. Never my wife. She's my sister. Her husband is out of the country, and my parents are traveling before grandchild number four arrives. Well, and their anniversary. It's their thirty-fourth or thirty-fifth. I always forget.”

“That's awesome your parents are still together.”

“Still together and disgustingly in love. They're sickeningly cute,” Teo said jokingly. “What about your parents? Are they still together?”

“My parents passed away when I was twenty-seven. The year after I got married.”

“I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to bring up painful memories,” Teo replied, looking sad.

God, the man had such a beautiful heart. Teo barely knew him, but he looked distressed for bringing up what he thought were painful memories. Michael put him at ease immediately, “It was fifteen years ago. I miss them dearly, but I've learned to live with it.”

It seemed to pacify Teo, but he still changed topics.

“So, you're forty-two. Damn, Doc, you look way younger. I pegged you for mid- to late thirties at most.”

Michael smiled at the compliment, preening inwardly. He wanted the younger man to find him attractive. If he thought he looked younger, even better.

“Nope. Forty-two with three kids.”

Michael decided to put that out there now. He needed to know how Teo felt about him having more kids besides Marlowe. He knew one was okay for most people, but three could be more than Teo bargained for. Especially when you added teenagers to the mix.

“Three? That's awesome. How old are they?”

Michael released the breath he hadn't even been aware he was holding. At least he wasn't running away screaming—that was a good sign “Well, you've met Marlowe, she's the baby. She's seven going on seventy some days. Then there's the older two Luc and Reagan. They're fifteen and fourteen respectively. They're typical teenagers. They think their dad is the most uncool person in the world.”

“Didn't we all think our parents were uncool at some point? I'm sure they adore you. Marlowe clearly does.”

Michael could hear the smile in Teo's voice and took his eyes off the road to take in the other man. Michael couldn't tell how Teo felt about kids one way or another. It didn't sound like he hated them, so that was a good sign. Awesome could just mean it was awesome for Michael that he had kids. Was it too soon to ask him how he felt about kids?

That brought up the question of more kids. Teo was still young, and he clearly adored his nieces. Would he want kids of his own? Did Michael even want more kids? Those were questions he needed to think about.

He looked over at Teo. The man had a questioning look on his face. “Sorry, I didn't catch what you said. Do you mind repeating that?”

“Oh. I just said I can't wait to meet them,” Teo replied with a blush. Before stammering, “N-not that you have t-to introduce me. We only just met, and we haven't even been on a date yet. Not that I think we will go on one. I mean, this isn't a date, right?”

Michael would have laughed if the poor guy didn't look mortified. He thought it was very cute and endearing, Teo getting flustered. Not one to waste an opportunity, he jumped on the opening he was being given.

“Trust me, this isn't a date. A date would be me picking you up, taking you out to dinner and maybe a movie. Or maybe to a gallery, since you're an artist. Then dropping you off at your front door with a kiss, and requesting a second date. What do you think?”

Teo stammered, and his face got even redder. “I th-think that s-sounds lovely.”

"I guess it's a date then. Me and you, dinner, tomorrow."

Michael couldn't help but catch the smile on Teo's face before he pretended to scowl, saying, "Smooth, Doc. But you still have to ask."

Michael liked the easy back-and-forth between them and that Teo was already comfortable enough to tease him.

He laughed before he took his eyes off the road quickly. Finally, LA traffic was good for something. "Teo, will you please do me the honor of going to dinner with me tomorrow at eight?"

He didn't have to be looking at the other man to hear the pleasure in his voice when he replied in a soft voice, "I would very much love to, Michael."

Fuck! Teo shouldn't say his name in that voice. It brought up visions of them naked and sweaty between the sheets. Tomorrow felt like eons away. He never wanted to let this man, who did crazy things to him, out of his orbit. He didn't want to lose this feeling. It was like his blood was fizzing he was so excited.

Michael didn't want to sound cliché, but it was better than the first time because this time he was older and wiser, and if he got to keep this man, he would never take him for granted.

TEO

*I*t was a study in self-control sitting in this car surrounded by Michael's tempting scent. Teo was so turned on he could burst with it.

He felt like every nerve ending in his body was alive and just one touch would send him over the edge. He knew it was a combination of Dr. Delicious and his extended time without getting any.

He hoped he hadn't made a fool of himself. Michael didn't know it yet, but the fact that he had kids made him infinitely more appealing to Teo. He even loved Michael's age. He wouldn't generalize and say older men were more stable, because some of them acted their shoe size and not their age, but this older man was ticking all Teo's boxes and even some he didn't know he had.

They finally got to Tris and Nathaniel's house. When they parked in the driveway, Michael switched off the car and got out. Teo took a moment to center himself and adjust his hard-on while telling it sternly to behave. Somehow in the process of catching his breath, getting ready for more time around Michael and what he did to Teo's emotions and equilibrium, he missed Michael coming around the front of the car and opening the door for him. Teo was charmed by it. He was charmed by the man. He could tell he wasn't doing it to score points; it was simply second nature, and that made it even better.

He got out of the car, taking the hand Michael held out for him. He thought Michael would let go once he was out of the car, but he

held on. He didn't let go. If this was a musical, this would be the part Teo burst spontaneously into song from how happy he was.

The front door of Tristan's house was open as expected, not that Teo didn't have a key. They walked into a quiet house. Teo knew everyone would be out back, since the guys had told him it was a pool party slash barbecue.

He fully expected Michael to give his hand back before anyone in his family or Michael's daughter spotted them, but apparently, he was wrong.

Before he even knew what was happening, Michael had him pinned up against the wall in the hallway leading to the kitchen and the backyard. The man was ravishing his mouth like he was a starving man and Teo was his next meal. Not that he was complaining.

He leaned into Michael, deepening the kiss. Teo was five seconds away from jumping and wrapping his legs around the man. It looked like he could handle it, and Teo loved to be fucked in that position. Not that they were there yet—but a guy could dream. Before he even got that far, he heard a throat being cleared behind him. He didn't even need to look to see who it was. There was only one person who would see them and stop to tease him instead of walking away.

Tristan didn't do subtle, especially not with the opportunity to tease Teo. He was a typical brother in that sense. Not that Teo didn't do the same to him given half a chance.

Teo buried his face in Michael's shirt and groaned because he knew what was coming. Tristan was finally getting him back for teaching the girls to sing, "Daddy and Papa sitting in a tree k-i-s-s-i-n-g." Teo had thought it was hilarious and hadn't taken into account how literal kids could be. It was driving Tristan up the wall because whenever he went in to kiss Nathaniel, even casually, the girls did the song.

The asshole started, "Teo and Michael sitting in a..." Before Tristan could finish, Teo stopped him. He didn't need Michael to see that his family was just this side of sane. That could come after, when he was in too deep that he couldn't leave. Teo mused letting his inner crazy speak for a second.

He looked up at Michael when he felt his chest moving against his face. The man was laughing. Thank fuck he found it funny. Teo was well aware of the age gap between them, and he didn't want the older man thinking they were juvenile.

"I'm glad you find this funny," he said to Michael, knowing the man would hear him. They were so close a piece of paper wouldn't even fit between them.

"It's adorable. I never had any siblings. I imagine this is what it would have been like. Then again, I do have Reid. It's definitely something he would do."

Teo groaned, "Yeah, when you were sixteen maybe."

Tristan chimed in, talking to Michael, "Glad to see you don't waste any time, Doc. Thought you were going to bite my head off when you walked in and saw me holding on to that one. Welcome to the family."

Holy fuck! Could Tristan be any more embarrassing? Teo hadn't even gone out on a date with the guy, and he was being welcomed into the family. He was going to think they were crazy. If there was a God, he would give Teo a natural disaster to save him from this situation. All he needed was a small earthquake and maybe a sinkhole he could jump into.

He realized Michael was replying Tristan, "I had half a mind to. But you could have been his boyfriend for all I knew."

"Don't worry, Doc. He's all yours. But I will be calling you Dr. Banner from time to time. Because you were totally channeling the green-eyed monster."

Michael laughed heartily. "Guess I don't like other people touching what's mine. Typical only child. I don't share."

Teo could feel the blush coming on, but for once, he didn't care. Michael had just staked his claim in front of one of the most important people in Teo's life. Could this day have gotten any better?

Teo looked up at Michael and saw him staring intently at him. If the man was worried he would get upset about him going caveman before their first date, then he shouldn't bother. He would hear no complaints from Teo.

He smiled at Michael and buried his face in his chest again, breathing him in. He knew that given half a chance, it would become

his favorite smell in the world.

Tristan saw the blush and smiled while teasing him, "Tomato much, Tee."

"Oh. Shut up and go find your fiancé. Let him muzzle you," he sniped good-naturedly at Tris, who laughed and walked towards the kitchen.

Teo stepped away from Michael regretfully. "We should probably go join them, or Tris may send the girls as a search party. Plus, we should make sure Marlowe is okay, yes?"

Michael smiled at him before nodding and replying, "Lead the way."

As he led Michael farther into the house, he made a mental note to ask who Reid was. He hoped it wasn't someone he had to worry about.

MICHAEL

Michael wasn't sure where his behavior was coming from, but he wasn't complaining. He wanted more than his hands all over Teo. He had never been a fan of PDAs, but now he could see the appeal. Not that he wanted to maul the poor guy in public randomly. Although, it didn't look like he would mind.

With Teo walking in front of him, Michael took his time taking in his body. Teo wasn't overly broad or muscular. He was just long and lithe, and Michael couldn't help but appreciate the way he moved.

Teo was wearing just plain jeans and a lovely casual shirt, but as he walked, Michael took in the light sway in those hips. He would be a liar if he said he didn't notice the way Teo's jeans hugged his plump, pert ass. And what an ass it was. *Fuck!* Michael couldn't let his mind wander to what that ass would look like without the jeans on.

Michael found himself also thinking about what was under those jeans. He had never considered male underwear sexy before. But he was suddenly imagining Teo in some gorgeous red jockstrap. That ass on display for him.

He must have been lost in fantasyland because he missed Teo stopping and walked right into him. Before he had a chance to apologize, Teo was teasing him, "Now, Doc, is that a thermometer, or are you just happy to see me?"

Michael couldn't stop himself. He laughed one of those deep belly laughs. This man was good for his soul. It might not have been

funny to some, but he hadn't had that kind of banter and teasing in his life for a long time.

"I have a feeling I'll always be happy to see you," he murmured into Teo's ear. He blew a light breath at the nape of his neck, delighting in the goose bumps that raised on Teo's skin and the shiver he couldn't suppress.

It did things to him, seeing how he affected Teo. Fuck!

Teo tilted his head, looking back at him and offered a small smile. Michael could see Teo liked how much he was affected by him too.

"So, what has you all hot and bothered, Doc? See something you like?" Teo asked while backing himself into Michael's cock and grinding that grabbable ass on him, doing nothing to help with quelling his raging hard-on.

Before Michael could reply, his daughter and her two new friends came running into the kitchen. Nothing killed an erection faster than his daughter running towards him for a hug. He would have laughed at the speed with which Teo put space between them, but he found he didn't like it. Granted, it was too new to share with his seven-year-old. He appreciated Teo getting that, but still, he found he wasn't a fan.

"What took you so long, Daddy? We got here *ages* ago," his daughter asked, looking up at him after stepping out of their hug.

"Oh, honey, uhh... Teo and I... Me and Teo... Well, we had grown up stuff to talk about." His daughter nodded like what he said made complete sense. But Michael didn't miss the snort and laughter from Tristan as he walked into the kitchen with an empty tray in his hands.

"And did you guys have a nice talk?" Tris asked with a knowing grin on his face.

Michael laughed but replied deadpan, "We had a lovely chat. Thanks for asking."

Tristan played along, "Maybe Nathaniel and I should go have a quick chat too."

The blond guy, Nathaniel, grabbed Tristan around the waist and planted a kiss on his cheek before letting him go and walking over to help the girls with the trays of desserts they must have come in to grab. "Stop teasing them, babe, before Teo dies of mortification."

He looked over at Teo in alarm. He thought it was funny, but he didn't think to check if Teo had a problem with them almost being caught. Michael breathed a sigh of relief to see Teo blushing deeply but with a smile on his face.

Teo, apparently, wouldn't be letting Tristan have the last word, because he walked towards the counter and picked up a tray of some fancy-looking dessert. Then, as he sauntered towards the double doors leading to the back of the house where a few people seemed to have gathered, he dropped his parting shot. "I seem to recall you and Nathaniel 'chatting' heatedly in my guest bathroom two weeks ago. If I remember correctly, we had to keep the kids outside while you *chatted* rather *noisily*."

Michael laughed out loud. He loved seeing the different sides of Teo, and it seemed his personality really came out around his family. He could tell they were very close, and if he wanted to be a part of Teo's life, Michael would have to find common ground with them. He liked what he had seen so far.

He stepped outside and saw Teo sitting with his sister, Mariana. At least he could say he knew someone at the party, even if he was more familiar with her cervix than her personally.

"Good to see you, Dr. Ashworth, but I guess I should call you Michael if you're going to hanging around these parts," she said to him as he walked around to take the seat next to Teo.

"Michael is fine, Mariana." He added with a smile, "Especially because I do hope to be hanging around these parts."

He hoped she heard the reassurance he was trying to give her. Michael was waiting for the "If you hurt my brother" talk he was sure would be coming very soon. They seemed like the kind of family who would give that warning for one of their own.

He sat back and just took in what was going on around him. He saw Marlowe, Samantha, and Emma wading in the shallow end of the pool while a vigilant Tristan stood watch.

Someone sat down beside him. He looked to his left and saw Nathaniel with a drink in both hands. He handed one to Michael. "They're a very tight group," the man said, "but once they let you in, you're stuck with them."

He nodded. "I kinda picked up on that. Are Tristan and Teo stepbrothers? I was going to ask him, but I haven't had a chance."

Nathaniel looked over at his fiancé, and Michael had to look away. He felt like he was intruding with the look in the other man's eyes. The only thing he could think of to call it was devotion. Pure and simple. And there was a little hint of awe in there too. Michael wondered what it would feel like to have such a look directed at him.

"They're not related by blood, but they consider themselves brothers. You should ask Teo. I'm sure he'll tell you the story."

Michael nodded. He could respect that. Plus, he could tell Nathaniel wasn't the chatty type. He felt like he had seen the man before, even though he couldn't place him.

"Have we met?" Michael asked Nathaniel.

"I don't think so," Nathaniel replied, albeit with a baffled look on his face.

"I'm very good with faces, and I could swear I've seen yours before."

Nathaniel shook his head. "No, I don't think we've met."

Teo must have been listening in on their conversation because he chimed in, "Nathaniel is too modest. He owns the company Rytech Inc.; they went public earlier in the year. He made the Forbes list and was named as one of Time's people of the year."

Michael realized that was it. He'd read the profile on Nathaniel Alexander. He'd been called the Steve Jobs of his generation. He hadn't expected the man to be so unassuming.

Tristan joined them at the table with three, dripping wet from the pool, happy, and he was sure hungry, little girls. They all took their seats while Tristan helped fill their plates from the vast options laid out on the table. As he was serving them, Tristan paused, looking at Nathaniel before briefly adding, "My man is a real-life genius. He's just too modest to say so."

Michael could tell Nathaniel didn't love being the focus of all the attention and praise. Luckily he was saved by Marlowe. "Like me. I'm a genius too," his daughter added matter-of-factly.

"Yes, you are, sweetie."

Michael loved how comfortable Marlowe seemed to be. She was usually shy and would be sitting next to him, but she barely paid him

any attention.

She went back to whatever conversation five-year-olds and a seven-year-old had while Michael dug into his meal, taking in the conversation around him. He couldn't help the small smile that came on his face when Teo's hand slid into his while talking to his family.

TEO

Teo wasn't sure what was happening, but he was very happy that it was. He'd had an internal debate with himself before taking Michael's hand in his. His heart melted when the man squeezed back in acknowledgment. He didn't think of himself as a clingy guy. Quite frankly, after his college relationship had crashed and burned, he was so careful sometimes he came across as cold. But somehow, in a couple of hours, Michael had slid past whatever defenses he had erected.

Before Michael had joined them, Mariana had told Teo she approved of the doable doc, and hoped he finally got the forever man he'd been searching for. His sister knew him too well. Even though he had done the whole song and dance of being happy single, she knew he wanted someone who would be his. He wanted someone who saw all the slightly dented parts of him and thought he was perfect anyway.

Still, she had to be Mariana and say, "He's so yummy! 'Bout time you got laid, little bro. Don't wait. Jump his bones. If I was single and he was into me, he'd have me flat on my back in no time at all."

Sigh. Why couldn't he have had a sane family?

Maybe he should go on the first date before he started picking out wedding tuxedos. Black for Michael, of course. White for him. Not that he had thought about it. Nope, he hadn't thought about the mix of contemporary and traditional for the reception. None of it had crossed his mind. Because that would be crazy, since they hadn't even been on a first date. Then again, he'd met Teo's family, and

they seemed to like him. He was sure he would hear all about it once Michael left.

Teo had also met Marlowe, who seemed to like him. That was one down, two to go. Teo hoped Michael's older kids would like him as well because his heart felt a strong pull towards Michael, and he wasn't ready to walk away. He didn't think it was possible for him at this point.

He was interrupted from his thoughts of happily ever afters by Samantha and Emma chanting his name. They must have gotten some sodas while their dads weren't paying attention, or Ri snuck them some. She did that sometimes because Nathaniel got superstrict about their diets—especially Emma's.

Emma spoke for both of them when they finally got his attention. “Uncle Teo, our new friend, Marlowe, saw the painting you did on the wall in our room, and she said she wants one too.”

Marlowe spoke up too, but to her dad, “Yes, Daddy, can I have one, please? It's Julien and Duke and all their friends in Worsley Woods, and you can see Ellesmere Castle too. Can I have one, pleeeeeeease?”

Teo looked over at Michael to see the man was tongue-tied for what felt like the first time. He clearly didn't know how to answer his daughter, especially after his nieces had said the drawing was done by Teo. Teo wasn't sure what to say either... was he supposed to volunteer?

As he was about to stammer an answer out, Ri, ever the helpful one, said, “I'm sure Teo wouldn't mind doing a painting for you too, sweetie. *Would* you, Tee?” In a none-too-subtle voice, just high enough for Michael to hear, she added, “You know, at the hot doctor's house, where he has his *bed* and other *flat* surfaces.”

If Teo could have died of mortification, he would have at this point. His sister was basically trying to pimp him out. She was making him look like a dateless loser in front of Michael. Was there a “trade in your sister” option? Because he was so ready to use his.

Instead of responding to his sister, he addressed his answer to Marlowe while still asking permission from Michael, “If it's okay with your dad, I would love to do a special mural for you, too.”

“Daddy?” Marlowe said in a voice that sounded less like asking and more like a prompt to give the correct answer. Michael replied in the affirmative to Marlowe. While whispering in an aside for Teo’s ears only, “I can’t wait to have you at my house.”

Teo glanced over at Michael, spotting the wicked grin on a face full of heat and promise of naughty deeds to come, and he shivered in delight. Teo had a feeling he would be taking his sister’s advice and ditching his waiting rule. Who needed to wait when you had all that smoldering intent directed at you?

The barbecue went as it usually did. Lain came through at some point, sitting down and eating like he hadn’t been fed in a year. Honestly, his friend needed to learn how to cook. He lived on takeout, family dinners, or showing up at one of their houses for food—not that they minded. They all knew the guy could afford a chef, so the fact he didn’t get one they took to mean he preferred coming to one of their houses instead. Teo suspected Lain just liked being around them, not that he would admit it. Lain would never say those words. He wasn’t the open-up-and-share type.

Everyone caught up on each other’s week, while the kids played on the swings and the play yard Tristan and Nathaniel had installed recently. There were only two grown-up swings, and that seemed to cause a little argument between the girls with three of them playing but was swiftly refereed before it turned into a thing.

Before he knew it, Michael sighed regretfully and said it was time for them to be leaving.

Marlowe seemed not to be on board with that and was about to throw a full tantrum. Tristan stepped in and mentioned inviting her for a playdate with the girls in a couple of days if it was okay with Michael. Since it was the summer holidays, the kids’ schedules were flexible.

Teo walked Michael and Marlowe out and stayed with his back leaning against the car and his arms crossed over his chest, biting his lips nervously while Michael settled Marlowe into her seat and watched as she put on her seatbelt.

Michael shut the door to the passenger’s side. He walked to where Teo stood leaning against the car on the driver’s side. For the first time since they had kissed, Teo started feeling awkward again.

They stood staring at one another, and Teo felt the blush climbing from his neck to his cheeks yet again.

"I enjoyed today. Thank you for inviting me along," Michael said, standing just close enough without their bodies actually touching.

"Well, technically, I didn't invite you. My nosy family did," Teo said lightly, tucking his hands into his pockets. He felt like a teenager after his first date. He wasn't sure what to say or do next. Did he give Michael a hug? Was he allowed to touch him with his daughter just a few feet away? What were the rules?

Michael laughed and stepped a little closer, still not touching Teo, but tempting him with his proximity. "Are you saying you didn't want me here?"

"That's not what I said," Teo replied. Somehow them whispering without touching heightened his awareness of Michael. His body was begging for some contact.

"They seem great. But I don't want to talk about them. I'm looking forward to tomorrow night," Michael replied.

Teo couldn't help the smile that appeared on his face. "Me too." He sighed. "I put my number in your phone earlier, you know, so you can call me or text me or whatever. Like, if you need directions or something."

Teo realized he was rambling and quickly shut his mouth. Michael stepped back without replying, and Teo stepped away from the car tracking Michael who stopped before opening his car door, turned, and gave Teo a quick wink, adding, "I'm sure I can find your house just fine, but how about a text just because, or don't you young people do that?"

Teo stared after him, feeling breathless. He watched as the car drove down the driveway until he couldn't see it anymore. Once he was sure Michael couldn't see him, he couldn't help but do a fist pump at the way the day had turned out.

MICHAEL

Michael woke up bright and early as usual. Well, early for a Sunday anyway. For the first time in over a week, since meeting Teo, he felt content and settled. Maybe it was finally knowing that he wasn't lusting over a married guy, or maybe it was just because he was looking forward to his date tonight.

Whatever it was, it had Michael feeling excited. The self-recriminations of the last few days were gone, anticipation taking its place.

He felt like he was on the brink of something life-changing. Before even getting out of bed, he picked up his phone to see if he had a text waiting for him from Teo. He'd texted him once he'd gotten home. Just to let him know he was home safe. It had just felt right letting Teo know.

The text waiting on his phone confirmed his thoughts.

Teo: I'm glad you're home safe. Even happier you sent a text to let me know. :)

Michael smiled at that. He was so looking forward to that date tonight.

Before he could even come up with a reply for Teo, his phone rang. The caller ID showed it was his best friend, Reid. He picked up the call, prepared to catch some shit from him. They'd made plans several times that Michael had to cancel.

"It's the first Raiders game of the preseason. Tell me you can make it," Reid said through the phone with no initial pleasantries.

Michael laughed at how predictable his best friend was. He should have been expecting this call, but somehow with everything going on, he'd forgotten that his team had their first game today.

"Hello, Reid. How are you? How are Alexis and Steven? Did you guys have a good summer vacation?"

His friend snorted before replying, "We had an awesome time. Thanks for asking. If you and the kids had come with us, you wouldn't have to. Now are you coming? You know Steven supports his team which shall not be named. And Alexis can't tell the difference between a quarterback and linebacker."

"Is Steven going to show up in full team colors rooting against us again?" Michael asked with mirth.

It was an ongoing joke that Reid had fallen for the enemy, and they both seemed to love to dress up in team colors when the others' team played. "You know he is. My competitive husband never misses an opportunity to root against my Raiders. He's lucky I love him," Reid said like a lovestruck puppy.

"Is that some kind of foreplay for you guys? Does all the back-and-forth get you going?" Michael asked.

"Well—" Reid started.

"You know what? Don't even answer that. I don't need to know how y'all get each other going."

"You sure, dude. I don't mind telling. Sometimes we..."

"Stop. Just no! But I could actually do with a football hangout," Michael said, swiftly moving on from what his best friend and his partners did in the privacy of their bedroom.

He could do with a day with his best friend, especially since his kids were spending the day with his Aunt Sally. She'd been the hippie, free spirit, fun, younger sister of his dad when he was growing up, and she hadn't changed much.

The kids actually loved days with her. She was the only version of a grandparent they had. Unlike Sierra's parents who they barely saw—not that he had any issues with that. She hadn't exactly been fond of them either.

He heard Reid reply, "Aunt Sally is in town? Oh my God, she was the best when we were kids. She totally let us use her house for some cool parties back in the day."

Michael smiled at the memory. "Those were good times. You know I'm sure our parents caught on after a while. How many teenage boys want to sleepover at their aunt's house that often?"

"I know, right. Good ol' days. So, are we seeing you? Steven wants to marinate the steaks and needs a headcount," Reid said.

"If Steven is cooking, count me in. Although I do have a date tonight, so I can't eat too much," Michael added.

"A date? Now that's a first. Who's this woman that's got you to go on an actual date?" Reid replied, surprise clearly evident in his voice.

His best friend had been trying to get him out on a date for the past few years. Alexis, his wife, had invited him to several dinner parties where he suddenly ended up sitting next to a friend of hers from work or college. Who knows, maybe if they had tried a guy friend, it would have turned out differently. Although, he doubted it. He had a feeling that Teo was the only person who could make him start living again.

He ignored Reid's question, knowing it would drive his friend crazy until he could get answers. It was something he used to do when they were teenagers and in college too. And the guy hadn't changed. Impatient as always.

He told him he would see him later in the day while Reid whined like a baby for him not to hang up.

Michael got off the phone and shot Teo a quick text.

Michael: Morning, angel. Hope you had good dreams. I know I did. Looking forward to tonight. I'll need your address to pick you up.

Before he could even get out of bed, a text came back almost immediately.

Teo: I could meet you at the restaurant. I don't mind.

That was quick. He liked that Teo was so eager to reply to his text.

Michael: Not sure what kind of dates you've been on, but when I take someone out, I pick them up at their door and drop them off, and hopefully there's a kiss somewhere in the mix.

He tried to imagine the look on Teo's face, and just the thought of the man put a huge grin on his own.

The smiley face in Teo's reply followed by his address showed he appreciated the move. Or that at least Michael was doing something

right.

Michael couldn't help the extra pep in his step when he got in the shower. Today was shaping up to be a great day.

He got through his morning routine with more excitement than he could recall in the past. He even planned his outfit for his date later that evening. He definitely had no intention of being late, and if some planning was what it took, then he was game.

He could honestly say he couldn't remember the last time he anticipated something so much. What did he even wear on a date? Did he call it a gay date? He was more than happy now that Reid had called. Maybe he actually did need some pointers. He definitely didn't want to screw things up. There was this feeling in his gut telling him that there was no room for error. Because this was important.

Maybe he could convince Reid, Steven, and Alexis to come home with him and rifle through his walk-in for something suitable. Who was he kidding? Once he mentioned it, they would invite themselves.

He decided to get ready and go to Reid's earlier than he planned. Michael felt like a teenager planning his date with the coolest kid at school. It was definitely a new feeling since growing up he'd been that kid.

He pulled out a pair of dark jeans that fit him perfectly and a black Henley and got ready as quickly as he could.

Michael went down to the kitchen and saw only one kid at the table. Reagan had her Kindle with her, and was reading and eating at the same time. It was nine am on a Sunday, and he was surprised to see any of the kids awake, if he was being honest. He was pretty sure their plans with his aunt weren't till later in the day.

He wasn't even sure if he should expect them back this evening. With Sally, a day out could end up with his kids in San Francisco for the day. He wasn't worried. Sally was one of the few people in the world he trusted implicitly when it came to the safety of his kids.

"Morning, honey. What's the plan with Aunt Sally today?" He kissed Reagan on the top of her head. He figured as it was a new day he hadn't done anything that could possibly annoy his hormonal

daughter. He was right because she actually looked away from her Kindle and smiled up at him before replying,

"Morning, Dad. Not sure. Aunt Sally said we'll see where the day takes us. Don't worry. She said to tell you she's not driving. She has Francis with her."

Michael had to snort at that. At sixty-six his aunt was perfectly capable of driving, but she drove like a crazy person. Even he didn't go that fast. It didn't help that she'd inherited some of her father's, his grandfather's, classic car collection and had also picked up a few herself over the years. Francis was her chauffeur, although she refused to call him that.

"That's good to know, sweetheart. But I know Aunt Sally is always careful with you guys."

"Nhmmm..."

He guessed his interaction with Reagan was done for the day.

"So, what are you doing today, Dad?"

Michael would have looked around if it weren't just the two of them in the kitchen.

"Wow. What did I do right to get some Reagan time?" Michael asked.

"Not funny, Dad. Just asking. You don't look dressed for work, sooooo what do you get up to while we are away?" Reagan asked with curiosity.

Michael wasn't sure what surprised him more, the conversation or the eye contact he was getting. What had gotten into his fourteen-year-old? Well, whatever it was, he would take advantage of it.

"I'm going to Uncle Reid's, honey. There's a game on, and Steven's cooking."

"Cool. I love Uncle Reid's house; it's always fun," Reagan replied. "Plus, I think it's so cool that he has two partners."

Michael had never asked, but he wondered if that was something she thought about.

"Is that something you think about, sweetie. Having two partners?" he tentatively asked his daughter, hoping it wouldn't upset her somehow. With teenagers, you never knew where the mines were, or when you'd step on one.

She didn't answer for a second, and Michael waited for the storming out or whatever may come. But none of that happened. Instead, she actually looked like she was thinking about her answer. He thought about adding he would be fine with it, but for one, he hoped she knew that, and for another, he didn't want to interrupt whatever she wanted to say.

She bit her lip nervously before replying, "Would you be mad if that happened?"

Michael felt like a failure in that moment. He thought he'd made it clear to his children that there was nothing they could do that would take away his love for them. He got up from where he was sitting opposite her and walked around, taking the seat next to her. She'd put her head down, probably thinking he was going to walk away or something.

He made sure to lift her chin so she was looking at him. "Reagan, sweetie, I don't care who you love, or how many there are. As long as it makes you happy. You're my daughter, I love you, and that will never change. As long as they're respectful and loving towards you, they're welcome in this family."

The look in his daughter's eyes nearly had his heart breaking. He saw relief there. What had he done to make her think that he would have an issue with any of it? His best friend was bi and in a long-term ménage relationship, for Christ's sake.

"Rea, honey, who you are, is my daughter. I love you. You're perfect, and if I've ever made you feel otherwise or not accepted, then I'm sorry."

"No, Dad, you haven't. It's just we never talked about it since I told you I was pan, and I thought maybe you were ashamed or embarrassed," Reagan replied.

"Never. Not for a second. Sweetie, it was never something I had to accept. It just is. The same way you are," he told his daughter.

"I love you, Daddy," Reagan replied, leaning into his chest.

Michael felt like he was ten feet tall. "Love you too, sweetie. Always."

She pulled out of the hug and wiped her eyes. Then went back to reading like nothing had happened. He smiled and got up to look for

something to eat for breakfast. He realized he'd just had a parenting win, and he couldn't wait to tell Teo about it.

Michael wasn't willing to look too closely at what that meant right now. First date first.

While he was getting some fruit and yogurt for breakfast, Reagan walked to the sink and left her cereal bowl. "Bye, Dad."

Well, maybe he needed to have more conversations with his kids if it meant them acknowledging him for more than five seconds at a time.

He rushed through his breakfast and left notes for the kids before heading out.

He got to Reid's house after stopping to pick up flowers for Alexis and beer and a couple of bottles of Steven's favorite wine. His friend lived not too far from Tristan and Nathaniel. He probably should have called and asked if Marlowe could come over for a playdate. But he was sure she would have fun with his aunt and her siblings. At least, he hoped so. He hadn't really seen her as playful until yesterday around Teo's nieces.

As he pulled into Reid's gate, he put the code in. He'd shot him a text earlier telling him he would be by long before the game started. He could freely admit that his main focus today wasn't watching his Raiders play.

He drove up Reid's drive, parked, and got out. He walked over to the back seat to get the stuff he'd picked up. As he was bent over reaching for the wine, he felt someone trying to pick him up and knew who it was already.

His best friend was six four, broad, and built. But not in that "gym rat on steroids" way... more in the "I work out and keep fit, but I also do outdoor stuff" way, so it was not all pointless muscle. Reid had dropped out of college in their second year and gone into the navy, so he still kept in shape like he was getting ready for his next mission.

He should have expected this from Reid.

"Hey, bud. Good to see you, too. Mind putting me down now?" Michael asked with a grin.

"Boys! Behave," Alexis said, from wherever she stood. He couldn't exactly see her since Reid was manhandling him. He had his feet off the ground and was holding Michael like he weighed nothing.

Reid finally set him down, and he turned around to give his oldest friend a hug. They'd always been close since they were little kids. The Ashworths were old money, oil, and real estate, while Reid's parents had made money in tech in the early days. It also didn't hurt that he was from one of the Nigerian political families as he called it.

His dad and Reid's dad had met at college and had somehow hit it off.

Mr. Banigo-West, Reid's dad, moved over here from Nigeria in the sixties for college. Somehow, his dad and Henry, Reid's dad, had made friends at college. They'd bonded over having fathers in the oil business, and the rest was history. Michael and Reid had grown up together, and the friendship survived into adulthood.

"You look well rested," Michael said to Reid as he stepped away.

"Yeah, the island was good to us," Reid replied.

"Why don't you make yourself useful and get the stuff out of the car while I greet the lady of the manor," Michael said, tossing his keys to Reid.

He walked up to Alexis where she stood at the front door and gave her a big hug while Reid got the stuff out of the car.

"Good to see you, Lex. Hope those two are treating you right?" Michael asked as he wrapped her in a big hug.

"They're behaving. You know I have them on a tight leash," Alexis replied with a smile.

"I don't think Michael wants to know about our bedroom activities, hon," Reid teased as he walked up to them.

"Oh, you," Alexis said, turning around and leading them through the house to the massive kitchen Reid had installed for Steven.

As they walked into the kitchen, Michael saw Steven at the stove as expected. He was a chef at one of the most popular gourmet home-cooking restaurants in LA.

Steven and Reid met at a charity thing for veterans and their families. Steven's brother had been in the Marines and had never made it home. While Reid had been in a very dark place from the things he'd seen, after coming home. Somehow, they'd kept the darkness they shared at bay, but it wasn't till Alexis that the guys had some light in their lives.

He loved both of them and owed them for saving his best friend.

"Hey, Steven. What's cooking?" Michael asked, giving the other man a side hug so he wouldn't disturb him from whatever was giving off those delicious aromas.

"Do you really want to know, or is that code for when is the food ready?" Steven bantered back.

Michael chuckled at that while shooting Steven a sheepish look. "You know me so well."

Steven looked at him and then Reid. "You're both the same. You only love me for my cooking."

Reid walked up behind his husband, trapping him where he stood while Steven pretended to pout. Michael was so used to their PDA he didn't even bother looking away. Instead, he walked over to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of beer.

While getting his beer, he was close enough to hear Reid say, "You know I love other parts of you, too." Michael looked away quickly, almost feeling like an intruder when he saw the shiver Steven couldn't suppress or the way he melted into Reid's bigger body.

Thankfully, Alexis came back in the room just in time to say, "Knock it off, you two. You could try waiting till Michael leaves before going at each other again."

"Now changing the subject. Football," Michael said before any more information was given about what his best friend and partners got up to.

Reid stepped away from Steven, but Michael would have had to be blind to miss his best friend adjusting the bulge now evident in his sweats. The three of them laughed at his expense while Reid walked over to him and gave him a slap on the back. Then he and Alexis picked up the rest of the platters of food to take to the TV room, and Michael followed.

As they settled in to watch the game which was about to start, Michael couldn't help but be envious of the relationship Reid had. He looked over at where the three of them sat with Alexis on Reid's lap while Steven had her legs over his knees. He wanted the same laughter, banter, and ease with someone, too.

He realized he wasn't paying attention to the game when Reid damn near took an eye out snapping his fingers in his face.

"Dude, I've been saying your name for a solid minute." Michael frowned. "You totally missed a wicked play," Reid added.

Michael cleared his throat. "Sorry, I was thinking. And stressing. What did I miss?"

Reid's brow furrowed before his expression cleared and his voice rose with excitement. "I don't know when you stopped paying attention"—he narrowed his eyes in question—"but the Packers almost scored. Rodgers took a shot downfield, and we came away with an awesome interception." Reid's smile was wide as he recounted the play.

"Yeah?" Michael asked, attempting to match his enthusiasm. He glanced at the screen and saw the halftime show had begun. He wouldn't admit how much of the game he'd actually missed. "And there was only time for one more play, so we took a knee," Reid continued. "We're up by fourteen, and it's our ball beginning of the third. We totally got this. The Raiders are fucking back!"

Michael chuckled, but it was forced, and Reid frowned. "I can't believe you missed that. I swear you seem off today. Is everything all right?"

"Yeah, you've been totally out of it. You even missed Steven taking shots at your Raiders. Is it the kids? Are they okay?" Alexis asked, concern lining her pretty face.

"No. No. The kids are fine. They're with Sally today. It's not that." He debated sharing his anxiety about his date tonight for a split second. Then mentally kicked himself. Of course he would. Reid was his brother, and Steven and Alexis were good friends, separate from Reid, and he knew they would be excited for him.

"Well, spit it out, dude, before halftime ends," Reid prompted in the usual brusque tone he used when he thought Michael was being an idiot.

He heard an oomph from Reid before Alexis said, "Ignore my sensitivity-challenged husband. What's up?"

"Well... I met someone, and we have a date tonight," Michael told them.

"I know you've not been on a date in, like, forever, but I think the rules still apply, dude. Why so stressed?" Reid asked, managing to be sarcastic and concerned simultaneously.

"Well, the person is younger. And oh, did I mention it's a he?" Michael added, just dropping it in there and waiting for his friends' reactions. He didn't have to wait long.

"What? Oh my God! Why didn't you tell me you date on both sides? I would have introduced you to some seriously hot guys from work," Alexis said.

"You're bi?" Reid asked in confusion. He handed Alexis over to Steven and got up, pacing agitatedly. "Why didn't you tell me? I thought we were friends. I thought we didn't keep stuff from each other, man. You know the shit I went through with my dad before he came around. You couldn't even mention it then? Do I even know you at all?"

Steven, ever the calm voice of reason, put Alexis down while getting up to soothe Reid. Michael never thought the conversation would go this way. He was too stunned to speak for a moment. He called himself stupid for not thinking about how Reid would react to his confession, because his dad had gone crazy after finding out he was bi. Luckily it was after he was out of the Navy and old enough to support himself. Still, it had taken a toll on Reid not speaking to his dad when they'd always been so close. He'd come around now. But still, it had taken almost two years for that to happen.

He got up and walked over to Reid. Steven stepped back, giving them space. "It's not like that, Reid. I never lied to you. This is the first time I've dated, or I should say about to date a guy. I would have told you. You know I would."

Reid looked him square in the eyes and must have seen the truth because suddenly the set of his shoulders relaxed, and his face cleared.

"I'm sorry man. I should have known. I overreacted," Reid said apologetically.

"I know. It's a surprise. I think it's him. It's Teo. He's special. He's just..." Michael said, babbling like some lovesick fool.

Alexis squealed loudly. "Oh my God. Wow. We've been waiting for this for so long. Who knew it'd be a guy? Tell us everything."

They all sat down again, and Michael filled them in on all the details of how they met. Him thinking he was married and then finding out he wasn't. He even told them Teo was *the* Benjamin Wright.

Alexis gasped before interrupting excitedly, "Wait. Teo? Like Teo Wright? Teo Wright, who is also the author of the popular series Adventures of Julien and Duke? And does the graphic novels as Matteo Romero?"

"I'm not sure about the graphic novel stuff, but yeah, the rest is correct," Michael replied in surprise. "You know him?"

"Of course, I know him. He's my boss's son. And I helped negotiate his contract to sell the rights and merchandising and all that. How crazy is that? What a small world. Oh my God, he's literally the sweetest, and he's hot too. And younger than me. Way to go, Michael. He's a catch," Alexis said, barely taking a breath.

"Cradle robbing now, are we, Michael?" Reid teased.

He was in for it now with Reid, and Michael couldn't blame him. Reid was his age, and Alexis was eleven years younger. Michael had teased him mercilessly for dating someone so young. When Steve and Reid met Alexis, she was twenty-five and fresh out of law school. Steve was thirty-seven now, so he was still five years younger.

Before he could even reply, Reid added, "Don't be shy. Tell us how old he is. Or maybe we should ask Alexis?"

Michael snorted before replying, "If you must know, he turned twenty-seven recently. But he's very mature for his age."

Reid, Alexis, and Steven all burst out laughing before Steven added, "I'm sure we've heard that before. In fact, I recall both Reid and me saying the exact same thing about our beautiful wife six years ago."

"Fuck off you three. And to think I was going to ask you questions before the date."

Reid chuckled a little more before getting serious. “So really, what's up? What do you want to know?”

TEO

Teo woke up with a feeling of anticipation. He was the least morning person in history, but somehow, he got up today like he had an injection of caffeine straight into his bloodstream. He couldn't believe he had a date with the delicious doc.

He never even thought it was a possibility when he had some seriously dirty dreams about him. He'd been trying to relegate him to strictly wet dream material, even though he hadn't had much luck with it.

What were the odds of Michael being single, having a child who was a fan of Julien and Duke, coming to his charity event, and also being attracted to him? Like, seriously? He couldn't have wished all those things aligning.

Teo knew if his and Michael's interactions had been confined to Mariana's appointment, then he would have never had this opportunity.

After Michael had left last night, he, Tristan, and Ri had squealed like prepubescent girls being asked on a date by their crushes. Lain had looked at them in sheer exasperation.

He couldn't help but replay the conversations he'd had with Michael. And he didn't want to put the cart before the horse, or was it the horse before the cart? But some of the things Michael had said, had sounded positively happily ever after-ish.

He knew he was a grown man, but he still wanted his happy ending, so sue him.

If he had wished for a perfect male, he still wouldn't have come near to Michael. He was suave and gentlemanly, and for once, Teo hoped his judgment was right.

His taste in men usually left a lot to be desired. There was Aiden at college who'd made him feel like he wasn't good enough. He'd cheated on Teo time and time again and had somehow made him feel it was Teo's fault for him not being able to keep it in his pants.

He'd left a giant trust-shaped hole in Teo's life when it came to guys. He'd been slightly on the chubby side when he was at college. Actually, he'd started his freshman year with a freshman fifty that came with him from high school. He'd added even more the first year of college.

A part of Teo felt like he'd stayed with Aiden so long out of gratitude. And even after he lost the weight, he still saw the chubby kid in the mirror.

He knew Aiden cheating was him being a bastard-faced douche-nozzle, according to Ri and Lain, but still, it had knocked his confidence severely.

It wasn't that he hadn't had the opportunity to date, or that he'd even been celibate. He'd had some short-lived relationships that to him didn't really count as relationships. They'd lasted four months and seven months respectively, and his parents and family had never met them, so yeah. Not a relationship to him.

Then again, his parents had never liked Aiden, and neither had his friends, so maybe he should relegate that to not really a relationship, too.

Michael was a shot at something new, and he hoped completely different. He couldn't help but admit that part of Michael's attraction was that he was older and had his life together. He knew age wasn't a magic douche *exemptor*, but he hoped his instincts about Michael were on track.

He couldn't help but wonder how Michael had stayed single and available. He was a catch to both men and women. He would be asking that question during their date.

Teo tried to get work done before his date that evening, but his concentration was completely shot. He was probably overexcited. So

instead, he left everything that was on his deadline and got out a new canvas and just let the paint say what it wanted.

Before he knew it, his alarms to get ready started going off. He'd set a few, and purposely left one outside the studio so he couldn't snooze it. As excited as he was for his date, the one thing that could keep him entranced was his art.

He took a step back and looked at the painting he'd started. He could always tell his emotions from what he made when he wasn't overthinking things. In the past five hours, he'd put all his emotions about Michael on canvas. Teo could see his hope that things went well and not just today on the date. He could also see his fear of disappointment and getting hurt again. He saw his anticipation and hesitation all laid out before him in color. It didn't escape his notice that hope was the overwhelming winner in the battle. There was also a flame of happiness trying to be lit with the hints of orange. He saw the streaks of red in different shades and knew that was passion battling with danger. He knew the danger was his fear of falling for Michael and being disappointed.

What surprised him the most was the colors that came through for Michael. He saw black, which for him was power and elegance, and the man definitely had that. There were also the lines of blue for Teo, which were truth, faith, and loyalty. Then there was white. Teo always saw white as light and safety.

He guessed his subconscious was showing him how he saw Michael, and he decided to listen. Even with the fear, there was faith, so he was going to go into this date with an open mind.

His anticipation levels were in overdrive, and he decided to take the pull in his heart as a good sign.

He couldn't help the runaway thoughts of future dates or of the times he and Michael could spend with Michael's kids as a family. Maybe go to Harry Potter world or just to the movies. And definitely hanging out with his whole family.

He couldn't help but imagine his mom's reaction to more instant grandkids. His mom loved Samantha since she was born, but she was in grandma heaven with Emma and Wyatt. Add in Ri's soon-to-be baby. He knew she was counting down to getting more grandkids. She was only sixty, but she acted as if they didn't give her grandkids

now, she would be gone before they did. Drama queen, much? Then again, he knew where he got it from.

He knew he should be worried about being this emotionally attached after one family gathering that barely counted as a date, but here they were. Fantasizing was so easy after seeing how well Michael fit in with his family. There was something about watching your possible love interest around your loved ones. It brought up visions of possible Christmases and Thanksgivings being spent together. Teo had all these thoughts swirling in his brain as he went through his shower routine. Teo touched up on the manscaping, shaving and plucking all the necessary areas. He also made sure to prepare just in case the date was supersuccessful.

He finally FaceTimed Ri when he was ready. "So, how do I look?"

"Nice outfit, lil' bro. The doc won't know what hit him. Okay, put the camera somewhere I can see you and do a twirl for me. You know you want to."

He walked over to the shelf in his walk-in and put the phone high enough for Ri to get a good look, then went to turn on all the lights before walking back for his "inspection."

"So, will I do?" Teo asked Ri.

"You're perfect, baby bro, and Michael is lucky to have you," Ri answered seriously.

"You don't think the blazer is too much? I could take it off, and the outfit would still work."

"Nope. I like it," his sister said.

"Okay, so I'm... I don't know what I am, sis."

Before Ri could reply, Teo heard the doorbell. "He's here," Teo whispered as if Michael would hear him all the way at the front door.

"Call me once you get home. I want details... all the details. Love you, baby bro. Have fun," Ri added, blowing him a kiss before hanging up.

On a deep breath, he walked over to his dresser mirror, and gave himself a final once-over.

His pants were tailored, slim-fit ankle grazers in soft gray. He had a slim-fit navy shirt on, unbuttoned without a tie, showing some skin. With a modern, fitted wool blazer in soft blue over the top. He'd

paired them with brown woven loafers from Burberry. He decided he looked as good as he possibly could.

He forced his nerves away as he walked out of his closet, turning off the lights as he went. He walked down the stairs to the front door and took in a deep breath before finally opening the door.

Michael looked stunning as Teo knew he would. He wore a soft black blazer which fit his body perfectly as if it was made specifically for him. He wore a black dress shirt without a tie, the collar left open, too. He matched it with dark gray pants tailored to perfection. He had never looked more dapper. *He was so fucking handsome*, Teo thought.

Michael had the suntan that said he spent time outside from time to time, and Teo just wanted to run his hands through that dark hair with the gray streaks. Everything put together had him looking like a modern version of the old-time gentleman. And Teo's heart and cock took notice.

Michael's eyes were focused on Teo when he made it back to his face after the detailed once-over.

There was a knowing glint in Michael's eyes. He had definitely noticed Teo's inspection and knew Teo liked what he saw.

"You look very handsome tonight," Michael said, handing Teo a huge bouquet of white lilies and jasmine a little hesitantly. "I wasn't sure if I should bring them, but"—he shrugged—"it felt right."

"I love them. Thank you. Do you mind coming in for a second so I can put them in a vase?" Teo asked.

"Of course," Michael replied, stepping into Teo's house.

Teo walked quickly down the hallway towards the kitchen. He walked to the cupboards and got down one of his favorite crystal vases he'd inherited from his grandmother on his dad's side. He walked over to the sink and filled it with water before carefully arranging the stunning bouquet in it.

For a brief second, he'd forgotten about Michael's presence. He wasn't sure how, but he guessed it had something to do with Michael bringing him flowers. "I'm so glad you like them," he heard Michael say. Teo looked up and saw him standing across the island from him.

"No one has ever brought me flowers before. I love them," Teo told the older man, almost shyly.

"I'm so glad. I hoped you would, but I didn't want you to feel... uhm." Michael stopped abruptly.

Teo helped him out, "You were worried I'd be offended because I'm a guy?"

Michael nodded a little awkwardly.

Teo put him out of his misery, "I love flowers, and these are perfect. Did you know jasmines and lilies are my favorites?"

"Really?" Michael replied.

Teo looked at him and saw the pleased—and a little smug—smile on Michael's face. Hmm... what was that about? It looked a little too knowing. Teo wouldn't put it past Ri calling the doc and telling him all his favorite things.

"Did my sister call you and give you a cheat sheet?" Teo asked suspiciously.

"Nope," Michael said, not adding anything else, but that smug smile was growing.

"Okay. Well, I'm ready if you are," Teo told Michael, presenting himself for inspection, almost.

"Well, let's get this show on the road," Michael replied, leading them back the way they came.

Teo couldn't help noticing Michael's hand at the small of his back as they walked out of his house. He hoped it was because the man couldn't help but touch him. Because he certainly wanted to lean into that broad muscular chest and hold on tight.

MICHAEL

Michael had ended up having to leave Reid's house in a hurry to make sure he got home and was ready on time for his date.

The three of them had overloaded him with information, and Alexis had asked Mariana what Teo's favorite flower was. He was glad she had because Michael loved the look on Teo's face when he saw them. He also loved the look on Teo's face when he'd gotten a look at Michael.

He'd taken a look too while Teo was distracted, and he had to tell himself not to be caught staring. He'd also shoved his hands into his pockets to stop from reaching out and touching Teo, who was gorgeous from his lean, toned body to his gorgeous face with those high cheekbones. He also looked fucking amazing all dressed up. Michael had to admit to a sliver of doubt. He'd thrown on the easiest thing he could find. You couldn't go wrong with black. But Teo looked so young and fresh.

As usual, Teo called to him physically, mentally, and emotionally. He hadn't had this nervous pit in his stomach in so long he'd forgotten what it felt like. If he was being honest, he'd never had this feeling before.

He'd known without question that Teo wasn't one of the people he dated who he would put a mental expiration date on. This wasn't going to be what Reid called his past relationships "A slightly longer one-night stand." No, this was his future staring him in the face, and for the first time in forever, he liked how it looked.

Michael couldn't help it. He'd stopped himself from touching Teo at the door. If he was being honest, he'd wanted to start the night with a kiss, but he'd restrained himself. But he'd seen his chance to get his hands on the other man on the way out from the kitchen, and he'd taken it.

He had to admit as they'd walked out, with him slightly behind Teo, that his eyes had strayed towards his ass. The pants he had on cupped it beautifully. Michael was tempted to graze his hands over those pert cheeks, but he knew if he went down that road, they would never make their reservation.

He ushered Teo to the passenger's seat of the car and closed the door behind him before taking a deep breath and then making his way round to the driver's side.

Teo was mostly quiet for the ride, but Michael had caught him fidgeting and had taken his hand in his. He'd meant it as a reassuring gesture, just a quick squeeze, but their hands were still connected as he drove.

The silence in the car was comfortable with soft jazz playing in the background. He hoped Teo liked jazz. It was stuff like that, which had him worrying about their age gap.

Michael had a plan. He would wine and dine Teo. Possibly take him for a nighttime stroll before dropping him off at home with a kiss at the front door and a second date on the books.

As he pulled up to the restaurant and parked in front of the valet stand, he finally let Teo's hand go. Michael had to admit he felt the loss. He got out of the car and walked round to Teo's side. Unfortunately, Teo had already opened the door, so Michael held it for him while he got out of the low-slung car.

He wasn't going to make a big deal about not opening the door for him. He figured Teo would get used to it as time went on. And Michael would roll with the times when he couldn't. It wasn't a sign of him trying to be "the man." It had nothing to do with that. He had just always seen his dad get the door for his mom, even when they were being chauffeured.

He was excited to wine and dine Teo. When Teo got out of the car, Michael said, "I hope you like the restaurant. I don't really eat out

much, but a friend is the owner, and I know the food will be excellent here.”

“I’m sure it will be perfect,” Teo replied, looking straight into his eyes.

Michael couldn’t help it. He pulled Teo into his body. He slid his hands under his blazer jacket and was rewarded when Teo wrapped himself around him. He looked Teo right in the eyes. “I’ve been wanting to do this since I laid eyes on you this evening.”

He didn’t even give Teo a chance to respond before moving in to taste those lips that had been tempting him from the moment he first saw Teo earlier in the evening. The moment their lips touched, Michael sighed. It was like that warm feeling you got when you came home after a long vacation. It only lasted a second before he wanted in Teo’s mouth with an urgency he’d never experienced before in his life.

Teo opened for him, and Michael deepened the kiss. So fucking hot. He plunged his tongue deep inside, luxuriating in Teo’s taste. Basking in finally having him in his arms again. Michael knew it had been less than a day, but having Teo back in his arms felt right. It was like that feeling you had when you knew something was missing, but you couldn’t quite put your finger on what it was, then finally having it appear again. He never wanted to let go.

The kiss was hot but tender and went on for a minute longer than was decent standing in the entrance of a restaurant for everyone and their mother to observe. And that all too brief encounter left him and Teo with hard-ons that were going to be uncomfortable to walk with.

As he pulled back from the kiss and looked in Teo’s eyes, he couldn’t help but take in the slightly glazed look, and he would have been dead not to notice how the younger man was rubbing on him like a cat in heat.

“We could skip dinner or maybe get dinner to go,” Teo started saying, his voice husky with lust.

Michael took a step back, separating them, even though it damn near killed him. “No. I have a plan. Dinner, a view. Then I drop you off like a gentleman,” Michael replied, even though his cock was screaming at him to take Teo up on his offer. “I want to do this right. I

want us to have a memorable first date we can look back on. This is the just start for us... I hope so anyway."

Teo looked at him intently, almost incredulously as if he couldn't believe the words coming out of Michael's mouth. He didn't know what kind of idiots were in Teo's past, but that was where they would stay—in the past. He was going to show this beautiful, amazing, big-hearted man what he was worth and what he'd been missing. A part of him was giddy that he would be the first to do all this with Teo.

Michael took Teo's hand and led him towards the restaurant and couldn't help but appreciate how Teo leaned into him as they walked and intertwined their fingers in a more intimate hold.

"Did I mention you look very nice tonight?" Michael asked.

"You did, but I don't mind hearing it again," Teo replied with a small smile.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Good," Michael added before leaning in for a quick peck. He couldn't help it. He liked having his lips on Teo. He couldn't wait to have them on every part of him.

"By the way, I don't think I said it, but you look very handsome tonight, Doc," Teo added as they reached the maître d'.

Michael puffed out his chest. Sure he'd seen the appreciative gleam in Teo's eyes when he'd picked him up, but he like hearing it too. He didn't have a chance to reply, because the maître d' asked, "Reservation for?"

Michael was interrupted before he could thank Teo. "Ashworth, table for two."

"Welcome sir, we've been expecting you. Chef West called and left specific instructions. Follow me please."

"It looks lovely, Michael. I've never been here before, but I've heard amazing things. My parents are regulars. I don't really get out much," Teo added almost in a whisper like he thought Michael would have an issue with that.

"Well, you're in good company," Michael said reassuringly. "From what I remember, it's cozy, and it has a relaxed feel, quiet, and I love the chef."

It didn't escape his notice that their fingers were still locked together. It felt like he'd been doing it forever, not just a day. He had to remind himself they were only on act one of their story. They were barely what people considered dating, and they would barely pass the threshold for being called a relationship. But every time he thought of Teo or was in his presence, his caveman, possessive traits came to the forefront of his brain. He was like a dog trying to mark his territory. He wanted to put a "back off" sign on Teo and let everyone know he was taken. But he had to control himself, or he would scare the poor guy away.

Michael said a prayer to God that he didn't get his heart shattered, dating someone so much younger. He hoped Teo was at a point in his life that a long-term relationship was in the cards. Michael knew. He just knew from the moment he'd laid eyes on Teo that this was it. He was just doing what needed to be done for Teo to get to that point too.

The maître d' led them to a table that overlooked the city, but was still secluded. Michael mentally thanked Steven for giving him both privacy and a view. It was perfect and romantic. The restaurant was as busy as he expected for a Sunday night, but the table they were shown to managed to give the illusion of being separate from the crowd.

Michael pulled the chair out for Teo before the maître d' could. He saw the appreciative smile on Teo's face and felt like he should pound his chest for putting it there. He pushed Teo's chair forward from behind before walking over to take his own.

The table was intimate, keeping them close to each other. The maître d' handed each of them their menu and recited the specials for the evening.

"Tonight's specials are organic chicken pot pie with potatoes, peas, and root vegetables in a light chicken broth with herbes de Provence and a puff pastry crown. We also have a turkey meatloaf with fontina and mushrooms, served with creamy polenta cake, asparagus tips, and a wonderful white wine cream sauce. Then today, our daily special mac and cheese will be served with prosciutto and three kinds of cheese and topped with gremolata

breadcrumbs. Chef West ordered a special bottle of wine for you, with his compliments."

After reciting the specials, Michael let the maître d' know they were fine with just Steven's choice of wine. He gave a slight bow before leaving them to peruse the menu while he took care of their wine order.

Michael looked over the menu before asking Teo, "So, do you see anything you might like to order?"

"Well, the mac and cheese sounded awesome, but I feel like I should try something else since I'm eating here. You know, not mac and cheese," Teo replied, a slight blush staining his cheeks.

Michael was charmed. There was something so innocent about Teo, and when he blushed, Michael had to admit it did something to his insides. "Nonsense, if you want mac and cheese, get the mac and cheese. We can always come back, and you can have something else next time."

Teo smiled at him and nodded. "Okay, well, mac and cheese for me. So, if we can come back, does that mean we are going to do this again?"

"Well, it's definitely part of my plan to share many, many meals with you. Here, wherever," Michael admitted.

"Oh? I mean, yeah... I mean, yes, m-more meals. Dates. I mean ..." Teo stammered adorably.

"I know what you mean." Michael beamed. He couldn't help but smile at the flustered Teo. He knew he sounded like a broken record, but honestly, the man was just adorable. He wasn't sure if he was even allowed to say that.

Michael reached across the table for Teo's menu and placed it on top of his. He was tempted to take Teo's hands in his again. But resisted. He didn't want to look like he was needy, or whatever the kids called it now. Before he could make more of a fool of himself, the waiter came forward with a wine bucket. He opened the bottle of wine, and Michael sat back while he completed the task.

"Sirs, are you ready to order? Perhaps the specials?" The waiter asked while pouring a little wine into Michael's glass to taste. Teo spoke up while Michael took a sip, "I'll have the special mac and cheese this evening, please."

"And I'll have the beef roast simmered in your veal stock, but instead of the polenta, I'll have the sweet potato casserole and market veg, please... And the wine is excellent," Michael said, giving the waiter permission to pour a glass for Teo. After placing the bottle back in the ice bucket, the waiter excused himself.

They sat in silence momentarily before Teo blurted, "I'm so nervous. I really want this to go well."

Michael breathed out in relief that one of them had said it. "So do I. Would you believe me if I said I even spent the day with Reid asking advice?"

"Reid?" Teo questioned.

Michael didn't miss the slight change in Teo's demeanor at his mention of Reid's name. If he wasn't mistaken, the younger man was radiating jealousy. Michael wanted to do a fist pump. Jealousy was a good sign. "Yeah, my best friend, Reid. We grew up together. Our parents have been friends since college. I'm pretty sure I mentioned him yesterday."

"No. No, you didn't. You may have dropped his name yesterday, but you never said who he was," Teo explained.

"Oh. Well, he's my best friend. I'm sure you'll love him. He's like the brother I never had. Kind of like you and Tristan," he emphasized, knowing Teo would hear what he was saying.

"Oh. Yeah? Tell me about him," Teo asked with interest.

Michael wanted him to know everything, and he wanted him to meet Reid, Alexis, and Steven. Apart from his kids and his Aunt Sally, they were the only family he had left.

"Well, Reid is married. He has two amazing partners, Steven and Alexis, and they've been together for six years, I think."

"That's crazy. I have a lawyer, well, she works with my dad. She has two husbands. Her name is Alexis too. What are the odds?" Teo remarked. "I love the idea of being committed to two people. How cool would that be?"

Michael growled, "No." He realized what he'd just said and tried to backpedal before he came across as a complete lunatic and scared Teo away. Unfortunately, Teo got the wrong idea.

"But he's your best friend. How can you have a problem with throuples? That's, I mean... I thought you guys were close," Teo

queried, confusion coloring his words.

“No. No. I didn’t mean I have a problem with... No. What I was trying to say...” Michael sighed. He considered how what he was about to say would sound and decided to just go for it. “I wasn’t talking about Reid, Alexis, and Steven. I love them. They’re perfect for each other. But when you mentioned being committed to two people, I got jealous if I’m being completely honest. I know we barely know each other, but the thought of someone else having their hands on you made me see red. And I reacted instinctively.”

“Oh. Oh. I like that,” Teo responded shyly. “I like that even the idea of me with someone else gets you feeling growly. It’s insanely hot.”

That adorable blush stained his cheeks yet again, and Michael realized it was quickly becoming one of his favorite things. He also admitted to wondering just how far the blush traveled downward, and he was waiting for the day he found out.

“I told you before. I’m not very good at sharing things I consider mine. I was serious,” Michael said, staring intently into Teo’s eyes. He didn’t care what anyone thought, and he knew some people would say he was jumping the gun. But Teo made Michael’s heart race and made him feel grounded at the same time. He felt like he was floating and standing still at the same time. Teo felt like the first drops of rain on the Sahara—giving life to what was once barren. And no one was going to tell Michael how he felt, or that it was too fast to feel it. One of the benefits of getting older was knowing exactly what you wanted. And Michael knew... without a sliver of doubt.

“I don’t want to share either,” Teo murmured.

“Good,” Michael repeated. “By the way, I have a confession. So you know how you said I got your favorite flowers?”

“Oh my God. Please tell me Tristan or Ri or one of the other guys didn’t call you. It’s totally something they would do,” Teo pleaded.

Michael laughed heartily before replying, “No. No, they didn’t, but it’s good to know that if I ever needed information, I can call them as well. Alexis, Reid’s wife. Well, she told me. She’s actually the same Alexis who works with your dad, or should I say for your dad.”

“Oh wow, that is a small world. I don’t know her very well. But that explains why my parents eat here so often. You said her other husband owns the restaurant,” Teo reminded him.

“Yeah. But let’s stop talking about them. I want to get to know you better. Tell me about you and your family,” Michael declared.

“Well. You’ve met my sister. There’s just the two of us. Ri and I have always been very close. Our parents made sure of it. There was always time carved out for family. Vacations, dinners, outings. So, sometimes we only had each other to talk to. Obviously we went through the whole sibling fighting stage. But now she’s one of my best friends. Then there’s Tristan. I’m not sure if I told you, but we are not related by blood—but we might as well be. His parents kicked him out before our senior year because he came out. Then he moved in with us. Although to be honest, he and his sister already spent a lot of the time at our house, so it wasn’t much of an adjustment. Let’s just say his parents don’t deserve to be called parents.” Teo stopped speaking abruptly, and sat back in his chair. “Sorry, I’m talking so much. I’m not even giving you a chance to get a word in.”

“Nonsense. I asked because I want to know. They mean a lot to you, which makes them important. I love that you’re close to them. Family is the most important thing to me. My kids, Reid and his spouses,” Michael told Teo soothingly.

“Me too. My family is the best. I don’t know what I’d do without them. That includes Lain and Cris, who is my other best friend. I met him and Lain at Yale, and we’ve been close ever since. You’ve not met him yet, but he’s the best. The most gentle soul you could ever meet,” Teo chattered on.

Michael would have to be blind to miss how effusively he spoke of his family. Teo radiated joy just at the mention of them. “I can’t wait to meet all of them. Maybe next time I’ll host a barbecue, and then you can invite all of them, and you can meet the older kids, too.”

“Luc and Reagan, right? I can’t wait to meet them,” Teo said.

Michael beamed. He loved that Teo remembered his children’s names without having to be told again. It was a huge step for him. Letting anyone he was, or in Teo’s case planned to be, intimate with around his children. Sure, Marlowe had met Teo, but not as

Michael's intended. Was that the right word? Did people even use that word still? Michael admitted that the fifteen-year age gap worried him slightly, but not enough for him to think twice about being with Teo. He tried to think of what could and was coming up blank. He wasn't a gambling man, but he was all in.

"Yeah, Luc and Reagan," Michael murmured

The waiter interrupted them again. As he placed their dinner plates in front of them, they both sat back in their seats. Michael picked up his glass of wine, taking a drink, his eyes never leaving Teo's.

There were two large plates filled with food, and he broke eye contact and moaned in approval. Teo must have been hungry because his stomach let out an approving growl, making the adorable man flush in embarrassment. Michael couldn't help it. He linked his free hand with the one Teo had on the table.

"Good, you're hungry," Michael said.

Teo lowered his gaze, probably embarrassed that Michael had heard his stomach, but Michael wasn't having any of it. He rubbed his thumb over Teo's knuckles until he looked up at Michael.

The waiter interrupted yet again, "Excuse me, sirs, is there anything else I can get you?"

"No, thank you. This looks wonderful. Pass on my thanks to the chef, please," Michael told him.

"Very good, sir."

TEO

Dinner was amazing, exactly as Michael said. The food was cooked with lots of care to culinary perfection. Teo's mac and cheese was decadent. The conversation between them never dwindled.

The night exceeded his expectations, and they had already been pretty high. They talked about Teo's career and how he'd gotten started. Michael told him about his kids and what it was like balancing his career and his family.

"You know I was convinced you were married and straight. But I guess one of the two was true," Teo said.

"Hmmm... I would disagree on both counts. My kids keep telling me labels don't matter, and never has that been truer than with us now. I was married. And straight? Well, I doubt that. Steven and Reid mentioned that we might need to have this conversation. Teo, I know it's not what a date wants to hear, but in this case, I think it might be. I'm completely attracted to you—but not just you."

"Uhhh, I'm not sure how that is supposed to help," Teo replied, sitting back in his seat.

"I'm saying this all wrong. What I'm trying to say is, you're not the only man I have ever found appealing. But you're the only one who makes my heart beat faster and my entire world speed up and slow down all at the same time. I don't know if that makes me gay or bi or whatever fits."

"Oh. So, what you're saying is you're not gay for me?" Teo joked.

“Huh! Who knew there was a name for it? Well, yes, I guess I’m not that. I did notice the attractiveness of other guys, but then I met Sierra, and maybe I skipped out on my experimenting phase in college. Or my chance to fall for a guy instead of her, I don’t know. All I know is from the moment I saw you in my office, I was stunned by you. Imagine how I felt thinking Mariana was your wife.” Michael finished.

Teo had to laugh at that. “Oh Lord. Tell me you didn’t.”

“Well, you look nothing alike. Her eyes are brown, and she’s blonde and more fair skinned than you are,” Michael defended.

“Yeah, I guess she is. She takes after my dad’s side of the family. I look more like my mom’s. My mother is half-British and half-Cuban. Her grandparents left during Fidel’s reign. My maternal grandmother was Cuban, and she met my maternal grandfather when he was over here as a visiting lecturer from the University of Manchester. They got married, and she moved back with him. My mom decided to come to the US for college. Her grandparents still lived over here, and she’d spent a lot of time here in the States on vacation. So she came back, met my dad, and I guess the rest is history,” Teo told Michael, even though he hadn’t asked.

“That’s an amazing story. So, you’re British too?” Michael asked.

“Well, I guess technically I am, but we never got the passport. There was no need. But I do have cousins over there. That’s actually where my parents are right now. They’re visiting her brother before they go to Paris for their anniversary,” Teo informed Michael.

“Well, I look forward to meeting them. If that isn’t too presumptuous,” Michael said.

“Not at all. I’m sure they’ve heard all about you from Ri. So they would definitely be looking forward to meeting you,” Teo assured Michael.

“And they wouldn’t think I’m too old? Or worried that I have three kids?” Michael asked.

Teo couldn’t help but spot the apprehension in his tone, even though he tried for light-hearted. “My parents will love you, and trust me, having three kids is a bonus. My mother has been on my case for grandchildren. Even more since Ri announced her pregnancy.” Teo flushed bright red when he realized what he’d said. He’d

basically implied Michael's children were his kids too or would be his kids. Whichever one it was, it made him look like he had them married and living as one big happy family, and that was a recipe for scaring guys off. Sure, Michael has said things that sounded like he saw them long term, but they were still so new.

"Well, then, I can't wait to meet them. They sound like they are great parents, and if they made you, then they must have done something right," Michael said.

Teo breathed a sigh of relief until Michael added with a wink, "And I'm sure my kids will be lucky to have them as grandparents."

Teo almost choked on the sip of wine he'd just taken. But he looked into Michael's eyes and saw the truth reflected in the words he spoke. Before he could even come up with a reply, Michael apologized as his phone chirruped, indicating he received a text. "I'm sorry about this. It could be the kids or an emergency."

While Michael checked the message, Teo took a moment to just breathe. He felt like he'd been waiting for the other shoe to drop since the date started. The cynical love-wary part of him had screamed Michael was too good to be true. But Teo was not letting that voice hold him hostage anymore. He wasn't worthless and wasn't unworthy of love. It might not work out with Michael, but Teo wasn't going to write him off for no other reason than his fear of getting hurt, as he had done many times before.

"Sorry about that. The kids just sent me a text to let me know they'll be staying with my Aunt Sally tonight," Michael informed Teo. "So where were we?"

"Well..." The waiter walked up at that moment to remove their plates.

"Would you need anything else, sir?" the waiter asked. "More wine or some dessert perhaps?"

Michael looked over at Teo who shook his head. "I'm stuffed. Thank you," Teo replied.

"Just the check please and take your time," Michael told the waiter before he relaxed back in his seat and reached for Teo's hands once again. It didn't escape Teo's attention that they were having whatever the hands' version of footsie was called. Michael trailed his fingers through Teo's. He turned Teo's hands over and did

the same thing until he reached his pulse point, making a shiver run down Teo's spine.

"So uhh..." Teo had nothing to say as Michael kept grazing his pulse point. He was shocked to realize his cock was standing at attention. He could honestly say he had no idea that was an erogenous zone for him. His heart started racing. *Fuck!*

Teo looked out into the night to calm his racing heart, then around the room. They were alone, and Teo could honestly say he had no idea when that happened. "Oh my! Looks like we're the last ones here. What time is it?"

Michael looked around before looking at his watch. "It's almost quarter past eleven."

"Wow. Really?" Teo asked, absolutely stunned. "How did we miss everyone leaving?"

"I can't speak for you, but I had better things to focus on," Michael proclaimed.

Fuck on a popsicle, Dr. Suave was going to have him dropping his trousers and bending over in public if he kept talking the way he was.

"Guess the night just flew by. You must be fantastic company, Doc," Teo drawled. Going for flirty to lighten things. His emotions were rioting with the feelings this man brought out in him.

"Or maybe it's just all about being with the right company," Michael offered seriously.

"Yeah. Or maybe what you said," Teo dazedly replied. "Uhhh, I think if everyone has left maybe, we should too. I wouldn't want to keep the staff later than we already have."

"That's a good idea, but I find I'm not ready for our night to end," Michael said, never taking his eyes off Teo, making Teo's heart pick up and his belly tighten.

Fuck. What was this man doing to him? He wanted to break every rule for him. Teo was really not the "sex on a first date" kind of guy, but he knew for Michael he would throw that rule out of the window in a heartbeat. "So my question now is, what shall we do next? I had planned on a nice stroll on the beach, but the weather doesn't seem to be willing to cooperate."

“Well, I guess we could do a rain check, or we could do coffee or something at mine?” Teo suggested, hoping Michael chose the latter. “Oh, and we could maybe try to figure out a day for me to come over and do the mural for Marlowe. I really don’t want to disappoint her.”

“Well, how about we take your idea, but we change the location. We could have coffee at my place, you could take a look at where you’re going to paint, and we get to spend more time together.”

“Yeah? That sounds good,” Teo replied, happily. He would say yes to whatever as long as it meant more time with the decadent doc.

“Yes. Plus, I could show you my favorite view since I was a kid,” Michael informed Teo.

“Oh, you’ve lived in your house since you were a kid?” Teo asked as they got up. Michael reached for his wallet and pulled out some bills. “We should probably leave a big tip for keeping them so late.”

Teo reached for his wallet too, but Michael stopped him, “No, this is my treat. Maybe you can take me out next time, and *that* will be your treat.” Teo smiled, nodding, and put his wallet away. He stepped away from the table, over to Michael, who immediately held out a hand for Teo to walk ahead of him. *Such a gentleman*, Teo thought. Although a wicked part of him hoped he wasn’t completely gentlemanly when they got naked because Michael had his cock at attention, and he better have a plan to put Teo out of his horny misery.

It was like the perfect storm of horniness. Teo hadn’t had sex in forever. Michael was fucking amazing. Like his thoughtfulness and kindness was a total emotional fluffer to Teo, that it was having physical manifestations. Also, Dr. Do Me was fucking fuckable. So yeah, he was definitely hoping the doc was being coy when he said he wanted to show Teo his favorite view. Teo had never hoped more for a guy to be using some clichéd excuse to get him back to their house. Because he was five minutes from climbing Michael like a tree.

MICHAEL

Michael couldn't help it. He'd tried his best to curb himself from saying everything that was on his mind. But somehow all the years of having a filter had disappeared, courtesy of one man who made him feel like a teenager in the midst of his first crush. But it was the excitement of the first crush with the surety of age and knowing exactly what he wanted. It was the best of both worlds.

He wasn't a fan of rain spoiling his plans for a romantic moonlight stroll, but he wasn't complaining about the fact that the change of plans involved having Teo in his house. He may have never had sex with a man, but his body clearly didn't see that as an issue. He was so turned on. Although he had an inkling with Teo around, that was bound to be a common occurrence.

As they waited for the valet to bring his car around, Michael closed the distance between him and Teo. He hooked his arm around Teo's waist and couldn't help but sigh in pleasure when Teo leaned into his body. They were standing with Teo's back to his chest, and he was sure Teo couldn't miss his very prominent erection. He groaned and nipped Teo's earlobe when the tempting man decided to entice him further by grinding his ass into Michael's cock.

"You'd better stop that, or the valet will get more than he bargained for," Michael whispered into Teo's ear.

Teo turned around in his arms and ground his cock against Michael's, sending the most delicious sensations down his spine.

“Maybe I know exactly what I’m bargaining for,” Teo said as they stood there, chest to chest in the empty parking lot, now looking at one another. It was like being ensnared and unable to look away. He never wanted to take his eyes off this man.

They were finally pulled out of their own world by the valet’s insistent throat clearing. Michael finally looked away from Teo and apologized because he could tell the young valet had been trying to get their attention for a minute.

“Thank you,” Michael told the impatient-looking valet and handed over a twenty, both for keeping him waiting and possibly making him stay later than he was meant to. He put his hand on the small of Teo’s back and led him to the passenger’s side, opened the door for him, and saw him settled before making it round to his side and getting in.

The drive to Michael’s house was quick for LA. At almost midnight, the roads weren’t as packed as they usually would be. The car ride was quiet, but it was rife with anticipation of what was to come, teeming with so much sexual tension that you could cut it with a knife. He also had Teo’s hand in his all through the drive. Thankfully he was driving one of his cars which had an automatic transmission so he didn’t have to worry about changing gears.

In no time at all, they made it to his Beverly Hills residence. He opened the gates to let them in, then took the long driveway along to his house.

“Wow, this is so crazy. My parents live in the same neighborhood,” Teo said, finally breaking the silence.

“Yeah?” Michael asked.

“Yeah, I know this street. Tristan’s family lives not too far away, and we live a few streets over,” Teo informed Michael.

“We are practically neighbors then. My family has lived here since the late 1920s. They moved here from Massachusetts. My great-grandfather wanted to break away from the family and came down here to make his fortune, even though it was family money that bought the land,” Michael shared with Teo.

“Wow, that’s pretty cool,” Teo replied. “I love that it has this rich family history. My parents weren’t exactly on speaking terms with their families when they got married. Even though they made up with

my grandparents long before they passed away, my dad still decided to sell the house where they grew up.”

“Sierra.. Uhhh.” Michael hesitated, unsure about speaking about his late wife on a first date. Wasn’t there some rule against that somewhere?

Teo interrupted his mental back-and-forth, “You can talk about her, you know. I would never ask you not to. She was a big part of your life, you had kids together, so I imagine she would come up. Don’t ever worry about that.”

“Yeah?” Michael pressed.

“Yes, Michael. She was a part of your past—An important part. Pretending she never existed would be juvenile of me,” Teo said emphatically, his hold on Michael’s hand tightening.

Michael brought their joined hands to his lips for a kiss. “Thank you. I wasn’t sure. I know we are new, but I would never want you to feel uncomfortable.”

Teo squeezed his hand again in reply. “I know.”

“What I was going to say was Sierra moved into my house after we got married, but then my parents died. We’d just had Luc, so it just made sense to move in here instead of looking for a place of our own, which we’d actually planned to do. I couldn’t sell it, you know, so we moved in, and well, I guess we are still here.”

The fact that he was sharing all this with Teo was all the indication Michael needed to know where his feelings for this man were leading. He never spoke of his parents or Sierra on dates. He never spoke of Sierra period unless the kids asked.

Teo interrupted his epiphany, “I bet your kids love growing up where you did.”

“I never thought about it that way, but I hope they do. This house is part of my family history,” Michael shared as he parked the car. He decided against parking in the garage, figuring he would be taking Teo home at some point.

“Well, it looks beautiful from the little I can see. The garden looks spectacular,” Teo said, craning his neck to get a better look. I can’t wait to see it in the daylight. I’m sure the riot of colors will be spectacular,” Teo gushed, excitement coming through clearly.

“I’m sure we can arrange a daytime viewing,” Michael replied, opening the door and getting out of the car. He made his way around and opened Teo’s too. “So, coffee?”

“Coffee,” Teo replied, looking at Michael with a gaze that could only be described as predatory.

Michael was really trying to be a gentleman, but he was at the end of his restraint. Teo was pushing all his buttons—even ones he wasn’t aware he had. The younger man had a big heart and somehow had that look which was both innocence and debauchery all wrapped up in one exquisite package. Michael couldn’t be held responsible for the carnal thoughts running through his mind right now. He was only human after all.

TEO

This man looked so sexy, too sexy, and Teo's breath caught in his throat. He took a small step forward as Michael reached out, stepping right into his body.

"I hope coffee is code for getting to the nearest flat surface as quickly as possible," Teo whispered breathily to Michael, trying to get even closer to his body.

He wasn't usually so forward, but Michael had all his inhibitions on pause. Teo was five seconds away from going down on all fours, taking the position and begging Michael to mount him. He wasn't sure where this was coming from, honestly. He so wasn't that guy. He never hooked up on a first date. Not that he had an issue with anyone who did. It just wasn't him, but with Michael, all the rules went out the window. The man had fried all his brain cells and kicked his libido up two hundred notches.

Michael took a step back, breath ragged. "Don't think I don't want to take you up on that offer, but that's not why I wanted you here."

"I know, Doc. If it was, I wouldn't be here, and I wouldn't be offering," Teo replied. "I know it's what everyone says, but I don't do this. Ever... like, not at all. But it feels different with you."

"I agree. It feels different because it is, but this part isn't different for me," Michael replied, a shameful look stealing across his face. "This is what I do. I don't date... haven't since my wife died. But I have slept with a few... okay, more than a few people. This isn't that, and I want to start the right way. Whatever this is, happening here between us... I can honestly say I have never experienced such a

depth of feeling before, and I don't want to screw things up by skipping steps."

Teo was tempted to ask if he was including his late wife when he said he had never experienced this depth of feeling, But he didn't. He wasn't sure if it was because it was not proper to ask or because he was worried he wouldn't get the answer he hoped for.

"I understand, but like you said, this is different, so we both know that going in. Plus, in case you didn't know. . . there are a lot of things we can do that wouldn't be going all the way." Teo emphasized the "going all the way" with air quotes.

"Oh! Now, do tell?" Michael practically purred.

"Well," Teo said, moving back against Michael's body, "we could." As Michael leaned in to listen to what Teo was about to say, he took advantage and fused their lips together. *Fuck*. It got better every time. It was like having the perfect first kiss over and over—knowing what to expect but still being surprised.

Teo broke the kiss, breath ragged. "If you don't want this to happen in your living room, I suggest you show me the way to your bedroom now before things become positively indecent."

Michael gazed at him with what Teo wanted to describe as an adoring look, but hesitated in case he was seeing things with the haze of lust clouding everything. "Are you sure? I don't want you to regret this tomorrow."

"I'm very sure, Doc. I would like to see what those million-dollar hands are capable of."

Michael looked at him with amusement written all over his face. "Million-dollar hands, huh?"

"I will admit I may have done some internet stalking." Teo felt his face heat and ducked his head shyly. "What can I say, Doc? I was smitten from our first meeting, even when I thought you were unattainable. Made for some pretty vivid dreams, I might add."

"Well, now. How about you tell me about these dreams, and I'll see what I can do about making them a reality," Michael replied, nipping Teo playfully on his neck. Teo groaned and purred at the same time. Michael couldn't have been aware, but his neck was one of the most sensitive parts of his body. Teo loved when his partner kissed and nipped and grazed him. If he left marks behind, even

better. It was like there was a straight line connecting his neck to his cock.

“Bed now,” Teo moaned, rubbing his aching cock against Michael.

“This way,” Michael said, leading Teo up the right-hand side of the double-sided stairs in the front entrance. Teo was fucking horny, but he couldn’t miss the grandeur that was Michael’s home. If he hadn’t grown up around this kind of wealth, it would have been completely intimidating.

“You have a lovely home,” he told Michael. “I can’t wait to see more of it.”

“I was planning to show you my favorite spot before you interrupted me with, well... all of you,” Michael said as he ogled Teo with a look that said he had undressed him mentally and was down to the black-and-red jock he imagined Teo wore under his outfit.

“Have you seen yourself in the mirror lately?” Teo asked Michael. “You have the whole hot older guy thing down to a T.”

“Glad I make the cut,” Michael replied with a snort. “But we could have done without the *older*.”

“Oh, Doc. You have no idea how much the *older* part works for me. Stick around, and you’ll see,” Teo replied with a wink.

“Well, this is it,” Michael said as they stood in front of double doors. He opened one of the doors to his large master suite. There were three steps before getting into the room itself. The center of the room had a massive king-size bed. To one side was a pair of comfy-looking light gray chaise lounges. To the other side was a black tuxedo-style sofa, covered with gray pillows. There was a gorgeous piece of abstract art on one wall that Teo recognized as an original Sottero.

Teo immediately felt comfortable in the space and couldn’t help but take a deep breath, inhaling all that was Michael. He imagined Michael in the space, and he fit. It was both masculine and subtle—like the person living there. He knew this was begging for heartache, but he could immediately imagine adding his own touches to the space, making it theirs, not just Michael’s. If he hadn’t already known it, that was confirmation enough. He was in way too deep. Before he could overthink or panic at how much he felt for the man standing

beside him, Michael pulled him into his body. He placed the palm of his hand on Teo's cheek, looking into his eyes like they held all the answers to life.

Michael must have seen the right one because he moved his hand from Teo's cheek to the back of his neck, drawing him in for an earth-moving kiss. Michael pressed the length of his body against Teo's, and Teo wrapped his arms around him, pulling him even closer and opened for the tongue thrusting forward. Teo sank deeper into the kiss. His body set alight. He let go, diving headfirst into a need and passion he had never encountered before. It both terrified and excited him.

They both lost their jackets pretty quickly, and Teo felt Michael's hands tracing down his spine. Michael paused, his hands lingering just above Teo's ass. He nibbled on Teo's lips. "You're fucking perfect," Michael whispered, barely breaking their kiss before his hands finally cupped Teo's ass. "Your body feels fucking amazing against mine, and you taste... so fucking good."

Teo was drowning. His body was on fire, and his heart felt like it would beat right out of his chest. *Fuck!* Michael was fucking perfect. He was saying all the right things, and Teo was terrified he would wake up, and this would all be a dream.

"It's not a dream," Michael whispered before kissing down Teo's neck, driving him fucking crazy. Teo could feel his cock leaking precum into his jock.

"Are you reading my mind, or did I say that out loud?" Teo asked, breathing heavily.

"Not reading your mind," Michael replied, nipping Teo's neck and breathing on the spot, making him shiver. Michael lowered his hands as he spoke, grazing Teo's rock-hard cock and started to massage. The sensations had Teo's legs feeling weak. He closed his eyes and rolled his hips into Michael's hands, seeking more. He needed more friction, more... *something*.

Teo hoped this night wouldn't be the only one he had with Michael. He hoped when this night ended, it would be a new beginning. He didn't want Michael to end up as a bad memory or lost to the "what could have been" pile. He didn't want to be just another body temporarily warming Michael's bed. He could feel his heart

hurting at the thought. Teo knew for a fact this was more than just sex for him. The moment Michael had kissed him outside that event hall, Teo knew it could never be *just* sex between them.

“Bed, now,” Michael said in a husky voice filled with need. Michael thrust his hips into Teo’s, grinding their cocks together, his hands never leaving Teo’s body. The grinding of their hips was driving Teo insane, but it still wasn’t enough.

“Naked. I want to feel your skin on mine now. Please,” Teo begged raggedly. His need was so high it felt like it would consume him. Michael slanted his mouth over Teo’s while they hurriedly shed each other’s clothes.

Michael thrust his tongue into Teo’s mouth, who opened for him, meeting him greedily. Teo couldn’t fucking get enough. None of it was fucking enough. His skin was on fire. His blood felt like it was boiling. What was this man doing to him? There was no hesitation in the way Michael touched him. Teo didn’t have to worry about Michael being bothered by him being a guy—he was a fucking quick study. He clearly knew what to do to drive Teo out of his mind.

The moment they were both naked, even though it nearly killed him, Teo stepped away from Michael, needing to see the man in all his naked glory. And what a sight he was. Teo took in that beautiful cock, erect and dripping precum, and his mouth watered. *Fuck!* He wanted to taste it. He licked his lips in anticipation. But before he could drool any further, Michael sank to his knees. “Please, I fucking have to taste you. Tell me if I’m doing anything wrong. I want to make it good for you.”

Before he even had a chance to reply, Michael took Teo into his mouth. He tried to take him deep at once but choked. “Slowly,” Teo coached. Michael did as he was told and took him in an inch at a time, nipping and sucking. He trailed his fingertips up Teo’s thighs, cupping his sac and rolling his balls around in his palms.

“*Fuck!* So Good. That feels... so... fucking... good,” Teo moaned, his fingers running through Michael’s hair, sliding down to his cheeks. He let Michael take it at his own pace, knowing it was his first time. What he lacked in skill, he made up for in effort and enthusiasm. He’d figured out the trick to breathing and apparently had excellent control over his gag reflex because he sucked Teo

deep inside as far as he could go, deep throating him. Teo worried because of Michael's inexperience, but the hard, thick cock he could see and the sounds Michael was making told him he shouldn't.

Teo's eyes watched as his cock slid in and out of Michael's mouth. The sight and the suction had his orgasm building until Teo's eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he let out a loud moan. "Feels so fucking good. Almost there."

Michael took the hint and doubled his efforts, kicking up his pace. Sucking Teo harder and deeper. Teo felt Michael's hands massaging his ass, sliding between his cheeks, fingering the sensitive nerves at his rim, teasing Teo, who was already at the edge. The moment he slid one finger past Teo's rim, he couldn't hold back anymore.

"I'm coming..." Teo warned, trying to free himself from Michael's mouth, but he was having none of it. Teo's balls tightened, and he lost what little control he had left, thrusting into Michael's mouth until his orgasm came spilling down Michael's throat, wave after wave crashing into him. He looked at Michael in awe as the older man milked him of every drop before releasing him from his mouth with a pop.

Michael stood, making his way up Teo's body, keeping a tight hold on him. Not that Teo planned on going anywhere. Not that he could, even if he wanted to. Whatever functioning brain cells he had left were fried. He couldn't imagine what he looked like, but he knew if Michael let go of him, he would be a puddle at the man's feet.

"You taste as good as I imagined you would," Michael said, moving in to Teo for a kiss, sharing the flavor with him.

"You don't have to say that," Teo replied after the kiss ended. "Not everyone is into swallowing."

"I never say anything I don't mean. It was a new experience, but one I can't wait to repeat. I wasn't sure what to expect, but it wasn't horrible," Michael told Teo, dropping a kiss on his lips.

They finally made it to the bed. "I like that I'm the first person you've ever done that with, or for... you know what I mean?" Teo finished. He suddenly felt nauseous when he imagined Michael doing that with someone else.

"Hopefully you'll be the only one I ever do that with or... for," Michael said, rolling on top of Teo and staring into his eyes, giving

him no choice but to look back. "I know you still have doubts. That's fine. I'll believe enough for the two of us."

Teo had nothing to say, so he didn't say anything in reply. But he was aware of the fact that every naked inch of Michael was touching every naked inch of his body, and even though Teo had just come, his body couldn't help but respond, especially with Michael's hard cock pressing against his.

Teo lifted his hips, grinding his hardening cock against Michael's. "I could help you with that."

"I like this position, and I especially like you in my bed," Michael said while grinding their cocks together even more. He crushed their lips together, thrusting his tongue deep into Teo's mouth. Teo met his tongue with every stroke. As their cocks slid together, Teo was shocked at how fast another orgasm was building. He slid his hands down to cup Michael's firm ass. Looked like the doc knew a thing or two about squats.

Michael thrust against him, and he pushed back, loving the feeling of that thick cock against his own. Michael's groan told him he was feeling the same pleasure as Teo was. He needed more friction, so he ground his hips harder against Michael's and rolled. He could feel the pressure building, rolling down his spine. They grunted and rutted against each other, searching for their release.

"*Fuck!*" Michael spat. Teo could feel Michael's orgasm build in the way every muscle in his body tensed. Teo increased his speed, trying to get Michael off before he came. Their precum helped with the glide of things. Teo slid his hands between their bodies, holding their cocks together, adding more friction. It must have been what Michael needed because he soon felt ropes of cum spurting on his stomach and heard Michael chanting his name like a prayer. The friction, Michael's cum on his stomach, and the sound of his name on Michael's lips drove him over the edge, and he came once again, mixing their cum together.

This time he leaned forward and kissed Michael through his orgasm. "That was amazing," Teo murmured to Michael. "Fucking amazing." He slurred like he was drunk. Drunk on Michael, it seemed. Michael tried rolling off to the side, but Teo wrapped his legs around the other man, trapping him where he was. "I love the

feel of your body over mine,” he murmured before passing out from the two orgasms and the late hour. He must have been fucking drained not to get cleaned up because waking up to dried cum was never fun. But he was too blissed out to care.

MICHAEL

As Teo fell asleep, his body relaxed, allowing Michael to get up out of bed and go into the bathroom. He cleaned up before getting a wet washcloth to clean Teo up too. Michael hadn't planned for the night to end like this, but he couldn't find it in him to regret it. Teo was more than Michael expected, and he wasn't just talking about the awesome sex. Teo was smart, funny, and so talented. The way he spoke about his family touched Michael. He could tell that it was very important to Teo, and for the first time, it made someone more attractive to him. It was like Teo came into Michael's life and changed all the rules on him. Whereas he had always gone for casual, Michael now wanted serious. He never, ever brought anyone into his home, and somehow Teo was here on their first date, and Michael didn't want him to leave. He never had any intention of introducing previous bed partners to his kids, but he was already planning on how to tell them about Teo.

Michael knew it would feel like he was rushing things. But he wasn't. He knew deep in his soul that this was the way things were meant to go. It was crazy because he always thought of himself as a logical man, but it seemed all it took to throw logic completely out of the window was a twenty-seven-year-old artist with mesmerizing gray eyes, a huge heart, and a body made to be worshipped.

Fuck! He didn't realize how perfect Teo was. But as he took in the man lying in his bed, he couldn't help but appreciate the stunning lines that made up his body. Teo naked was a sight to behold. He was long, muscular, and lean, and had a fantastic tan that probably

had a lot to do with his Cuban heritage. Everything about the man sleeping in Michael's bed called to him. He knew some people would expect a freak-out from suddenly going from only being with women to being with a man, but he realized that he hadn't even compared the two. He could say honestly that Teo's face was all he saw. Every other lover had been wiped from his mind while with him. He felt guilty admitting this, but he'd made a promise to himself on his way to pick Teo up that he would work on not feeling guilty. He didn't need or want that feeling touching any part of his relationship with Teo. Michael was self-aware enough to know it wouldn't suddenly disappear, but he also knew that for him to have a future with Teo, he had to lay his past to rest, and he intended to. Michael was willing to do whatever it took to make sure that his future with Teo was more than just a dream, that it became a reality.

Michael didn't know what he had done to deserve this second chance of happiness in the pure soul that was Teo, but he was enough of a selfish bastard not to want to give him up. But selfish or not, Michael was no fool, and he fully intended not to repeat the same mistakes he had made the first time around. He would *never* take any moment for granted he promised himself. He got back into bed and kissed Teo on the forehead before spooning him.

"I don't know why I deserve you, but I'm never letting you go," he whispered to a slumbering Teo before letting himself drift off to sleep.

Michael wasn't sure what woke him, but having Teo in his arms definitely put a smile on his face. It also didn't escape his notice that his morning wood was perfectly poised between Teo's firm, rounded ass cheeks. *Fuck!* Michael couldn't wait to sink his cock into that perfect ass.

Before he could imagine further what that would feel like, Michael heard the distinctive sound of footsteps coming towards his bedroom. He looked at the time and saw that it was nine o'clock. He breathed a sigh of relief at that. As much as he wanted his kids to meet Teo, it was certainly not like this. And since it was only nine, he

knew it wasn't the kids returning from his aunt's because they never got home so early when they stayed with her. It must be one of his housekeepers since it was nine on a Monday morning.

Michael realized the error of that assumption too late to do anything about it, although he was too old to rush Teo into his closet as if he was a kid hiding something from his parents. Still, having his three kids walk in and finding him with someone in his bed they knew nothing about, nor were they expecting was a version of hell he had yet to imagine.

"Oh, my God!" His kids walked in as normal, surprised to see him still in bed at that time in the morning. Like, seriously, how was it possible that the one time he had someone at home with him, Sally decided to be early? The woman was usually never punctual. Were the heavens ganging up on him or something? Michael decided to go for the "rip the Band-Aid off" for this situation since they were already in it. He discreetly woke Teo so the man wouldn't be caught unawares, although that ship had already sailed. But since they were already in the eye of the storm, they had to ride it out whether they liked it or not. Talk about trial by fire. He said a silent prayer that this didn't scare Teo off.

Marlowe poked her head around the door and was about to say something when she saw Teo trying to sit up in bed. Her eyes went the size of saucers at the sight of him. Marlowe's mouth turned upwards into a grin as she started running and hopped up onto the end of the bed, sitting on top of the covers. Nothing could have wiped the sleep out of Teo's eyes faster than a child chattering not three feet away from him while he lay naked with her father. Michael could have admired the intensity of Teo's blush, and appreciated finally having his question whether he blushed everywhere answered, but he didn't have a chance to.

"You had a sleepover with my daddy," Marlowe exclaimed to Teo.

"Uhhh," Teo started before looking at Michael, then Marlowe, and then to the two other kids at the door. Reagan and Luc looked shell-shocked. Unlike Marlowe, they knew what finding their dad with a naked man in his bed meant. Michael would have liked to have broken it to them gently and in his own time, but as the saying went, "if wishes were horses." Teo looked at him with a panicked pleading

look on his face, but Michael was at a loss as to how to proceed himself. Was he supposed to make introductions with him and Teo naked as the day they were born and only covered by a duvet? He must have missed the part in the parenting books on how to introduce your children to Daddy's much younger gay lover, and, oh wait! Daddy now swung for both teams. Yeah, he must have skipped over those chapters because he wasn't sure how to make the situation less awkward.

And if things couldn't get worse. "Does this mean I have two daddies, like Samantha and Emma? Only Mommies and Daddies sleep in the same bed." Marlowe spoke with all the innocence of childhood.

That seemed to jar his older kids out of their surprised stupor because Reagan called her younger sister to her. Marlowe jumped off the bed in excitement and made her way to her siblings, who couldn't seem to meet Michael's eye.

"Aunt Sally is going away for two weeks and wanted to drop us off on her way to the airport. She's downstairs waiting to say hi before she leaves," Luc informed Michael as they hurried out of the room and shut the door behind them.

Once the kids had left, Teo groaned and covered his head with the duvet, but Michael could hear him chanting, "Kill me now," over and over again. With the kids gone, Michael could actually see the humor in the situation. Kind of. He wasn't ashamed of Teo and had fully intended to have him meet the kids sooner rather than later. So, he guessed now was as good a time as any.

Before any of that happened, he had to stop his man, fuck... he had a man. Yeah, those were words he hadn't expected to come out of his mouth, but damn it they sounded right. With that thought in mind, he pulled the covers down so he could see the gorgeous man beside him.

"So that was fun," he said, trying to lighten the situation. He knew he'd frozen for a second, but with time to think, he realized he was fine with the kids meeting Teo right now. He could have done without the naked plus bed part, but well, he wouldn't let that spoil the excellent mood he was in.

Michael moved so that he was lying on top of Teo. "So my plan was to start this morning with a kiss and if I got lucky a blow job. Option two may now be off the table, but I can still get that kiss." He leaned in, fusing their mouths together, not even caring about possible morning breath. He kissed Teo passionately, and Teo returned in kind, opening his mouth, giving Michael entry. Michael's morning wood that had abruptly vanished at the arrival of his kids reappeared swiftly. He wished they could take care of their hard-ons, but he didn't need to give his kids time to speculate, although he couldn't help but grind down into Teo, and he loved the moan the man couldn't hold back. He finally broke their kiss, and held Teo's face in his hands as he gazed intently at the man and revealed with feeling, "Apart from the kids coming in, last night and this morning were absolutely perfect. I find I like waking up next to you."

"Yeah?" Teo asked.

"Yeah," Michael confirmed, "I really do."

"Me too," Teo whispered before sealing their lips together in another kiss. Michael had to remind himself his kids were waiting for them to make an appearance and were probably also waiting for introductions and explanations.

Michael reluctantly broke the kiss. "I think we should get out of bed before things go any further," he said raggedly, trying to tamp down his building need.

Teo sighed with a face Michael could only describe as a pout, which was fucking adorable. "I guess I should get ready. Do you want me to wait up here or slip out while you try explaining things to them?"

"Fuck that," Michael replied vehemently. "No. I want to introduce you to them. I'd planned for it to happen at some point. Looks like my timetable has just been expedited slightly. Not that I'm complaining. It just means more sleepovers." He stood up and stretched, and Teo did the same. Michael couldn't help but take in all that honeyed skin.

"I can get behind having more sleepovers," Teo said while stretching giving Michael an excellent view of that plump and perfect derriere. If Michael wasn't mistaken, it had gone from Teo stretching to using his body to tempt Michael.

"I can't wait to get behind you," Michael growled.

“Like what you see, Doc?” Teo teased, making his way towards Michael, who wanted to pick the man up and dump him back in bed. “Guess it’s a cold shower for you,” Teo purred, wrapping his fingers around Michael’s prominent erection, “and maybe if you’re lucky, I’ll help you with that.” He gave Michael’s cock a nice squeeze before trailing a finger to the tip and gathering some of the fluid there, rubbing it around his lips, then finally licking it all away.

Michael reached out to grab him, but Teo took a step back, then another before turning and running towards the open bathroom door.

“Keep up old man,” Teo teased before disappearing into the bathroom.

They rushed through their shower, although there was enough time for them to give each other mutual hand jobs. What better way was there to start the day? Michael got a pair of sweats for Teo to wear and a plain black T-shirt so he wouldn’t have to put his dinner clothes back on. Michael liked seeing Teo in his clothes. They were a little loose and long, but not by much as he was probably only a couple of inches taller than Teo. Michael got dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, and finally, they were ready.

“Guess it’s time to face the music,” Teo said, “although the offer still stands to wait up here or slip out through a side door or something.”

“Not necessary. I’ll introduce you to them, then drop you off and have a chat with all of them later. At least we know Marlowe is on your team,” Michael joked, trying to lighten things.

“I’ll have to see her room for the mural before I leave, just so I know what the size is. So I can get stencils made to make it go quicker,” Teo babbled.

“We can do that before we leave. Come on, can’t keep them waiting forever,” Michael said, leading him by the hand out of his room, down the hallway to the stairs.

Michael led Teo through the house to the kitchen, knowing that was where he would find the kids. He hoped that his Aunt Sally had left to make her flight, but he also knew he couldn’t be that lucky, especially since it was a private plane, and she could easily change her departure time. She probably had when the kids had told her what they’d seen.

He walked into the kitchen, Teo falling back behind him. Michael didn't like that. He never wanted Teo behind him. He wanted Teo beside him or in front of him so he could watch that gorgeous body as it moved, especially that perfectly sculpted ass that Michael couldn't help admiring at every turn. He walked up to where Sally sat and dropped a kiss on her perfectly made-up cheek. "Hey, Sally. Wasn't expecting y'all back this early."

"I'll say," she said with a cheeky smirk on her face while taking Teo in shamelessly. "He's gorgeous, Mikey. You always did have good taste."

Michael flinched. "You know I hate being called Mikey." The second comment he ignored—he expected nothing else from Aunt Sally. She was the ultimate flower child, hippie hybrid. Even though he was pretty sure she was too young to fit into the age category. She'd also been in San Francisco during the White Night Riots and had told him all about losing lots of friends to the AIDS epidemic in her twenties. It was also why he knew she wouldn't bat an eye at Michael dating a guy. But she would go for shock and awe if he let her. "Don't you have a flight to catch or something, Sally? The kids said you were going on vacation, and that's why you're here this early," Michael asked pointedly.

"Oh, don't worry about me, dear. The pilot said we could get a later take-off spot," Sally said with a mischievous grin on her face.

Michael ignored his aunt. She would do whatever she wanted. The impromptu speech at his wedding had been proof of that. It was better to ignore her and hope she got bored. He faced his kids instead. Honestly he wasn't worried about his kids not being on board with him dating a man. No, that wasn't his main concern right now. His main concern was the question they would have about his relationship with their mother, so he decided he would just go for honesty. Michael faced his kids head on and introduced Teo.

"Luc, Reagan, this is Matteo. He's a ..." *Fuck!* What did he call Teo? They hadn't spoken about labels."

"I'm his friend," Teo finished for Michael. "It's nice to see you all. And Miss Marlowe, it's good to see you again."

"Again?" Luc asked, a suspicious note in his voice.

“Yeah, I thought Marlowe would have told you guys. We met Teo yesterday at her reading,” Michael added.

“Marlowe said she met Julien, and he was going to come and paint her room. We figured she meant Benjamin Wright. She didn’t say anything about some young guy coming home with you.” Luc sneered, dropping suspicion and diving straight into hostility. Michael couldn’t figure it out... He knew his son wasn’t a homophobe. For Christ’s sake, they’d attended some pride events geared towards teens. Luc had gone with Reagan and some of his friends who identified somewhere in the LGBTQIA+ rainbow. He assumed, therefore, it had to do with him dating in general... But that couldn’t be it either. The kids had said it themselves. They wouldn’t mind him getting remarried.

“So, where did you meet my dad?” Michael heard Reagan ask Teo and thanked God. At least only one of his kids was giving him attitude.

“Yeah, where exactly did you meet my dad?” Luc chimed in, his voice harder than Michael had ever heard it.

Michael glanced at Teo where he stood. He saw the question in his eyes and gave a small nod.

“I met your dad at his office a couple of weeks ago...”

Before Teo had a chance to complete his sentence, Luc interrupted him rudely with a question, sounding more interrogatory than friendly. “What were you doing at an OB’s office? You’re not exactly his target patient.” Luc gave Teo a disapproving once-over. Teo was about to reply, but Michael interrupted him before he could get a single word out. It was one thing if Luc was curious, but he was being rude, and that was unacceptable.

“Teo, why don’t you go with Marlowe and get a look at her room. Marlowe, honey, go show Teo where you want your mural to go, okay?” Michael hoped Teo wouldn’t run. Then again, the not-love-sick part of him pointed out his kids were non-negotiable, and if Teo couldn’t handle them, it was better that he left now before things became even more serious between them.

Once he was sure Teo was out of earshot, he looked at Luc and asked, “What was that? Why were you so rude?”

"How old is he, Dad? Oh my God. He looks like he's barely older than we are," Luc retorted, his chin set stubbornly. He knew that look all too well and where his son had gotten it from. His late wife could dig in her heels with the best of them.

"First of all, adjust your volume and tone, young man. I will answer your questions, but if you want to go the disrespectful route, we can table this conversation till you can behave maturely."

Luc gave a grudging nod.

"First of all, not that it is any of your business, but Teo is twenty-seven. Last time I checked, that was older than all of you. Secondly, he was at my office with his sister who is having a baby. Does that answer your questions?" He looked at his daughter first.

Reagan shrugged. "He seems cool, Dad. Totally hot... even though that's, like, really gross thinking my dad's boyfriend is hot. But yeah... nice catch, Dad." Michael's smile at what his daughter just said was wiped off his face at his son's disapproving growl. Sally wasn't helping with her snort, but he noticed she hadn't chimed in one way or another. He wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

"Dad didn't say anything about him being his boyfriend, Reagan," Luc snapped at his sister angrily.

"What if he is?" Michael asked.

"You said he was a friend. Plus, what was he doing at a kids' book signing? Does he have kids too?" Luc asked instead of answering Michael's question.

Michael was holding on to his temper because he knew snapping at Luc wouldn't do any good. But it never for a second occurred to him that his kids would think Teo was too young.

"He was there to work," Michael replied, "And no, he doesn't have any kids."

Luc scoffed, "Yeah, right, work. Work as what? Bet he was looking for wealthy old guys to scam."

Michael told himself not to get into an argument with a fifteen-year-old. "First of all, not only did you just insult me, you insulted Teo, and that is not acceptable. Ever. Not that I owe you any explanations, but he was there for the reading of his books. I'm pretty sure my bank account is safe seeing as he just signed an

eight-figure deal for the rights to The Adventures of Duke and Julien.”

“Oh my God. Dad, you’re dating Benjamin Wright? That’s actually cool,” Reagan replied excitedly.

“Whatever,” Luc murmured, walking out of the kitchen.

Reagan actually gave him a kiss on the cheek and whispered, “I think it’s totally cool that my dad is in the rainbow family, too.”

“Thanks, kiddo.”

“Well... that went well,” Michael said out loud to himself. He did a double take when Sally spoke up.

“Could have gone worse. Benjamin Wright, huh! Nice one, Mikey. I know his mother from the charity circuit... good family I hear, no scandals. Nice lady too. You could do worse. What am I saying? You have done worse.” Sally pointedly referred to Sierra’s family. Michael groaned at the reminder. His late wife’s parents were going to have a field day with this. They hated, well, everyone. Yeah, he was not looking forward to the stress that would come with them finding out.

TEO

When Teo had woken this morning, he'd felt at peace. He didn't regret how their date ended, even for a second, even though it only lasted until he realized it wasn't just him and Michael in the room. He hadn't been sure how or when he would meet Luc and Reagan, but he definitely wasn't planning on meeting them while naked and in their father's bed. The shower hand job was a brief respite, taking him and Michael back to the magic of the night before, but reality had barged in swiftly. He wasn't stupid. Even before Michael had sent him off with Marlowe, he hadn't missed the glares coming from Michael's oldest child. Clearly he didn't have a friend in Luc. Reagan, on the other hand, was polite and sweet. Teo was looking forward to getting to know her better.

After checking out Marlowe's room, he'd come back down to ask Michael if he should simply call an Uber, but before he had a chance to, he'd heard Reagan refer to him as Michael's boyfriend. He'd paused for a moment to see what Michael's response would be because he was definitely not averse to that title being used to describe them. He hadn't gotten a definitive answer one way or another, yet.

Even though he'd offered over and over to order an Uber, Michael had vehemently refused and insisted on driving him home. The ride wasn't as awkward as Teo thought it would be. Michael felt the need to apologize for his son's behavior, but Teo actually got Luc's protective instincts and didn't feel like Michael should be apologizing. Teo was a new entity, and he expected some pushback

from the kids. He just hoped it didn't go beyond that or fester into resentment or something more.

Teo had jumped into his group text with Tris, Lain, and Cris and had a mini freak-out. Sure, he was doing the whole zen thing about Luc not liking him, but he knew that Luc could put a strain on his and Michael's... relationship thing. Or whatever they were. He knew technically he should have shared his fears with Michael first, but how did you tell a guy you've only been on one date with, that you were scared he would choose his son over you. That was just not a conversation you had, especially when you knew that it was a fact. And because, if Michael was the kind of man to put Teo over his kids, Teo would not be attracted to him at all.

Teo totally wasn't surprised to see Tristan and Lain show up at his house that evening. If he was being honest, he'd expected them earlier. He hadn't gone into the details, but the "OMG! OMG!" and "Kill me now..." he'd sent to them kind of made his point clear.

"Yo, Tee, where are you? Hope you have food? Cause I'm hungry, man." Lain shouted from the bottom of the stairs.

"You know there are these rooms called kitchens, and if you go in there, spin around three times, and yell abracadabra at the stove, food magically appears," Teo heard Tris say to Lain as he made his way down.

"Fuck off, man. I'm hungry. If Teo hadn't gone emoji and OMG crazy, I would have stopped off for food or something," Lain replied.

"Yeah, right. You would have turned up here for food anyway," Teo mocked. "Don't blame me. This just gives you a legitimate reason to turn up here. Not that you need one."

"Whatever, guys. So who's feeding me? Where's Cris? He would have whipped something up without the extra sarcasm on the side." Lain sulked with a definite pout.

"You're right. Where's Cris, Tee? I expected him here before either of us. He's been superscarce lately. What gives?" Tristan chimed in from where he was lounging at Teo's breakfast nook.

Teo pulled out his phone and scrolled through their WhatsApp chat. "Hmmm... you're right. I noticed too. It's that new guy none of us have met somehow. I totally thought he'd replied, but he didn't."

"Hmmm, that's strange. Maybe you should call him, Tee," Lain suggested with his mouthful. He was rummaging through Teo's fridge and had clearly found something to munch on.

"Okay, I'm dialing. And, Lain, get your ass out of my fridge. You're letting the cold air out," Teo sniped at his friend.

"But food, guys... Can't you see I'm withering away here? This is hostile treatment to the French," Lain complained, bordering on a whine.

"Please... you're barely French. You can't even speak the language. Although he does love to slide it in there when it's time to pick up guys. And he somehow magically has a convenient French lilt to his voice," Teo teased in what was a long-running joke for them.

"It's not my fault that the accent gets the jocks, boxers, briefs, the odd thong—I do like a man in a thong—off," Lain bragged.

"Okay, his phone is going straight to voicemail. I'm sure he'll turn up with stories about their vacation," Teo said, trying to convince himself more than anyone else.

"Why do you sound like you don't believe a word coming out of your mouth?" Lain questioned.

Teo shrugged. He had this niggling feeling in his gut that all was not well with Cris. He sighed and shared with the guys, "Okay, I have no concrete proof, but seriously, since we all became friends, who has never, ever missed anything? Who turns up early to help set up or just hang out?" Teo looked at Tristan and Lain. Maybe if they said he was crazy, he would chalk it up to him just being a worrier.

Tris and Lain looked at each other and back at him with a worried frown. "Maybe he's busy giving up that ass, and he's not checking for us right now," Lain said, but Teo couldn't miss the doubtful look on his face.

"Fair point. But we always meet each other's dates before we even get to... like, date three," Tristan chimed in. "You guys met Nathaniel only a week after I did."

"Yeah, but y'all were moving in together," Lain replied.

"You would have met him anyway, even though we didn't. Tee is right. This guy Cris is dating has skipped out of every family barbecue, brunch, and dinner we've invited him to," Tris said, thinking out loud now.

“Y’all are being paranoid. But fine, let’s give it a few days, and, Teo, I know you can’t help yourself, so blow up his phone. If he’s still AWOL, we’ll all go check on him,” Lain added reasonably. “Plus, I’m pretty sure we came here for Teo’s drama, so... can you spill already?”

“Yeah, Tee, spill. Did you let the doable doc mount you like a prized mare, or is it stallion? Whatever. You know what I mean,” Tris asked with a mischievous gleam in his eye.

“First of all, we would both be stallions in that scenario. Secondly, we didn’t totally have sex. I am a lady after all,” Teo replied with a wink as he placed a plate of warmed-up lasagna in front of Lain and a glass of Ribena in front of Tristan. It was something his mom got them into. It was a British concentrate that they’d been drinking since they were kids, and he and Tristan always had cases in their houses. He’d even got Samantha, Emma, and Wyatt drinking it. He remembered the first time Mom had offered Lain and Cris a glass of squash when he’d brought them home from college for the holidays. They’d looked a little concerned until Teo explained to them it wasn’t the vegetable but a British drink.

“Okay, no more stalling. Spill. How was the date?” Tris asked.

“It was the best date I’ve ever been on. Michael was such a gentleman. Like, he did the door opening thing. And he was just so...” Teo sighed, thinking about last night. Before he knew it, he was lost in thoughts of Michael.

“Earth to Teo. Check you out, looking all dopey and shit!” Tris teased.

Teo smiled and was giving the play-by-play of dinner, how he and Michael just seemed to connect, how easy it was when they were together, but he was interrupted by Lain, “Blah, blah, blah. Get to the good stuff. Like cut or not cut... inches and all that good stuff.”

“Oh my God! You’re such a perv. And you know I don’t kiss and tell,” Teo replied. Tris was snort laughing. Neither of them was too surprised at the question, though. Lain was all about the get down and get out.

“Ha... Since when? You had no problem dishing in the past.” Lain snickered before taking another bite of his lasagna.

"It's different, right? Like you feel as if you want to savor it and keep it just between the two of you," Tris chimed in, hitting the nail on the head.

Teo smiled shyly. "Yeah. That's the perfect way to describe it."

"So bloody whipped, dude. Like, seriously. It's only been one date. If you weren't gonna dish, why are we here?" Lain complained, even though he didn't really mean it.

"Well, looks like you're here to stuff your face," Tris teased Lain.

"Bite me! We can't all have perfect fiancé's now, can we?" Lain said.

"If you stopped fucking your way through LA, then you probably could," Tristan reminded Lain.

"Yeah! No thanks. Y'all can keep your monogamy. That shit is not for me," Lain replied, as he usually did.

They were all used to this rant from him. For some reason, Lain believed in monogamy for the others but not for himself.

"Back to me, guys! Okay, Michael and I had an awesome date, like I said. And one thing led to another, and we ended up at his place... and you know... stuff happened," Teo explained, making his friends squeal like children. "But then this morning, the worst thing ever happened. Michael's kids came back early and walked in on us."

"Holy shit. Like, walked in, walked in... like, y'all were getting busy doin' the dirty?" Lain asked, more gleeful than was absolutely necessary.

"Stop enjoying my pain. And no, we weren't getting busy, but we were naked when they walked in. I was legit asleep, and I woke up to kids in the room. I wanted to die. Like, legit prayed for the end kind of die," Teo said dramatically.

"Dude, that's just wrong. You were naked in front of kids? Yeah. Yeah. It was under a blanket... but still... Damn, you're sick, Tee," Lain declared, joyfully teasing Teo.

"Why do I bother with you guys? So freakin' helpful... Not... I was trying to say that Luc, Michael's son, completely hates me," Teo whined.

"Duh... So the boy walked in and found your naked ass in bed with his dad. Of course he gave you shit! Bro... think about it," Tris

added. Even though he was technically being helpful, Teo didn't miss the smirk on his face. His friends were the worst. *Geez!*

"By the way, can we just have a moment of silence for Mr. We-Have-To-Be-Seriously-Dating-Before-We-Have-Sex putting out on the first date. You ain't playin', boy... Go get you that doctor," Lain added very unhelpfully.

"It's always the quiet ones, right? Freaky Teo. Giving up the ass," Tris chimed in, encouraging Lain's crazy.

"Sweet on the street and a freak between the sheets, that's our Teo!" Lain ragged gleefully.

"But, really... you actually talked to Marlowe while you were nekkid? With her Daddy?" Tristan asked.

"What else was I supposed to do? Cover my head in shame? Don't get me wrong. I totally thought about doing that, but... yeah! I had to act all grown up..." He sighed. "I hate adulting." Teo slumped in his seat dramatically.

"Calm down, lady. It's not that bad. Michael doesn't seem to be stressed about it, so why are you? The kids aren't going to love you immediately. You know it takes time. The whole naked thing, they didn't see any bits, so that's a victory in itself. Don't go all Teo on the situation and overthink it," Tris said seriously.

"Yeah, I know I'm giving you shit, but the doc seems like a good guy, so just go with it, and maybe you'll end up all locked down, like that one over there," Lain said, pointing at Tris.

"I knew there was a reason I kept y'all around," Teo replied.

MICHAEL

Michael knew some would expect him to have had a freak-out or something at this point about Teo being a man, but honestly? All he felt was complete. It was certainly different, but not as different as one would think. Teo made him feel alive and whole. He could not remember a time he wasn't completely focused when he was at work. His career was always important to him, but Teo had managed to make him lose focus. The man was haunting his sleeping and waking hours. If he'd thought that going on a date would change that, he'd been mistaken. Somehow it had intensified his need for the younger man. It was like when you unwrapped a gift, but what you found inside was even more than you thought, so instead of satisfying the curiosity from before, you were in a state of constant longing to get back to playing with the gift when you were away from it. Not that Teo was a toy, but he was certainly a gift. One Michael had no intention of taking for granted.

He'd probably lose *cool points* for texting Teo the same day as he'd dropped him off, but he didn't care. He was too old to play coy. He wasn't going to do the whole "wait three days" thing. Although he had to admit to himself, it probably had more to do with the fact that he couldn't bear to wait that long. Somehow Teo had come into his life and turned it upside down. But Michael wasn't complaining. He'd just been going through the motions before, but now he'd actually awakened looking forward to his day.

It was three days since their first date, and Michael was finally going to see Teo again. They'd managed to get together for coffee the day before, but it was such a brief meeting Michael didn't feel like it counted as a date.

For the first time in recent history, as far as Michael could recall, he was actually leaving his office for lunch. He met Teo at a bistro not far from his office, and the moment he laid eyes on him, he had to have him in his arms. Michael didn't care who saw them. He was unapologetic about his personal life. His children knew about Teo, and anyone who disapproved could shove their opinion where the sun didn't shine. He knew there was a possibility some of his clients wouldn't be okay with the fact he was dating a man, but Michael honestly couldn't give a fuck.

Michael had sacrificed enough for his career, and Teo wasn't going to be another victim. Besides, when it came to fetal surgery, the next best surgeon was at the Mayo Clinic, so he was pretty sure his practice would survive, and if it didn't, well, that was fine too. He knew he was being all doom and gloom and that times had changed. He also knew if this had happened at the start of his career, eighteen or so years ago, it would have been a whole other ball game. But he now had a good enough reputation to be able to turn people away if he so chose—not that he did. So, if anyone had a problem with his personal life, they could fly off elsewhere for treatment. He knew who he slept with had no bearing on how well he practiced as a doctor, but he also knew there were some people that would think it did.

He knew he had a stupid grin on his face all day. Even his ultrasound technician commented on it, but Michael couldn't help it. He thought back to the words he'd said to Teo when he'd fallen asleep in Michael's arms.

"I want to wake up to this every morning."

He knew Teo had been asleep, but he meant every word. He knew he should be scared of how strongly he felt about Teo after such a short time, but he wasn't. It was almost exhilarating. It was the kind of feeling you got when you were at the top of a roller coaster right before the drop. The excitement, expectation, and a little terror. But he was ready. So *fucking* ready. His heart felt whole for the first time in forever. He wasn't ready to use the four-letter

word yet, it would change everything, but he knew it was what they were leading to. He knew he'd found his next and hopefully final chapter. Teo was the destination at the end of the road for him, and he was so *very* okay with that.

Michael knew he had to take it slow. He didn't want to scare Teo away. Not a lot of men of that age were ready to settle down. Especially with an instant family in the mix. Still, he couldn't wait to get home today. The knowledge that Teo would be there already had him counting down the hours till it was time.

Michael rushed home from work. He'd actually managed to get out of the office at five o'clock. He'd also made sure he wasn't on call. It was a time of firsts, it seemed. He felt guilty for being able to leave work early if he put his mind to it. But he figured it was one more way he was learning from his mistakes. One of Sierra's major complaints revolved around him working too hard, which was ironic seeing as she was one of the youngest junior partners in her firm. That definitely didn't happen without some seriously billable hours. But Michael was intent on making different, better choices this time around.

He would admit that since Teo had left his bed, he'd been counting down the hours till he could get him back in it. His mind kept supplying images of Teo under him, Michael exploring his body, memorizing it, savoring every detail. Before his imagination could supply any more vivid X-rated images, Reagan came out of the music room and saw him.

"Hey, Dad. You're home early," Rea said.

"I... I'm... I'm not. It's after six. That's not early," Michael replied.

"It is for you though." Reagan chuckled, probably spotting the guilty look on his face. "Don't worry, Dad. I'm only teasing... he's out in the backyard with Marlowe, helping her with some art project."

"Is Luc home yet?" Michael asked Reagan.

"He was, but he told me to tell you he went out and he'll be back before curfew," Rea informed him.

Michael reined in his temper at his oldest. It would do him no good yelling at Reagan because of Luc. His son knew better than to go out without even sending his father a text. Michael was also aware Luc had an issue with Teo's age, but this was no way to behave, and he was not about to let it slide. They needed to address it before it became a bigger issue.

He kissed his daughter on the forehead and made his way to the back of the house in search of Teo. Michael had this nervous, excited feeling in his belly. Coming home to Teo in his home made him feel giddy. He could imagine it becoming a permanent thing. He hoped that one day it would. He saw himself arriving home and Teo coming out of whatever room he was in, meeting Michael at the door when he heard the "Honey, I'm home."

Michael could see himself waking up to Teo's smile and it being the last thing he saw before going to sleep. If he hadn't known before, he knew now—he was in serious trouble when it came to Teo Benjamin Wright. He knew it was the early signs of him falling head over heels. It was such a rush.

Since Sierra's death, he'd been sure he'd never feel like this again, but his feelings for Teo were proving him wrong.

His mind tried telling him that Teo could do better than a damaged, older man with three kids, especially when one of the kids wasn't exactly hiding his animosity towards Teo.

Michael had to admit there was a part of him that felt slightly guilty when he'd realized dating Teo could be beneficial because he was a man, but it was true. His mind had supplied that at least his kids would never feel like Teo was replacing their mother. He put that thought process out of his mind forcefully.

When Michael made his way out back, what he saw made his breath catch in his chest. All the lights were turned on. Teo and Marlowe had canvases out and were both painting on the deck. Teo was giving Marlowe pointers and patiently helping with her technique, and his daughter was taking everything in. They hadn't even heard him making his way out to them; they were so engrossed. Michael took a moment to appreciate the scene before him and added it to the mental list of why Teo was perfect.

Michael walked over as quietly as possible, not wanting to startle either of them. The scene made him wish someone was painting them too. Michael knew his daughter was gifted, but seeing her and Teo engrossed in their art showed just how talented she truly was. He also didn't miss how she seemed to be clinging to every word coming out of Teo's mouth. They both looked like they were having tons of fun. Michael was hesitant to interrupt.

An intense feeling of rightness washed over Michael. Teo and Marlowe looked so right together. They'd clicked on their first meeting. Sure, it didn't hurt that Teo was her favorite author, but his youngest daughter wasn't exactly the most sociable person outside of Michael and her siblings, yet she'd quickly warmed up to Teo. Michael could imagine Teo slotting into their lives seamlessly, making them a family of five again—once Luc got on board, of course. Not that he intended to let it be a problem.

The urge to sneak up on them and put his arms around Teo was strong, but Michael felt like he needed to set a good example for his kids. If they were married, he wouldn't hesitate. Michael didn't miss how easily he imagined himself married to Teo. He didn't even have the urge to run as far and fast as he could at the idea of matrimony, as was always the case before now.

"Hey, guys," Michael said, making himself known.

Teo turned around first, and the urge to lean in and kiss him made Michael step forward, but he caught himself in time and simply hugged Teo, giving him a kiss on the cheek. Marlowe didn't get up but excitedly said, "Daddy, look at my painting. Teo said I'm very talented."

"You most certainly are, sweetie," Michael said, planting a kiss on the top of her head. "It's so good, my little artist. When it's done I would love to hang it in my office."

"Teo, Daddy said he'll hang it in his office. We have to finish up our paintings," Marlowe said with a huge smile on her face directed at Teo.

"We certainly will, princess. You should tell Daddy to pay for it because you're a professional. Such good art should be paid for," Teo said with a fond smile on his face especially for Marlowe.

Michael loved how easy it was with Teo and Marlowe. He hoped it would be the same with the other kids once they got to know Teo better.

"Yes, Daddy. I'm a professional, you have to pay for it," Marlowe said with a serious look on her face.

Michael swallowed his laughter at how serious his little daughter looked. "Yes, honey, Teo is right. I will pay for it. My first Marlowe original."

Marlowe beamed at him before turning back to her canvas. Michael could feel Teo's eyes on him like it was a caress. Damn it, he wanted Teo in his arms right now. He wanted to tell him thank you for making his kid smile, for going above and beyond anything that was expected of him.

"So," Teo said.

"So, I see you guys are having fun. I really hate to interrupt," Michael said.

"You could never interrupt," Teo replied with a small smile.

"Yeah?" Michael asked.

"Yeah," Teo reiterated.

Teo smiled shyly at Michael, who felt his stomach swoop. Was he too old for swooping? He felt like he was free-falling twenty stories with no parachute.

Teo was turning his whole world upside down. Then again, maybe it had been upside down all this time, and he was putting it right. Michael didn't know, and he didn't care. All he knew was that he hadn't felt this carefree in ages, and he would do anything to hold on to it. He was going straight to hell for the thought, but he wished his daughter would take her leave and let them be alone. He must have had someone looking out for him up there because Reagan came outside. "Hey, munchkin, wanna watch some Netflix with me before dinner?"

Marlowe looked torn. She clearly wanted to go with her sister but didn't want to stop painting with Teo. Michael was about to chime in, but Teo beat him to it. "How about we pick up where we left off next time I'm here? The paint needs time to dry anyways." Marlowe clearly wasn't having any of that vagueness, because she replied, "Tomorrow?"

“Uhhh,” Teo stuttered, looking at Michael helplessly. “If your dad doesn’t mind.”

“Daaaddeeee.” His daughter made daddy sound like it had ten syllables with how she dragged it out.

“If it’s not too much trouble for Teo, tomorrow is fine by me.” Michael could have kissed his daughter for wanting Teo here the next day. Marlowe was moving things along beautifully for him. He needed to get both his girls a present. Although that seemed like poor parenting, rewarding his children for helping him get laid.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, sweetie,” Teo said to his daughter with a smile. Marlowe jumped down from her stool and walked right up to Teo, giving him a hug. Michael smiled at the easy affection developing between the two of them, but for the first time, he found himself jealous of his child. Just for a solid second. He wanted to be in those arms himself.

Once they were alone on the patio, they drifted towards each other like two magnets that couldn’t keep away. “Hi,” Michael said when they were standing so close a breeze couldn’t pass between them.

“Hi,” Teo replied, his lips close to Michael’s. Even though they were outdoors, Michael felt like the space had shrunk to the size of a closet. The air between them was heavy and teeming with anticipation and heat.

Teo swallowed before saying, “I missed you. Is that weird when I only saw you yesterday?” He started to babble.

“Missed you too,” Michael whispered, cutting him off before he could say anymore. He brushed their lips together in a barely there kiss. Michael’s heart was pounding in his chest. Everything between them felt heightened. He wet his lips and brushed them against Teo’s, making him gasp and moan. The sound made Michael’s cock twitch in his pants. Finally he went in for a kiss, their lips making contact. A deep moan rumbled in Michael’s chest, like a thirsty man getting his first sip of water. Michael missed having Teo in his arms. It felt so fucking good to kiss him again. *Fuck*, this man intoxicated him; he felt drunk just being in his presence. He wanted to breathe him in, memorize his scent and the feel of his body pressed against his.

Michael felt his heart swell almost painfully in his chest. He was fucked. This man had him. He wasn't sure Teo realized that Michael was his. Completely. The kiss between them went from sweet to heated in no time flat. Michael walked them to the corner of the patio against the wall away from any prying eyes. He knew it was one of the camera blind spots from his teenage years. He pressed Teo against the wall, trapping him with his own body. Not that Teo was trying to get away. Michael nibbled on Teo's lips, seeking entry. Teo ground his hard and hot erection against Michael's in search of relief, practically dry humping like teenagers. They weren't just kissing, and Michael knew if they didn't stop soon, they wouldn't be able to stop at all.

Arousal crawled down Michael's spine, making him almost light-headed. He held on tightly to Teo, kissing him back for all he was worth. Michael pulled away, putting space between them, his chest heaving like he'd just run a marathon. Teo's skin had a lovely tinge of pink, his eyes were glazed, and his lips were puffy from their passionate kisses.

Michael had to take a few deep breaths to calm himself before he pounced on Teo again as this time, he wouldn't be able to stop. Teo made him act like a teenager on prom night, all eager, with absolutely no finesse. What he had in mind definitely needed privacy and preferably a nice comfortable bed. He wanted to ravish Teo until they were both breathless and exhausted, until their legs couldn't hold them up anymore. He fucking wanted the man naked and panting in his bed. All his primal urges were kicking in, and Michael was ten seconds away from sweeping the younger man off his feet and carrying him to his bedroom. Only the knowledge that his children were somewhere in the house tamped down his raging libido.

Once he had his breathing under control, he closed the gap between them, "I like coming home and seeing you in my house. It feels right," Michael said quietly, as if he was revealing a secret.

"I find I like being here too. Marlowe and Reagan are great. They really made me feel welcome," Teo replied.

"Good," Michael said. He was about to lean in again and crush his lips to Teo's once more when he was interrupted by his phone

ringing. "I have to take this. I'm not on call, but they might need me if it's an emergency they can't handle." Michael pulled his phone out of his pocket without taking a step back from Teo.

"Dude, we've been waiting for you to call and give us the details of your date. Did it go well? Is there going to be a second?" Reid fired without bothering with a hello.

"Hello to you, too," Michael replied.

"Dude. Don't make us turn up at your house. You know Alexis is nosy enough to show up just for the gossip," Reid said, ignoring the sarcasm in Michael's voice.

"Yeah, Alexis. Dude, we all know *you're* the one that wants to know. Stop blaming it on your wife," Michael retorted, still not giving Reid any of the information he wanted.

"Fine. Will it take me admitting that it's me for you to spill?" Reid replied.

"Hmmm... Give it a shot," Michael replied cheekily to his best friend.

"Fuckin' jackass. I've literally cracked detainees in Afghanistan quicker."

"Keep your knickers on, soldier," Michael teased. As close as they were standing, Teo could hear every word of the conversation, and he'd been quiet so far, smiling at the banter between Reid and his man. At that comment, he finally let out a snort, giving away the fact that Michael wasn't alone.

"Wait. I'm pretty sure that wasn't any of the kids. He's there, isn't he? Can he hear me? Hello? In case Michael hasn't told you who I am, my name is Reid, and I'm his brother... Basically."

Teo looked at Michael questioningly, asking if he should speak. Michael nodded. "He's told me *a lot* about you. It's nice to put a voice to the stories," Teo teased.

"Whatever he said, they're all lies. I'm an angel and the best friend he could possibly ask for," Reid said.

Teo laughed before replying, "He said very nice things, actually." Michael couldn't help but notice how Teo's face filled with pure light, and Michael wanted to bask in it.

"I guess since you're there now, the date went well. Your man was panicking about what to do on a date, so if he knocked it out of

the park, you're welcome," Reid replied.

"Hey! Hey! I was not panicking. Steven, please put a muzzle on your husband," Michael chimed in.

"So you're not the one that..." Steven thankfully cut off whatever Reid was about to say. "Hey, Teo. As you heard, I'm Steven, Reid's husband. Don't mind those two."

Teo replied with a smile in his voice, "It's fine. I have best friends and they would totally do the same thing."

"Well, we can't wait to meet you, Teo. I'm sure that will happen very soon, but let's leave you and Michael to your date. Bye," Steven said, although they could hear Reid complaining in the background before Steven hung up.

"Well, that was fun," Teo chirped, looking at Michael with a mischievous glint in his eye. "So you were panicking, huh?"

"I was definitely *not* panicking. Don't listen to Reid. He talks a lot of nonsense." Michael laughed, holding Teo's hand and leading him indoors.

"Hmm. I think that means talk to Reid. He knows all Michael's secrets," Teo replied, eyes dancing with laughter.

"Well, I guess that means you wouldn't mind me having a chat with Tristan," Michael bantered back.

Teo let out the cutest snort before replying, "Tristan is a vault. He will never tell." But he couldn't even say that with a straight face. "Okay. Okay. Truce. Who am I kidding? He will spill everything and take great pleasure in doing so."

Michael loved how Teo leaned into his body as they made their way to the kitchen. He loved how easy things seemed to be between them. Like they'd known each other forever.

"So would you stay for dinner? Tell me about your day? Don't leave yet, please?" Michael asked.

"I would love to," Teo replied with a grin.

TEO

Teo knew it was foolish to get attached to Michael's kids, but he couldn't help it. He did a mini victory dance inside when Michael asked that he stay for dinner. Michael had made it clear that he didn't bring dates home around his kids. Teo had to stop himself from jumping to conclusions about what that meant. He must have gotten lost in thought because Michael had to gently nudge him and ask him again how his day went.

"Sorry about that. Just got a little sidetracked," Teo said apologetically. "My day was awesome. Marlowe is a little boss in the making."

Michael laughed, "What did my little miss do now?"

"Let's just say she has definite opinions. In fact, she was directing me on exactly how and where she wanted what place," Teo told Michael, looking back on his day with the little spitfire.

"She gets that from her mother. Sierra was very forthright and always knew exactly what she wanted," Michael said.

As they talked, Michael pulled out a baking sheet that had what looked like spaghetti squash topped with broccoli, bacon, and cheese. "Do you need any help?" Teo asked.

"Could you please set the table? The plates are over there in that cupboard." Michael pointed to his left. "And the cutlery is in the drawer below. The glasses are in the cupboard by the fridge, and you can also find the placemats in the drawer at the end there. I usually have the kids do it, but thank you."

“Oh, it’s my pleasure,” Teo replied as he followed Michael’s instructions, setting the table. “So do you guys do family dinners every night?” Teo asked as he set out the plates for five. Michael didn’t answer immediately, so Teo looked up about to ask the question again, but he stopped at the guilty, regretful look on Michael’s face. He was about to take the question back, but Michael started to answer.

“More than we used to before, that’s for sure. I worked a lot you know, residency and then my fellowship in fetal medicine. Then I was setting up my practice. It was always something. Anyway, I missed a lot of family dinners, trips, all that. And after Sierra passed, I didn’t really know what to do with the kids. I wasn’t around enough to really know who they were, you know? Anyway, I left a lot of stuff to Sierra’s sister and our former housekeeper, who’d been with us since I was a kid. Wasn’t until she had to retire, I realized that my kids were growing up and I barely knew them. So, I decided to try and make family dinners a regular occurrence at least four times a week. I usually call Frederick on nights I can make it, and he cooks and leaves us to it. Sorry, I’m babbling,” Michael said. “You asked a simple question, and I gave you a whole essay.”

Luc finally came into view, taking longer than was necessary to make it from the front door to the kitchen. “Where were you?” Michael immediately asked his son.

“Out,” Luc replied, a defiant look on his face.

Teo was close enough to Michael to hear him grinding his teeth as he took a deep breath before asking his son again, “Out where? Why didn’t I get a text, and why didn’t your sister know where you were?”

Luc shrugged without replying. Instead he walked over to the fridge, opening it and pulling out a bottle of water.

“Lucas Michael Ashworth, I know you’re not ignoring me.” The tension in the room was so thick Teo felt he could choke on it. Luc was a miniature version of Michael, so it was like looking at the past and present version of two bulls fighting for dominance. He felt completely uncomfortable. Was he supposed to weigh in and cut the tension or just keep quiet? He wasn’t sure, and he was five seconds away from getting stress hives.

Lucas huffed and twisted his face like he'd tasted something sour, or whatever look teenagers knew how to pull off to show their utter disinterest in humanity, humanity being their parents. "What? I told you I was out. And I'm back before curfew and in time for dinner."

Teo wanted to give them space. He didn't think him being present when Michael scolded Luc would earn him any points.

"Maybe I should just leave..."

But before he could even finish his sentence, Michael said, "No, you're not going anywhere. It's fine... dinner is served. I'll deal with this later." He looked over at Luc. "Go get washed up and get your sisters down here. Dinner is ready. We'll talk about this later."

Luc snorted before leaving them alone. Teo felt so awkward he couldn't exactly point out to Michael that his child was being a snot-nosed brat, so he decided to ignore the ministandoff that had just gone down and picked up the salad Michael had thrown together.

"He's not usually like that," Michael said. "I guess he's just having a hard time adjusting." Teo looked over at Michael where he stood at the island plating the spaghetti squash. Michael's head was bent, shoulders sagging in defeat.

Teo felt the need to reassure him. "I'm not going anywhere, you know. Kids are kids. Teenagers especially. We're good." He walked up to Michael, and the man turned and faced him. They brought their foreheads together, not kissing, just connecting. He looked into Michael's eyes and reiterated, "We're good. I'm not going to leave just because you had a disagreement with your son."

"Yeah?" Michael asked, seeking confirmation, not just vocally but staring into Teo's eyes like he was looking for something. He must have seen whatever it was because he gave Teo a peck. As he stepped back, Marlowe and Reagan made their presence known. Teo wasn't sure what they'd seen or heard, but the girls didn't seem to have the scowl Luc sported, so Teo took it as a win.

They managed to sit down for dinner without much more drama, although the silence was deafening. Teo was sitting between Marlowe and Michael, but unfortunately he was across from Luc. And although everyone else may have missed it, whenever he met Michael's son's eyes, they were shooting daggers at him that Teo

studiously ignored. He was not about to have a battle of wills with a fifteen-year-old. No way.

Marlowe, sweetheart that she was, seemed to be the only one talking at the table. She described in great detail the mural Teo had done in her room, excitedly to her dad. It had Teo preening like a peacock. He'd only done a mural for two other little girls and those were his nieces, and Marlowe was quickly becoming as important to him as they were.

"It's beautiful. You're really talented," Reagan said shyly. Teo was surprised that she was directing words at him. Sure, she wasn't outwardly hostile like her brother, but he wasn't really sure where he stood with her either. Teo had grown up with Mariana, so he knew better than to agitate a teenage girl. Somehow he felt like Luc being the one giving pushback was a little easier to deal with. Teenage girls were a minefield that required careful maneuvering.

"Thank you, Reagan. If you ever want something done, let me know. It doesn't have to be from my books. I'd be happy to help," Teo said, taking a shot at connecting with the older Ashworth daughter. She smiled at him, making eye contact. Teo knew that was like getting a gold medal in teenage girl world.

"Yeah? That sounds cool. I'll look online to see if there's anything I'd like."

"You can text me anytime. Just get my number from your dad." Teo was not expecting what came next at all. "There's a party next weekend, if you're not busy, uhhh... would you..." She trailed off, not finishing.

Teo jumped in immediately. "Shopping? I would love to. We can make a day of it, brunch, mani, pedis..." He cut himself off, realizing he was making plans with Michael's daughter without his permission. "I mean, if that's okay with your dad. Of course." He looked at Michael and mouthed an apology in case it felt like he was overstepping, but thankfully Michael just smiled.

"It's fine with me."

That finally seemed to be the straw that broke the camel's back for Luc. "Oh my God. Can we stop acting like it's okay that he's here? Dad's been screwing some guy who's like barely older than we are for, like, five minutes, and suddenly he's at family dinner? Bet

that's why he's even home early. Not like we've had one of these in, like, three weeks," Luc said with an angry scowl on his face, his voice choked with tears.

"That's *enough*, Luc. Do not ever speak in that tone of voice to me. I am still your father, and you will respect me whether you like it or not," Michael said, raising his voice. Teo put a hand on Michael's shoulder to try and calm him down, but he was having none of it.

"I don't have to listen to you. You're barely even here, anyway. And now you're dating some young guy, and you'll be here even less. Why can't you date Aunty Ashley? She's Mom's sister, and she at least cares about us. Not some random guy," Luc said, pushing his chair back so hard it fell over before he went storming off.

"I'll talk to him," Michael said. "He's just having a hard time adjusting, that's all. It's nothing. Don't know where he got that ridiculous idea about Sierra's sister. That's never happened," Michael said in a imploring tone to Teo.

"It's fine," Teo said. "Just fine." They all clearly heard the door slam from upstairs, and Teo couldn't let the fight between Luc and Michael escalate, "Why don't you go and talk to him. The girls and I will hang out for a while. And go easy on him. He's just processing."

MICHAEL

Michael was shocked at Luc's behavior. Clearly there was more to it than just Teo's age according to all his son just yelled at him. Michael made his way up to Luc's room, thinking about what to say all the while. He had to admit he liked how well Teo and his girls were getting along, and all that was missing was Luc, so he had to fix this. He also had to let him know there was no chance that he would ever date Sierra's sister, Ashley. Where he had gotten such a ridiculous idea was a mystery to Michael. He stood in front of Luc's door for a moment, taking a deep breath and hoping that whatever he needed to say would come to him, before knocking. Teo was right. Luc was just processing, so he couldn't come at him angry.

He waited a beat, not wanting to go in with no invitation, but Luc was clearly ignoring him because Michael had to knock again. When he still got no response, Michael called out, "I'm coming in. Luc" before opening the door and making his way through his son's sitting area to his bedroom, where he found him face down on the bed. Michael sat down on the corner and took a deep breath before speaking, "I knew that you kids seeing me with someone would be an adjustment, Luc, but I didn't think you would be so mad. Son, what's really going on?"

He said a prayer that Luc would actually speak to him and not do "the whole ignore Dad until he gives up and leaves." "Luc, I know I haven't been a very good Dad since before your mom died, and sure, I know I still work a lot. But don't ever doubt that you and your

sisters are my priority, and my spending time with Teo doesn't change that." That finally had his son rolling over, even though he still wasn't making eye contact. "I know you're upset, but what you said was rude to both Teo and me."

Michael heard a mumbled, "I'm sorry" from Luc.

Well, that was at least a start. "Talk to me, son. I can't fix it if I don't know what needs fixing." Michael hoped he was wrong, but he had to ask. "Is it because it's a guy I'm dating? Because I know you've mentioned some of your friends are gay and bi." That finally had his son sitting up, even though he did put more space between them.

"No. Never. I don't care if you're gay or whatever. But does that mean you never loved Mom? And is that why you never brought a date home? ...and why now? Why him? ...he's so young. Couldn't you, like, date someone your own age?"

Michael sighed. He should have addressed the issue about their mother with them before. He'd known it would be an issue, but he never thought it would hurt his son this much. "I loved your mom very much, Luc. Never doubt that. She wasn't some sort of beard for me. She was the love of my youth. And Teo is the first guy I've ever dated. If we want to put a label on it, I'm bi, not gay, like your Uncle Reid."

"Does that mean you're gonna end up with two people like Uncle Reid?"

"No, I don't think so, Luc. I was just using him as an example so that you realize that whatever happens with Teo doesn't take away from what was between your mom and me. I heard what you said about me missing so many family dinners. I promise I'll do better, but you have to know, none of that is Teo's fault. Could you please just give him a chance, Luc? He's great if you'd only get to know him." His son looked away, and Michael really hoped he was thinking about all he'd said.

"I'm not going to plan any shopping trips with him," Luc mumbled.

"I can respect that, son. I'm not asking you to. I'm just asking that you give him a fair chance. Oh, and maybe show him that you have better manners than you've displayed so far."

Luc groaned and turned around to finally face him. "I was kind of rude, wasn't I?" Luc said, not really asking, but Michael answered anyway.

"You were. But it's fine. He gets it."

"Yeah, because he was a teenager, like, five seconds ago," Luc said. Michael was about to scold him again until he saw the mischievous twinkle in his son's eyes and the smile he was trying to fight.

Michael had to smile at that. "Actually, mister, he hasn't been a teenager for eight years, I'll have you know." His son snorted at that but didn't say anything. "Luc, son, I'm not asking you to be best friends with Teo, but if you got to know him, maybe you'd like him."

"Do you think you'll, like, marry him?" Luc asked tentatively.

"I don't know yet, son, but would it be so bad if that happened?"

"I guess I kind of always hoped you'd end up with someone like Aunt Ashley, Dad."

Michael had to stop himself from laughing at the incredulity of the suggestion. "Why on earth would you think something like that?"

"Because she's kind of like Mom, right? And she was over here a lot right after Mom died, and I guess..." Luc shrugged, not finishing his sentence.

"You guess what, son?" Michael prompted.

"I guess, I thought she would be the next best thing if we couldn't have Mom," Luc said, voice hitching. Michael scooted closer to his son and pulled him in for a hug.

"Oh, son, nobody can replace your mother, and I wouldn't want them to. Teo being here doesn't mean we can't remember her or celebrate her. I don't want to ever replace her, Luc, but Teo is the first person to make me happy since she passed away."

"Well, I'm still not going shopping with him, but I'll try to be less rude," Luc muttered.

"You could just say I'll be nicer." Michael laughed.

"I can't make that promise yet," Luc said with a straight face.

"Fair enough. I'll take it. So, how about we go down and see if there's any dessert leftover for us" Michael suggested.

"Yeah. Yeah, Dad, I'll go apologize to your *boyfriend*," Luc said, getting up. "I'll just go wash my face."

“And he’s not my boyfriend.” *At least, not yet*, Michael thought. He wasn’t even sure how that conversation even went.

Michael couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief. That had gone better than he’d expected. Granted, Luc didn’t agree to be best friends with Teo, but Michael would take not rude for now. Michael also realized that he had to do better. He was doing the bare minimum with his kids, and that wasn’t okay. He knew he worked a lot, but most of that was unavoidable. You couldn’t always schedule when babies were born, and he was still the go-to doctor for a lot of difficult births. But he could do much more. He thought he’d been doing better, but his son being so pissed at him not being there proved he wasn’t. And he hated the thought that his kids would think that dating Teo would take him away, even more.

Michael had to admit though that Teo was already making him a better dad because he knew he probably wouldn’t have thought to come speak to Luc immediately. He would have stewed a little at how his son had spoken to him before going in guns blazing.

He waited for Luc to come out of the bathroom, and they made their way back to the kitchen together. The scene he walked in on gave him a warm and fuzzy feeling. Teo was standing behind Marlowe, who was sitting on a lot of pillows while he put her hair in a beautiful French braid, and Reagan was chatting along, asking him if he would do the same for her and teach her how to do it.

“So how did you learn to do the braids?” Reagan asked, standing right next to Teo.

“My sister. She made me learn so I could do it for her sometimes.”

Reagan pulled out her phone. Michael was shocked to realize his daughter even had it put away. She was usually surgically attached to that thing. She must have pulled up a picture because she was showing it to Teo and asked if he could do it for her, and he replied telling her he would love to.

Michael cleared his throat, making their presence known. “Looks like you guys are having fun.”

“Yeah, Teo is teaching us how to do French braids. How cool is that?” Reagan said.

“You could have gone on YouTube if you really wanted to learn,” Luc said to his sister, making his way towards the oven in search of dessert, and Michael followed. He jumped in before Reagan came back with a reply and the two of them got into another fight.

“It looks really nice. Did you say thank you to Teo?”

“Yeah, we did, Dad,” Reagan replied. Michael didn’t miss the snort from his son beside him, and he was five seconds away from snapping at Luc, but he didn’t want to ruin the moment the girls were clearly enjoying. He also didn’t want to ruin the good time Teo seemed to be having. Michael hadn’t missed the huge smile on his man’s face when he walked into the kitchen. Teo finished with Marlowe, and Reagan excitedly took the seat Marlowe just vacated and let her hair down. Teo got to work doing some complicated looking updo style with French braids for Reagan.

As Teo worked on his daughter’s hair, Michael spoke. “So Luc has something he wants to say, don’t you, Luc?” He didn’t miss the sigh from his son before he muttered the most unconvincing apology ever.

“Sorry,” he muttered with a mouth full of pie.

“I don’t think Teo heard you through your dessert,” Michael said, but before he could ask his son to apologize again, Teo chimed in,

“No problem. Thank you, Luc.”

Michael wanted to tell Teo the apology wasn’t enough, but as he looked at the younger man, Teo must have read his mind because he shook his head. So Michael let it go and finished his pie while waiting for Teo to finish off with the girls. Luc left once his pie was done, not even bothering with a goodbye to Teo, but Michael would go with baby steps in that situation. Teo finished Reagan’s hair, and her face lit up like a Christmas tree as she took in her hair using the camera on her phone. She jumped up and gave Teo a big hug, which he returned just as excitedly.

“Okay, time to get ready for bed, ladies. It is a school night. Say goodnight to Teo,” Michael prompted. Teo crouched down to Marlowe’s height and gave her a hug, and his younger daughter held on to his neck like she didn’t want to let go. Reagan had to separate them. Teo stood, and Reagan gave him a quick hug and said thank you once again before herding Marlowe out.

“Alone at last.” Michael sighed.

TEO

Teo was suddenly shy once the kids had left. He was also very happy with the way the night had gone, except for the whole Luc part. He knew he needed to give Luc some time, but a part of him wanted the kid to like him straight away. At least Reagan seemed to be warming to him. When she had asked him if he knew how to do French braids once they'd been left alone, he had jumped at it like a man trying to get on the last life raft of the Titanic. He probably stank of desperation, but he really wanted Michael's kids to like him. He wished he had something to do with his hands right now, but he'd already cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher.

He finally looked up and caught Michael staring at him intently like he was the last donut in the box and Michael was starving. Teo actually found himself taking a step back, but that seemed to excite Michael because he seemed to move as Teo did. He couldn't miss the sleek lines that made up the older man. He was like a jungle cat stalking his prey—and Teo didn't mind being prey for this man. He was willing and ready to be caught.

"So you survived your first family dinner, and you're still here. You're either a saint or a masochist," Michael said when he was right in front of him.

"They're great, Michael. I guess they just need to... erm... adjust... not that... they... I mean, not that I... oh, hell," Teo groaned. He knew he was babbling, but he didn't want to seem forward and say that Michael's kids had to adjust to him being around.

"I want you here for more dinners and stuff, if that's what you were trying to say," Michael said, saving Teo from making more of a fool of himself than he already had. "And I hope they more than just *adjust* to you," he added before placing a kiss on Teo's lips. "You're beautiful," Michael said, smiling softly. "Have I ever told you that?" He reached out, tracing the line of Teo's collarbone, then letting his hand slide down, brushing over Teo's nipple through his shirt on the way down before lifting the shirt and skimming over the skin at the top of his belt buckle. There was no way in hell Michael couldn't see how hard Teo was. Judging by the bulge he could feel against his thigh, he wasn't the only one.

Teo loved feeling the evidence of what he could do to Michael. It was so fucking hot. It was a heady feeling knowing how they were affected. It made his mouth dry and his stomach tight and fluttery.

"So, does this mean we're dating now? I'm not sure how this works, but we've been on three dates, you've met my kids more than once, been to family dinners. I've met most of your family. Your sister likes me. So, does that make us official?" Michael asked with a hint of shyness Teo wasn't expecting.

Teo smiled at that. He hadn't known how to bring up the conversation with Michael, and he was kind of glad that Michael was the one to address it. "Do you want us to be official? Are you asking if we are boyfriends? Are you not too old to be called a boyfriend?" Teo teased.

Michael nipped him on his neck for the comment before asking, "Well, is that a yes?"

"Why, Dr. Ashworth, are you asking me to go steady with you? That's what they said in your time, right?" Teo asked, basking in the newfound confidence of Michael wanting to put a label on their relationship.

Michael playfully took a step back and wore what could only be described as a pout. "Just how old do you think I am, Mr. Wright?"

Teo darted forward and captured Michael's lips, crashing their mouths together. Sucking on his lower lip. "I like you just the way you are, Doc, and I would love to go steady with you."

"Stay a little longer?" Michael asked.

Teo played with Michael's belt buckle and kissed him again, mouthing, "Yes."

"You know the way to my room. Wait for me there. I'll go check on the kids and meet you," Michael suggested.

"You have to give me some space first, Doc," he reminded Michael, who was still pressed against him. Michael took a step back hesitantly, almost like it was physically painful not to be touching Teo. "I'll be waiting for you after you've done your rounds," Teo said, placing another kiss on Michael's lips, then taking himself upstairs out of Michael's reach before they ended up naked on the kitchen table.

Teo made his way to Michael's room and let himself in. After he'd toed his shoes off, he took the time to look around at the frames and other personal items Michael had in his space. There were framed pictures of all three kids, and a frame that had a picture of a man and a woman, with a smiling kid of around six or seven between them. From the resemblance to Michael now, he assumed the picture was of his parents. There was also one of Michael and Sierra and what looked like a graduation ceremony for Michael. Teo picked that one up, studying the woman Michael had chosen to spend his life with. She looked like the perfect all-American girl. Blonde hair, brown eyes, curvy in that Scarlett Johansson kind of way that even he could seem to appreciate, and with a smile that lit up her whole face. He could immediately see what Michael had been drawn to in her. She looked warm and inviting with a spark of intelligence in those brown eyes.

There was a little part of Teo that was jealous of her—of the life she had enjoyed with Michael, of the children they shared. He knew it was irrational, but there it was. He was jealous of the history they shared, one he could never compete with. He was so lost in thought he didn't hear Michael come in until he was standing behind Teo looking over his shoulder.

"That was at my med school graduation. I got married and graduated the same year. Sierra was actually already pregnant with Luc in that picture."

"Wow, how did you manage a kid and... residency, right? That's what comes after medical school?" Teo asked, leaning into Michael.

“Well, we had help. We had a housekeeper my parents previously hired. She helped raise me and stayed on to help with our kids. I was just about to start residency, and Sierra was in her final year of law school. We needed all the help we could get.”

“I like hearing about your life and your past. Thanks for sharing it with me. I know some parts are hard to talk about,” Teo whispered, leaning back against Michael’s chest. He loved the size difference between them. At six feet, there weren’t many men who could make him feel small, and he was relishing the feeling of being safe in Michael’s arms. He found he kind of liked leaning on Michael literally, and he hoped figuratively too, but only time would tell. He turned around so they were face-to-face.

“I like sharing with you,” Michael said, leaning in for a kiss. He sealed their lips together, sucking on Teo’s lower lip. Teo reached down and pulled Michael’s buckle open, then slid the belt out of the loops, and opened the buttons of Michael’s pants. Michael maneuvered them over to the bed until the backs of Teo’s knees hit the edge, and they lay down.

Teo looked up at Michael, and his heart faltered at that moment. He loved the feel of Michael on top of him, those strong thighs straddling his hips. He wanted Michael like he had never wanted anyone before, and it made him a little light-headed.

“Will you let me take care of you? God, I want you, so fucking much. I love feeling how much you want me. Let me show you,” Michael asked in a deep, husky voice filled with need. As Michael spoke, he ground their cocks together, rubbing against one another. Teo was being driven insane, his need getting higher. Michael leaned in, slanting his mouth over Teo’s and thrusting his tongue deep into Teo’s mouth. Teo matched Michael tongue to tongue, thrusting his hips, needing more friction on his aching cock.

He had Michael’s shirt wadded up in his hands, holding on for dear life. Michael broke their kiss, brushing his cheeks against Teo’s jaw, and Teo took a deep breath, taking in Michael’s intoxicating scent. He could smell the shampoo Michael used—it had a hint of mint to it—and his cologne that was a little woodsy, but beneath all that was a redolence that he knew was all Michael, and Teo was drowning in it. He inhaled deeply, committing the aroma to memory

for when he was alone. Michael's eyes met his and held firm, his breath huffing into Teo's mouth. Teo leaned in, sealing their lips together yet again, needing the taste of Michael back on his tongue. He still had Michael's shirt in his grasp, and he lifted it till they had to break their kiss to allow him to take it off, and Michael did the same for him.

Teo wasted no time in diving back into their kiss. He parted his lips and let his tongue glide between Michael's lips, slowly slipping inside. Teo's hand snaked up Michael's back around his neck, holding his head in place while their tongues danced together. Their movements were becoming urgent as they kissed and ground their cocks together, moving in sync, Teo's cock hard and leaking. He nipped and sucked on Michael's mouth and moaned into it. Teo was lost in a haze of lust and sex. He grabbed onto Michael's ass and squeezed, making Michael groan.

Fuck! Teo couldn't help but imagine sinking his cock into Michael's hot, tight hole for the first time. He growled at the thought that he would be the first and hopefully, the *only* person to share that with Michael. He hoped like fuck that Michael was open to bottoming. Teo may have been vers, but he wanted to top Michael—Desperately.

His hand held Michael's hip in place, and he angled upward against him. "Fuck, this feel so fucking good. I love the feel of you. Your body on mine is making me crazy," Teo said, his voice sounding husky and growly to his ears. "I could cum like this, grinding against you like we're a couple of teenagers."

"I haven't felt this turned on in fucking ages," Michael replied, not stopping the rhythmic movement of their cocks.

"Let me show you how good it can be between us," Teo whispered into Michael's mouth, placing his hand on Michael's cheek before taking his mouth again and thrusting with his body, using his elbows for leverage to flip them over. He knew that without Michael's help it wouldn't have been possible, but he didn't miss how the older man's eyes grew wider. He broke their kiss again and put some space between them. If he was going to rock Michael's world, then he needed to pull himself together before he shot like a teenager with no self-control.

Teo stood and took off his pants, tossing them aside. He then focused back on Michael, and trailed his fingers down his chest, flicking Michael's nipples with his nails, making him shiver. He trailed down until he got to Michael's pants, then pulled the zip down carefully, mindful of the hard cock begging for freedom. Michael's pants were soon down past his thighs and thrown to one side.

Teo thought Michael was absolutely gorgeous, his muscles sculpted but not overly so. His skin had a golden glow to it, and Teo wanted to lick every inch from top to bottom. His hands shook a little as he hooked the waistband of Michael's underwear and tugged them down, Michael lifting his hips helpfully. Finally, Michael was naked, and his cock lay on his stomach heavy and thick, making Teo's mouth water.

Fucking hell! Michael had such a perfect cock. Thick and long with prominent veins Teo couldn't wait to feel against his tongue. He couldn't help but notice the precum gathering at Michael's slit. He rubbed his finger around the head, gathering some for a taste. He moaned as Michael's flavor exploded on his taste buds.

"You taste so good," Teo said, making Michael groan and bite his lip. He couldn't miss how Michael's eyes had darkened, no hint of green to be seen. Teo bent over and flicked his tongue over the sensitive head of Michael's cock, teasing, before pulling back. Michael moaned and begged for more, making Teo smile wickedly.

"Patience. I'm just getting started." Teo knew he was usually reserved around people and they would probably assume he was meek and submissive in the bedroom. Although he did go for being dominated sexually from time to time, he liked to take the reins on occasion and drive his partner crazy with pleasure. He gripped Michael's cock, and he bit down on his lip as if trying to hold in a groan. "I want to hear you moan. I want to hear how good I make you feel. I don't want to make you freak, but I want you so fucking much," he murmured, giving Michael friction on his cock.

"I'm not going to freak. I know what I want," Michael panted.

Teo had to take Michael at his word, trusting him with his heart and hoping he was making the right decision. He hoped he wasn't being ruled by the intimacy between them. He bent over, breathing in the scent at the juncture of Michael's thighs, nipping the sensitive

skin there, making gooseflesh appear, and leaving Michael writhing. Teo blew at the head of Michael's cock, making him arch his hips.

"I need..." Michael moaned. Teo knew what Michael needed, but he wasn't ready to give it to him. Teo took his time nibbling and kissing before finally getting to the base of Michael's cock. He flicked his tongue out, licking firmly across the skin between his balls and cock, making him squirm and moan. He flattened his tongue and dragged against the vein on the underside of Michael's dick, noticing as Michael gripped the sheets tighter. Teo licked his way to the head of Michael's cock, licking the precum coming out of the slit. *Fuck!* The taste made his mouth water. He finally took Michael deep, stretching his lips around the thick cock. He couldn't help but imagine feeling that stretch in his ass, the thought making his hole clench.

Michael was lost in the pleasure, whimpering and moaning as Teo bobbed his head and hollowed his cheeks. Teo sucked for all he was worth, wanting to make this the best blow job Michael had ever received. He used one hand to reach for Michael's balls, rolling them in his palm before giving a gentle tug. Teo took a chance, and reached further, lightly brushing his taint. He was pleased that Michael spread his legs, giving him access. He released Michael's cock from his mouth for a second to ask permission, not wanting to take things further than he was ready for.

"Are you okay... with me... Can I?" Teo wasn't even sure how to ask. Fortunately Michael seemed to take the hint.

"Please."

Teo looked him in the eye intently. "You know I'm asking to play with your ass, right?"

"Yes," Michael replied. "I won't know what I like until I try, right?"

"Right," Teo echoed. "Lube?"

"Top, left-side drawer," Michael said, pointing. Teo didn't miss the glazed look in his eyes or the shallow breaths he was taking or the flush to his skin. He wasted no time, rolling over and opening the drawer to get the slick he assumed Michael used for when he jacked off. He quickly got back into position, taking Michael's cock deep in his mouth again while lubing his fingers. He made sure to get Michael good and hard, and moaning, before rubbing his lubed

finger over the tight inviting hole. He tapped against Michael's hole, rubbing circles around his rim. He knew he couldn't just slip in before Michael relaxed. Teo kept up the suction on Michael's cock while rubbing against his pucker till he felt it give. Then Teo pushed the tip of his finger inside and groaned at the heat surrounding his digit. Michael moaned too, and Teo took that as permission to keep going.

He pressed his finger deeper inside, making Michael thrust firmly into his mouth. Teo took his time searching for Michael's prostate, ready to introduce him to new levels of pleasure. Michael bucked and moaned, his cock leaking profusely in Teo's mouth, letting him know he'd hit the jackpot. He sucked harder and relaxed his throat, taking Michael all the way back. He took his fingers out of Michael's hole, and the man let out a groan from the loss. Teo added more slick to his fingers before pushing one finger back in, followed by a second. Michael moaned louder, now fucking Teo's face while gabbling.

"Fuck, oh God, so good." Michael's groans and the heat from his hole had Teo's cock aching and leaking more.

He let Michael fuck his mouth while he played with his ass, massaging his prostate. Teo couldn't miss how Michael's balls pulled tight against his body, and how his cries became more desperate and his thrusts became sharper, right before he felt the first spurt of release against his tongue. He saw how Michael bit down on his lip, and heard the grunts he couldn't quite hold in as his orgasm ripped through his body. Teo let himself sink into the experience. Taking in the look of tortured pleasure on Michael's face until his orgasm subsided and smoothed out. Teo released Michael's sensitive cock from his mouth and withdrew his fingers, making Michael moan a little. Teo crawled up Michael's body and kissed him softly on the lips until he opened his mouth, letting Teo in once more to share the taste of Michael's seed.

Michael broke the kiss. "Wow. I don't think I can move. I think you sucked my bones out through my cock." He gave a small chuckle.

"Well, that means I did it right," Teo bragged. He hadn't come yet, but that was okay. He'd wanted to give Michael all the pleasure first.

"If you give me some recovery time, I'll reciprocate," Michael said, even though he looked like a puddle of goo and wasn't moving.

"I'm fine," Teo told him.

"Yeah, and that's a gun I can feel against my thigh." Michael laughed.

"That wasn't about me. We can take a rain check," Teo said, putting his head on Michael's chest, listening to his heartbeat.

Teo felt a hand grip his cock, making him moan, and he heard Michael say, "No rain check. It's my turn to blow your mind."

How could anyone argue with that?

MICHAEL

Michael made sure Teo got to come twice, and he got to come once more before they collapsed under the covers. They lay there together afterwards, quietly enjoying just being, giving Michael a quiet moment or two to examine his feelings about what Teo had done to him.

Teo was happy to see Michael wasn't freaking out. He knew he wasn't quite ready for full-on penetration, but at least the question on whether he was open to it had been answered.

"How have I never realized what that could do for me? That was possibly the most intense orgasm I've ever had to date," Michael mused out loud, making Teo snort laugh.

"Stick with me. I'll show you a whole new world?" Teo replied cockily.

"Did you just quote Aladdin to me?" Michael asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, if I did... you recognized it, sooo... Ya.. You can't judge me," Teo said before yawning.

Michael realized he was having fun. Teo made him laugh. It was also Michael's first time cuddling post-sex in as long as he could remember, and he already loathed the thought of Teo having to go. "I know you have to leave, but I really don't want you to," Michael shared earnestly.

"I don't want to leave either, but we cannot have your children finding me in your bed again if for no other reason than Luc hates

me enough already.” Teo burrowed further into Michael’s chest if that was even possible.

“He doesn’t hate you,” Michael said, kissing the top of Teo’s head. “He’s just having a hard time, I think. Marlowe barely remembers Sierra—she was so young. Reagan is a little better but not by much. Luc probably has the most memories of her. Even though the kids mentioned me dating again, I don’t think they imagined what that would be like, and they’re still getting used to the idea. Marlowe and Reagan seem to be on board, and I’m sure Luc will come around eventually if we give him enough time.”

“I hope you’re right, and I hope you told Luc no one could ever replace his mother.”

“I did, but I think he may need to hear that from you too when the time is right,” Michael replied.

“Well, we’ll have to cross that bridge when Luc stops giving me death glares. By the way, I was going to ask what’s with the whole you and Sierra’s sister getting together.” Teo lifted his head off Michael’s chest to look him in the eye questioningly.

“I have no idea. Sure, she spends time with the kids. Luc more than the girls. I’m not sure why though. Marlowe isn’t really a fan for some reason, and I think Reagan had a falling out with her recently because she’s refused to go meet her whenever Luc has. I asked why, but she wouldn’t say why they stopped hanging out. But I know something must have happened because Reagan would have asked her aunt for help last year or even a couple of months ago, but she asked you instead,” Michael shared with Teo.

Michael was not a fan of Sierra’s family in general. Her sister, Ashley, was manageable, but Michael knew she saw dollar signs whenever she looked at him. Sierra herself had avoided her family as much as possible while she was alive. Even when they’d met at college, she’d told him that she’d worked hard to get her scholarship so she could move out of the house as soon as possible. The first time the family had met him, they’d been completely uninterested, but once they’d realized who his family was, they’d changed their tune so fast they almost got whiplash.

“Did you try asking Luc?” Teo asked.

"Asking Luc what? Sorry, I totally spaced out," Michael said apologetically.

"It's fine. I said did you ever trying asking Luc why Reagan wouldn't hang out with their aunt?" Teo asked, resting his head back on Michael's chest.

"Well, unless Reagan told him, he wouldn't know. She came back from a shopping trip one day and has refused to go anywhere with Ashley ever since."

"Huh. Well, I guess until she's ready to share, you just have to be patient. But why would Luc think you would date her, let alone marry her?" Teo asked Michael while lightly stroking his chest.

"I have no idea. I have never even hinted at it. But maybe she has. Who knows? It's definitely something Ashley would do," Michael said, a hint of anger creeping into his voice because the more he thought about, the more sense it made. "Where on earth would Luc get such an idea?"

"Calm down, big guy," Teo said soothingly. "Why are you getting angry. It's not a big deal."

"Sierra had a complicated relationship with her family, and let's just say I'm not their biggest fan either."

"So why do you let the kids see their Aunt Ashley? Doesn't sound like you think much of her," Teo asked in a considering tone.

Michael sighed before replying, "Well... she's their mother's sister, so I didn't think I should keep them away from her, especially after how helpful she was after the funeral and how much Reagan and Luc seemed to like hanging out with her... well... at least until recently."

"Maybe you should speak to Ashley," Teo suggested. "She may be more forthcoming than Reagan, and you can ask her about why Luc thinks you and she could end up together." Michael didn't miss the hint of jealousy Teo tried to hide, not that he did a very good job.

"You know I don't want her, right? There has never, nor will there ever be anything between Ashley and me. No way. She's definitely not my type," Michael said reassuringly.

"Oh? And what exactly is your type?" Teo asked, moving away from his chest, sitting up like he needed to look at Michael while he answered.

"You're my type," Michael said softly before stretching up and placing a soft kiss on Teo's lips.

"Nice answer, Doc," Teo said with a small snort. "But I wasn't fishing. I was wondering what your usual type was."

"Honestly? I don't have one. Obviously I can tell if I find someone attractive, like I do with you," Michael said, smiling at Teo. "But it's more like personality stuff, you know. I like smart, funny, big-hearted, family-loving, gray-eyed, nice-assed artists." Michael pulled Teo closer until his back was against Michael's chest.

Teo laughed and pinched his thigh playfully. "Dr. Delicious thinks he's slick too. My momma did warn me against silver-tongued devils," Teo said, unable to hide the humor and pleasure in his tone.

Michael couldn't help but laugh too, especially after hearing what Teo called him. "What did you call me? Dr.... what?" he asked, squeezing Teo around his waist. "Dr. Delicious, huh? I should have that printed on my cards." He tried flipping Teo around to see his face, but the younger man wouldn't let him. "So, you think I'm delicious. What other lovely names do you have for me?" He nipped Teo gently on his earlobe.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Doc. I think old age is making you hear things or something."

"I'm pretty sure that's not how it works, but I could tickle it out of you," Michael said in a mock threatening voice.

"What are you, twelve?" Teo quipped. "And I am so *not* ticklish."

Michael would have had an easier time believing him if not for Teo trying to wiggle his way out of the hold Michael had him in. "Is that so? Let us test that theory and see where it gets us." He tickled Teo on his side, making the younger man burst out laughing while begging for him to stop.

"Uncle. Uncle. Okay, I surrender, Dr. Delicious, or maybe you prefer Dr. Do Me or Dr. Delectable or perhaps you're more of a fan of Dr. Sexy, Dr. Yummy..."

"Looks like someone's put a lot of thought into those," Michael said, laughing with Teo. "I have to admit I have not laughed this much in forever. Thank you."

"I love that I can make you laugh," Teo said while turning around in his arms.

"I love that you make me laugh, too," Michael said seriously, placing a kiss on Teo's mouth.

Teo sighed before pulling away. "But I still have to go. It's already past midnight. If I stay any longer, I won't want to leave."

Michael sighed, holding Teo tighter to his body. His arms already felt empty at the thought of Teo leaving, but he knew he was right. "Setting a good example is no fun." Michael reluctantly let go of Teo, giving him room to get out of bed. Michael followed, walked over to his closet, and pulled out a pair of sweats and a plain black T-shirt to wear walking Teo out.

Michael ignored the need coursing through him. He wanted to push Teo back into bed, put his arm back around the one person who had given him a reason to smile, and never let him go, but he let logic rule instead. He walked out to see Teo standing in his room all dressed up, checking his phone, faced away from Michael, so he walked up behind him, wrapped his arms around Teo's waist, and kissed him on the neck before placing his chin on his shoulder. "When am I seeing you again?"

Teo exhaled before replying, "I have some work to do for the next few days, and I promised Tristan and Nathaniel I'd watch the girls." Teo hesitated a second before adding, "Do you think Marlowe would like to spend the day with us?"

"I'm sure she would love that," Michael said, nipping at Teo's neck, careful not to mark him, even if he kind of wanted to. "I'm castigating myself for standing here a little jealous of my daughter, who will probably get to see you before I do," he admitted reluctantly, not wanting to sound clingy. Clingy was never good.

Michael spun Teo around to face him, stroking his chin before bringing his face closer for a kiss which lasted several minutes, and Michael could feel his cock making a valiant effort to get back in the game, but after two orgasms, he was spent. He reluctantly broke the kiss, then put their foreheads together. "Guess I should walk you out then."

"You don't have to. I can find my own way out," Teo whispered back at him as though speaking any louder would break the spell they'd created.

“No. I want to walk you out. Good excuse to spend more time with you, even if it’s just the distance from my room to where your car is parked. Plus, we’re dating now. I kind of like the idea of walking my boyfriend out,” Michael said, testing the word *boyfriend* on his tongue and liking it. “If I had my way, I would drive you home, but you have your car here.”

“I do like the sound of boyfriend,” Teo said, grinning happily as they made their way out of Michael’s room, hand in hand.

TEO

Teo had been cooped up in his house all day working, although admittedly he'd gotten less done than he usually did. Between daydreaming about Michael and calls from his family, he was barely on schedule for what he had planned today. But he couldn't even find it in himself to stress. The happiness in him overshadowed the fact that he was probably going to miss his deadline and that he'd barely gotten enough sleep.

After he arrived home from Michael's, he had a hard time falling asleep. He tossed and turned, acutely missing the feel of Michael's strong arms around him. If that wasn't enough, he'd sent a text to Cris who was usually up late or woke at the slightest sound, but he was still getting no replies from him.

Teo: Cris, where are you? Everyone is getting worried. Check in.

He didn't get a reply. The morning passed, and he was into late afternoon and decided to send another message.

Teo: Seriously, dude, I know you're all boo'd up, but we're worried. Let us know you're okay. xx

He waited another twenty minutes and didn't get a response back. So he opened the group chat.

Teo: Still not heard from Cris. Text and called no reply. You?

Tris: Dropped a text, got nothing back.

Lain: Me too. Tried calling, and he sent me to voicemail.

Teo: You sure it wasn't switched off?

Lain: Yeah, got cut out midring, so I figured it was a DND thing going on or something. When did he say he'd be back from his trip?

Tris: Uhh... Let me look.

Teo: Friday. So day after tomorrow.

Lain: Well, why are we all worrying if he's still on vacation.

Teo: Have we ever been out of contact this long... Even on separate vacations.

Tris: He's right. Plus, remember when I moved in with Nathaniel, and I told you he was being all weird.

Lain: You guys are paranoid. He has a man, he's on holiday... bet he comes back with a tan all glowing and stuff.

Teo: You mean, bet he comes back all red and sunburned. You know he can't get a tan to save his life.

Tris: He's gonna kill us when he reads this.

Teo: I'm gonna kill him for making us worry so much.

Lain: Okay! Stop stalling, Tee. I want those first drafts ready to go on time.

Teo: You're no fun,... taskmaster.

Tris: Really should get back to work on this order if I want to make it home on time. But needed a break. This detailing is killing my back.

Teo: Who's this one for? Or is it all confidential and shit?

Tris: It's for that actress marrying the country singer... I've forgotten their names.

Teo: OMG! You mean Ivy Reign and her HOT! HOT MAN, Ash Lewis.

Tris: LMAO! Stalker, much... Yeah, them...

Teo: Shut up! You know you think he's yummy too.

Lain: He's fuckable. Can we please move on now. Thanks.

Tris: Someone's in a bitchy mode.

Teo: You mean his default setting.

Lain: Bite me.

Tris: So how's Dr. Do Me?

Teo: Well, he knows I call him Dr. Do Me for starters.

Teo snorted to himself, remembering how mortified he'd felt at letting that slip.

Tris: Spill.

Teo: Too long for text. Call me later.

He wanted to tell the guys about him and Michael making things official, but he wanted to see the looks on their faces as they heard the news.

Teo: BTW... How's Nathaniel doing with days when you're home late.

Tris: Better! But you know how it is. Some things won't change overnight, so I make sure he knows if I'll be back late. I text before I leave the bakery. And sometimes we speak all the way home.

Lain: WHIPPED.

Tris: Hater.

Teo: Losers.

Teo: Lain, you here for dinner tonight?

Lain: Yup.

Teo put his phone down, and tried going back to work, but his concentration was shot. He thought about it for a second before deciding to send Michael a text. He'd let him know he'd gotten home safe that night, and they'd even exchanged texts earlier in the morning, but he was missing Michael.

Teo: So how's the doctoring going today? He put the phone down, judging himself for being so weak, but he missed Michael, and what was the point of being all coy? They were technically dating. There was nothing wrong with texting your boyfriend at work. Teo loved calling Michael his boyfriend—it sent an excited shiver down his spine. He tried to pretend he was busy while waiting for a reply from Michael, but he was really staring at his phone every minute. He couldn't help the sigh of relief at the text chime, and seeing Michael's name pop up.

Michael: Same old. A lot of hormonal pregnant women. One natural birth and one emergency C-section that was touch and go, but thankfully mother and baby are okay.

Michael: Your text made me smile. How's your day going? Did you manage to get a lot done?

Teo: That's good news. Can't imagine what it'd be like if a baby didn't make it. Must be difficult for you. And I got some work done, but I'm pretty sure Lain will bitch that it's not enough.

Teo had to wait about five minutes before he got another reply, but he figured Michael was busy, so he could be patient.

Michael: Sometimes it happens, and that's the worst part of my job. I hate having to tell a mother bad news about her child. Whether from a miscarriage, stillbirth, or finding a birth defect. There are some things that never get easier.

Teo felt for Michael. He couldn't imagine having a job like his. He couldn't imagine having such fragile lives in his hands. And he couldn't imagine how his beautiful man felt when he couldn't save the life of a child. He had to know how to deal with those days because life was cruel, and he wanted to be there for Michael.

Teo: Do you have some sort of ritual for the bad days that I should know about?

Teo stared at the chat, and saw Michael type and stop over and over with the dots appearing and disappearing.

Michael: I try not to get lost in the darkness, and I definitely try and keep it away from the kids. But sometimes I feel so helpless, you know? Like what could I have done differently? Even when I know there was nothing else I could do. Even after all these years, a loss hits me hard, makes me doubt myself. But I have to snap out of it because I know it's not about me.

Teo: You're a good man, that's why. Some people might get numb to it, but you have a good heart.

Michael: I don't know about that. I like that you see me that way. But I don't want you to see only the good parts, Teo.

He thought about how to reply. Because Michael was right. They couldn't only show the parts they wanted the other to see. For this thing between them to last more than a minute, it had to be all or nothing.

Teo: I don't want to see only the good parts. I want to know every little part of you, Michael. I wanna know all the parts that make you who you are. Because I like what I know so far. And just to put it out there, if you ever have a bad day, I'm here. We can just sit together, no talking.

Michael: I'm happy to hear you say that because I want to know everything there is to know about you, too. Because so far, I think you're amazing. You make me laugh and smile. I want to experience

new things with you... And I may just take you up on that offer. But maybe instead of sitting, we can cuddle... hopefully naked. ;)

Teo smiled at that. He liked how Michael saw him. He liked that he could bring some joy back into his life. Teo couldn't imagine losing his spouse, and he hoped he never had to, but a selfish part of him whispered that if Michael wasn't a widower, Teo wouldn't have this shot with him.

Teo: Naughty! Naughty Doctor. But I'll gladly sit or cuddle with you whenever you want.

Michael: I'm so glad you walked into my office. I'm even more thankful Mariana turned out to be your sister.

Teo was about to reply, but he saw that Michael was typing something else, so he waited.

Michael: You chase the darkness away.

He wasn't sure what Michael meant by that, but he was happy to know he brought light into Michael's life.

Teo: So not fair to tell me that in a text when I'm so far away from you. But you make me very happy too. :)

He waited for a reply, but Michael seemed to have disappeared, and he figured he was busy. He would usually get all antsy if his boyfriend didn't reply to a message like that, but for the first time in a relationship, his partner made him feel secure. His head and part of his bruised heart tried to tell him he was being gullible trusting Michael, but Teo knew that was his fear talking because Michael was a good man.

With all the baby talk Teo couldn't help but wonder if Michael would want to have kids with him. He knew that if they ever got to the point of marriage, he would love Michael's kids as if they were his own. Hell, he was already halfway there, and he was only just now getting to know them. Teo had always dreamed of having kids with his husband, and he thought that maybe it would happen with Michael.

He managed to get lost in Photoshop and Illustrator for the next few hours. When he wrapped up for the night and shut down his computer, he'd been sitting for so long that he had to stretch out the knots he'd gotten while working. He needed to start dinner if Lain was going to turn up, so he left his home office and made his way to

the kitchen. Teo wasn't sure what he wanted to cook for them tonight, and as he was looking at his fridge for options, his phone rang from where he'd left it on the island. He rushed to get it, hoping it was Cris or Michael. It turned out it was neither. His caller ID showed *Mom UK*.

"Hi, Mom," Teo answered. He quickly walked back to his office to get his wireless headphones so he could cook and chat at the same time because he knew a call with his mom was never short.

"Hmm, I'm not sure if this is my son because my son would have called me more than once during my trip."

Teo sighed. Okay, so he was getting Dramatic Mom today. Good to know. "I'm pretty sure we spoke, like, right before the auction."

"That was ages ago, Teo. You know you should call your mother more often, especially when you've been seeing someone new. Someone serious maybe?" Teo didn't miss the hopeful note in her voice and just knew his sister had been gossiping again. It couldn't have been Tris, because he would have told Teo immediately after telling his mom. Ri was so dead.

"It was Ri, right? She told you... the bloody traitor."

"Be nice about your sister. She's my only good child. She calls her mama... unlike some people I know. Tell me about this guy? Ri only mentioned that you'd been out on several dates."

"Well, at least she didn't spill everything," Teo huffed.

"Oh, please. You knew she would spill, so quit whining and talk."

"Well. His name is Michael, and he's Ri's Ob/Gyn. He's a little older, and he has kids."

"Oooh. I do like an older man for you, honey. And the kids... that's amazing. How many kids and how old exactly? Don't think I didn't catch you trying to slip the older part in there without giving me an age. Is he young-old or Dad and me old?"

"Oh my God. No, Mom. He's only forty-two. And he has three kids, two girls and one boy."

"I do like the sound of that. You know your grandparents had a similar age gap, and they were very happy together. But what's his deal? Where's the ex?"

"Nosy much, Mom. And he's a widower. His wife passed away several years ago."

"That's so sad, honey. I could never imagine losing your father."

That made Teo sigh. He hoped one day Michael would say that about him to their kids. "How's Dad by the way? He seems to be loving Facebook at the moment, sharing all those pictures of your trip."

"He's wonderful, honey. He needed the time off. You know he's not ready to retire, but I have to force him to slow down so he will be with me for a long time yet."

"Argghh, you guys are too sappy, gosh! So, are you still back this weekend?"

"Yeah, we are. Are you boys going to come over Sunday? Or should we wait till next week?" his mom queried.

"I'm not sure, yet. I'll speak to the guys, but won't you need to rest? You'll be jetlagged."

"You know I prefer to get back in the time zone I'm in as soon as possible. But let me know soon, honey."

"I will, Mom."

"Well, I can't wait to meet that doctor of yours. Does it mean I can ask Ri for all the details now?"

"You were totally going to anyways, Mother, so why bother asking."

His mom laughed loudly before adding, "You know your mother so well... But you sound happy, honey, and that makes me so happy too."

"I am happy, Mom. Very happy."

"Talk to you later, son. Love you, Tee."

"Love you, too, Mom. Bye."

It looked like today was "talk to everyone important in his life" day. Not that he minded. Now if he could just get in touch with Cris, he could stop worrying. He knew that Lain and Tris thought he was just being Teo and worrying, but something in his gut told him something wasn't right. But he was going to honor the timeline that Cris gave them before turning up at his house and camping out there if necessary. With his mind made up, he went back to making dinner for him and Lain while making a note to call and curse his sister out for her big mouth.

MICHAEL

Michael had been enjoying texting back and forth with Teo. He knew he would not be seeing him till the weekend, which he wasn't happy about, but they were both adults with full-time jobs. He'd been having a good day until Ashley had turned up at his office. He'd decided to take Teo's advice and speak to her directly about why Luc would think they had a chance and what exactly happened with Reagan. He generally avoided her as much as he could, making sure when she picked his children up, he was either busy or about to leave so he could keep their interactions brief.

He wasn't as surprised as he made out to Teo. Ashley had made some hints the last few times he'd run into her about them possibly having dinner or something along those lines. She'd made sure to let him know that she was open to having something with him, but Michael had pretended not to notice. When he'd left a message on her voicemail telling he wanted to talk, he definitely had not expected that she would show up at his office, but she had, interrupting his messaging with Teo between patients and ruining his mood.

"What are you doing here, Ashley?" Michael asked, not bothering to hide the impatience he was feeling at being interrupted. As usual, Ashley was immaculately dressed in designer garb from head to toe. Not that he was surprised. She'd divorced husband number two about a year ago, and that was when the hints had started. He would give her credit for at least waiting till her sister's body was cold

before making a move. Sierra had always joked that her sister would hit on him given half a chance. Guess she wasn't wrong about that.

He took in the tall strawberry-blonde in front of him. Objectively, Ashley was a stunning woman. She was five feet eight inches tall, classically curvy in that Marilyn Monroe way with her small waist and flared hips. She also knew how to dress to show off her stunning figures. He understood what men would see in her, but she left him cold. Michael wasn't a fan of the way she used her looks and her body to get what she wanted. She knew she was considered attractive, and she used her so-called assets to her advantage. If her last two divorce settlements were anything to go by, she picked her men based on their net worth, and that was the ultimate turnoff to him. It always baffled him how Sierra and her sister could be opposites in every way—well, except for their looks. Physically they were almost identical. Perhaps that was why Ashley thought that she could slide in and replace his late wife.

Instead of answering the question, she sauntered in, what he guessed was supposed to be, a seductive walk to the seat across from his. She pushed the chair back and crossed her legs in what she must have thought would attract him, but it left him unmoved. He asked again, "What are you doing here?"

She leaned forward, towards him, which put her ample breasts on display. "Come on, Michael, what do you mean what am I doing here? I got your message. Sounded like you wanted to talk."

"On the phone, Ashley. On the phone. You didn't need to show up at my office. Unannounced, I might add."

"Oh. It was no trouble. I was in the neighborhood," she purred.

Michael had to keep himself from grimacing in annoyance. "I doubt you happened to be in the *neighborhood*. There's isn't a designer store within a five-mile radius."

"Oh you!" she said in that same annoying voice. "You said you wanted to talk, and I know you're a busy man. So here I am."

He sighed in resignation. "Yes, here you are. Fine, let's talk. What's this nonsense about Luc thinking there's a chance of both of us ending up together? What have you been saying to my children? And while we are at it, why won't my daughter talk about why she came home so upset the last time you took her out?"

She leaned back in her seat, clearly not expecting him to come at her as directly as he had. She giggled in a way he assumed was meant to be endearing, but simply grated on his nerves. "Oh, you know how kids are. They say the darnedest things. Reagan is going through a phase, and I told her it was wrong, that's all. And Luc... well, he always was a smart kid. I'm sure he saw something between us and came up with it all on his own."

Yeah, and monkeys were gonna fly out of his ass. Who did she think she was talking to, for Christ's sake? She must be mistaking him for one of the men who weren't allergic to her bullshit. He wasn't unaware of the fact that Ashley had designs on him. She had hinted at it more than once every time they saw each other, and he had been polite enough not to laugh in her face. But it seemed pretending not to understand wasn't getting him anywhere, and now she was using his kids to try and push things along. The time for subtlety had come to an end.

"I don't know how that could possibly happen, Ashley. There is nothing to be seen between us. There has never been anything between us, and you making it out like there is to my child is definitely *not* appreciated."

"But..." she tried interrupting.

"No. I'm talking here. I'm seeing someone now, and it's serious, so I would prefer if you stopped all that sort of talk with Luc from now on."

Her face twisted into an angry mask for a moment before she pulled herself together. "Who is this person you're seeing? And why didn't anyone tell me about it?"

Michael looked at her like she was out of her mind. "Why would anyone tell you?"

"What do you mean by that? I'm family. I should know who comes around the kids. I'm their mother's sister," she said, barely holding on to her temper.

"I don't see what that has to do with anything. I don't need permission from you or anybody else concerning who I date," Michael replied coolly.

The idea of marrying Ashley was unendurable to him. She would make him miserable, and he had a feeling all her niceness towards

the kids would end the moment she got a ring on her finger. If she was the only member of Sierra's family he found objectionable, the kids would not be hanging out with her, but he knew they needed some sort of connection to their mom, and she was the best he had, so he had to make do.

"Come off it, Ashley," Michael said, dropping all pretense.

She feigned surprise at his tone and words. "Come off what, Michael? I feel like I should be able to worry about who you bring around my sister's children. You can't just introduce them to some random woman who we know nothing about."

Michael snorted at that. "We? There is no *we* here, Ashley. There has never, nor will there ever be a *we*. Not with me and certainly *not* with my children. And *not* that it's any of your business, Teo is *great* with the kids. Marlowe and Reagan seem to love him, and I'm sure Luc will come around once he gets to know him better, so don't worry about them."

"Teo? That doesn't like a woman's name. Where is she from? Don't tell me you fell for some down-on-her-luck immigrant woman or something equally as basic. They are below our station, Michael. Honestly."

Michael was disgusted at how she sounded. She'd always thought herself better than others. It was one of the many things he disliked about her. "Below your station? Might I remind you that I met you before all your social climbing, Ashley, or have you forgotten the knock-offs you were known for?" Michael sneered, not pulling any punches.

"Water under the bridge now. Besides, not like I was from"—She lowered her voice like she was saying something taboo—"...Mexico or something equally as disgusting." The way she pursed her lips after speaking, one would have thought she'd tasted something nasty.

"That's *enough*. I don't know what impression I may have given you, but *never* speak about anyone that way in my presence. First of all, Teo is not a woman's name; he's a man. Secondly, he's half-Cuban, not Mexican. And not that it matters one way or another, but he is most certainly *not* down on his luck."

Michael didn't miss the way her mouth twisted in disgust at him saying he was dating a man. He knew Sierra's parents hated everyone. They believed foreigners stole their jobs and that was why they didn't work. They hated gays, blacks, Muslims. You only had to name someone, and they had an issue with them, but he never would have thought Ashley had the same feelings. Clearly he was wrong. Sierra never had. Hell, she'd tried setting Reid up a time or two back in the day.

"Surely you're joking. You're not gay. You can't be gay. I know you dated that Addison woman for a time last year, so how could you suddenly be dating a man?" She kept shaking her head and repeating that Michael couldn't be gay, as though she was in a nightmare and would wake up any moment. But Michael didn't care about all that.

"How on earth did you know who I was seeing? It certainly wasn't from the kids, because I never mentioned it to them. Are you having me followed?" Michael asked incredulously.

"Don't be absurd. It's a small town if you know who to ask." Ashley stood and began pacing the length of his office. "I cannot believe you're involved with a man, Michael. Is this some form of the grieving process I haven't heard about? Is that why Reagan thinks she's pan-whatever she calls it? I'm sure that's what's given her this absurd idea. Honestly, Michael, how could you expose your children to such immoral and disgusting behavior?"

Michael had heard enough. He finally understood why Reagan had resisted going out with her aunt the past few weeks. And he couldn't blame her if Ashley spewed the same vitriol at his impressionable daughter. It also explained Reagan's behavior before they had their conversation. That was it! Sierra's family or not, Ashley had to go. He wouldn't have her belittling his daughter, making her feel like she was wrong to have such feelings. And to be filling Luc with ideas about him and Ashley possibly getting together? That would happen over his dead body or when Hell froze over—whichever occurred last.

Michael stood, losing the thin veneer of patience he'd adopted where Ashley was concerned. Enough was enough. "First of all, do *not* speak to me about immoral, because your *whole life* is immoral.

You think I don't know about your search for a millionaire husband before your settlement runs out? Let me make it clear to you once and for all. It. Will. *Never*. Be. Me. And please, keep your hateful spite *away* from my children. Who, by the way, you will not be seeing again anytime soon. My dating Teo has *nothing* to do with grieving. To be honest, he is the glimmer of sunlight my life has always been missing, so you will respect him or else."

Ashley's face was a mask of fury at being put in her place, and she looked like she was five seconds away from stomping her foot in a fit of pique. She walked up to him and wagged her finger in front of his face. "How *dare* you judge me when you're taking part in those disgusting homosexual acts. And you have no right to tell me I can't see my sister's children, who need me now more than ever when their father is some sort of gay freak. Trust me, I wouldn't want to get with you ever again, but bear in mind there are other ways to get settlements. Like maybe child support when I get those kids away from you for exposing them to your vile lifestyle."

"Don't ever threaten me, Ashley. If we take this to court, not only will I win, but I will make sure you never see my children again." Michael couldn't say he was surprised, yet clearly he had underestimated her small-mindedness. But nobody threatened him, and especially not about his children.

She huffed and flipped her hair back, walking around him to pick up her purse on the seat where she'd left it. She walked around him and made her way to the door of his office before pausing and turning around. "We'll see who wins this fight, Michael. I'm pretty sure the courts will look kindly on grandparents and an aunt trying to protect their kin from immoral behavior." She asserted before walking out, slamming the door behind her.

Good riddance. Michael found himself thinking. He honestly couldn't be upset at the fact that Ashley and her poisonous influence would be out of his children's lives. Even though he wasn't worried, he made sure to send an email to his lawyer once he collected his thoughts. He knew she had no chance with a case, but he believed in covering all his bases.

Once that was done, he checked his phone and saw Teo's reply to his last message.

Teo: So not fair to tell me that in a text when I'm so far away from you. But you make me very happy too. :)

Michael's mood picked up immediately, and he typed out his reply while counting down the days till he could see Teo again.

TEO

Teo had been very busy all week catching up on the illustrations for his new graphic novel. He'd done the first draft and then the artwork for it, but he still had to go through it a final time before submitting it to his editor. At least he was on schedule. He hadn't seen Michael since the night at his house, and he missed him terribly, but they'd kept in touch via text and phone calls.

Michael sent him a message early in the mornings on his way to work, and they tried to text each other at random points. He'd actually gotten to know him pretty well. There was something to be said for late night phone calls, filling in all the blanks they had about each other.

He even told Michael that his mom knew about him now, courtesy of his sister. Some men might have been freaked out by that, but his only questions were if they'd like him and whether they'd think he was too old. He'd even gotten a text from Reagan the day before confirming they were still on for their shopping date. He may have squealed loudly at getting a text from her. He didn't want to push his way into the family, so he hadn't asked Michael for her number. The fact Reagan must have asked her father for his made him do a little happy dance.

It was Saturday, and he'd gone over to Ri's for breakfast. Usually they would do brunch, but because of his plans with Reagan, he'd moved it to breakfast. He figured that instead of cancelling on his

sister, who would bitch forever about it, he could squeeze them both in.

“Oh my God. I’m so excited for you and Michael,” Ri gushed. “A day with his kid—you know that’s, like, huge, right? Are you excited? You’re excited, right?”

She was possibly happier for him than he was for himself. Apart from the guys, Ri was his best friend. Once they’d outgrown the fighting sibling stage, they’d somehow become closer. Talking about boys, shopping, and just hanging out, the two of them took advantage every chance they got.

He ignored her excited yapping because they’d already had the conversation while stuffing themselves with waffles and syrup. Teo remembered something he hadn’t shared yet. “By the way, did I tell you Michael knows someone we both know?”

Ri looked up at him from her comfortable spot in her den where they’d retired to after stuffing themselves with a little too much food.

“He does? Who?” she asked curiously.

“I’m not sure if you know her. She works for Dad at the LA office. She’s a lawyer,” Teo said.

“Well, *duh*. What else would she be if she works for Dad?” Ri said, her voice laced with sarcasm.

“She could be an assistant, a paralegal or something like that. Don’t be so smart. Do you want to know who it is or not?”

She made a zipped lips gesture, so he carried on speaking, “You’re so annoying, did I tell you that? Anyway, it’s Alexis. I don’t really know her very well. I think she was one of the lawyers who helped with my contract. But I always remember her because at the Christmas party she turned up with these two hunky-as-fuck men she’s married to.”

“Wait. I know Alexis, and her husbands... Uhhm, don’t tell me, Steven and the mountain of chocolate man, Reid.” Ri licked her lips, thinking about the yummy man she’d noticed at the Christmas party their father’s firm hosted every year.

“So, check this out. Reid is Michael’s best friend.”

“Oh my God! Shut your face. Are you serious?” Ri asked excitedly.

“Calm down, sis. Don’t get the baby all excited. I would hate to have to rush you to the ER because you were thinking filthy thoughts about someone else’s husband.”

“Oh, bite me. Don’t pretend like you haven’t had some naughty thoughts about him too,” his sister said, staring at him pointedly.

“Why... I would never,” Teo replied in his best Scarlett O’Hara impersonation. “I am a lady.”

“And the lady is a tramp,” his sister quipped.

“Oh! Fuck off,” Teo said before bursting out laughing. “Anyway, that’s Reid, Michael’s bestie since they were, like, babies.”

“Oh my God, I’m sooo slow. I should have totally put two and two together when she called asking about your favorite flower. I thought it was weird she didn’t go through Lain, but I figured it had to do with work, so I didn’t think much of it.”

“I actually thought Michael called *you* to ask what my favorite flowers were. He pretended to take credit for a second before explaining the connection,” Teo said, thinking back to their first date with a happy grin on his face.

“He really makes you happy, doesn’t he?” Ri commented. He knew it wasn’t a question because his sister knew him almost as well as he knew himself.

“He really does,” Teo said, beaming. “Okay! So, I hate to dine and dash, but I have to get going if I want to be on time.” He stood and walked over to where his sister had situated herself as it looked like she had no plans to move in the immediate future. He bent over, placing a kiss on each cheek, then on the top of her head. “Love you, sis. I’ll call you when I get home and give you the details.”

“Love you too, baby bro. Have fun and say hi to my soon to be brother-in-law,” she teased as he made his way to the exit.

“Don’t jinx me!” he begged, even though in his mind he replied, fingers crossed.

He got to Michael’s house in just over an hour, after having run into traffic from Mariana’s. He pulled up and put the code into the gate.

Sure, it wasn't the same as getting a key, but having his gate code was a step in the right direction. He'd texted Michael when he was leaving his sister's house to let him know he would be there soon. Michael had said Reagan seemed quite excited about their day out, making Teo happy and nervous at the same time.

He hung out with his nieces a lot, but they weren't teenagers, so he didn't have to worry about upsetting them with every word that came out of his mouth.

Pulling into Michael's driveway, he took a deep breath, centering himself. He knew that three out of the four members of the Ashworth household would be excited to see him, but Teo also knew himself well enough to realize that he wouldn't be able to rest until all the Ashworths were Team Teo. He got out of the car, shutting his door, and went round to the trunk which was filled with canvases, paints, and a bunch of other stuff he'd picked up for Marlowe. He knew he still owed her a painting session from his last visit, but he figured they could finish it another time. In the meantime, she could explore her art solo.

He'd probably gone slightly overboard at his favorite art store, but he wanted Michael's daughter to be able to pursue her art as much as she wanted. There were sketch pads, a bunch of different pencils, oils, acrylics, watercolors, and a large array of brushes. He'd even got her a couple of painting and drawing for beginners books. Michael must have seen him through the CCTV cameras because he came out of the house to help. Michael's appearance made him pause what he'd been doing to stare. He was dressed casually today in comfortable jeans and a plain white V-neck T-shirt that hugged all those lovely muscles he'd missed during the past few days. Teo couldn't be blamed for pausing and staring at him. His mind screamed *mine* and *yum*.

"Hi." Teo smiled at Michael, who was now standing in front of him. He looked all relaxed and was hands down the hottest man Teo had ever laid eyes on.

"Hi," Michael replied, dropping a quick kiss on Teo's lips as if it was second nature. He finally looked in the trunk of Teo's car and saw the bags in there and looked at Teo, eyebrows raised. "Someone's been busy."

Teo glanced at the boot, looking sheepish. "I was already there replacing some stuff, so I figured... why not?"

"Riiight... I'm sure you were. Well, let's get these inside. I'm pretty sure you may have just become Marlowe's favorite person in the world," Michael said dryly before leaning in and picking up as much as he could manage.

They unloaded the trunk, and Teo pressed the button to shut it, then followed behind Michael into the house. Marlowe was waiting on them in the foyer, sitting on one of the chairs between the double staircase. When they walked in, she bypassed her father and went straight to Teo for a hug. He carefully put his burden down before picking the little girl up and swung her around. He knew she was probably too old for that, but in that moment, it felt right. And his instincts were proved correct when she squealed and held on to his neck.

"Reagan helped me with my painting, Teo. Do you wanna see it? Daddy said I have to leave it to dry, but it's in my room. I think I did good." Marlowe wiggled to be let down after sharing all that information with him, so he complied.

"I'm sure you did an excellent job, honey. Do you want to show it to me?" Teo asked, focusing solely on Marlowe.

She turned and faced her father, asking, "Daddy, if it's dry, can I bring it down, pleeeeeease?" The please having more syllables than was strictly necessary.

Michael looked at his youngest indulgently. "Yes, you can, but make sure to hold it with the paint facing forward and walk slowly. Don't run. Okay?"

She was off like a shot, yelling, "Promise," as she made her way up the stairs.

"I think she's got the painting bug," Michael said to Teo, from where he stood. Even with space between them, Teo still felt like Michael was standing right next to him. They must have been on the same page giving each other space with the kids around.

"So?" Teo said.

"So?" Michael repeated.

Teo laughed at Michael echoing him, before taking a look around. "Where's Reagan?" Teo asked. "Is she ready for our outing?"

Michael let out a small snort. "She's been ready, like, four times. She keeps changing her outfit."

Teo didn't realize that while they were speaking, they had both somehow moved closer to each other. Like their bodies had done the work for them, overruling their minds. Not that he was complaining. Michael put his hand out and cupped Teo's cheek before saying, "I missed you the past couple of days."

Teo tried for light, even though he wasn't feeling it. "We spoke every day, sometimes twice a day."

Michael looked him in the eye, unblinking, and said it again, "I missed you the past few days."

"I missed you too," Teo said, finally leaning in and laying his head on Michael's shoulder, needing that connection just for a moment. They were interrupted, or rather both took a step back when they heard footsteps coming down the stairs, and they looked up to see Reagan and Marlowe coming down together.

"Hello, Reagan," Teo said, smiling up at the teen. If her father hadn't told him, he would never have known she'd changed a bunch of times, because she wore a Calvin Klein crop top he was pretty sure was a sports bra, a pair of denim shorts, and an oversized plaid shirt over the outfit. She also carried a mini-backpack. Teo thought she looked so cute trying to be all grown up, but he knew better than to say such a thing. She walked down the stairs and stood beside her father. "You look very nice, Reagan. I hope you're as excited for today as I am."

She nodded shyly, and spoke in a low voice he hoped she would lose once they got going, "Yeah. Dad said I can update my closet today. I hope that's okay. My aunt usually takes me but..." she trailed off with a sad look on her face.

He looked at Michael to see if there was some backstory there and caught the fierce scowl the man didn't even try to hide. *Uh-oh!* That wasn't a happy look. Before he could even ask what was going on, Michael mouthed, "Later,"

Teo nodded before returning his attention to Reagan. "Of course, sweetie. We'll take as long as you need."

Marlowe must have gotten tired of being ignored as she stepped up right in front of him, and pushed her painting towards him, making

sure she had his full attention. "Look, Teo."

He made sure to study it intently so the little girl would feel like her work was being given the admiration it deserved. "It's wonderful, Marlowe. So good! Better than many people who are much older can do."

"Really?" she asked, beaming.

"Really," Teo confirmed.

She looked at him shyly, and held it out further. "I want you to have it. You know, for your room... so that you can always remember me. Like the one you made for me."

Teo had to stop himself from crying like an idiot, but he collected the painting from Marlowe, admiring her surprisingly accurate drawing of Michael's garden. He made sure to handle it like the treasure it was, and he put it against the wall of the stairs and walked back over to Marlowe. He knelt down to her level and opened his arms. She didn't hesitate with giving him a bear hug. "Thank you, honey. I will hang this up as soon as I get home, and maybe one day your dad will bring you over, and you can see where I put it."

She stepped out of his arms and looked at her father, clearly waiting for him to agree to the plans. Knowing who was in charge—in this case Marlowe—Michael simply nodded. "Whenever you want, sweetie," Michael said, leaning in to ruffle Marlowe's hair, then stopped when she pulled away in alarm, making all of them laugh.

Michael shook his head, smiling, then pointed to the bags they'd forgotten about and said, "Why don't you say thank you to Teo, sweetie. I think he may have bought out the whole art store for you."

Marlowe's eyes widened comically as she took in all Teo had bought for her. She started jumping up and down in excitement, her body vibrating with happiness like a kid on Christmas. She kept repeating, "Thank you," over and over as she made her way through each bag until she got to the books he'd chosen. She pulled them out one by one, studying each one carefully, clearly in her own world. She put most of them down, keeping hold of the one about drawing and painting. She then walked back to Teo, looked up at him, and said, "Thank you for the books, Teo. They will be very helpful and make me much better for the next time we paint together."

Teo couldn't help but be charmed by the little girl who was a child one minute and a grown-up the next. She went back to the chair she'd laid all the books out on and grabbed the bag before asking if she could be excused.

"I guess we won't be seeing her the rest of the day." Michael laughed as they watched her disappear around the corner and into one of the rooms Teo had yet to explore.

Teo looked over at Reagan who'd been quietly observing while also typing away on her phone. Teo was pretty sure she'd been texting without looking at one point. As they made eye contact, he said, "So are you ready to see how much shopping we can do in"—he looked at his watch—"hmm... five hours?"

Reagan nodded before putting her phone in her bag, giving her dad a quick peck on the cheek, then walking towards the front door. Before she could open it, Teo stopped her and handed her his keys. She took them and walked out, leaving Teo and Michael alone.

"Do you want to tell me what all the stuff with her aunt was about? I don't want to step on any toes," he directed at Michael.

Michael did that lip twisty thing that made him look like he'd both tasted and smelled something bad at the same time. "I'll fill you in later, but trust me, you're not stepping on any toes. You'd best go before her highness starts getting in a mood for being kept waiting." Michael tried to joke, but it was halfhearted at best. "We'll talk when you get back, I promise. Now go and have fun."

Teo nodded before leaning in for a quick kiss they both had to back away from before it got out of hand. "Later," he whispered against Michael's lips.

"Later," Michael echoed, his voice husky. Michael stood by the door and watched as Teo got in his car and drove away with Reagan.

It was a bit awkward in the car, to begin with, neither of them wanting to break the silence first. Teo wasn't sure exactly how to start the conversation with his boyfriend's daughter. He didn't want to be one

of those people who came off super-fake when dealing with the kids of the person they were dating. He decided that in the end, it would be best to give Reagan the chance to break the silence when she felt comfortable. He didn't have to wait too long. It wasn't even twenty minutes or so into the car ride before she asked, "So, you're, like, boyfriends with my dad, right?"

Teo took his eyes off the road for just a second to look at Reagan. He wanted to see how she felt about it one way or another. She looked more curious than anything else, so he replied, "Yes. I guess you could say he's my boyfriend."

"Isn't he, like, really old? You're, like, in your twenties, right, and he's over forty. So why would you wanna date someone his age?"

Teo wasn't sure if she was trying to trip him up or if she was genuinely curious. She could have planned this with her older brother and then separated him from Michael to pounce. The saner part of him told him to stop being paranoid and just answer honestly. "Well, your dad and I have a lot in common, and honestly, when you get older, age matters less and less."

"Like, what do you have in common?" Reagan asked.

Teo laughed before replying, "Hmm, you don't pull any punches, do you?"

She shrugged while looking at him expectantly. "Well?"

"Well, we have the same taste in music, books, and art. Whenever we're together, we can talk about nothing and everything. Also he *gets* family, you know. Most guys my age are still in the partying phase. I kinda skipped all that. I prefer hanging out with my sister and my friends. I'd much rather spend the day taking my nieces to the zoo than going to a club or whatever. And your dad loves you guys so much, you know. He never stops talking about you and your siblings. So yeah, we have that in common too."

"He does?" Reagan asked. Teo couldn't miss the hope and pride in her voice.

"He certainly does. He told me how good you are at the piano, how you're also on the swim team, *and* how you won a bunch of prizes for both. He told me that your brother plays lacrosse and is very good at it, and is taking his PSATs early, and how he's in all AP classes."

“Really? Because he’s only been to my recital, like, twice, and he barely makes any of Luc’s lacrosse games. And he promised we’d do family dinners more often, but he cancels more than he’s there,” Reagan told Teo, and he heard how hurt she was by her father’s absence. Teo couldn’t help being a little upset on the kids’ behalf. He knew Michael was a doctor and very busy, but his children should have been his priority. He could see that he needed to make sure the man put his kids first in the future.

“I’m sure he doesn’t mean to, honey. But I bet if you told him how much you wanted him there, he would try and do better. Sometimes dads need a talking to.”

“You think?” Reagan asked hopefully.

“I know, sweetie. You guys are the most important people in his life,” Teo replied, taking his eyes off the road for a second to meet Reagan’s.

Reagan nodded happily before putting her headphones back on and ignoring him for the rest of the ride. He breathed a sigh of relief. *That went rather well. Maybe I won’t screw this up completely.*

MICHAEL

Michael couldn't help the knot in his belly the whole time that Teo and Reagan were out shopping. He wanted nothing more than for them to have a good time together. He figured that if Reagan had good things to say about Teo, then she could at least share them with Luc and thaw the cold front he had put up.

Michael couldn't figure out why Luc was dead set against Teo. They'd had the conversation the other day, and he'd hoped that would be that. But no such luck. Granted, Luc hadn't seen Teo again, but the fact that he'd made the point to stay in his room while Teo came to collect Reagan was indication enough that he was nowhere near close to being Team Teo. Marlowe, on the other hand, was Teo's biggest fan, and it had nothing to do with the fact that he was also her favorite author. It probably had a lot to do with the attention he showed her and how he treated her like a person. Probably didn't hurt that they'd bonded over art too.

Michael had looked in on her earlier, and she was sitting at the desk in her room, going through one of the books Teo had given her. Lost in her own world. Michael realized that Teo just being in his life was making him more present with his kids. This was the second Saturday in a row that he wasn't at work. He'd asked Frederick to prepare dinner for five. Michael hoped this one went better than the last, which meant he would have to talk to his son and see where he was at.

With Teo and Reagan out and Luc ignoring him, he decided to catch up on what was going on with the family business. Although he wasn't part of the day-to-day running, he was still on the board and made sure to keep updated. He had no interest in the oil business but figured that one of his children might be one day, so he wanted to ensure there was a company left for them if they ever went down that route.

Michael could see how Teo was changing him already. He'd always been focused on his career before meeting Teo, even when Sierra was alive. Although she'd been as driven as he was, having come from the family she did. She'd told him she never wanted to be in a situation where she was dependent on anyone else. Even though she'd been an excellent mother, she'd also been a workaholic like him, making her way up the ranks. The difference was that she'd found a way to make it home early enough to spend time with the kids and read them bedtime stories.

Teo seemed to be the opposite. Michael could see he enjoyed his career, but he also knew from their talks that his family came first, always. He was willing to drop whatever he was doing if they needed him. Michael had a feeling Teo would be happy doing the full-time dad gig, cutting down his workload significantly. They hadn't quite gotten around to that conversation, but Michael didn't hate the idea. He didn't hate it at all.

Michael was always wondering what it would have been like to bring one of the women he'd had relationships with in the past around his kids. One of his main concerns, apart from him feeling like it would be replacing Sierra, was finding someone who could love and accept his children and whom they could love and accept in return. He'd always thought it might be an impossible task, but somehow here was Teo proving him wrong on all counts.

He must have gotten lost in the minutes from the last board meeting as his stomach alerted him to the fact that it was way past lunchtime. He glanced at his watch, amazed to see how late it had gotten. He took off his glasses, rolling his head round to relieve the sore muscles in his neck and shoulders.

He decided to try and have another chat with his son before dinner tonight. Using his intercom, he called up to Luc's room,

inviting him down to have lunch with him if he hadn't eaten already. He was aware that Luc could get lost in his video games and forget to eat on the weekends. He knew Marlowe would be taken care of with Frederick and Anita, the housekeeper, around.

He must have caught Luc in a good mood because he agreed. The past few days he'd been giving Michael one-word answers and only spoke to him when he asked a question. Michael knew it was time to face things head on. He wasn't even sure what the issue was anymore. He'd been home for dinner every day that week, even though he'd had to leave almost immediately afterwards.

Michael came out of his office and walked down the hall, running across Luc on his way, so they walked to the kitchen in silence. He opened the fridge and rooted around while he tried to decide what he wanted. He pulled out the makings of a ham and cheese sandwich. Looking over to his son, he asked, "You okay with this?"

"Yeah," Luc answered, not even making eye contact.

Michael had half a mind to snap at the boy for being rude, but decided it would get him nowhere and alienate Luc even more. So, he made the sandwiches, adding lettuce and tomatoes, with mayo on his, and mustard for Luc. He got out pickles for himself and put a couple on his plate. Once he had everything plated, he fetched two bottles of apple juice from the fridge before calling out to Luc to get his plate.

"Thanks," Luc said, grabbing his plate and walking over to the informal dining table. Michael followed and took his seat across from his son. He wasn't sure what he was expecting, but it certainly wasn't being ignored throughout the whole meal. He realized that if he wanted to talk, he would have to be the one that started the conversation.

"So, how was lacrosse practice?" Michael asked, trying to break the ice.

Luc looked up at him for a second before replying, "Fine," then went back to eating and what he was doing on his phone.

Michael tried again. "When's your next match? Maybe the girls and I can come cheer you on."

Luc sighed a put-upon sigh before putting his half-eaten sandwich and his phone on the table and meeting Michael's gaze.

“Dad, look, we don’t have to do this. If you want to tell me to be nice to your boyfriend at dinner, just say so and don’t bother with the whole interested act.” Luc gave his father a challenging look as if he was daring Michael to lie and say that wasn’t the point of the whole “let’s have lunch and talk” routine.

He sighed inwardly. “Luc, I’m asking about your game because I’m genuinely interested, not because I have some ulterior motive. You’re my son, and I want to be involved in your life.”

“Since when?” Luc asked sarcastically.

“Luc, I know I’ve missed a lot, but I want to do better. Teo made the point...”

“And there it is. You can’t even go one conversation without bringing him up, can you?” Luc snapped.

“Lucas,” Michael said in a warning tone and hoped his son would hear it.

“I knew you only wanted to talk about him. That’s why you invited me down for this stupid sandwich. Don’t worry, Dad. I won’t embarrass you in front of your boy toy today,” Luc scoffed. “Aunt Ashley said you only married Mom to hide the fact you were gay and you never loved her. She said you told her to stay away because your new boyfriend doesn’t want reminders of your wife in the house. I bet you’ll soon send us off to boarding school because that’s what he wants.”

Michael didn’t need to ask who “he” was. It was pretty clear. Even though his son hadn’t cursed at Teo, he may as well have with the derisive tone he’d used while referring to him. If Michael hadn’t been so stunned, he would have laughed at how ludicrous everything was Luc said, but he could see that he’d underestimated Ashley’s vindictive streak.

His lawyer had informed him that Ashley and Sierra’s family had no leg to stand on when it came to getting custody of his kids. Not only did Michael send money to them monthly, but they had no discernible form of income, and the father was a well-known drunk. He’d been told that even visitation might not be forced on him since the kids didn’t have an existing relationship with their grandparents. But apparently, that wasn’t the only way they could wreck his family.

He hated how much influence Ashley had over his son. He knew she was willing to use them as pawns in the game she was playing, but unfortunately for him, she had her claws hooked deep in Luc. Michael knew that a lot of it was his own fault. He'd let her worm her way in while he was barely paying attention, and his kid was suffering the consequences.

Michael stood and walked over to the seat next to Luc's. He made sure he had his son's full attention because whether he heard anything else Michael said today or not, he needed him to hear this, and believe it. "I am very sorry if I ever gave you a reason to doubt me, even for a second, Lucas. I need you to know this, once and for all. You and your sisters are the most important people in my life. You will come first, always."

Luc tried interrupting him, "But Aunt..."

Michael didn't want to hear that name mentioned in his home again, but he wasn't about to say what he thought about his ex-sister-in-law to his son—it would serve no purpose. "No, son, listen to me. First of all, you and your sisters are not going anywhere. I have never had any plans of sending you off to boarding school, not even for a moment, and without trying to upset you at the mention of Teo, but he has never, ever even hinted about any such thing, Luc. I promise you. And I won't lie to you. I did have words with your aunt, but don't worry. That has nothing to do with you or your sisters. Okay? Nothing at all..." Michael paused for a moment and took a deep breath before carrying on, "And as for me never loving your mom, I can tell you that I was crazy about her. I loved her as much as I knew how. And, son, I'm sure if she hadn't passed away, we would still be together as a family, but she did, and it hurt, so much, and I will never, ever forget her. How could I? She gave me you, Reagan, and Marlowe. But, Luc, your mom is gone, and for the first time in a long time, there's someone who has made me happy again. And believe me, I would never, ever date anyone who wouldn't love you and your sisters. Son, you just have to give him a chance. Teo doesn't want to take your mother's place or erase her memory. If you get to know him, you'll see he's not half bad."

Before Michael could carry on speaking, there was a throat being cleared from behind them. He didn't even have to look around to

know that it was Teo.

"I hope you don't mind. We just got in, and I couldn't help but overhear," Teo said with a sheepish look on his face.

Michael was about to tell Teo to give them a second, but Luc spoke before he had a chance.

"Is my dad right?" Luc asked, turning around in his seat to face Teo, who was still standing at the arched entrance to the kitchen, unsure of whether or not he should enter.

"Right about what, Luc?" Teo questioned, taking a step into the kitchen.

"He says you're not trying to replace my mom and you never said anything about sending us away." Luc paused and stared at Michael for a second before turning towards Teo again and adding, "Also, he said he's not gay, and he loved my mom, but my aunt said that's not true."

Teo looked over at Michael, asking for permission to reply, and he gave him a nod. Maybe hearing it from Teo would help. He didn't know what else to try at this point.

"Your father didn't lie to you, Luc," Teo said. "From everything he told me about your mom, I can tell he loved her dearly. And, Luc, nothing, not even your dad and I being together, can ever change that. As for him, being with her first and now dating me, well, I'm sure you have friends who are bisexual, right?" Teo paused, waiting for Luc to reply, which he did with a nod.

Michael didn't love that his boyfriend was talking about his sexual orientation with his son, but he guessed it needed to happen. Michael had made too many assumptions, like the fact that because his children's generation were more open about their sexuality, he wouldn't have to talk about it to his kids.

Teo continued with a smile at Luc, "Well, I guess the easiest way to describe your dad would be bi, and without going into too many details, for everyone's sake, it means your dad can have a romantic relationship and feelings for people of both sexes. His dating me takes absolutely nothing away from what your parents had. I need you to know that, and I will respect whatever boundaries you set. I have no plans to erase your mother, Luc—not that I ever could."

Michael hoped his son was taking in everything Teo was saying, and he was desperately hoping it would make a difference, for all their sakes.

"Just know that I'm here for you if you ever decide to give me a chance, but I promise never to force my way in if you don't want me here, okay?" Teo finished with a quick glance at Michael before focusing back on Luc.

Michael had to admit he had his fingers, legs, everything crossed, hoping for something... he didn't even know what, but some sign they had gotten through to his oldest.

"Okay," Luc said after a brief pause.

"Okay?" Teo echoed.

What the fuck? That was it? After all that, it ended with an "okay"? He was about to say something, but Teo gave him a subtle shake, telling him not to.

"May I be excused, please?" Luc asked.

Michael had no other choice but to nod. "Yes, son, of course you're excused."

Neither he nor Teo said a word for a minute or so until they were certain Luc was out of earshot. Michael motioned for Teo to come over, tapping his knee, motioning for him to sit. Then Michael said, "Well, that just happened, and I'm not sure if it went well or not."

Teo sighed. "Me either, but we can't force him to accept me. We can only be honest with him and hope for the best. Speaking of which, what's all this about your sister-in-law? Why didn't you tell me any of this all the times we've spoken the last few days?"

"She's just trying to cause trouble. It's nothing to worry about," Michael said.

"You sure about that? Because Reagan told me what happened between them, and I have a feeling we'll be hearing from her. Hate doesn't go away silently," Teo added, leaning into Michael's chest.

"You might be right if some of the vile things she said to me about being with a man are any indication, but we are not going to worry about that right now. Instead, tell me all about your day with Reagan. How did the shopping trip go? Did you guys have a good time?"

TEO

Teo had hesitated when he'd searched for Michael and found him and Luc having their conversation. He walked to the kitchen and caught the part about him making Michael happy and couldn't help but pause and eavesdrop. He'd planned to sneak away and call out, making his presence known, but then he heard what Michael said after about him not trying to take Sierra's place, and decided to reassure Luc that he had no intention of doing anything like that.

He'd already had the conversation once that day with Reagan, and he made it clear that he wasn't going to try and be her parent. He let her know that he would love to build some sort of relationship with her, but it was her choice what it would be.

Teo knew it was probably forward of him, but he also knew that being honest with kids was the best way to go, so you didn't end up disappointing them. He'd come home from his day out with Reagan, excited at how well it had gone, and he couldn't wait to share it with Michael.

"Reagan and I had a great time," he told Michael from his comfortable position on his lap. "We hit up all her favorite stores, Topshop, H&M, Forever 21, and a bunch of other places. I even took her to some of my favorite vintage stores. I'm all shopped out."

"That's great, babe. I'm happy that you and Reagan are bonding. But I honestly don't recognize half those stores," Michael said in an amused tone. "Guess it's a good thing you came along."

Teo smiled at Michael calling him that term of endearment. He was pretty sure it was the first time. "Babe, huh?" he asked with a smug smile on his face. "I like the sound of that." He smiled at Michael, probably looking a little goofy.

As excited as he was to spend the day with Reagan, Teo was happy to be back in Michael's arms. He'd missed him terribly during the last few days, and talking on the phone, even FaceTiming, couldn't replace being this close to each other.

Teo sighed. "I missed you. Missed this... just being in your arms." He looked at Michael, drinking in the face that had come to mean so much to him in such a short amount of time. Teo reached up, putting his hand behind Michael's neck and pulling his face towards his. He slowly brought his face forward until their mouths met in a gentle kiss. The kiss didn't last long, but when he pulled back, Michael arms tightened around his waist.

"I missed you too, and I missed having you in my arms," Michael whispered before resting his head on Teo's back. They stayed like that for a long minute, just taking in each other, and making up for their absences the past few days. Teo knew it would get harder and harder to say goodbye to Michael, but he also knew that he didn't want to rush into anything. He wanted to savor every part of their relationship as it happened.

"So, you said Reagan told you about what happened with her aunt. I think I have some idea, but would you mind sharing it with me?" Michael asked.

Teo had known, from the moment Reagan told him about her aunt shaming her on their last outing, that he would have to share it with Michael. There was no way he could keep information like that to himself. He'd made sure to tell Reagan that he would have to tell her dad about the incident, and she had seemed relieved not to have to be the one to let him know.

"Reagan told me she's pansexual, and apparently she shared this information with her aunt. At first, Ashley had simply laughed it off as one of those new terms kids use, but it was important to Reagan to share that information with her aunt, and she also wanted some dating advice about someone she was crushing on."

Michael interrupted his recounting, "She has a crush? On who? Did she tell you?"

Teo laughed at the half-excited, half-terrified awe in Michael's voice. "Yes, she told me, but I think you're going to have to speak to her yourself if you want the full details."

"Damn, I thought she would have shared with you," Michael said.

"Oh, she did, but she told me in the *strictest* confidence, so my lips are sealed," Teo replied in a triumphant tone of someone who knew a secret another person was aching to know.

Michael began to tickle Teo, who yelped and struggled in his attempts to get up off Michael's knee, but he only held on tighter, laughing. "Now, that's not how this whole *partners* thing works. We're supposed to divide and conquer, you know."

Teo grinned. "So we are partners now, are we?"

"Well, I assume so, boyfriends, partners... isn't that what we agreed on?" Michael asked, a hint of uncertainty creeping into his voice.

"No," Teo replied and immediately saw Michael's face fall. "No... I mean... yes." He sighed. "What I meant is... yes, we agreed on being boyfriends, but partners just sounds... you know, more serious. You know, like living together, co-parenting serious."

"And you think it's too soon?" Michael asked.

"Well, don't you?" Teo asked, throwing the question back at Michael, unsure of what he wanted the answer to be.

"I think... rather... *shit*... I hope... that is where this is leading." Michael looked at Teo with an earnest look in his eyes.

"Me too," Teo murmured happily.

"Yeah?" Michael prompted.

"Yeah," Teo replied. "But it's still a secret, and you still have to ask Reagan yourself about who she's crushing on."

"Seriously! And I thought we were having such a profound moment," Michael said with a definite whiney note to his voice.

"We are, but Reagan and I are still building trust, and I don't want to ruin it, you know."

"Aww. You're so sweet. Don't worry. I'll talk to her. Don't want you breaking your word," Michael said.

“My knight in shining armor,” Teo said, placing a quick peck on Michael’s lips. “Back to what I was saying. Your sister-in-law made Reagan feel like being pan, and liking who she likes is wrong and dirty. And she basically showed herself to be a small-minded, bigoted bitch. Pardon my French. I don’t mean to speak badly of your late wife’s family, but that’s disgusting behavior and definitely not what someone coming out for the first time to a person they trust and love needs.”

“No pardon necessary. I could kill her for doing that. It certainly explains why Reagan has been acting strangely. When she told me she was pan, it didn’t make a difference, you know? I wasn’t sure exactly what it meant, but I knew it had to do with who she loved. I did a lot of research so that I’ll never say the wrong thing. She’s my daughter, and I love her. She’s perfect. But I think not reacting made her feel like I was rejecting her too, but we’ve smoothed things over, and we’re good. I could wring Ashley’s neck for making her feel so bad. Not that I’m surprised,” Michael added, shrugging. “She said some pretty vile things to me when I told her I had a boyfriend. She actually threatened to take me to court for the kids because my lifestyle was disgusting and immoral or something equally as idiotic.” Michael snorted with a look of contempt on his face.

“Is that even something that can happen?” Teo asked, concerned.

“Hell no, but I won’t put it past them to try using it as means of getting money from me. Won’t be surprised if it ends in a payoff,” Michael said in a voice Teo heard dripping with disdain and disgust, and the look on his face matched.

“Would you actually pay them off?” Teo asked curiously.

“If it keeps them away from my kids, you bet the fuck I will,” Michael answered without even thinking about it. “Honestly, if Sierra were alive, I’m not sure how involved they would be in the kids’ lives. She wasn’t exactly a fan of the way they behaved, but after she passed away, I felt like they were the only connection to her history, you know?” Michael said on a sigh. “But maybe I was wrong.”

Teo used his finger to lift Michael’s chin so he was looking at him after he’d dropped his head in defeat. “You were wrong. If Sierra kept them away, she had her reasons, but that’s not why you’re

wrong. You're their connection to her. You have stories of times you shared with each other and stories she must have told you about herself from before you met. You're the one they want to hear it from, babe. Trust me."

"You think so?" Michael asked, vulnerability shining in his eyes.

"I know so. I'm sure you have some wonderful stories about you guys in college. Hell, maybe even bring out the wedding video and tell them stories about it. Michael, you're a good dad. You just need to trust yourself."

Michael looked up at him with gratitude shining in his eyes. "Sometimes I worry I'm not enough, you know. I know I can do better, be more present for them, but even after all this time, I still struggle. But you being here, saying this. It really helps. You make me better, Teo."

Fuck, what was this man doing to him? A vulnerable Michael was like catnip for him. Emotion clogged his throat, so he tried for light. "Then aren't you the luckiest man in the world, as I don't plan on going anywhere?"

"I feel like the luckiest man in the world," Michael said seriously before sealing his lips against Teo's in a hot and passionate kiss, filled with so much meaning, saying things with their lips they weren't prepared to say out loud. He suddenly felt Michael's tongue licking at his upper lip seeking admittance, and he opened for him. He turned so he was sitting astride Michael, and soon they were sucking face like a pair of horny teenagers, their cocks pressed together through their jeans. Suddenly, Teo's phone rang, and he had never been happier for an interruption before things got out of hand.

MICHAEL

There was something about Teo that made him forget everything, including his surroundings. He knew better than to start something like that where his children could happen on them. But Teo supporting him, saying exactly what Michael needed to hear, to let him know he was doing the right thing, had him losing his head.

He hadn't realized how good it was having someone there to just listen to him or to tell him he was doing a good job when doubts overwhelmed him, but that was what Teo did without even trying. He knew when Teo had told him he was the luckiest man in the world. He had been trying to use humor to diffuse the seriousness of the conversation, but Michael actually felt that way. He wasn't sure what he'd done right in his life to have Teo in it, but he would be forever grateful that he did, although never had the saying saved by the bell meant more. He would hate to set a bad example for his kids. Not that them seeing their father happy was a bad thing, but it would most certainly be a bad thing if they caught him playing tonsil hockey with Teo on the kitchen floor.

He hated losing the feeling of Teo in his arms, but they definitely needed to put some space between them. The sexual tension between them was about to blow. He knew some people would call him old-fashioned because they were taking things slow, but Teo deserved to be courted, and Michael was enjoying going through the steps with him, plus there was something to be said for anticipation.

Michael heard his name and tuned in to the conversation Teo was having, "Yes, Mom, I am at Michael's." Teo stopped talking, clearly listening to the other person on the line speak before answering again, "No, Mother, I haven't invited him to your Sunday brunch." There was another pause, this one shorter. "Because it hasn't come up," Teo suddenly exclaimed. "*Mother...*" he waited a beat, then added in a pleading tone, "If I promise to ask, will you get off the phone." Teo must have gotten a yes because next came, "Love you too, Mom," before he hung up.

"What was that about?" Michael asked.

Teo's face had turned redder than Michael had ever seen it, and he was intrigued at what could have been the cause.

"My mom wants to meet you," Teo mumbled.

"Uhhh... and why is that an issue?" Michael asked with interest while trying to suppress a laugh at the embarrassed expression Teo was sporting.

"Because..." Teo said, still pouting where he stood, his phone in his hands, trying to avoid eye contact.

"Because?" Michael prompted.

"Because it's embarrassing," Teo said in a whiny voice that should have annoyed Michael, but somehow didn't.

"Why exactly is it embarrassing? I really don't mind meeting your parents."

"Yeah... at some point, but like... she's asked... ordered... me to invite you as if I'm a teenager, and she wants to inspect my prom date before I'm allowed out to the dance. I bet you haven't had to meet anyone's parents in a long time."

"Hey." Michael laughed. "I think you just called me old."

"Well, you kinda are," Teo said, and Michael could finally hear a smile in his voice.

"Looks to me like you're dating an old man then," Michael teased. "Wonder what you see in him."

He wasn't fishing for compliments when he made the comment, but Teo replied seriously.

"Well, he's hot. He's super-sweet and wicked smart. He makes me laugh and smile, and he's a totally awesome dad, and I'm totally falling for him."

Michael stopped laughing at that. Did Teo just say he was falling for him? He walked up to where Teo was standing with his hip against the island.

"Say it again," Michael asked, hoping he didn't sound like he was begging.

"I'm totally falling for him," Teo repeated, looking him right in the eye.

"You are?" Michael asked, unable to hide the hopeful note in his voice. He knew it was crazy quick, and some people would say they were rushing things, but he didn't care—he was totally falling for Teo, too.

"I am," Teo whispered.

"I was waiting for the right time to say it to you because I didn't want to scare you off in case you weren't ready yet, but I'm falling for you too, Matteo Benjamin Wright," Michael said.

"You missed the Julien," Teo said, beaming.

"I'm falling for you, Matteo Benjamin Julien Wright," Michael repeated. Admitting that should have terrified him. After Sierra died, he'd locked his heart away, thinking no one could ever reach it again so that he wouldn't feel the pain of loss and the crushing guilt that came with it. He never wanted to go through losing someone he loved again, but somehow, without even trying, Teo had worked his way in, slipping past all Michael's defenses and capturing his heart. The fact that Teo felt the same made him feel like on top of the world, but he could also feel the fear trying to muscle its way in and had to cut it off quickly before it could take root. Instead of allowing any negative thoughts in, he was going to focus on caring, nurturing, honoring, and protecting this man who had given him the chance to live again.

He took Teo's lips in a kiss that he hoped conveyed all the feelings in his soul, and Teo kissed him back just as fervently. Michael's heart swelled with happiness. This was everything he wanted. He wanted Teo. He wanted to feel this joy coursing through his veins all the time. He'd never thought he would have this second chance at happiness, and now here it was, with the beautiful young man he had in his arms. It was his fucking miracle, and he would

fight any human being who tried to take it away from him—and that included his former in-laws.

The kiss soon became a little more heated as Teo opened for him, meeting Michael's tongue halfway until they were sliding together. It ended just as quickly when they heard footsteps approaching, signaling dinnertime. Michael kept Teo in the circle of his arms, even though he knew Teo wanted to step away before the kids appeared.

"Stay tonight?" Michael asked, looking Teo directly in the eyes.

"I'm not going anywhere," Teo replied.

TEO

Dinner, thankfully, was uneventful. It consisted mainly of Marlowe talking excitedly about everything she'd learned from the books Teo had given her, and he realized, for a kid with an eidetic memory, that was everything. Reagan also joined in the conversation, putting her phone away and interacting with the rest of them. Teo was so proud of Michael, who made sure to ask his older daughter about their day, and listened as she excitedly recounted everything they'd done.

Luc seemed to be present in body, but that was it. He made no effort to engage whatsoever in the conversation taking place, and Teo and Michael respected that. They were both aware that they'd given him a lot to think about. Besides, Teo knew everything wouldn't be resolved overnight. Michael had to rebuild trust with his son and vice versa. Teo just had to wait and see—and hope.

Teo hadn't meant to blurt out to Michael how he felt about him, but he realized he wasn't the only one who felt insecure and vulnerable in the relationship. He also knew Michael would be protective of his heart, unlike the ex before him, and Teo intended to treasure him. It may have seemed boring to some, but sitting in on Michael's semi-awkward family dinner was one of his ideal relationship goals because although this family was not perfect, the members were still amazing individuals, and he hoped one day he could call them all his family, too.

Teo had known what Michael meant when he'd asked him to stay the night, and he was ready for it. Even if they didn't have sex—

which he really hoped they did—he knew falling asleep in Michael’s arms would be perfection. He also knew the safety of Michael’s arms was his new favorite place.

Before dinner ended though, Marlowe threw some decidedly interesting questions Teo’s way. He knew it was probably her way of figuring out exactly what was going on, with him being around so often. He recognized that as the youngest, she probably observed more than most people gave her credit for.

“Teo, do you like my daddy?” Marlowe asked.

He looked at Michael, who was absolutely no help shrugging his shoulders as if to say, “you’re on your own.”

“I *do* like your dad, Marlowe... very much,” Teo replied, glancing up at Michael first before returning his attention to Marlowe.

“Okay,” she replied, nodding before going back to her meal. Teo laughed and went back to his, but he should have known that wasn’t it. No such luck.

“Does that mean you’re going to marry my daddy? And then I’ll have two daddies?” Marlowe asked, and Teo took back his earlier thoughts about semi-awkward dinner being a relationship goal.

He almost choked on the piece of chicken he had just put in his mouth and said a prayer, hoping the question wouldn’t make Luc angry. His luck seemed to be holding because even though the older boy lifted his head up, he didn’t say anything, and both Teo and Michael let out huge sighs of relief at avoiding the possible blowup.

That didn’t help him answer Marlowe’s question any better though. What the hell was he supposed to say? Stalling for time, he asked, “Why do you ask, hon?”

“Well, I saw you and daddy kissing and when grown-ups kiss that means they are going to get married, right?”

Well, that sounded like irrefutable seven-year-old logic. Teo wasn’t sure whether it was time to explain that sometimes grown-ups just kissed, and that was it, or sometimes you had to kiss a lot before you found the grown-up you wanted to marry. So he went for honesty, well, as honest as you could be with a kid of Marlowe’s age. “I don’t know, Marlowe. Grown-ups sometimes have to...” Teo trailed off, not knowing how to complete that sentence. Michael was no help

either. Teo had a feeling it was partly to see what his answer would be.

Surprising all of them, Luc answered for him. “Dad and Teo have to date a little longer before they decide if they want to get married, and yeah, if they do, we’ll... I mean... you’ll have two dads or one dad and a stepdad... Whatever.”

Teo wasn’t sure who was more shocked, Luc, Michael, or himself, but he knew better than to make a big deal of it, so he carried on chewing like nothing had happened. Luckily the answer seemed to satisfy Marlowe, and Luc didn’t say another word until he asked to be excused once he had finished his meal.

The kids all excused themselves after loading their plates in the dishwasher first. Then it was only Michael and Teo left. They made quick work of tidying up. Then Michael double-checked the house was locked up and the alarm activated.

They made their way up the stairs together, hand in hand like an old married couple who had done the same dance every night for many years. At the top of the stairs, they separated, Teo going towards Michael’s room while Michael went to check on the kids.

Teo felt like they’d been together forever, making their way to bed after yet another family dinner with the kids already safe in bed for the night.

Teo undressed down to his briefs, hoping it was a huge indicator on how eager he was to get to sexy time with Michael, then made himself comfortable in Michael’s bed, happy to be surrounded by the scents of his man.

It didn’t take long for Michael to show up in the bedroom, pulling the door closed behind him—and this time making sure it was locked.

Even though they’d given each other blow jobs and hand jobs, this was a whole new step for them. Teo knew that it was going to mean even more now that they had shared their feelings. He knew Michael was the first guy he’d let in for a long time, and he couldn’t even compare what he felt for Michael to his feelings for any of his exes.

“So that just happened with Marlowe,” Michael said as he took off his clothes, neatly folding them and putting them on the chaise. Teo

couldn't help but admire Michael in all his masculine glory as he walked towards the bed. He had to admit Michael looked nothing like his forty-two years. Michael's body was still in excellent shape from his strong arms and shoulders to the abs that weren't quite as defined but still very visible. He knew from their talks that Michael kept in shape from his daily treadmill runs and weights twice a week with Reid and Steven. He also liked the light dusting of hair on his chest and the trail leading down to his beautiful cock.

"My eyes are up here," Michael joked as he got in bed, making his way towards the middle, then settling between Teo's thighs. Immediately Teo wrapped his legs around Michael's hips, pulling him closer. "Don't think I didn't see you checking out my goodies, Mr. Wright."

"Well, they are excellent goodies now, aren't they? And I do believe they can be called *my* goodies now since they're all mine," Teo said, half joking, but not really.

"I do like the sound of that. Would you like me to get *Property of Teo* tattooed on me?" Michael teased.

Teo pretended to consider it seriously for a second before laughing and placing a kiss on Michael's lips. "And at least we know Marlowe doesn't mind us being together."

"I'm pretty sure asking if we're getting married means she's passed the doesn't mind stage," Michael deadpanned.

Even as they joked and teased each other, Teo's stomach was doing cartwheels over what was about to happen between them, and he couldn't help but gaze at Michael—a little in awe that he'd found someone like him.

"You're staring." Michael laughed a little shyly, and Teo realized he must have been looking at Michael so intently he hadn't even heard what he said.

"Yeah, guess I like looking at you," he admitted honestly.

Michael tried to laugh it off, but Teo saw the blush creeping up his neck. Maybe he was unused to being complimented, but that was too bad because Teo intended to do so as often as he could.

Michael reached out, trailing his fingers up Teo's thigh, making small shivers run up and down Teo's spine at the contact. Anticipation made his stomach tight, his mouth dry. Teo liked that

even when they were in bed and clearly fucking turned on, there was an intimacy between them beyond the sexual.

They were barely doing anything, but just the feel of Michael's weight over his body had his cock at attention and begging. His body reacted whenever Michael was in close proximity—not that Teo was complaining. Michael's fingers had slowly made their way up Teo's thigh until they were hooked in his JJ Malibu Mystery Collection briefs. He lifted his hips, helping Michael pull them off.

"I've been looking forward to this," Michael said. "You have no idea how much."

"I think I have a pretty good idea," Teo replied, looking down at the cock straining up towards his stomach and wet his lips in expectation.

He knew technically it would be Michael's first time, but he had no doubts—not even for a second—that Michael would do everything he could to make it good for him. Teo had already brought the lube and condoms out of the drawer before he'd gotten into bed, not wanting to pause for any reason. He knew he didn't have to worry for a second about Michael hurting him because he always treated Teo with so much gentleness and care.

It was probably fucking sappy of him, but he knew for the first time in his life, he would be making love—not just having sex—and he couldn't wait to share that experience with the man who made him feel like every previous disappointment was worth it because it led him straight to this moment, with Michael.

MICHAEL

Michael wanted to savor every moment of what was about to happen, but he also knew that he'd been dreaming about this moment since he'd laid eyes on Teo. After taking Teo's briefs off, he removed his, wanting nothing between them. He wanted to worship every inch of skin on this perfect man's body. He wanted to show Teo with his mouth, his hands, his cock, just how much he adored him.

Walking into his room and finding Teo in his bed like some kind of perfect gift displayed for him to come and play was almost too much for him to handle, so he'd taken his time undressing and folding his clothes, to center himself so he wouldn't pounce on his beautiful man.

Once they were both naked, he covered Teo's body with his, putting them face-to-face. The kisses began slow and tender, but in no time, they were kissing and nipping at each other, grinding their painfully hard cocks against one another as they clung tightly to each other, like neither one wanted to let go.

"Please," Teo begged. "Make love to me."

Fuck! Were there any sweeter words spoken in the human language? Michael didn't know, and he didn't fucking care.

"I want you so fucking badly, Michael. Make me yours," Teo begged as he lifted his hips, grinding their cocks together, scrambling Michael's brain.

"So fucking sexy," Michael said before moving, kissing his way down Teo's body until he arrived at the juncture of his thighs. Michael

pressed his face in and breathed deeply, taking in the scent that was pure Teo, groaning as he did. He felt Teo's hands gently running through his hair, pressing Michael's face further into his groin. He began to lick and nibble on Teo's inner thigh, making him squirm and moan, begging Michael to put his mouth on his cock. Michael finally gave in and focused on the prize waiting for him. He lifted the hard cock from where it rested and, looking Teo in the eyes, brought it to his hungry mouth. Michael's tongue flicked out and swiped across the head of Teo's cock, lapping up all the precum dribbling out. Teo moaned at the feeling, driving Michael's need higher. He didn't waste any more time before he was sucking on Teo's cock, buried in his warm, wet mouth.

"Ahh! *Fuck!* Yeah! Suck my cock! *Fuck!*" Teo cursed, making Michael smile at his innocent Teo having a potty mouth. He slid farther down Teo's cock, whose hips were rising as he tried jamming more of his cock down Michael's throat, making him choke and back off. Teo cursed even more, this time in frustration at having his pleasure interrupted.

Michael hadn't let Teo know, but he'd actually spent some time browsing through gay porn sites, preparing for when he'd have a chance to pleasure his man. He wanted to make sure that he drove Teo out of his mind and had him begging with need.

Michael took Teo deep, all the way down his throat, trailing his fingers up the insides of Teo's thighs, cupping his sac, and rolling his balls around in his palm.

"Feels so fucking good," Teo panted, bringing his hands round to caress Michael's face while he sucked. Michael pulled off Teo's cock until just the tip of the head was on his lips, teasing, before sucking him back deep inside, letting Teo go as far as Michael could take him. Michael's own dick was straining against the sheets, and the sounds Teo was making, the feel of Teo's cock in his mouth, and his taste on Michael's tongue, caused it to drip with anticipation at what would soon follow.

Teo had lifted his body up, putting his weight on his elbows as he watched his cock sliding in and out Michael's mouth. Michael gripped the base of Teo's cock tighter and worked him harder, speeding up the pace with his mouth. It didn't take long before Teo's head fell

back and he moaned louder, telling Michael he was close. Michael picked up the pace as much as he could, sucking Teo harder. He moved his hand down to Teo's ass, slipping in between his cheeks and fingering Teo's rim slowly until he relaxed enough for Michael to slide a finger slowly inside, seeking out his prostate.

"Fuck. I'm coming," Teo chanted as Michael found it. Michael didn't stop his ministrations, instead sucking him harder, wanting to taste Teo on his tongue. Teo was fucking Michael's mouth at this point chasing his own pleasure. It wasn't long before the orgasm came, spilling down Michael's throat, Teo groaning out his pleasure. Michael milked Teo's cock, making sure he got every drop in his mouth before releasing him. Then he climbed up Teo's body until he could take in the dazed and sated look on that beautiful face.

"I think I'm getting pretty good at that," Michael whispered in Teo's ear.

It took a moment for Teo to reply before he murmured as he recovered, "Mmm, if you get any better, you just might kill me."

"Good thing I'm a doctor then. I can bring you back to life," Michael teased. "And I'm still not finished with you yet, so I may have to practice my resuscitation skills on you before the night is over." He crushed their lips together, thrusting his tongue deep into Teo's mouth, and Teo met him stroke for stroke. It wasn't long until Teo was hard again. Michael could see dating a younger man had its benefits and would definitely keep him on his toes. He broke the kiss. "You're fucking perfect," Michael said almost reverently.

Michael reached to his left where the condom and lube lay. He was a little nervous, but he'd read up and watched how he could make this good for Teo.

He tore open the condom packet and put it on. He stared at the bottle of lube for a moment, then took a deep breath before exhaling. Teo must have read his body language or guessed at what he was feeling because he asked Michael, "Need any help there, Doc?"

Michael bent over, placing a quick kiss on Teo's lip before saying, "Nope, did my research."

"You watched porn without me? I'm hurt." Teo pouted.

"Strictly for educational purposes," Michael defended, laughing.

“Yeah, right, so you didn’t touch your cock, even once?” Teo teased.

“I plead the fifth.”

“All right then, Doc, show me your new skills,” Teo said, spreading his thighs in invitation, making the moment go from lighthearted to heated in seconds.

Michael didn’t miss the shiver of anticipation that ran through Teo at the first touch of his fingers against him. Michael had to calm his racing heart, but he’d been waiting for this for what seemed like forever, and it was finally about to happen. The blow jobs, hand jobs, and everything else they’d shared had been a preview of what was coming. This *now*, this *very moment*, was so much more.

Michael made sure he was watching Teo’s face as he opened the bottle of lube and prepared to get him ready. As much as Michael was dying to sink his cock into Teo, he knew he had to take the time and prepare him. Especially as Teo had admitted to Michael over the phone on one of their nightly phone calls just how long it had been.

He coated his fingers with the lube before putting the bottle aside at arm’s reach. He took Teo’s lips in a soft kiss again, his tongue sliding in, then lowered his hand down to Teo’s ass until he was gently massaging Teo’s rim. *Fuck*, he was tight. Michael deepened the kiss, making sure Teo was relaxed before inserting a finger. Teo pulled his legs back, giving Michael complete access to his body, so trustingly. Michael worked two fingers in, stretching and massaging Teo until his hips were moving, seeking Michael’s fingers. He deepened the kiss, swallowing Teo’s sounds of encouragement. Michael’s emotions were heightened as he realized what he’d been missing the past few years from his sexual encounters. The connection felt when in love with a partner was indescribable. More than ever, he wanted this to be right and perfect for Teo—the man he realized he had fallen in love with.

Michael made sure to stretch Teo till he was a writhing, begging mess, and could slide three fingers in and out of him easily. He reached for the bottle of lube again, quickly opening it and pouring a few drops directly on Teo’s ass.

“No more. I need you now,” Teo begged.

"I don't want to hurt you," Michael said, even though his cock was screaming for him to get on with it.

"You won't... I'm ready... Pleeese, Michael," Teo pleaded, humping the air. "I can't wait any longer."

Michael couldn't either—he was only human after all. He quickly drizzled some of the lube on his cock, using his hand to coat the condom, then moved forward, pushing Teo's legs further apart, bringing his cock into position against Teo's hole. Then Teo wrapped his legs around Michael's waist. Michael slowly began to push forward and looked into Teo's eyes as he eased the head of his cock through the tight ring.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" Michael chanted at the feeling of Teo's muscle strangling his cock, which took his breath away. Teo was so fucking tight. Michael had to urge his body to take it slow, even though all he wanted was to pound into that heat.

"You feel so fucking good. So good!" Michael forced out. Teo unwrapped his legs from Michael's waist, then using his heels, he lifted his ass, taking more of Michael's cock until he slid all the way home. Satisfied with himself, Teo wrapped his legs back around Michael's waist.

"Well, okay then," Michael murmured. He still took it slow at first, pulling his cock out of that snug heat, then sinking back in, inch by inch. His heart was beating uncontrollably in his chest. Michael had to close his eyes and breathe in deep to stop his body from rutting into Teo the way it wanted to before he was ready.

Sweat trickled down the side of Michael's face as he moved in and out of Teo's body. He felt like the missing piece of the puzzle had finally clicked into place—like at last, he was whole again. Nothing had prepared him for the intense emotional feeling of being joined with Teo.

Teo's heels dug into Michael's ass; thighs clenched around his hips forcing him deeper. Michael tangled his fingers into Teo's hair and never stopped moving while Teo was encouraging him on. Michael pulled himself almost completely out before gently sliding back in.

"So good. Feels so fucking good," Teo panted, rolling his head from side to side, and whispered, "More. I need more."

Michael pulled out and thrust forward, this time with a little more force. *Fuck!* “I’m so fucking close.” Michael pulled back, then snapped his hips forward, thrusting into Teo again.

“Me too,” Teo moaned. “Close.” He dug his heels into Michael’s ass. Michael picked up the pace, moving faster, fucking Teo harder, slamming in and out with more strength than before. Michael brought his mouth down hard on Teo’s, taking him in a bruising kiss while his cock pistoned in and out of Teo’s ass with even more power. He slid his hand down between their bodies, gripping Teo’s cock, making him moan deeply and buck his hips, meeting Michael thrust for thrust.

Michael began stroking Teo in the same rhythm he had created—fast and hard, making Teo moan encouragements while digging his heels hard into Michael’s ass. Teo’s muscles strained forward, his back arching, his fingers digging into Michael’s back, leaving a mark. He thrust his hips against Michael’s once more before pearls of creamy white cum painted their chests and abdomens. Michael released Teo’s cock and fell forward, catching himself on his elbows, bracing himself as he slammed into Teo’s ass chasing his own release. His movements became more erratic as his release built inside him, crawling up his spine. He bucked his hips forward one more time before coming with a force like he’d never felt before. His release came, wave after wave, until it took more strength than he had to hold his body up.

Michael collapsed, just managing to fall to one side so he wouldn’t squash Teo with his weight. His heart raced, and he was panting like he had just done a two-hundred-meter sprint. Michael loved the feel of Teo’s legs still wrapped around him and their bodies still connected.

“That was”—he tried catching his breath before finishing—“p-perfect. It was perfect.”

“It was,” Teo replied with a yawn. “Wake me up soon, so I can sneak out before the kids get up, okay?”

Michael watched Teo as he slept, taking in his beautiful features. He realized he wanted this, always. The thought of Teo sneaking out of the house left a sour taste in his mouth. The fact he couldn’t wake

up next to this man wasn't acceptable to his heart. He wanted to fall asleep and wake up next to Teo every day for the rest of his life.

TEO

Untangling himself from Michael in the early hours of the morning after the best sex of his life was one of the most difficult things Teo had ever needed to do. He'd been woken by a full bladder and realized that it was almost five o'clock. If he didn't leave soon, the kids would be seeing him at the breakfast table, which was really *not* the example they were trying to set for them.

It hadn't escaped his attention that he'd woken up wrapped around Michael like some sort of octopus, holding on for dear life.

There wasn't a more beautiful sight than Michael asleep. Teo had reached up and brushed back a lock of his hair that had fallen over his forehead, and in that moment, his chest clenched from the intense feelings that flowed through him. He'd kind of given up hope that he would find someone who made him feel that even with all his imperfections, he was still perfect to them, but somehow, here he was.

He leaned over and kissed the tip of Michael's nose, unable to stop himself. "Mmm... I was supposed to wake you up, wasn't I?" Michael mumbled, looking at him through half-open eyes.

"My bladder did the job for me," Teo said in a low voice. "I have to go."

Michael sighed sadly, his face scrunching up. "I don't want you to go."

"But you know I have to. The kids can't find me in your bed again before we explain certain things to them."

“I know,” Michael replied before throwing his arms over his eyes for a moment. He heaved a sigh before adding, “Fine... Let me put some clothes on, and I walk you out.”

Teo looked at Michael’s body he could see above the covers and sighed. It fucking sucked to be responsible and have to set a good example because he certainly wouldn’t have minded having Michael wake him by sliding his hard cock into his—already slick from the night before—ass.

He’d gotten out of bed, taken care of business, and put his clothes on. He realized that at some point Michael had cleaned him up since there was no sticky residue on his body. He knew it was just a small gesture, but it showed yet again how thoughtful Michael was, making Teo even more tempted to say fuck it all and crawl back in bed instead of doing the right thing.

He was lost in thought for a moment after dressing until Michael came up behind him, sliding his arm around Teo’s waist, kissing his neck, and holding him like that for a long moment.

“One day very soon, you won’t have to leave, because this will be your home,” Michael whispered to Teo, melting him.

Teo had spent almost every day of the following week with Michael and his kids. It was Tuesday afternoon, and he was over there again. He and Marlowe were practicing her painting. He was trying to teach her a new shading technique, which she seemed to pick up very quickly.

“You’re a natural, honey,” he said, looking at the work she was doing.

She beamed at him excitedly. “Does that mean I can start with the acrylics soon, Teo. I read about it. You said we could try next time. Please, please, please.”

Teo laughed. He should have known better than to think Marlowe forgot anything. “Very soon, sweetie. I promise.”

He was having a blast introducing Marlowe to her art. Not only was it amazing to nurture young talent, it was also kind of their thing

now, and he hoped it always would be.

Teo wanted to connect with all Michael's children as best he could. If he was going to be in Michael's life—and theirs—he didn't want to be just the guy shacking up with their father. He wanted them to see him as part of the family, although he and Michael had yet to discuss exactly what part that would be.

With Marlowe, he had art, and that was cool. He was sure as time passed, it would evolve further. Reagan had also warmed up to him significantly.

As he watched Marlowe work, he suddenly got an Instagram direct message from Reagan, with a picture from Kendall Jenner's Instagram page.

Reagan: Oh my God... she's so hot.

Teo: Uhhh! I guess she is... but so not my "TYPE." Sorry, wrong audience. But Kourtney totally has the best closet though and her house!! The interior is to die for.

He snorted at Reagan sending him that picture. What was he supposed to do with a Kardashian? They didn't have any parts he was in to. Now Kourtney, she had good taste in men, with her ex-model bae, but he wasn't about to send that to his boyfriend's daughter... at least not until she was sixteen or something.

Reagan: Totally wasn't what I meant, but whatever. Did you check out the Pinterest board I sent you?

Teo: Yeah, I did. You should show it to your dad. I'm sure he would be dying to support you.

Reagan: You think?

Teo: Oh my God! Yes... You want to start your own athleisure line. You've done the research. I'm sure if you spoke to him, he'd be your biggest supporter.

Reagan had told him how she wanted to start a line selling athleisure clothing, and swimwear, taking advantage of the current trend and the fact they lived in LA. She wanted to use social media as her main source of marketing, like a lot of the newer brands did now. Teo thought she was brilliant, but had sworn he wouldn't tell Michael and would wait till she was ready to do so herself.

They kept on texting until she sent him a meme that had him snorting and laughing. One of the ones with the Cardi B and Nicki

Minaj Feud.

"What's so funny, Teo? Is it my drawing," Marlowe asked.

"No, sweetie. Not at all. Your sister just sent me a text that had me laughing," Teo responded quickly.

"That's silly. Why is she sending you messages when you're in the same house? She's so weird," Marlowe replied before going back to what she was doing as though her sister baffled her.

He and Reagan had bonded over fashion, pop culture, and the new Riverdale series on Netflix. That was their thing and, apparently Reagan sharing her secret Pinterest boards with him was kind of a big deal in the teenager-verse. Who knew? So that was two kids down, one to go.

Luc still wasn't his biggest fan, but at least he managed not to look at Teo with disdain. Teo saw *that* as a win, even though they'd yet to have a meaningful conversation.

It was another Friday night dinner at Michael's, and they were all sitting around the table. As usual, Luc was silent while his sisters filled in the silence with random tidbits. Teo had to admit it was a far cry from the first dinner at Michael's. As usual, once Luc was done eating he asked to be excused.

Once the kids were gone, and it was just Teo and Michael, Michael said, "We've gone through this every night this week. I thought it would get better."

Teo had walked up beside him, putting his chin on his shoulder before saying, "He's stopped looking at me like he wishes I was dead. I'll take that as a win, and keep hoping he comes around. Baby steps, remember? We can't rush him." He placed a kiss on Michael's cheek, hoping to take away the worried frown on his face.

Teo knew from walking past Luc's open bedroom door, that the boy was a fan of video games. He'd actually considered trying to break the ice by talking about his favorites, but he knew that he had to wait for Luc to come to him. He couldn't force it with the teenager.

Even though he was at Michael's every night, he made sure he was gone early enough, and Michael made sure to complain about it every night. They had explored each other bodies thoroughly, and Teo could not have asked for a better lover. Michael was a quick study, even if he did say so himself and had him so turned around he

didn't know which way was up half the time. He'd even mastered rimming to the point that if he was asked to sell his firstborn while Michael worked him over he would scream "Yes! Yes!" over and over again.

They were quite sure the older kids knew what was going on, but they agreed they still had to keep up at least the façade of being stellar role models. So, Teo was still waking at the ass crack of dawn and sneaking out of Michael's house, praying every time that he didn't run into one of the kids. So far, his luck was holding.

His mother was going to have a fit if Teo kept putting off inviting Michael and his family over for one of their family gatherings. It wasn't that he didn't want them to meet, but there was a part of him that was enjoying having Michael and his kids all to himself. He knew he couldn't keep it up for long. Especially because he wouldn't put it past his mother to turn up at Michael's office and personally invite him herself.

He'd been to see his mom last Sunday evening. It was the day following a night with Michael, and he couldn't wipe the dopey smile on his face off to save his life.

"So what has you smiling like the cat that got the canary," his mom asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm just happy to see you and Dad," he'd replied.

"Yeah, right. That's definitely not an "I'm happy to see the parents" face. That's an "I got it put on me good" smile," Mariana said dryly.

"Oh my God. Shut your face, Ri," Teo said, trying not to strangle his sister.

"Hmmm, you do have a glow," his mom added.

"Please kill me now," Teo pleaded.

His dad finally chimed in to save him, "There are some things a father never needs to hear about his son." That didn't slow his mother much. She simply changed her line of questioning, peppering him with questions about Michael and his kids, wanting to know everything she possibly could.

Mariana had made their mom force him into setting a date they could all meet by gushing about how wonderful they were together.

“Oh my God. You should see them, Mom. Teo literally melts when the man speaks. And Michael is gorgeous. He has that whole older guy, sexy thing going on.”

“How is it fair that me, your mother, am the last one to meet him? I went through eighteen hours of labor to...”

“Okay, okay, how’s next weekend? We can have a get-together next Saturday,” Teo said, throwing his hands up, before his mother told the story of his birth and how he’d refused to leave the womb after she’d gone into labor early. Yeah, he so didn’t need that guilt trip.

His dad looked up from the newspaper he was reading. “You’re so easy, son.” Then he turned to his wife, placing a kiss on her cheek before adding, “I’m surprised it took you that long to pull out the labor story, sweetheart.”

“I was trying to give him a chance to be a good son,” his mom huffed before leaning back in her seat with a satisfied smirk.

“So weak,” Mariana teased.

“Traitor,” he replied, sticking his tongue out at her.

Before he’d left his parents’ house, Teo set the dinner date, and his mom had planned the whole thing after bitterly complaining about his refusal to have it at her house, over and over again.

Before Teo left, his dad said, “You’re lucky you set a date. Your mother was a day away from issuing an invitation through Alexis at the office.” Teo knew she would have done it too.

Teo had been busy planning the get-together at his place for Saturday, which was now only a day away.

Tristan, Nathaniel, and Lain had already confirmed they would be there, while Cris had only replied with a maybe after Teo threatened to show up at his house to personally get a response.

Marlowe had reminded him over and over again that he’d promised to show her where he’d hung the painting she’d given him of her dad’s garden. Michael had set it up so that her homeschooling teacher had the day off and Teo had Marlowe with him for the day.

She was going to be his little helper while he picked up bits and pieces for the party the next day.

Marlowe has launched herself at Teo in greeting when he'd turned up at Michael's to collect her.

"Teo, Teo, I get to see your house and my painting. Are you excited? I'm excited. How come we never get to go to your house?"

"Well, you, your dad, Reagan, and Luc are here. Where else would I be?" he asked before gently tucking her hair behind her ears.

Teo saw it as a huge sign of trust that Michael let him take his youngest child out for the day. They stopped at the farmers' market on their way.

"What are we doing here, Teo? This doesn't look like your house," Marlowe asked, looking around at the booths, tables, and stands where fruits, vegetables, meats, and cheeses were being sold. There were even stalls selling some prepared foods, that Teo had to admit smelled awesome, but there was no time for that. This was a quick stop today.

"Just want to pick up some fresh veggies for the salad I'll be making for tomorrow, sweetie," Teo replied. "Then we'll stop at the supermarket for some burger buns and hot dog rolls for the party tomorrow. Your dad told you about it last night at dinner, remember?"

"Yes. He said we will be meeting your mommy and daddy and I'll get to see Emma and Samantha again," Marlowe replied, nodding.

"That's right. So, I have to pick up a few things for the party and you get to help," Teo replied, hoping she was amenable.

"Okay. Then we go to your house, right?" Marlowe confirmed.

"Then we go to my house," he replied.

He rushed through picking up everything on his list, both at the supermarket and whole foods. He'd decided to go easy and picked barbecue foods, which meant his dad, or maybe Michael this time, would be manning the grill. How cool was that? He actually had a man to "man" the grill. Maybe Teo could go all, *would you like a beer while you man the grill* to Michael. He couldn't help but laugh at himself for the thought.

He knew his mom wouldn't come empty-handed. She'd show up with Tostones and probably her baked beans, which weren't like the canned ones you could buy off the shelf, but a Cuban dish that went

really well with chicken at barbecues. He didn't even bother shopping for desserts. With Tristan in the family, they always had the best desserts whenever they wanted, and tomorrow would be no exception. He'd even gotten Michael to invite his best friend, Reid, and his spouses, so he was going to have a full house.

After finishing the shopping, he drove an excited Marlowe to his house. Teo let Marlowe into the house while he brought in the shopping. As he was getting the last few bags out, he heard a car pulling up and turned round to see no one other than his mother. He should have known she couldn't resist coming over to meet one of Michael's kids. Teo knew deep down she was counting out how many more grandkids she had to buy Christmas presents for. Michael's kids didn't know it yet, but they had Grandma Sonya waiting in the wings, ready to claim them once she was given the go-ahead.

His mom didn't even pretend to have an excuse for stopping by. She simply said, "You knew I would turn up to meet my new grandbaby, so don't act all surprised."

What surprised him though, was how quickly Marlowe took to his mom. They were soon fast friends, and she seemed to love the attention.

"I did a painting for Teo, and he said it's very good, so he said he was going to put it up in the house. Do you want to see it?" Marlowe asked his mom shyly.

"Of course I would, sweetie. If Teo said it's good, then it *must* be very good. It's undoubtedly amazing. Let's go so you can show it to me." His mom asked where he'd hung it, and he let them know it was in the studio.

She took Marlowe's hand in hers, and they chatted away as they went off to his studio together.

Teo realized he hadn't just been given Michael to love. He'd also been given the chance to show Michael and his children what it meant to have a *complete* family again, and luckily—or unlucky for the Ashworths, depending on who you asked—they'd just been added to the mishmash that was Teo's family. They'd just gotten their very own instant family.

MICHAEL

Since the day they'd had mind-blowing, heart-pounding, brain-melting sex, Michael felt like everything was coming up his way, and he was actually building a new relationship with his kids, all thanks to Teo. Reagan and Marlowe seemed to light up whenever they saw Teo, and he knew Luc would come around sooner or later.

Whenever they sat at the table for dinner, which Teo had been present for three times that week, Teo made sure that Michael engaged in conversation with his children. He now knew that Reagan was huge into fashion and all things coding. She had even recently joined a computer club in school. Teo had also made him add all the kids' activities to his calendar. He'd told Michael that he had an office manager to manage his schedule, so he had no reason to miss anything, and if he simply gave her the information, she could fit his appointments around his children's schedules, too.

They were in bed together, after another round of energetic, mind-blowing sex. "So, Reagan and I have been texting back and forth a lot. I hope you don't mind," Teo said.

"Mind? Why would I mind? I love that you and she are building your own relationship. I'm glad she feels like she can talk to you," Michael said, placing a kiss on the top of Teo's head. Michael definitely didn't mind at all. He couldn't be happier if he was being honest. He wanted his kids to accept Teo and see him as a permanent fixture in their lives. "I think she's getting back to her old self, you know. She was kind of sad for a while there. I don't know,

maybe it's because of the whole Ashley situation, but she seems to be bouncing back. And I think I have you to thank for that," he added, tightening his arms around Teo for a second.

"I can't take the credit for that. I think she just feels better getting it off her chest, you know. Plus, I think she knows she has her dad back, and that's made all the difference."

"Maybe, but I know none of it would have happened without you," Michael insisted.

Teo didn't give himself enough credit. He didn't realize what a difference he'd made in Michael's life. In *all* their lives.

"Hmmm... Well, what I do know is that girl loves her daddy very much and wants your approval more than you realize," Teo said with a yawn. "I told her to talk to you. I'm sure she will soon."

"Well, until then, she has you to talk to, doesn't she?" Michael asked.

"Always," Teo replied, snuggling into Michael. "You know you should let them see how important your job is. Maybe schedule a day where you take them to work with you, but, like, one at a time."

"That's an amazing idea, baby. I can't remember the last time the kids were at my office. Actually, I'm not even sure they've ever been," he admitted. "You know, you came along and just changed everything in the absolute best way possible. You're changing *me* in ways I could never have imagined, making me a better man and most important, a better father," he added, kissing Teo on his shoulder.

Teo tried to deflect the compliment. "I didn't do anything. You guys just needed to..."

Michael interrupted him before he could continue. "Needed you. We just needed *you*. Because of you, I actually have a chance of raising kids who actually come home for the holidays, if or when they move away. Not kids who send me a Christmas card with family pictures featuring grandkids I never get to see because I raised kids who resented me for never having been present."

"You're making me blush, babe. I think you're giving me way too much credit," Teo said, his voice heavy with sleep.

As Teo drifted off, Michael lay there thinking about how things were going. He knew more about what was going on with Reagan

than ever before. Teo had even shared that Reagan was trying to get up the courage to ask out the person she liked. Luc had thawed somewhat, in that he wasn't rude to Teo, but he didn't engage with him either, and Michael said a prayer for help to change that.

He counted his blessings daily, Teo being at the top of the list. What were the odds of such a vibrant, beautiful young man falling for him? What were the odds that the same man had a heart big enough to embrace his children? Even when they didn't reciprocate. Michael knew that finding two loves in one lifetime made him a special kind of lucky son of a gun, and he didn't take it for granted, not even for a second. Teo didn't know it, but Michael had a game plan that had him living with him in the near future, with a wedding ring to follow soon after, so the whole fucking world would know Teo Wright was his and was off the market.

He'd had a conversation with Reid just the day before about whether he was crazy for moving so fast. He could recall Reid's answer to his questions.

"Is it crazy that I've been with Teo less than a month and every picture I see of my future has him in it? Is it too fast?" Michael asked his best friend.

"Too fast in whose opinion? Isn't yours the only one that counts?" Reid said. "Plus, I've watched you the past couple of years, using sex as a stress reliever, never letting anyone close, burying yourself in your work. But, man, you should see yourself now. You actually look rested. I swear your shoulders are like three inches lower than they used to be. If that's all Teo, hold on to that man and never let him go."

His best friend was right. Somehow Teo *had* made him relax. Michael didn't wake up in the morning thinking about getting the day over with. More often than not, he felt like he didn't have enough hours in the day, especially when most of them were spent away from Teo. He probably sounded like a love-sick fool, but he didn't care. He was old enough to appreciate what he had. Only someone who had known the crippling darkness of being lonely even when you weren't alone could understand.

He'd also thanked his lucky stars or whoever it was that kept spiteful former sisters-in-law away. After that ridiculous threat at his

office, he'd planned on setting his lawyers on Ashley like they were sharks and she was the bleeding chum. He would have ripped her to shreds if she'd tried attacking his family. But maybe sanity had prevailed because he hadn't heard a peep from her since, so maybe she had thought better about trying to mess with his family, and she would stay away from them.

Teo didn't believe that was the case. He'd told Michael that crazy didn't just disappear silently into the night; it went kicking and screaming, trying to take everyone down with it. Michael thought he was just being paranoid. He decided he wasn't going to waste any energy on the negative when he had so much to be positive about. His thoughts settled, and he drifted off to sleep.

It was the early hours of the morning, and Michael was woken by Teo's fucking alarm, as was the case every morning that week. Even though they'd made love before falling asleep the night before, he'd spooned Teo in his arms all night.

"I'm beginning to hate the sound of your alarm," Michael complained through half-opened eyes. "Because it means I have to let you go."

Teo looked over his shoulder at Michael and kissed him thoroughly before whispering, "Me too."

As had been happening the last few days, Michael found it harder to let go of Teo when it was time for him to leave, and this morning was no exception. He found himself thinking he didn't want to go to Teo's house for the get-together. He wanted Teo in *his* house. He wanted them to be *joint* hosts, welcoming Teo's family together to where he wanted to be *their* home, but Michael had to give his inner voice a stern talking to, telling him not to mess with the plan.

He placed a kiss on Teo's shoulder and held on a little tighter as he tried to get out of bed. "Just a few more minutes."

Teo stopped wriggling, probably hearing something in Michael's voice. Michael rolled them over so he was on top of Teo, whose only response was to wrap his legs around Michael's waist, giving the

thick, erect cock easy access to Teo's hole still lubed up from the night before. Michael rubbed his cock over Teo's hole, teasing, making him moan.

"Please, Michael," Teo begged. "I need to feel you inside me. Mark me. Make me yours. I want to leave your bed with your cum in my ass. Fuck me."

Who was he to deny his love when he begged so prettily? Michael thought. This was going to be the second time he would be inside Teo without a condom, the night before being the first. Michael couldn't explain the feeling of being joined with Teo with nothing between them. It was fucking amazing—the snug, warm heat almost had him blowing before he was ready.

It was a feeling of becoming whole, being part of Teo and Teo, being part of him. Them being together, joined as one. Michael had never been a poetic man, but Teo made him want to write sonnets or whatever the fuck they were called.

He pressed the head of his cock against Teo's opening, pushing forward slowly, giving him time to adjust, until he was buried inside him, his balls resting against Teo's ass.

"Fuck. *Fuck*. So good. You feel so good inside me," Teo said with a moan. Michael's hips began pumping slowly.

Teo was having none of that. He used his heels to encourage Michael to move faster and harder.

"Fuck, you are so fucking hot, so fucking wet and tight," Michael groaned before thrusting faster, slamming his cock deep into Teo. He felt his orgasm approaching as his cock grew harder and harder inside Teo. He could also feel Teo's hard cock leaking precum between them. Teo's ass was strangling Michael's cock so tight Michael felt the orgasm crawling up his spine, and he made sure to graze Teo's prostate on every downward stroke so that he could orgasm before Michael. The feeling of Teo's ass clamping down on Michael's cock as he came had Michael unable to hold back any longer. He fucked into Teo, faster and harder, until the orgasm started deep inside him. He could feel it traveling up from his balls before he shot into Teo's heat. "Fuck," he groaned. Michael muffled his moan with a bruising kiss as he shot straight into Teo's ass, marking him.

After Teo had gotten cleaned up and dressed, Michael had walked him to the door, kissing him thoroughly and watching till his lights could no longer be seen in the driveway. With Teo gone, he had no chance of going back to sleep, so he didn't even try. He went back to his room and ignored the bed, knowing it still smelled like Teo and not wanting to get in it without him there.

He rushed through his shower, brushed his teeth, and got dressed for the day. While having his coffee, he thought about the party at Teo's house later in the day. Although he hadn't gotten a chance to see Teo's family again, he knew more about all of them. He was still stunned by hearing about how Tristan and Nathaniel met and fell in love. He also didn't miss the worry Teo tried to hide concerning Cris, the one friend Michael had yet to meet but would hopefully be meeting later today, and of course Teo's parents. He hoped like hell it all went well.

TEO

Teo had to leave Michael's house early on Saturday and make his way back home to prepare for the backyard party, as he was calling it in his head. Leaving Michael's hadn't gotten any easier, but at least he knew he would see him a couple of hours later, and he'd gotten the best wake-up call he could ask for—a load of Michael inside of him.

He got home and into the shower quickly. He was a little sad at having to wash Michael off him, but he couldn't exactly entertain guests without washing the sex stink off him. He finished showering and got dressed quickly before going down to his kitchen to prepare.

He got all the meat out first, marinated the steaks lightly with salt and black pepper before covering the tray with clingwrap and placing it back in the fridge. The chicken had already been seasoned the day before and was in the fridge waiting to be pulled out later. He'd also prepped some veggie skewers with halloumi cheese, yellow peppers, zucchini, and cherry tomatoes and popped them in the fridge too. He got out all the veggies he'd picked up at the farmers' market and washed everything thoroughly before throwing together a salad in the huge salad bowl.

He'd gotten the cleaning service to come through the day before, so his house was spotless and ready for guests. He double-checked the freezer to see if he had enough ice, and once he was satisfied with everything food related went out the back to check the pool and patio. Everything looked perfect, and Teo was glad he'd opted to have people in to clean. It wasn't that he couldn't do it himself, but

not when he was going to have his whole family and Michael's too. Okay, he didn't really care if his own family saw the place messy—it wouldn't have been the first time.

As he was pulling out the drinks he'd picked up from Costco for the party, Teo kind of regretted not taking his mom up on her offer to send someone over to help him. Why on earth was he being so extra? It wasn't like Michael would know what he had or hadn't done by himself.

By the time he was done fussing and organizing, it was almost one, and he heard the front door open. He knew it could only be someone from his family coming in, and his hunch was confirmed when Samantha and Emma ran in, calling, "Uncle Teo! Uncle Teo!" Samantha's impish face wore a huge grin as she found him first and flung her herself at him. Her curly blonde hair was tied with bright blue ribbons to match her outfit of denim shorts and a cute blue top that matched her eyes. Emma wasn't far behind with her hug, and he had to put Samantha down and get on one knee so he could hug both of them and listen as they spoke to him a mile a minute.

"Daddy said Marlowe is coming, Uncle Teo? Is it true, is it true?" Emma always the more talkative of the two asked.

"Yes, sweetie, Marlowe will be here soon with her daddy and her brother and sister," Teo replied, unable to stop the huge smile that came over his face just from mentioning Michael.

"Uncle Teo?" Samantha said.

"Yes, sweetie. What's up?" Teo asked, giving her his full attention.

"Are you going to marry Marlowe's daddy and be her daddy too?" Samantha asked, looking at him with those big blue eyes he'd fallen in love with on the day he'd first held her in his arms.

"Uhh...." Teo stuttered.

"Yes, Teo, please share with the class. Will the doctor be making an honest man out of you?" Tristan teased as he came in the kitchen where the girls had found Teo.

"Samantha, Emma, can you tell Daddy to mind his business please and that it's not nice to tease your Uncle Teo," Teo said, looking at his best friend, who had a stupid wide smile on his face.

"Uncle Teo said it's not nice to tease, right, Daddy?" Samantha asked Tristan.

"Yes, baby girl. It's not nice to tease because sometimes people's feelings get hurt," Tristan said to his daughter. He placed boxes from his bakery on Teo's kitchen island, then walked towards Teo, pulling him up from where he was kneeling with the girls, giving him a hug. "...but Uncle Teo makes it so easy," he whispered, for Teo ears only.

"Good to see you too, Tris," Teo said sarcastically.

"You know it is. Don't pout. So, when does the delicious doctor get here?" Tristan asked, taking a step back. "And is he prepared for Sonya?"

They both laughed at that because no one could be prepared for his mom. You could never be sure what she would ask or say. She was as loving as she was honest, which was a *whole lot* of honesty. He just hoped she behaved, but he wasn't really holding his breath.

"Where's Lain?" Tristan asked, looking around. "He lives like... next door... why isn't he here yet?"

Teo snorted. "Who knows? Honestly, he's probably still at his pickup from last night's place, but he'll be here, although he did promise to go by Cris's place first to make sure he actually showed up today."

"Ha! You're probably right about Lain, and what's the deal with Cris? I swear he's avoiding me," Tris said with a slight hint of annoyance. "I was talking to Nathaniel last night about it, and he was all weird, like maybe he's dealing with some stuff."

"Did he say what?" Teo was intrigued.

"Nope. He said he was only guessing, so he didn't want to say anything in case he was wrong." Tris snorted. "My love is so principled," he added with an adoring look on his face.

A few weeks ago, seeing Tristan look so taken with Nathaniel would have made Teo's heart hurt a little with longing, but now with Michael in his life, all he felt was happy. For the first time, he could relate to someone who was stupid in love with another person because he felt the exact same way.

"Ooooh! I know that look," Tristan teased. "That's the 'I'm so dead for him' look."

"Of course you know it," Teo deadpanned, "you see it in the mirror every day."

"Whatever, dude," Tristan said, not wiping the grin off his face.

“Solid comeback.” Teo snorted. “By the way, where’s my beautiful nephew and my brother-in-law-to-be.”

“Wyatt is a little stuffy, so we gave him some medication, and he’s sleeping. I’m sure Nathaniel is just putting him down for a nap upstairs. So, do you need help with anything? You know we could have sent the chef over to help, right?”

Teo sighed. “I know, but it’s mostly prep work, plus Michael’s best friend Reid’s husband is bringing a bunch of sides, so I just did a bit of seasoning and put the salad together.”

“Oh, the *chef*, right? Where you and Michael had the first date? What’s his name now, Steven something?” Tristan asked, his face scrunched, trying to remember.

“West. Steven West. Yeah, he’s bringing a whole bunch of sides,” Teo supplied helpfully.

“Ooh, look who’s gone fancy on us. You got a Michelin-starred chef catering your backyard barbecue. Swish. Swish,” Tristan teased.

“You’re actually the worst.” Teo laughed. “How on earth does Nathaniel put up with you?” he asked as Nathaniel stepped quietly into the kitchen.

“Well, I do this thing with my to...” Tristan was interrupted when Nathaniel put one arm around his waist and used the other to cover his mouth, cutting off whatever he was about to say.

“Good to see you, Tee,” Nathaniel said. “And what my lovely fiancé meant to say was that I love him very much. That’s why I put up with him.” He finished kissing Tristan on his cheek before taking away his hand.

“I was totally going to say that,” Tristan said, leaning into Nathaniel’s body.

“Sure you were, and Kim Kardashian’s ass is real,” Teo deadpanned, making both Tristan and Nathaniel burst out laughing.

His parents and Ri showed up next, his parents having stopped to collect his sister. As usual they let themselves in too. Teo wondered what would happen if he moved in with Michael. Would he be okay with giving out security codes and keys to Teo’s family?

“Oh, I’m so glad we’re early,” his mom said as she came into the kitchen, a large dish in her hands. His father followed behind,

similarly encumbered. “Oh, I’m so excited. Teo hasn’t brought anyone home in... hmm. Has he brought anyone home before?” she asked, although Teo wasn’t sure it was even a question.

“Well, I should point out that, technically, I’m not bringing anyone home to meet the parents. I’m a grown man, this is my house, and I’m hosting all of you here with my boyfriend, so don’t make this a big deal, please.”

Teo was pretty sure everyone in the room snorted at that because they all knew Sonya, his mom, was going to do something right along those lines, possibly smothering Michael’s poor unsuspecting children with hugs or something equally embarrassing. He would just die if she told Luc to call her Grandma Sonya.

“Nice try, squirt. But you know Mom grilled Bastian when he came home for the first time, so best believe the hot doc is gonna have to get through an interrogation, too,” Ri said.

“Honestly, you’re all exaggerating. I only ask a few questions, you know, to make sure they’re on the up and up,” Sonya said, defending herself.

“Suck it up, Tee. You knew it was coming. That’s why you tried keeping him away,” Tris added, laughing.

“Whatever, man.” Teo sighed, then begged, “Dad, please keep your wife in line.”

His father snorted. “Son, we both know who’s in charge out here.”

“You suck. All of you are the worst,” Teo said. He was five seconds away from stomping his feet.

“You’ll be fine,” Ri said, walking over to the fridge and getting herself a bottle of water. “Mom’s not that bad...”

“Thank you, Mariana. I knew you were my favorite,” his mom said with a huff before turning and facing Tristan and Nathaniel. “Now, where are those beautiful grandkids of mine?”

It was almost three o’clock when Teo heard the sound of cars pulling up. At first, he thought it was Lain and Cris showing up fashionably late, but when he didn’t hear the front door open and then the

doorbell rang, he realized it was showtime. Michael and his family had arrived.

Teo took a deep breath in and then let it out slowly.

“Calm down, dude,” Tristan said. “It’s just us, and most of us have met him and like him already, so chill out and go let them in”

Teo nodded, straightening out his shirt before making his way to the front door. Even though his family had been previously spread out around the house doing their own thing, he knew they would all be in the living room waiting for introductions to be made.

Teo opened the front door, and came face-to-face with what he hoped was his future.

Michael, Marlowe, Reagan, and Luc all stood together, with Michael’s best friend, Reid, and his partners, Alexis and Steven. Fuck on a popsicle stick, Reid was gorgeous. Why didn’t Michael tell him his best friend was a tall hunk of milk chocolate? If Reid was single, Teo would be seriously jealous of him and Michael being so close, or maybe he would be crushing on him. He wasn’t quite sure which at the moment.

He must have kept them waiting too long gawking at his boyfriend’s best friend because he heard from inside the house, “Will you let them in already before we all die of old age?” It was Ri.

Teo sighed, while the adults and Reagan laughed. “I guess you heard the lady. Come in, come in, please,” he said, stepping aside.

Marlowe rushed in the house immediately, even though Michael tried to stop her, but Teo said, “Don’t worry. She knows her way around, plus I have a feeling my mother is lurking just out of sight and will take her to join Sammy and Emma in the playroom.”

Reagan walked into the house and gave Teo a quick hug. “Hey, Teo, nice place,” she said as she walked past him.

Luc simply said, “Hey” and followed his sister into the house.

“I missed you,” Michael said, walking through the front door. He leaned in for a light kiss on Teo’s lips.

Teo didn’t miss the small sigh in the background and looked up to see Alexis grinning, while Reid and Steven smiled at their wife. He saw each of them had serving dishes in their hands and blushed sheepishly. “Oh my God, excuse my manners. Please come in,” he said to the three of them, not letting go of Michael’s hands.

Alexis walked up and dropped a quick kiss on his cheek. "Nice to see you again." Reid and Steven weren't far behind.

Steven came in first, held his dish in one hand, and put the other out for a handshake. "Nice to finally meet you, Teo. We've heard good things."

Teo smiled and replied, "Likewise. I'm so glad you could make it."

Reid didn't bother with a handshake. Instead he handed the serving dish he had in his hands to Michael and pulled Teo in for a bear hug, whispering, "It's great to meet you, Teo. I don't know what you did, but thank you for bringing my friend back to life," before taking a step back and collecting his serving dish from Michael, walking further in to the house, and leaving him and Michael behind.

"Well, let's go meet the villagers before they revolt," Teo said, leading the way towards his family.

MICHAEL

Before they'd left for Teo's house, Michael had a chat with his kids, and although he'd wanted to single Luc out, he'd decided against it, not wanting to start a fight with his son. Teo had told him to pick his battles, and this didn't seem like one he would win. Reagan and Marlowe were excited enough for all of them, and that would have to do for now.

While waiting for Reid to show up, Luc said, "I invited someone for the barbecue."

Michael looked over at his son and asked, "Who?"

"Does it matter? You said we could bring someone if we wanted, right? Or was that a lie?" Luc asked suspiciously.

Michael sighed. "No, Lucas, it wasn't a lie. Do you need the address?"

"Nope. Teo left it for us in case we wanted to give it to a friend," Luc replied before going back to ignoring Michael.

Michael sighed and left it alone, hoping if Luc had a friend with him, he would at least try and enjoy himself, and he wouldn't act out showing Teo's parents just how poor a parent Michael really was. At least he had two kids who wouldn't scowl their way through the day. He honestly hoped whoever Luc had invited distracted him enough to keep him occupied.

Pulling up to Teo's house, Michael found himself nervous for the first time in a long while. He couldn't remember the last time he'd prayed for someone's parents to like him. Sierra hadn't cared one way or another what her parents thought, so Michael meeting them

had been more a formality than anything else. Honestly, a part of him never thought he would have to ever again, but he knew how important Teo's family was to him, and that made them important to Michael, and most importantly, that made them liking him paramount.

Walking up to Teo's home and seeing him when he opened the door shouldn't have been a big deal. He'd only just seen the man earlier that morning, but as had become the case, his heart did somersaults in his chest, and his stomach got all fluttery. Michael had to tell himself he was a grown-ass man, so he didn't do something silly like run and grab Teo into his arms in front of God and country.

He walked into the house with Teo and through to the large living room space that opened onto the deck and backyard. There was no doubt about who Teo's parents were. Not that there were enough people for him to have to guess from, but still.

Teo took after his mother. They shared the same features, although she was a little darker than he was. His father was tall and distinguished, standing behind his mother like it was his job to protect her. Michael could see that Teo and his sister were an interesting mix of their parents. With Teo taking his mom's facial features, but his dad's eyes and height, although his father was as tall as Michael.

"Mom, Dad, I would like you to meet Dr. Michael Ashworth and his family. We have Lucas over there," Teo said, pointing to Michael's son who had taken the furthest possible seat away from everyone while still managing to be in the room. Teo then pointed to Reagan who was sitting next to his sister. "I guess you've met Reagan." Teo then looked around for Marlowe. "And I'm sure Marlowe is around here somewhere, but, Mom, you've already met her."

"She's with the other girls. Found her way to the playroom without needing directions," Teo's mom said, smiling.

Michael, this is my mom and dad, Sonya and Benjamin Sr.," Teo said. Judging by the looks they received back, Michael could tell that they were taking his measure, then looked at their joined hands approvingly, which was a heck of a relief.

Teo's mom stepped forward. "Hello, Michael, it's lovely to meet you, at last," she said with her hand out. Michael had to let go of

Teo's hands to shake his mother's. She held on to his hand while looking him in the eye, like the answers to his soul were hidden there, but Michael didn't break off eye contact or fidget. He had nothing to hide, and his intentions towards Teo were pure, so if he had to go through an intense bout of mother scrutiny, she could bring it on.

"You'll do," she said after what seemed like an intense round of the no-blinking game. Then came in for a hug.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, too," Michael said, smiling.

Teo's father followed his wife's lead and came closer, tentatively shaking Michael's hand.

"Obviously you know Alexis, Reid, and Steven," Teo said, pointing to the throuple, who seemed to have introduced themselves to everyone and had also clearly found the kitchen, since they seemed to have lost the serving dishes and now had drinks in their hands.

"This is a perfect day. I love having all my kids together, and it's nice to have new friends and family here to enjoy it with us as well," Sonya said before Teo's dad clapped his hands and looked around. "Well, then, let's get this barbecue started."

Teo let go of Michael's hand. "Go and mingle. I need to help bring all the food outside. Maybe go talk to my dad. Y'all may have something in common."

Michael pulled Teo into his body before he could step away and whispered for his ears only, "Are you saying that because we are the two oldest people here?" He nipped on Teo's earlobe, making him shiver deliciously.

"No," Teo answered, his voice suddenly husky. "I'm saying it because I want you and my dad to get along. Now stop trying to make me hard and go mingle."

Michael stepped away from Teo, smirking. "Doesn't look like I have to try very *hard*."

"You suck," Teo replied, laughing.

"I will, later on," Michael replied.

"Ewww, you two get a room," Ri said as she walked up to grab Teo, leading him towards the kitchen and leaving Michael no choice but to go mingle with everyone else.

Before Michael knew it, the grill sizzled with burgers and hot dogs, chicken and seafood skewers too, letting out wonderful smells that had his taste buds watering.

Reagan seemed to be having a good time, Snapchatting and Instagramming the party. Apparently being at her dad's boyfriend's backyard pool party was Snapchat-worthy. Who knew? Apparently him having a boyfriend was cool to her and her friends... Go figure. He'd noticed Teo's mom speaking to Reagan earlier, and she had seemed okay, so he hadn't interfered. She also seemed to have kidnapped Tristan and Nathaniel's son, Wyatt, who she deemed the most adorable baby in the world, even though the kid was a year old at least. They were now lying on the deck, tanning together.

Marlowe was having a swell time with Tristan and Nathaniel's other kids, Samantha and Emma, with Nathaniel hovering nearby at all times. The kids were playing in the pool, splashing each other happily. Tristan must have seen him watching and walked up to him. "He still hovers over her, you know, because of the transplant. She's doing way better now, and her hepatologist is happy with her recovery, but Nathaniel worries, you know. It's part of what makes him an excellent dad," Tristan said.

The doctor in Michael couldn't help but ask, "Any signs of rejection or problems with her medication?"

"Nope. We did have a small scare in the early days, although it seems to have passed, but we're always vigilant, you know?" Tristan replied, his eyes on his fiancé and kids for a second before focusing back on Michael. "So, you and Teo, huh?"

Michael laughed before answering, "Is there a question there?"

Tristan looked at him seriously for a second. "He's crazy about you, you know? And Teo doesn't do *anything* halfway, so that means he's all in... I'm just saying. I hope you are too." Tristan finished, taking a sip of the drink he had in his hand, never taking his eyes off Michael.

"Is this the treat-him-right speech? If so, it's really not necessary. I could never hurt him. He means the world to me, more than I can explain. He brought back the light into my life. I would die before hurting him," Michael told Tristan honestly.

"Well, I'll drink to that," Tristan said, back to his less serious self.

“What are we drinking to?” Teo asked, coming up behind Michael, putting his arms around his waist, and laying his cheek on his shoulder.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Tristan said, teasing Teo.

“I’m sure I can get it out of Michael,” Teo replied to Tristan.

“Oh... I just bet you can,” Tristan said with a wink.

“Looks like everyone is having fun,” Teo said, “although we are missing a few people.”

“Yeah, Lain and Cris, right?” Tristan said, chiming in. “I’m sure Lain is doing the whole “roll out of bed late at the weekend” thing and Cris is waiting for him or something. They’ll turn up.”

The speakers played in the background, not that anyone was listening, and the food was done, but no one seemed quite ready to eat yet while they chatted or lay out in the sun. The table looked set: plates, napkins, and way more food than all of them could eat.

Michael loved the thought of this becoming something they did regularly, but maybe in his house next time, and hopefully, by then, it would be Teo’s too. “Do you want to get in the pool?” Michael asked Teo, imagining all that honeyed skin wet and glistening in the sun, but before Teo could respond, the doorbell went off loud and clear.

“Huh! That’s strange. Why would Lain or Cris ring?” Teo said, wrinkling his nose as he moved away from Michael, into the house to get the door.

As Teo moved away, Michael’s best friend, Reid, who’d been chatting to Teo’s dad, walked up to him, two bottles of beer in hand. He passed one to Michael, and they both took a sip before Reid spoke, “You couldn’t have picked a better person to fall in love with, and if you manage not to screw it up, well, you may be as happy as I am with those two.” Reid pointed to his partners, who were chatting animatedly with Teo’s sister, Mariana, who Michael had to admit looked pretty good, even sporting her baby bump, which she allowed Alexis to feel.

Michael, seeing that, asked Reid, “So, are you guys ever going to jump on the baby train?”

His friend smiled a huge smile before saying in a low voice, “It’s still a secret, but we’re pregnant.”

Michael could hear the pride and joy in Reid's voice at the news, and he went in for a hug. "That's great, man. Congratulations. But don't tell me you're going to some other doctor for her prenatal care, or our friendship ends now," Michael said, laughing, taking a step back from Reid.

"Oh, shit," Reid said under his breath.

"I was just joking, man. I get you may not want your best friend seeing your wife's privates." Michael laughed, but he was a little concerned when Reid didn't follow suit. "Dude, it's fine. I don't mind if she goes to another practice or whatever."

"Man, that's not it... fuck, who invited her? Did you invite her? But why would you? Fuck! This cannot end well," Reid said, not making sense.

Michael finally looked in the same direction as Reid and did a double take. Not even thinking about it, he quickly walked in Teo's direction, and of all people, Ashley was coming towards him. Who the fuck invited her here? Was she stalking him... He couldn't wait to get his lawyers to slap her with a restraining order.

Michael did not miss the blank look on Teo's face as he walked behind Ashley. He was ready to strangle her if she'd said anything to hurt Teo.

"What are you doing here?" Michael asked, his voice low, while blocking her from stepping further into the backyard.

"Why? I was invited," Ashley answered in a deceptively sweet voice Michael wasn't buying, even for a second.

"You certainly weren't invited, and I think you should leave," Michael said, pointing back the way she came.

"Now, why would I do that when my lovely nephew sent me an invitation? We're all family here, and I think I should see the family you're replacing us with, don't you think? For Sierra of course." Ashley said in a saccharine-sweet voice. "Now, where's my favorite nephew?" she asked, clapping her hands together.

Michael looked around for his son and saw him walking up to his aunt from where he'd been sitting by himself. He had never wanted to shake his son more than he did at that moment. What would possess Luc to invite Ashley to a gathering thrown by Teo, with his family present?

His son came up to Ashley, giving her a quick hug and making the conscious effort not to look at Michael. "Come in," Luc said, "the drinks are this way."

"That is definitely not happening, Lucas, and I will be dealing with you later because *we* both know *you* know better than *this*."

"Now, don't scold the child," Ashley said. "Maybe he didn't want to be the only normal one here surrounded by fairies." She sneered.

"Oooh, someone better hold Sonya back," Michael heard someone mutter behind him. He realized they had garnered an audience, standing in the middle of the deck, having this conversation.

Michael could feel his temper fraying, and gritted his teeth. "I think it's time you left, Ashley. You're causing a scene," Michael said quietly but firmly.

Ashley wasn't having any of it though. "Why, Michael? Don't want to hear the truth? How you exposed my sister's children to a bunch of fa..."

Before she could finish saying that vile word, Michael heard, "You better not finish that sentence in my son's house, lady, or we will be having more than words."

"Isn't he one of the gays?" Ashley asked, not heeding Sonya's warning. "If this is his house, he's the one that infected my sister's husband with his..."

"Cock?" Alexis—Michael recognized her voice—said helpfully.

He turned around to see Mariana high-five Alexis, Reid's wife, for her comment.

"You're all disgusting. You've already contaminated one child with your sickness," Ashley said, voice rising as she pointed at Reagan.

"Now you've crossed the line," Michael said in a cold tone of voice. "Don't you ever speak about my child with those words. You can say whatever you want about me, but you will respect my partner and my children."

"Partner. Who the fuck is your partner?" Ashley damn near shrieked. "That th-thing," she said, pointing at Teo, who had moved to stand beside Michael at some point during his defense of Reagan.

"Whose child do you think you're calling a thing? Now the gentlemen have asked you to leave really nicely. I will drag you out

by your scraggy extensions before you insult my child in my presence, honey. My husband is a lawyer, and whatever I do, I'm sure he can argue self-defense. Can't you, sweetheart?"

Michael needed to get Ashley out of there before his, hopefully, soon-to-be mother-in-law ended up in a fistfight.

"I wish you would." Ashley sneered. "We'll just see who has the better lawyer when mine cleans you out for assault."

That had Alexis laughing loudly. "Oh, sweetie, you so do not know who you're messing with, do you?"

Teo's dad broke a smile for the first time during the whole debacle. "Why, thank you, Alexis," Benjamin said, not moving from the position he'd taken up behind his wife like her very own bodyguard.

Before Michael could open his mouth to speak, Luc did. "I think you should leave, Aunt Ashley. You lied. You hate them, and it's not because of us. It's because you're a horrible person. My sister is not contaminated." His voice was thick with the tears he was trying to hold back.

"Luc, you know I'm the only one who loves you. These people aren't your family. Can't you see your dad is trying to replace us? And very soon he'll replace you with children he has with *him*." The way she sneered and looked at Teo, she might as well have called him a four-letter word, with the disgust on her face.

"Enough is enough," Teo said. "Look, lady, he's not buying what you're selling, so I'm done with the pleasantries. Get your fat ass out of my house, now."

Ashley raised her hand like she was about to slap Teo, but Sonya grabbed it before it could connect. "Oh, I wouldn't do that if I were you. No one lays hands on any of my children, lady."

"Wow, I didn't even see her move," Michael said.

"Yeah, my mom don't play," Teo said, burrowing into Michael's chest.

Michael was about to go help Sonya and Benjamin escort Ashley out, although it was more like Sonya was pulling her and Benjamin followed for protection, although he wasn't quite sure whose protection, because Michael had a feeling Sonya would knock

Ashley clear across the drive given half a chance. He could hear her screaming obscenities as she was damn near lifted out of the house.

"I feel like I should have done that, seeing as she's technically still my family," Michael murmured to Teo.

Teo laughed. "Trust me, my mom is having fun, plus Dad's there if things get sticky."

"Oh my God, I forgot about the younger ones," Michael gasped, looking around.

"Don't worry. Nathaniel got them out of the pool and inside when things started getting hairy," Teo said.

While they were holding on to each other, Luc walked up to them with his head bowed. "I'm sorry, Dad. I really didn't know," he said dejectedly.

"I know, son, but I think you owe someone else the apology."

His son looked up for a second, meeting Teo eyes before looking away again. "I'm sorry, Teo."

"It's fine, Luc. She's your family; you trusted her," Teo said, trying to comfort Michael's son.

"May I go inside, please?" Luc asked.

"Yes, you can, son, but we will be having a long talk once we get home," Michael said.

Luc nodded but didn't say anything else.

"Luc, if you want to play some games, I have a PS4 and an Xbox One. I could show you were they are," Teo said hopefully.

That managed to get Luc's attention and had him perking up slightly, but before Teo could move to follow, his phone starting ringing.

"Give me a second while I get this," Teo said apologetically to Michael's son.

Teo pulled out his phone and saw who was calling, smiling when he saw Lain's name on his caller ID.

"Dude, like you're so late you missed all the drama that just went down," Teo said, laughing and was about to start telling Luc about Ashley, but he suddenly went silent, and the smile dropped from his face before he gasped and started saying, "No, no," over and over.

"I'm coming... Yeah, Michael is here... sure... I'll tell Tris. Just stay with him. We're on our way," he heard Teo say.

Once Teo hung up the phone, he burst out crying, and Michael gathered him into his arms immediately as he sobbed his heart out, getting everyone's attention. Sonya, Tristan, and Mariana rushed up first, with Benjamin not far behind.

"What is it? What's wrong? What happened?" they were all asking at the same time.

Teo was sobbing so hard he had to catch his breath before saying, "It's Cris. Lain went to pick him up." He wiped his eyes with the back of his arm. "And he went to his house and found him. It's bad. Very bad," Teo said before he started sobbing again.

"Is he..." Tristan tried asking but couldn't seem to finish the sentence.

"No. No. But he's really hurt, like someone beat the crap out of him. We have to go," Teo said, trying to rush out of Michael's arms, but he held on tight.

"Calm down, baby. We'll go. We'll *all* go," Michael said.

"No. Lain said Cris doesn't want the kids to see him like this," Teo said.

"We'll stay with the kids," Sonya said, tears in her voice. "You go check on Cris. Your dad and I have got it covered."

"I'll kill the person who did this," Tristan said harshly, more anger in his voice than Michael thought the man was capable of.

"I think I should come with you," Reid said, chiming in.

"Yes. I think that's a good idea," Michael replied.

He needed someone with him who could keep a clear head, and Reid was just the guy. Plus, if Cris had been attacked, then it was prudent to have an ex-SEAL with them. Lord only knew what they were walking into.

"I knew something was wrong. I just knew it," Teo repeated over and over. "I knew he wasn't okay. Bet it's that boyfriend of his. I never trusted him. Oh! I'm going to kill him if I get my hands on him," Teo said, talking to no one in particular as they made their way outside to the cars to drive to Cris' house.

EPILOGUE

Michael and Teo

“Well, that wasn’t exactly how I envisioned the day going,” Teo said with a deep sigh.

“You can say that again,” Michael replied as they took off their clothes and got ready for bed. “You know he’ll be fine right?”

“I know, plus Reid’s friend is gonna be his new shadow,” Teo replied.

“Yeah and trust me, those guys are no joke, so wherever that guy who hurt your friend is, he needs to watch his back.”

“Good,” Teo said, sadness coloring his voice. “I’ve never seen Cris so... broken.”

“I promise, he’ll be fine, baby,” Michael replied.

“I know. I know. I realize this isn’t the best time, but with all the craziness that happened after, I forgot to ask. You called me your partner to Ashley. Is that really how you see me?” Teo asked, emotion thickening his voice, from his side of the room, and that was what it was to Michael now—Teo’s side of the room. He couldn’t wait till all Teo’s things were here to signify that even more.

“Yes,” Michael said.

“Just yes?” Teo asked.

“Just yes,” Michael answered, walking over to Teo. “I love you, Teo. You’re everything I never expected. You brought light back into my life, and yes, I want you to be my partner and everything that means.”

Teo walked straight into his arms and kissed him with everything inside him. Every bit of love and appreciation poured from his heart into the kiss. Michael slid his hand up to Teo's face, turning him to deepen the kiss.

"I want forever," Michael said.

"I can do forever," Teo murmured. "For the record, that wasn't a proposal."

THE END.

THANKS FOR READING!

Hey Y'all,

Thanks so much for reading His Instant Family, the Second book in the Stories of Us series. If you enjoyed this book, please take a few minutes to write a review on Amazon or Goodreads.

Interested in more Stories of Us? Stay tuned for Cris and Lain's stories.

For news and updates on upcoming releases, ARC opportunities, bonus content, and special giveaways/promos, join my Facebook readers' group: [Richmond's Rider](#) or subscribe to my newsletter: [Click Here to receive Richmond's Riders Newsletter](#)

Stay in touch!!!!

ALSO BY RHELAND RICHMOND

[A Family For Keeps - Stories of Us Book 1](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Since she was a little girl, Rheland Richmond entertained herself with any book she could get her hands on. She has written as long as she can remember, and now she finally gets to share some of those stories with other people.

She loves a good happily ever after. Because she believes love and light should touch everything. She is an obsessive reader and would never have considered writing if it wasn't for all the authors that inspired her and the thousands of books she has devoured along the way.

When she's not reading she's caught up in all her guilty pleasure TV Shows. Or catching up with her sibs wherever they are in the world, which usually involves long distance calling. She's an introvert that will take a night in before anything else.

Made in Nigeria and Raised in the UK she's an interesting mix of both cultures and appreciates both equally.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As usual I have to thank my family first, for supporting me unconditionally. Especially my mama and my sister. Love you Rhems for staying up with me some nights, when I needed someone to help me stay up to write.

Temilola and Rach, you guys are my sisters, no blood required. Thank you for always believing in me and celebrating me.

Susi there will never be enough words. For taking the time out of your busy schedule to talk through things with me. For talking me down when the anxiety hits. You're amazing, don't ever change.

Theresa. Oh my God... What would I do without you? Thank you for always being there whenever I need you.

Frances for being my first ever reader of these guys. I will never forget.

To my editor Ann Attwood, for the awesome feedback and all around awesome experience. It was such a pleasure working with you.

Jay Aheer you're a true artist.

Sarah, my fave beta reader, thank you for your amazing feedback. As usual it was invaluable.

Baylin, for trying to explain American football to a Brit. I still don't get it but, I appreciate the help.

To all the awesome friends I've made, I didn't expect you guys, but I'm so happy to have met all of you.