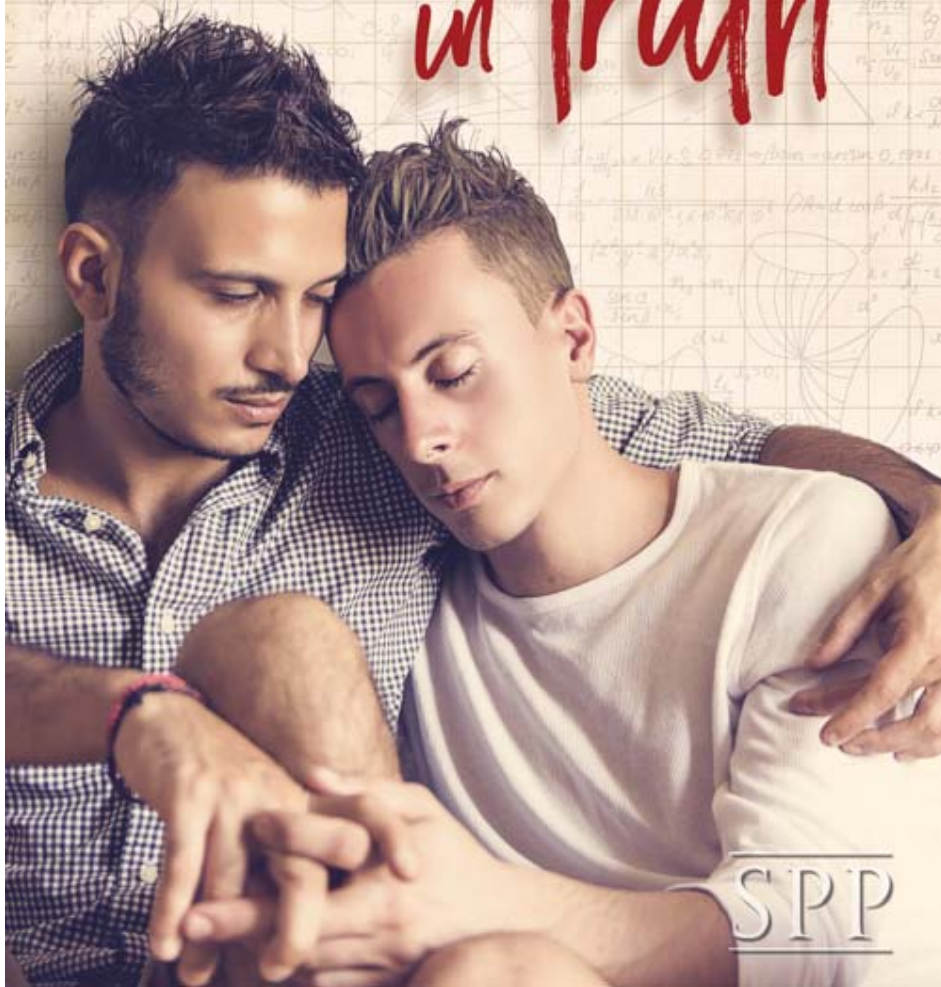


SLOAN PARKER

a Lesson
in Truth



SPP

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A LESSON IN TRUTH

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A LESSON IN TRUTH with Bonus Short Story

Sloan Parker

A LESSON IN TRUTH: David's a graduate student about to finish his thesis. Michael is his advisor and former instructor. The two shouldn't have feelings for each other, but after two years of friendship and longing, David can no longer deny what he's feeling. Is Michael ready to accept being more than a teacher to a man fifteen years younger? And if they give into their desires, is it only a way for them to say good-bye?

SWEPT AWAY: The biggest case of Eddie's career and nothing's going right. He's stuck in a stifling courtroom with no air conditioning during the worst heat wave in years, and the judge has denied his latest motion. He just wants to spend a quiet night celebrating with his partner, Mike, on their fifteenth anniversary. But Mike has a surprise in mind this year. A surprise that may be more than Eddie imagined possible.

A Lesson in Truth

“I can’t do this anymore.”

“Do what?” I asked. My voice squeaked in a way that bothered me almost as much as his words.

“You know what,” Michael said, his gaze focused on the stapled pages of my latest chapters lying before him, a red pen in his hand as if he was going to grade my work with me sitting right there.

I stared at him, hoping to hell he’d say more without me needing to add anything else to the conversation. The squeak was bound to emerge again. No need to remind him I was fifteen years his junior. Squeaking might give him a clue.

He ditched the pen with a flick and ran his hand through his hair. The dark strands popped up and gave his hair a spiky guise that made him look too young to be a tenured professor, too vulnerable to be telling me we were over. We hadn’t even started. One kiss. One long, beautiful kiss that ruined me for all other men and he was calling it quits?

“I’ve asked Professor Shields to take you on,” he said. “He’s familiar with your thesis and knows the field of research well enough.”

My stomach did a flip-flop thing I could only recall it doing one other time in my life—waiting in my dad’s car as he took my dog into the vet’s office for the last time. Was I going to vomit like I did then? Was I going to lose it sitting across from Michael, his metal desk between us, a wall of ungraded midterms blocking the way? I’d been in his office every week for the past two years. How did I not know where the trash can was?

“David, you’re not saying anything.”

Yeah, I wasn’t. I was busy holding down the Cap’n Crunch I’d inhaled for dinner. That’s what I got for eating a kids’ cereal. Why’d I buy that shit anyway? Because I had no self control. I never could turn down what I desired—no matter how bad it was for me.

“David.” That was his professor voice. The one he used when someone else was within hearing distance. Not the one he’d used for the past year. Not the one he used when we were alone. He was leaning his elbows on the desk, his eyes wide, the spiky hair still an issue, but the vulnerability the mussed hair had caused was gone. Or maybe it had been my imagination.

“What?” I said. “You want me to work with someone else? Fine.”

“Don’t say it like that. You know I don’t have any other choice.”

“Right.”

“We kissed last night. Do you want to pretend that didn’t happen?”

Was he crazy? I’d waited two years to feel his lips on mine. Nothing he said would erase it from my memory. Even if he wanted to forget. Even if he wanted to believe we hadn’t been more than professor and student, more than friends, for a long time.

I forced myself out of the chair. I was a half-step from the door. Then why couldn’t I make a move toward it?

Because this was it. I had lost my chance with him. Lost the possibility of having both a friend and a lover, having a partner who understood me like no one I’d ever dated, who was smart and funny and the sexiest man I’d ever known.

I reached for the printed chapters I had handed him five minutes earlier. No way was I leaving them behind. He was done being my advisor. He was done being my best friend. Done being my anything. The papers rattled with the shake of my hand.

Michael stood and stepped around the desk. “God, babe. Come here.” He didn’t wait for me to move. He came to me and pulled me against him, holding me in his arms.

I dropped the pages as he traced an invisible path up and down my back.

“I didn’t think it would upset you this much.” Not his professor voice. Could he just stop fucking talking?

Apparently not.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

I lowered my head to his shoulder. Two years I had waited to be in his arms and this was all I was ever going to get. I turned toward his neck and breathed deep. He smelled of the cologne he always wore, but it was stronger from this distance. Almost as strong as when I wore the same stuff on the weekends—an action that gave me a bit of a stalker vibe, but I didn’t care. I wanted to smell him on my sheets. Apparently it had been a wise choice. That was the only way I was ever going to have his scent there.

I searched out his skin with my tongue. The salty, rich taste burst into my mouth. I craved more. I opened wider and sucked in the warmth of him.

“God, David.” He gripped the back of my head. Was he going to make me stop? He held me against him and tilted his head back.

I wound my arms around his waist and took one small step until our bodies smashed together, leaving not an inch of air between us.

Michael moaned.

Good thing his room was at the end of a long hall. Good thing it was too late for office hours.

The soft sound surged adrenaline and lust throughout my body. My dick filled, and I

worked my way to his lips.

The kiss wasn't soft and slow like the one the night before. It was a kiss between two men who'd spent a damn long time dreaming of this moment, both turned on and ready to feel something more, ready to consummate a year-long love affair we had tried to pretend didn't exist.

Only I hadn't pretended as much as he. I had let myself imagine it all—the touching, the lovemaking, the nights spent in his bed.

Oddly, the one daydream I hadn't pictured was us fucking in his office.

The mental images spurred me on. I wanted him to lay me over his desk, his laptop and the stack of midterms pushed aside, and do every beautiful, naughty thing I'd been dreaming of until I screamed his name.

Michael touched the side of my face and retreated from the kiss.

That was it, then. The last taste I'd ever have.

He still held my face in his hand, though. Until he moved his hand lower. And lower. He reached the bottom of my shirt and gripped the fabric in both fists. He tugged the shirt over my head. "I want to feel you." He threw off his own shirt. "Been dying to feel your body against mine."

His hands on my bare chest took away any resistance I could've voiced. I didn't care what it all meant for him. I wanted it.

I wanted him.

He came to me as if not even a call from the university president could've stopped him. Our mouths joined again, his arms tight around me, his hands touching me in all the places I'd longed for him to be.

My heart raced at the press of his erection against my groin. I glided my hands down his arms, loving the heated flesh, the fine muscles that reminded me he didn't always sit at his desk grading papers.

"I want you." Definitely not his professor voice.

A tremble worked through me and my hands shook. "I want you too."

He ran a hand through my hair. "It's okay, David. We don't have to."

Yeah, he was crazy.

I took a step back and reached for the laptop on his desk. I set it and his favorite coffee mug on top of a short bookcase.

He shoved everything else, stack of midterms included, aside. Pens, sticky notes, paper clips, and a stapler fell to the floor. The clattering of the office supplies barely made a sound over my own deep breaths. The top of his desk sat bare before us.

I undid the zipper on my jeans.

Michael stared at me. Then his gaze dropped to where I worked my pants open, and his breath hitched. Maybe this was what he'd been dreaming of—a quick fuck in his office.

He stilled my hands. “Wait.” He stepped closer. “Let me.” He parted the opening of my jeans, and without removing more of my clothes, he dipped his hand inside my briefs.

I arched into the touch. The warmth of his palm around my cock could no way be compared to the two years of jerking off I'd done waiting for this moment.

He met my lips with his again. I gripped his biceps, and my hips matched the rhythm of our tongues. The sweet surrender of kissing him made me dizzy.

He stilled my body with a hand to my hip. “Wait.”

He had to quit telling me to stop. A point would come when stopping would be impossible. Hell, who was I kidding? We'd already reached that stage.

He undid his dress pants and shoved them and his underwear off, kicking them away with his shoes and socks.

I froze at the sight of his hard cock. The flushed, stretched skin gave beauty new meaning. The solid flesh couldn't hide his desire. Neither could the husky voice.

“Take off your pants.”

My hands shook more as I undressed. Once I stood naked, he hauled me to him again. His body tight to mine, from chest to shin, was better than any fantasy, better than any other sexual moment in my life.

He took both our cocks in his hand and stroked. “Been waiting to feel you like this.” His voice had grown deeper than ever before. “Been waiting to taste you too.”

Sounded good to me. I captured his mouth with another kiss and caressed his tongue with mine. Never had such a simple coming together of mouths spun my desire so out of control.

“My, God,” he said. “You can kiss. But I actually meant something else.” He took a step forward, moving us as one until the back of my thighs smacked against the desk. “Lie down.”

I slid my ass across the desktop and tried not to shiver. It was the cool surface on my heated skin. That was all. It wasn't Michael standing naked before me.

Sure.

I lowered my body until I was lying flat before him.

He reached out and brushed the inside of my thigh with his fingers, the touch soft and tender. “Damn, you're gorgeous,” he said.

The shiver was back.

He hunched over me and stopped with his mouth an inch from my dick. He met my stare and smiled before he traveled the last fragment of space separating us and lowered his mouth over the tip of my cock.

Oh God. Michael's mouth. I closed my eyes and took his head in my hands, needing to touch him. I caressed him as he worked his wet tongue down my shaft.

He began a slow pull with his lips, wetting, sucking, bringing me closer and closer to the edge. A low moan echoed in the small room. Was that me? No squeaking there.

I threw my eyes open and raised my head to watch. No way was I missing another second. His head bobbed faster. His hot lips grazed my flesh with each lift. Damn. He was good. How much practicing had he done in his life? He had probably sucked his first cock while I was learning to crawl.

It didn't matter.

There's no one else here with him now. Only me.

I quivered again as my orgasm advanced, then gave up on watching and dropped back to the desk.

Michael released me and said, "Don't come. Not yet." He rose up over me and lowered his body to mine. "Been waiting too long to be inside you." He leaned over the side of the desk, fumbled with the bottom drawer, and returned with a condom and lube. How many times had he done it in his office?

Who cared.

But I did care. Too much.

"I want to see you when you come," he said. Then his fingers were where I wanted them to be, easing the way, slicking me, then himself.

Oh, God. He was going to be inside me soon.

I lifted my legs, opening myself until he could sink into where I'd been needing him most.

That wasn't quite true, though. He'd been where I needed him for a long time. In my heart.

Michael bent over me; his strong arms framed my shoulders. His cock pressed between my ass cheeks but not inside me yet.

"David." He nuzzled my chin with his cheek. His breath traveled along my jawline as he said my name again. It mixed with a long moan. He kissed me.

I wrapped my arms around him and tugged him closer, driving my tongue deeper, trying to get him in me. I bucked my ass upward, and his hips jerked forward. Finally, he eased off my chest, took his own cock in hand, and lined up. I bit my lip as he sank deep.

The sweet burn had my toes curling.

He froze. How could he hold still? Didn't he want to fuck me?

He slanted his upper body over me again. One hand gripped the edge of the desk. The other he brought to my mouth. He caressed my lip until I released it from between my teeth.

"I want to hear you," he said.

What? My moans? My pleas for more? If I let those out, I might let loose so much more.

He kissed me again and moved in a slow rock. He was everywhere. My mouth. My ass. My heart. And I wanted it all. I wanted all of him.

He gave me one last, slow kiss then he pulled back and took my legs in his hands as he set to showing me how inadequate all my other lovers had been.

How could he give this up?

How could he not want to take a chance?

Because he had his entire career to think about. *And because I'm just a college kid he has a hard-on for.* Nothing special. Nothing to take a chance on. We'd been tap dancing around this possibility for a long time, and I had let myself hope it meant to him what it did to me. I'd let myself think all the nights and weekends we'd spent together outside of the classroom—the Saturday morning pick-up basketball games, the Sunday beers with lunch, the late-night on-line chats—had meant we were dating.

I should have transferred to another advisor—hell, to another school—long before we could get to the sex on his desk part. Because having him in me, around me, all over me was going to make walking away harder than it would've been a few minutes before.

But we'd gone too far. Nothing could've stopped me.

He wrapped a hand around my shaft, and something inside me short-circuited. I came as the words I swore myself I'd never say poured out. "Love you, Michael. Loved you for so long." No wonder I ate a kids' cereal. I sounded like a babbling teenager with his first crush. I clamped my mouth shut and gripped his thighs as he thrust into me again and again.

He came with one word on his lips. "David." He collapsed onto me, and his body shuddered.

I held him. I wanted to stay that way all night, but there was the matter of the condom.

And the fact that he'd broken up with me, if I could call it that.

He lowered my legs, and I groaned as he left my body. From the physical sensation? Or from knowing he'd never be within me again, that we'd never have this moment again?

Michael draped his body over mine. His heavy breaths hit the side of my neck. "I knew,"

he said. "I knew it'd be good, but I had no idea..."

I shook again. Not from the cold. Couldn't even try to lie on that one. Why did he have to say anything?

He angled himself alongside me and leaned on his elbow, his legs entwined with mine, his abdomen solid against me. Why was his desk so damn small?

He ran a hand across my chest. "Are you okay?"

I slid off the desk and reached for my pants, not bothering with my underwear. "I'll go now."

"Go? Jesus, maybe I am too old for you. I thought there'd be some cuddling after. Thought you'd come spend the weekend at my place."

I froze, my pants halfway up my thighs, my briefs still lying on the floor next to my bare feet. "What are you talking about?"

He sat up. Damn, he was beautiful, his skin a temptation I ached to touch again.

"What do you think happened here?" he asked.

I spotted my thesis on the floor. It had landed on the long edge of the pages, forming a little white pop-up tent. Maybe I could crawl underneath it and hide. Anything to avoid conversation. He already told me we were done. Did he need to drag it out? But that's how he always was—concerned about my feelings, asking if I was working too hard, if I was getting enough sleep, if I'd bothered to eat a fruit or vegetable in the past week.

I met his stare. "You were saying good-bye."

He stood and slipped on his pants. Then he came to me. He grabbed the waistband of my jeans and drew them up. "I can't be with you and continue to serve as your advisor. It's unethical."

I shook my head. They were the words I'd feared since I had accepted I was in love with him. He was too good, too upstanding, too entrenched in his job to fuck a student. Even if I was done taking his classes, I was still a student in his department.

But we had fucked. No. Scratch that. We'd made love. And that's why his words were killing me even more than when I'd first stepped into his office.

He took my face in his hands. "You're so smart, sometimes I forget how young you are." He ran the pad of his thumb over my lower lip. The way he had when he'd been buried inside me. "Babe, I'm in love with you. And I'm not about to give you up. So I'm going to have to give up being your advisor. I've scheduled a meeting with the dean for Monday morning. I was hoping since you're done with your coursework and we hadn't slept together yet, this wasn't going to get me fired." He smiled. "I guess that plan's out the window."

The flip-flop thing in my stomach was back. And I hadn't found the damn trash can yet.

He loved me.

He wanted to keep seeing me.

He was going to get fired because of me.

"Oh God." I made for the chair. My feet got tangled in something—my underwear on the floor—and I pitched forward.

He reached out and caught me. His sure hands helped me to the seat. "Are you okay?"

Was I?

My briefs were wrapped around my right foot. He kneeled in front of me and unwound the white fabric from my ankle. Thank God my mother taught me about wearing clean underwear. Of course, she had mentioned auto accidents and hospitals. Not college professors and naked office sex.

Michael and I had sex.

And he loves me.

"Oh God."

Michael laughed. He reached for my face again, drawing me in for a long, slow kiss—like the first one we'd shared. When he released me, he pressed his forehead to mine. "I love you."

"Are you sure?"

He stared at me, his eyes searching mine. "I tried to tell myself for a long time I didn't have feelings for you. I think you and I have both known for a while now that what we have is special. I love my job, but I'm not going to deny what I feel for you. I'm not going to deny us any longer."

"They'll fire you?"

"I think I can convince the dean this isn't a scandalous thing, that I'm serious about you. I didn't realize I was going to have to convince you too. Good thing I already had this planned."

"Had what planned?" I slipped my toe through the pant leg of my briefs and twirled them in the air. "Sex on your desk?" I asked in the huskiest tone I could manage.

He laughed again.

So the trying-to-be-sexy thing wasn't for me.

His laugh ended, and he lunged at me, the kiss as passionate and full of strength and tongue and promise as any he'd given me when we had been on his desk.

Okay. So maybe my sex appeal was based in humor and not my ability to flirt with men's underwear.

“The sex was supposed to come later,” he said. “After.”

“After what?”

He went to his desk and used a key to unlock the top drawer. He pulled out a small box and brought it to me. A jewelry box. But not new. The top was worn; the black exterior faded. He kneeled beside me again and opened the lid. “After I gave you this.”

A gold band.

“It was my father’s. I’d love for you to wear it.” He took my hand in his. “I’d love it if you’d marry me.”

Damn. Where was that trash can? He either had to stop making me flustered as hell, or I had to quit the Cap’n Crunch. Could a grown man go cold turkey off the Cap’n?

The jewelry box and the wedding band inside trembled. He looked like he’d need the trash can before I did.

“Are you sure?” I asked again.

A smile spread over his lips, and the crinkles at the corners of his eyes returned. “You’re the only person I’ve wanted since I met you. I’m not going to let our age difference or the fact that you’re a student keep me out of your arms for one more day. I want to support you, comfort you, live with you, make love to you in a bed we share every night.”

Okay. The Cap’n Crunch would have to go. I’d need protein mixed in.

He removed the ring from the box and held it out between us. “I want to spend my life with you.”

It was my turn to grab for him. We ended up with him on my lap, his legs straddling my thighs, his groin pressed against my lower abdomen. Our tongues and bodies found a rhythm I didn’t want to end.

But it had to end—I had something to say.

“Yes.” I took his hand in mine, the ring pressed between our palms. “I’ll marry you.”

Bonus Story: Swept Away

“Motion denied.”

I tried not to flinch, but the judge’s decision hit me hard. “Your Honor—”

She gave me a stern look that said don’t push it, and I backed off. I’ve been told I’m a dominating presence in the courtroom. I wasn’t sure what it was about me. Maybe the tats across the back of my fingers didn’t convey I was a by-the-procedures kind of guy, although that’s exactly what I was.

This was my first time in her courtroom, and I couldn’t afford to push my luck on a long shot. Not this early in the game. The Ohio LGBT Coalition for Equality needed this win and part of that was not pissing off the judge.

“Thank you, Your Honor.” I took a seat in the solid wood chair, and I just knew my underwear would be stuck to my ass when I stood again. The courtroom wasn’t nearly as hot and humid as the heat wave outside, but with the air conditioning on the fritz it was unbearable, to say the least. I could feel the sweat streaming down my back, soaking a line down the dress shirt I had on under my jacket. My tie felt like it was trying to strangle me. I couldn’t wait to get home and strip down to nothing.

I resisted the urge to rub my temples. Not like that would help anyway. Nothing eased the ache that had been pounding in my head on and off for months. Since the president of the Coalition had taken a seat in my office (back when five inches of snow had been on the ground) and had told me about the elderly gay couple who’d been forced into separate rooms when they’d moved from their senior community apartment to the on-site assisted living facility.

This was the case I’d become a lawyer to win, and the stress was taking its toll.

The judge spoke again as she dabbed at her upper lip with a tissue. She looked miserable. The heavy robe had to be worse than my suit and tie. The industrial fans they’d brought into the courtroom didn’t do much to help. They just blew the humid air and the scent of everyone’s sweat around the room. They also left me straining to hear the judge, which was doing nothing for my headache.

“Very well,” she said. “If there’s nothing further, Counsel, I will see you both Wednesday morning at eight a.m.” She adjourned the court and was off like a shot for her private chambers. Maybe she had a secret window AC unit and was also going to strip down to nothing and stand in front of the window. Maybe I could hire some kid to climb the fire escape on the building next door and take pictures to blackmail a win in the case. I

almost laughed at that, but I was too damn hot to muster the energy for even a half-ass chuckle.

I slipped the paperwork for the filed motion into my backpack, said goodbye to the representative from the Coalition, and left the courtroom. I was dying to get home and into a cold shower. The hallway outside the courtroom was even worse than inside had been. Apparently circulated, rank, humid air was better than nothing. I picked up the pace and headed for the elevators. I wanted to get out of there before the press or anyone else could stop me. After the shower, I was parking my naked ass on the couch in front of a fan, kicking back with a cold beer and a mindless action flick or two, and I wasn't moving until the morning.

"Hey, Eddie. Wait up."

Damn. Ten feet from my escape route.

I sighed and faced Tony. I'd known him for years, and it wasn't his fault I was tired and in a shitty-ass mood. In fact, I always felt like I owed the guy something. Maybe that's why we'd stayed friendly all these years. It had been his ass I'd been chasing when I coned my way into that private party in the normally-hetero sports bar fifteen years earlier. I hadn't known then it had been Tony's private party—with a few dozen of his closest gay friends in attendance—or that the tough bald guy named Mike working behind the bar would rock my world. I'd just been after a blow from the lawyer with the pretty lips.

Tony was out of breath when he reached me. "Damn heat." He wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "I heard about the judge's ruling. Sorry it didn't go as you'd hoped."

"Thanks. It was worth a shot."

"Definitely." Tony knew about risks. He took them all the time. It was what made him one of the top civil rights attorneys in the state. A slew of high-profile clients paid him a shit-load of money to "fight the good fight" as he always called it. He could afford to host all the private gay orgies he wanted, while I took on neighborhood nuisance gigs, representing the little guy for a minor fee. Hell, if I didn't win this case I might not even be doing that any longer. The president of the Ohio LGBT Coalition for Equality said they had hired me because they wanted someone hungry for a big win. She'd come to the right person, then. I was starving for it.

Tony slapped me on the shoulder and let his hand linger a moment too long for a couple of colleagues standing in the hallway of the courthouse. He always did stuff like that. He was a big guy, but at several inches shy of six-foot, he liked to assert his strength and dominance as often as he could. Or maybe he just liked touching me. Mike had told me plenty of times over the years that Tony still had a thing for me. Maybe I should have let

him blow me that night fifteen years ago. Maybe that would've gotten me out of his system. But ten minutes inside that bar, and I'd had my sights fixated on someone else. Little did I know the next day I'd be heading into my first long-term relationship—a monogamous relationship, at that.

Not that I'd go back and do anything differently. Even if it meant Tony would stop groping me in the courthouse. From day one, Mike was it for me.

Tony gave a last squeeze to my shoulder and asked, "You and Mike ready for tomorrow night?"

"Yep. Fifteen years deserves something." Not that we were planning anything special. We'd done the same thing every year, and I wasn't all that excited about our usual plans this time around. I was proud of us for making it this far as a couple, though.

"Hell yeah," Tony said. "I'm looking forward to seeing the whole gang. I'll catch you at the bar around ten." He was backing down the hall the way he'd come.

I nodded and took off for the elevators again. My head was pounding more than before talking to Tony. I just wanted to get my ass to my air conditioned car and then home.

The elevator doors opened and a blast of warm air hit my face. Great. Maybe the city would get the AC working over the weekend and this would be my last ride in the elevator from hell.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I fished it out and checked the display as I stepped into the elevator. It was Mike. I hit the answer button and heard the roar of music and laughter from the bar before the phone was at my ear. Mike still owned the same place where we'd met. I called it his "other man." His other love, to be more precise.

"Hey. You busy already?" I asked. Apparently happy hour started early for some. Later for struggling civil rights attorneys. Or maybe never. It wasn't like I would describe myself as happy these past few weeks, even with a few drinks in me. Stress is called a silent killer for a reason.

"Eddie? I can barely hear you." He was shouting into the phone, so I heard him just fine.

"Go into the storeroom." I said the words louder than my elevator-ride-from-hell companions preferred if their looks were anything to go by. Apparently a heat wave this early in the summer pissed everyone off until we were all a bunch of grumps trudging through our days.

Mike must have taken my advice, whether he heard me or not. The background sounds of the bar muffled in my ear. "That's better," he said. "How'd it go today?"

"As I expected. The motion was denied. Opening statements on Wednesday."

“Damn. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. It’s not like I wasn’t prepared for it.”

“Still sucks.” He paused for a moment, and I could picture the expression on his face going from that concentrated frown to his I-want-your-ass leer. Maybe I’d heard an exhale or something. Or maybe I just knew him so damn well I didn’t need to see his face to know what he was going to say next. “Tomorrow night I’ll help you forget all about it. Me, you, a little celebration.”

And forty of our closest friends. Hell, a few strangers too.

Every year on our anniversary Mike threw a private party at the bar to celebrate. A way to relive the night we’d met. The same bar and the same crowd of guys (looking a little older with each year), bringing along whatever guy they were into at the time.

I’d wear my leather pants and vest with nothing underneath, just like the first time, showing off the tats that spanned the length of my arms. Mike was fairer skinned than I, and he loved my darker complexion and the look of my skin against the black leather. He also loved my art, but every year at our anniversary party he was downright obsessed with the tattoos. He’d trace them with his fingers, his lips, kiss and lick them all night long. Maybe he’d been staking his claim, showing all our friends, acquaintances, and those few strangers that I was his. Which made sense with how the rest of the night always went. Because at some point we ended up fucking. Not in his office or in the storeroom. Right out in the bar in front of everyone. Sometimes he’d bend me over a table in the corner. Sometimes he’d blow me on the dance floor. No matter where or when, everyone would stop what they were doing and watch us, cheer us on. We were the live show they’d been waiting for all night.

It was hot as hell in the beginning. Like that first night. Once I’d gotten a look at him, I sat at the bar and had a few drinks, talking shit with him as he worked. Then he’d asked me to join him on the other side, and without another word, he’d spun me around and fucked me up against the bar while I faced the sea of men. I couldn’t even remember his name once his dick was inside me, but I knew I wanted to see him again.

And every year after, we relived that moment. The bar. The booze. The crowd of men. The public fucking.

God, I was sick of it. But I didn’t want to say anything to disappoint him on his favorite night of the year.

We weren’t in the scene much anymore, and his bar was normally as hetero as the average population. That one night meant a lot to him, took him back to his younger days, to the leather bars, the excitement of casual, got-to-have-it now sex, the thrill of meeting

me. He always said the best part was remembering the moment he first saw me, the moment he'd found something special he hadn't even known he'd been aching for.

"Eddie, you there?" he asked over the phone, bringing me back to our conversation.

"Yeah."

The elevator doors opened, and I made my way through the courthouse lobby and outside. The humidity level rose with each step I took toward the parking garage. I didn't bother ditching the suit jacket. What was the point now? My shirt had to be soaked underneath. I'd strip as soon as I got in the front door of our place, and maybe I'd just burn the damn suit when I was done with my shower.

"God babe, I've missed you lately." His voice had taken on that low rumble that matched the leer I'd been picturing. "I'm really looking forward to tomorrow night."

"Me too," I said. That was partially true. I missed him something fierce. Missed the way we'd been six months earlier. Before I'd taken this case. Before he'd made the decision to expand the bar and add on a restaurant. Before we'd both started working all hours of the day and night.

I was so damn tired I doubted I'd even get it up at the party. Nothing like forty guys staring at you, waiting for your dick to get hard. Once upon a time that had been a thrill. Now, I just wondered if they were all going to judge my technique, or lack thereof.

I used to worship Mike's cock through the longest blowjobs I'd ever given, teasing and sucking for all I was worth, easing off whenever he got close, until he was begging me to let him come. I hadn't done that in a long time. It all just seemed like too much effort. Most days we were too exhausted to do more than get off quick and hit the sack. Hell, I hadn't even blown him in two months. We were pretty much jerking off together in the shower or in bed before we'd both collapse for a few hours sleep.

I wanted those jaw-exhausting blowjobs back. I wanted him to be so hot for me he couldn't wait till I got undressed to have me, maybe even taking me up against his bar after closing. Just not with the live audience watching us.

"Listen," he said. "I gotta go. The contractor's meeting me in a few. That was the other reason I called. Could you pick up Steven at the airport? I can't get away from here for a couple more hours."

Steven. So much for spending the night naked on my couch with a cold beer. I could probably still go for the beer, but no way in hell was I sitting around with my balls hanging out while Steven—Mike's ex—stared at me.

They had remained friends from the day they'd broken up, even though Steven now lived in New York. He'd been at the bar the night I'd met Mike, and every year he flew back

to attend our anniversary gig. Some traditions really needed to die a miserable death. Not that Steven was a bad guy, just one more reason in a long list why I was finding our usual thing tiresome.

“What time?” I asked.

“His plane lands in half an hour.”

So much for getting out of the suit. And the cold shower. “All right. I’ll take care of it.”

“Great. I told him I’d meet him at baggage claim.” The sexy voice was gone. He was in work mode again. “Thanks, Eddie. I owe you one.”

* * *

The double doors to the main terminal at the Toledo Express Airport slid open, and the cool air gave me a jolt, some kind of crazy-ass high that only people melting to their deaths must feel. I didn’t want to move a muscle. I’d had to park in the long-term lot and walk what felt like three miles in my suit jacket. I had taken the damn thing off for the ride over, but my shirt still wasn’t dry by the time I’d gotten to the airport. No way was I meeting Steven sopping wet from my own sweat. I might still stink in the jacket, but at least I wouldn’t give the impression I’d run to the airport while Steven strolled off the plane looking (and smelling) fantastic, as usual. Not like a guy who’d been marinating in his own stink all day. Hell, I doubted the man even sweated during sex.

I headed for baggage claim and checked my phone. I was late. The crowd grabbing their luggage at the baggage carousels was pretty thin, but Steven was nowhere in sight. Ten minutes later I confirmed with the closest arrival board that his plane had landed on time. Still no Steven.

At least the airport was air conditioned. I waited by a vending machine selling frozen yogurt push-up pops in the various flavors of the rainbow. If Steven didn’t hurry his ass up I was going to get naked and rub one of those yogurt pops all over my body. I really didn’t want to get arrested. The way my luck was going, by the time I got to the jail someone would’ve probably had the brilliant idea to transfer the AC unit from the jail to the courthouse, and I’d be left sweating all night, still wearing the damn suit. My head throbbed again.

Maybe Steven had missed his flight. How very un-Steven-like of him.

An elderly woman with a walker shuffled toward me. She stopped in front of the vending machine and stared up at me. “It doesn’t look like you’re having a good day.”

I gave her a smile. “I guess I’m not.”

“Eddie.” That voice. Definitely not Steven. I turned around.

Mike was standing ten feet away holding two bags, one in each hand. He was a few

inches shorter than I, but no one would argue the fact that he had an even more dominating presence. Maybe it was the way he carried himself, holding nothing back, his chest out, arms at his sides but not relaxed, ready to engage in whatever activity was necessary at any moment. He was in a T-shirt, shorts, and a pair of leather sandals. I'd never seen him wear sandals before, no matter how hot it'd gotten outside. Was Mike changing, and I wasn't even noticing? That hurt too much to contemplate.

I made my way to him. "I thought you wanted me to pick Steven up." Dammit. I wasn't in the mood for this.

Mike didn't say anything right away. He just stood there with a weird-ass smirk on his face until he finally said, "Here." He handed me one of the bags. It looked a lot like my bag. "That's yours," he said and held up the other. "This one's mine. Our flight leaves in an hour, so we better get checked in."

"What are you talking about?"

He smiled that sexy grin that had his eyes crinkling up and meant he was seriously enjoying himself. I hadn't seen that look in a long time. "Can't a guy surprise his man after fifteen years?"

I looked at the bag in my hand, then the one in his. "We're going somewhere?"

He handed over the ticket.

"Chicago?" I asked. Although it was a stupid question since I'd read the destination off the printed ticket with my own name.

"Keep reading," he said.

Another flight. "Hawaii?"

"A private resort on Lanai. We'll get there after midnight their time. We're staying on the beach. Ocean breezes. Fifteen degrees cooler than here. Should feel damn good."

I wanted to comment on how much a trip like that must have cost, but he was weird about money. His grandpa had left him a sum that would keep him more than comfortable, but he liked earning his own way. Besides, his family had stopped speaking to him when he'd come out in his early twenties. He got a kick out of keeping the money and not touching a dime of it. A private resort? On the beach? Sounds like he finally found a reason to dip into the funds. Which blew me away. I hadn't thought there was a reason in the world why he'd spend that money. I said, "I have court on Wednesday."

"We get back late Tuesday." He stepped closer and spoke in that voice he used when discussing something serious he thought I might not like. "You need a break. *We* need a break."

Had he said those words without giving me the ticket first, I would've thought he was

calling us quits. Even on the day before our anniversary. “What are we going to do when we get there?” I asked.

The smile was back. “Now that’s a surprise.” He’d probably found the one gay bar on the island. Which would be okay. He’d planned something just for the two of us. Something different than the usual way we spent our anniversary. I could live with one night out surrounded by a slew of strangers.

I couldn’t think of anything to say, except... “Tony was talking about the party tomorrow night.”

“Yeah. I told everyone to keep up appearances.” He laughed. He was really enjoying this. “Come on. I brought you something to change into.” The smile on his face grew with a shake of his head. “That suit has got to go.”

* * *

“Aloha! Welcome to the Lanai Paradise Resort.” The woman working the resort’s front desk smiled at Mike while I stood a step behind him holding our bags. It was late, and the lobby was empty, except for the two of us and the clerk with the huge smile checking us in.

Mike had a way with women. They always thought he was coming on to them, and he didn’t bother explaining otherwise. Maybe it was that bad-ass-tough-guy look he had going on combined with the nicest-guy-you’d-ever-meet personality. He’d give the shirt off his back (and a hell of a lot more) to anyone who needed it. Maybe that’s what most women were looking for. Women usually knew what it was they wanted. Me? I hadn’t a clue until I was so far gone in lust I didn’t want to walk away, so I actually took the time to get to know him.

She looked up our reservation and said, “One of our honeymoon cottages. Excellent choice.”

Okay, she’d seen that I was with him, knew we were sharing a room, so maybe she got that he wasn’t flirting. I stared at the back of his head as he signed for the room. Not a room, though. A cottage. A honeymoon cottage on the beach. Holy shit, he’d gone all out.

Once we were checked in, a young man led us outside. Mike insisted we carry our bags. We just had the one each, and he never did like someone else doing something for him he could do for himself, even when it was an included paid service. We followed the man down a stone pathway behind the back of the resort’s main building. Seven-foot-tall torches lit the way, offering a view of the surrounding foliage and small lighted ponds of colorful tropical fish. The trees and shrubs were more exotic than anything I was familiar with. It all gave the place a secluded feel. A second path veered off to the right, and in another minute we were standing before the honeymoon cottage, a small one-story

building with dim lights already on inside, creating a soft glow in the darkness of the night.

Mike tipped the young man and went inside. I stepped one foot in and stopped in my tracks, dropping my bag to the floor beside me. I was speechless. Across the room was a wall made of glass, a sliding door with floor-to-ceiling windows on each side and curtains pulled back to reveal the panoramic view. The door leading to the deck was open and beyond the deck and white sand of the beach I could see it. The ocean. Even in the dark of night it was a vibrant blue, clear and sparkling under the moon's rays. The waves rolling onto the beach were hypnotic to watch. I walked straight for the doors and stared out. The moon was high, and it lit the beach and the water far beyond in the distance. The sound of the surf rushing in and out mesmerized me.

But the best part, the part I wanted to stand there until I could soak it into every molecule of my body, and could also figure out how to bottle it up and take it home with me, was the cool breeze blowing in off the ocean.

God, it felt great. Nothing like the stale, humid air in Ohio.

I could have stood there all night, watching the water foam as the waves crashed onto the shore, the wind on my face, the curtains on each side of the windows billowing out beside me.

Mike cleared his throat.

I forced myself to turn and look over the rest of the place. The cottage was one large room in a tropical decor of blues, greens, and yellows with hardwood floors and bamboo-style rugs. There were windows on every wall, including a picture window above the bed's headboard. That one king-size bed was the focal point of the room. No desk. No TV. Nothing to distract. A ceiling fan spun silently overhead. I could see a full bathroom through the open door behind Mike. The tub looked large enough for two. "This is..."

"What?" he asked as he tossed his bag on the chair beside the bed.

"Romantic."

He smiled and looked around. "Yeah, I didn't do too bad, did I?"

"I didn't know you knew how to do that."

"What?"

"Romance."

"Fucker." He smirked, and a second later he came at me. In a rush he took me in his arms and planted one hell of a kiss on my lips.

That was more like Mike.

He moved me backward out the open doors. "You need a shower."

I pointed to the door on the other side of the bed. "That's the bathroom."

“The ocean is this way.” He kept moving me until we made our way across the deck. “Ever swim naked in the Pacific?” he asked.

“Never swam in any ocean, clothes or no clothes.”

“It’s about time we changed that.”

“It’s the middle of the night.”

“It is,” he said. “Which means it’s officially our anniversary.”

We’d slept on the plane or I might have argued with him that we were too tired to swim in the ocean at this hour, no matter how bright the moonlight. Hell, even without the sleep I wouldn’t have said anything. He was being romantic. A moonlit anniversary swim with a naked, romantic Mike. I wasn’t missing that.

“Yeah,” I said. “Sleep’s overrated.” I didn’t want to waste one minute alone with him.

He raised my T-shirt over my head and dropped it to the wood deck. With his tongue he traced the beaded tattoo that wound around my neck and down my chest. He only ever made it a few inches along that path. He moved lower to my pecs. I always got off on his lips and tongue teasing my nipples. He knew it and used that to his advantage. But it had been such a damn long time since he’d done so.

He straightened, took a step back, and stripped off his shirt. “Get undressed.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice, and it wasn’t just because I’d been dying to sit around naked for the past twelve hours. He lowered his shorts to the deck, and I stopped with mine halfway down my thighs. Mike was hard. Seriously hard, with a drop of precum lingering at the tip of his cock. One kiss and a short suck of my nipple and he was ready to pop. Maybe he needed this trip even more than I did.

Maybe he needed me—just me—more than our usual anniversary party, more than I’d given him credit for. The relief washed over me, and the muscles in my neck and shoulders loosened as if he’d just given me an hour-long massage. Guess it hadn’t been only work making me so tense.

I expected him to bend me over a piece of the matching wicker deck furniture, the table or maybe one of the oversize lounge chairs, but he didn’t. He smiled again. I hadn’t seen him smile this much in months. He looked like a dope with the silly grin and his dick rock hard. I didn’t care. It was a stunning combination.

“Race you,” he said, then jumped off the deck and ran onto the beach stark naked, heading for the water’s edge.

“Asshole,” I called out as I kicked off my shorts and shoes. I chased after him, laughing all the way to the water. He’d already made it in waist-high by the time I got there. He splashed me as I ran in. I lunged at him, and he let out a huge-ass giggle as I wrapped my

arms around his chest from behind. A fucking giggle.

Wait. That hadn't come from him. It was from me. His laugh still sounded like a guy his size normally would. It sounded great. I sounded like a kid running to get to the dodgeball first at recess. Maybe it was the sound of pure joy.

I had every intention of dunking him under the water, but I gave up on that idea. I couldn't bring myself to end his laughter. Better to cut off my own embarrassing sounds. I let go of him, dove under the surface, and basked in the cool water that surrounded my heated flesh from head to toe. The stickiness of the past twelve hours washed away, and every concern and worry went with it.

Maybe I had been under too long. His large hands grabbed my arms and yanked me up. "Come here." He brought his lips to mine. The stubble on his face was wet, and the water dripped to my chest as we pressed closer together.

He grabbed the back of my head and parted his lips. So many times we'd done this, a caress of tongues, the intensity building, our cocks growing harder as our bodies surged together, as we shifted our hips and found the rhythm that drove us both to the edge. But we'd never done anything outside. We'd fucked year after year in front of forty guys, but not once had he given me a simple kiss on the lips outside of our place or a gay bar. Never outdoors where someone might see. Never standing naked in the ocean.

He backed up a few steps toward the cottage tugging me along with him, never stopping the touches or the kisses until we reached the water's edge. He pulled me down to the sand until I was lying on top of him. I braced myself, hands in the wet sand on each side of his head, and lined up our bodies groin to groin. I stared down at him. The wet hair on his chest shone in the dim light of the moon. The muscles of his biceps flexed as he ran his palms down my arms. His eyes crinkled up again at the corners as he gave me a slow smile. God, he'd never looked better. The swell of the surf rolled in around us, the water shallow, barely an inch deep where he had decided to get horizontal. Such a smart man.

We moved together, creating friction that had my cock wet at the tip for reasons that had nothing to do with the ocean. I rocked faster, loving the groan he gave up as my shaft grazed the sensitive skin below the head of his dick. I didn't want the moment to end. But I also wanted the wave of orgasm to crash into us both, like the surf washing over our tangled limbs. I wanted to watch his face in the moonlight as he came.

He must have had another idea. "Eddie, stop. Up. Inside." Maybe those were all the words he could form right then.

I figured he meant that he wanted us to go inside the cottage since he was pushing me away from him, and not that he wanted me to get my dick inside him. I stood and stared

down at him as he lay in the sand, his gorgeous hard cock resting against his abs, waiting for my touch again, the taut muscles of his body reminding me of his power and strength and everything I loved about the male body—about his body. He still moved me beyond mere desire and lust like no one I'd ever known.

I couldn't wait any longer. Not once I realized I'd been standing there stroking my dick as I stared at him. I didn't want my own hand. I wanted him. I reached out and helped him stand. He kissed me, hard, fast, then grunted out the words, "More. Inside." He tugged me with him toward the cottage. He didn't stop for the table on the deck, for my bag, for his, or the bathroom. He went straight for the bed.

He threw back the thin blanket and the sheet beneath. Both caught in a gust of air and billowed out before wafting to the floor beside the bed. He climbed onto his knees in the middle of the mattress. I didn't wait for him to grunt out more one-word commands. I kneeled facing him. The lengths of our cocks touched first. He hissed, and that spurred me on. I grabbed his ass and dragged him closer until we were kissing, clutching at each other like we had on the beach.

Mike pulled away and flopped onto his back on the bed, his hard cock bobbing and slapping against him. I wanted to stuff it in my mouth, but there he went again with another idea.

He gripped my hips and forced me to straddle his thighs. He moved me forward and spread my ass until his cock nestled between my ass cheeks. Hands still clutching my hips, he helped me move up and down, rubbing my ass along his shaft. He said, "Did you notice anything special in this room?"

Huh? I was supposed to be looking at the room?

If he wanted to have a conversation, then the heat of his cock against my ass was way too distracting. I tried to focus. Okay. Headboard. Open window above. Yellow walls. White ceiling. Bedside table. Lamp. Wait...

"What is that?" I asked.

"Your favorite kind."

Talk about romantic.

Seriously.

I grabbed the bottle of lube from the table. It must have already been there when we'd arrived. I hadn't seen him open his bag. Which meant he'd arranged with the resort to have it waiting for us. Which meant he'd really given this a lot of thought.

"I didn't think they made this anymore," I said. We hadn't had any at our place in five years or more. I'd searched every sex store I could find, both in person and online.

“They do,” he said. “It’s just really hard to come by. Took me forever”—he thrust up and grunted—“to find a place that sold it.” Which was so damn sweet when I thought of how often he’d made fun of me for being so attached to a specific brand of lube. He was thrusting up against my ass harder, faster. He grasped the tops of my thighs in both hands. “Hurry.”

My hand shook as I squirted the lube into my palm. “I love Hawaii.”

“Hey, it’s not the island of magically-appearing lube. I searched all over for that shit.”

“Such a good man.” I lifted my ass and reached around behind me to slather his dick. His head fell to the pillow at the contact of my slick hand to his shaft. I swiped the remainder of the lube over my hole and held his cock up as I lowered my body to him. The head of his dick pressed against the tight ring of muscle. Fuck, I’d missed this. And not just my favorite lube. I’d missed the feel of him pushing at my body, dying to get inside me, not just to get off fast anyway we could muster the energy for. I’d missed being so damn turned on I might explode with just his dick in my ass, but wanting to make it last as long as he could stand it, wanting nothing more than him pounding into me, taking his pleasure from me.

He pushed up, an easy, gentle motion, and the head of his cock pressed inside. I waited a moment to catch my breath, for the burn to ease, then I shifted up and down, working myself onto him.

He threw his head back again and bit his bottom lip. “Yes. God, yes. Eddie!”

I surged forward to kiss him. His tongue met mine in a fierce exchange.

“I’m ready,” I said.

It was a response to a question he no longer asked but that he had for weeks when we’d first started fucking. His way of making sure I was ready for what he wanted to do.

His eyes widened at my words, and that was it. In an instant he had me flipped over onto my back, my legs over his forearms, and was thrusting inside me like a man possessed with a desperate need to climax or die trying. I shifted my hips, wishing I could get his dick to hit my gland, but there’d be time for that. Later. We had four days in this paradise. And by paradise, I wasn’t thinking about the resort or the island.

Mike’s breaths came harder, and his face reddened as he groaned and slammed into me one last time. If any part of my brain was still working I might have tried to figure out when the last time was I’d had his cum in my ass. It didn’t matter now.

He fell forward, his forehead landing on my shoulder. He was panting. His heavy breaths blew across my body, tickling my chest hair. I was content to stay that way for a while despite having my knees practically at my ears and my still-hard cock’s interest in

some friction. Mike had other ideas. He sat up fast, slipped from my body, and flipped us over again until I was lying on top of him.

“Up,” he said.

I didn't know what he wanted, but I propped myself over him on my knees with my hands on either side of his broad shoulders. He scooted down the bed in one quick movement. I gasped as he gripped the base of my cock and his mouth sucked me in. I straightened my legs and rose up onto my toes to keep some of my weight off him. He focused on the head of my dick for a long time, wetting, swirling, sucking. My arms and legs were shaking by the time he slid his mouth over the length.

One long pull to the tip, and he released me. “You taste salty.”

I almost told him it was okay to use his hand, but his next words stopped me short.

“It's okay, Eddie. Fuck me.” He grabbed my ass and tugged me forward, all the way into his mouth again. I let myself go. Let my body move and thrust into the wet heat of his talented mouth. His big hands massaged my ass. One slid to caress my balls, then back again, between my cheeks, pressing at and around my hole, over and over.

When his thick finger drove inside me and hit my gland, I was a goner. “Mike!” I gave one more thrust and came, my hips making little jerking movements throughout the spasms that took hold of my body.

“Oh God.” I fell to the side, trying not to land on him as my arms gave out.

He kissed my hip, his hands still massaging over the muscles of my ass. I glided my own hand over the surface of his smooth bald head and down the back of his neck, reveling in how masculine he felt when I touched him that way, how hot he looked with his cheek resting on my leg next to my spent cock. He nuzzled my balls and made his way up the bed, never letting go of me, wandering his hands over my heated skin and tracing the tats along my arm and shoulder with his tongue until we were lying face-to-face.

His eyes were half closed, but he had a satisfied grin. I probably had the same. A matching set.

It was the first time we'd done it in a bed on our anniversary. The normalcy of that may seem boring to most. Not to me. I'd been waiting years for this.

He laughed as he shifted his ass on the sheet. “God, I have sand everywhere.”

I'd forgotten he'd been lying on the beach while I'd been on top of him, and I could only imagine where the sand had gotten. I laughed with him. “Uncomfortable?” I asked.

He ran a hand down my cheek. The stubble made a scratching sound against his palm. His thumb lingered over my lower lip. “Not at all,” he said.

“That's a damn good lie. Come on. Let's get cleaned up.” I got off the bed and dragged

him up with me. He gave me a chaste kiss, then withdrew. He didn't speak. He held my face in his hands and watched me. Was I supposed to say something?

His stare grew more intense, the squeeze of his palms tighter. Not painful. Intent. Serious. His eyes searched mine. "I love you."

He'd said it before. A lot over the years, in fact. Then why did those three words move me like never before? Maybe we'd gone too long without saying them. Maybe it was the beach, the skinny-dipping, the sound of the surf, the tropical breeze, my favorite kind of lube. Or maybe it was just that he always had great timing.

"Thank you," I said.

His grip on my face eased, and he smirked. "For telling you what you should already know?"

"For all this. For the trip. Everything."

"You're welcome. But tonight was only the beginning. Let's go shower, then we'll get some sleep. We have a big day tomorrow."

"Oh yeah?"

"I booked a few things so we can see the island. Then there's this bar—"

I nodded. "Sounds good." I grabbed him by the back of the neck. "I love you." My lips grazed his as I said the words, then we were kissing again, a deep, long kiss that helped me forget about whatever he had in mind for tomorrow night.

Tonight had been perfect. I could live with however he wanted to spend the rest of our anniversary.

* * *

I heard Mike's distant laughter, and that did it. I went from jogging to a flat-out run.

He must have done the same. Even the laughing wasn't slowing him down. We were nearing the stretch of beach in front of our cottage. At this rate I was never going to catch him. He was older than I, but I could already hear the old-timer comments he'd sling my way. I'd never hear the end of it if I couldn't at least close the gap.

We'd gotten up early despite our late night and had rented a four wheeler to drive to a red rock formation that changed colors under the rising sun, then we'd spent the rest of the day snorkeling and kayaking near Hulopoe Bay. The tropical fish, sea turtles, and two dolphins we caught glimpses of all afternoon fascinated Mike, and I could see he was disappointed when it was time to get out of the water. If the night before alone together had been perfection, then today had been the best damn icing on the cake I'd ever tasted. I hadn't had a headache all day. I hadn't thought about court or the case or anything else. Just the two of us and the gorgeous views.

All of it had reminded me of what I loved about Mike. How much damn fun he was to just hang with. His humor, his easy way of going with the flow, his curiosity and the thrill he got out of trying new things.

When we'd made it back to the resort we'd parked the four wheeler at the main building, slipped off our shoes and shirts, and started to walk barefoot along the beach to our cottage. Until Mike had yelled, "Race you," and taken off.

Who knew he was such a kid at heart.

I guess I did. Once upon a time. I liked him in Hawaii. Away from the bar and the stress of the construction at the restaurant.

He came to a stop and stared out over the ocean. I was out of breath when I reached his side. He turned and without a word he tackled me. We fell to the ground, both of us breathing heavily. He was on top, but I dug my heels into the sand and flipped us.

We wrestled more, rolling in and out of the surf. Neither of us had shaved since we'd left Ohio, and the rasp of his facial hair against my chest as he tried to roll me over teased my nipples. I was getting hard. I hadn't been turned on from such simple, playful aggression in a long time. I felt free, like I could breathe again, only I hadn't known I'd been holding my breath for so damn long.

We need a break.

"Hey." Mike stopped the rolling and sat up beside me. He stared out over the water again. "Check it out." The sun was setting in the distance, giving off a glow that turned the surface of the ocean blazing shades of orange and red.

I sat up and said, "I can't believe you did all this."

"You having fun?" he asked.

"I am."

He stood. "It's time to go get ready or we'll be late." He reached down and helped me up. When I was standing beside him he slipped his hand into mine and didn't let go. In fifteen years we'd never held hands. Not outside of the bedroom. I wanted this moment to go on for a while longer. I didn't want to go to some bar where we didn't know anyone, where it wouldn't be just the two of us, where he wouldn't laugh like he'd been doing all day.

But I had made a promise to myself. This one night I'd give him what he needed.

When we reached the deck I stopped. There was a small round table in the middle that hadn't been there before. It was set for two. Covered plates at each setting, candles lit in the center, and a bottle of wine off to the side.

I pointed to the table. "Are we eating first? I thought you said we'd be late."

“Yeah. For this.”

“No bar?”

“No bar. I said that to throw you off the surprise. I thought this year maybe...” He looked at the table, then back to me. “Just us.”

I stood staring at him for a minute, then leaped forward and grabbed him. I’d meant for it to be a hug, a show of appreciation. I hadn’t meant to fling myself at him so hard we’d go flying backward. Good thing the deck was low to the ground. He landed on his back on the sand, and I came down sprawled half on top of him, half beside him.

I pulled myself up and straddled his thighs. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. I take it you’re okay with the change of plans?”

“More than okay.”

He sat up and shifted us around until we were kneeling side by side watching the sunset again.

“Why did you do all this?” I asked.

“Fifteen years deserves a little something special, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

He slowly looked my way, his expression serious, and then he glanced out over the water again. “We needed this. It’s too easy to get swept away by life. Away from what matters most. I wanted us to be swept away together, if just for a little while.” He paused, then added, “We need to do this every year. Get away. Recharge. Just us.”

“Just us,” I said. I looped my arm around his and placed my head on his shoulder.

He rested his temple against mine and whispered in my ear. “Happy Anniversary.” I could hear it in his voice...he was smiling again.

That made two of us.

* * * *

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