

OUT AND PROUD



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Editing by Jo Bird

This book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Please don't read if you are under eighteen.

BLURB

Starting over is the scariest kind of adventure, but when the future looks this bright, it can't be all bad.

Fresh out of the closet

It might have cost me everything, but I couldn't live a lie anymore. I was engaged to a woman I loved... but when I realized that no matter how much I cared about her, it wasn't really love, and I wasn't really being honest with myself or anyone.

I didn't expect my entire family to shut me out and leave me in the cold because of it. The only way to be myself was to let go... and Hawaii was as good a place as any to start.

A workaholic in search of peace

Don't ask me when I last took a vacation because the answer is never. My life has been nothing but work for as long as I can remember, but after my father's death, I must agree with my therapist it's time for a vacation.

There's no better place to forget about the outside world than lying in the sun on a sandy beach with a piña colada. What I didn't plan on was finding something more than relaxation.

Brian and Michael come from very different worlds, but when an unexpected connection is sparked on a flight to a tropical paradise, there's no telling what each can discover or what love can teach them about themselves and what matters most.

Out and Proud is a sensual and steamy gay romance featuring romantic encounters on sandy beaches, beautiful sunsets, and a

serious case of butterflies. This m/m romance novel is best enjoyed by readers over the age of 18.

THE AIRPLANE



Brian buckled himself into the aisle seat, tugging hard at the strap to be sure it was nice and tight. Glancing at the window two seats over, he leaned as far across as he could to close the shade, but he was buckled in too tightly. With a long-suffering sigh, he unclasped the seatbelt and pulled down the offending shade with a click. Sitting back with an annoyed huff, he buckled himself in again.

A middle-aged woman across the aisle, her gray hair pulled into a long braid, gave him a warm smile tinged with pity and understanding. Brian tried to smile back, but his facial features weren't working right. He realized with a jolt that he didn't know anybody's name, and nobody on the plane knew his.

It was Brian's first flight, and he was alone. He was starting to think it may have been a big mistake. He could still remember his best friend Lee's words as he dropped Brian off at the airport that morning.

"You know I'm not mad at you, don't you?" Lee had asked, biting his lip. "The rest of the family, sure, but not me. You

were my friend before you broke off the engagement with my sister.”

“Thanks, Lee. I appreciate it,” Brian had replied, rolling his eyes.

“Seriously, though, you know it’s not about the gay thing. It’s just about Hannah. They’ve got to be on her side, you know? But they’ll come around. Even Hannah will. You two were friends for years before all the dating shit.”

Lee had touched on the issue that had been bothering Brian. Lee’s family had been like his own since they’d become friends in fifth grade. Brian’s parents were older and had him late in life. While they were nice enough, they were senior citizens now, and he had no siblings or cousins. Lee’s family was huge and lively, swallowing Brian right up the moment he’d come over to play with Lee the first time and only spitting him back out again when he broke up with their only daughter. Lee’s parents and sea of brothers hadn’t spoken to him in months.

In retrospect, Brian had wanted to be a real part of Lee’s family. He’d always wanted that. Marrying into it had seemed like the logical thing to do. Like so many of Brian’s ideas, it had been a bad one. Hannah, who’d had a big crush on him since she was little and who Brian still cared deeply about—platonically—had gotten her heart broken, and it was all his fault.

“I’m glad it’s not about the gay... *thing*.” Brian had grimaced, watching Lee out of the corner of his eye.

“Oh, you know what I mean! And I promise, I’ll figure out how to talk about it like a normal person.” Lee had looked properly chastised, and Brian bumped his shoulder against Lee’s to reassure him. “You’re my best friend, Brian. I want you to be happy. Nothing can change that.”

So Brian had walked into the airport with his bags, feeling refreshed and ready for a vacation. His best friend

and his own parents supported him. He was single, out of the closet and on his way to Hawaii for a much-needed break from reality. He'd somehow overlooked the nine-hour flight part and the fact that he was terrified of flying.

When the plane rolled slowly away from the gate, he pulled the emergency booklet from the pocket of the seat in front and read along with the instruction video playing on the small screen overhead. A commotion behind him pulled him out of his intense focus.

"Sir? Sir! You need to take your seat." A loud and serious-faced flight attendant was following a well-dressed, blond man down the aisle, her eyebrow raised comically high. Brian wouldn't have wanted to cross her.

"Sorry!" the blond called over his shoulder, looking annoyed. His blue eyes scanned the seat numbers as he came closer. "I thought I still had time to use the bathroom."

"Sir, we are *taxiing*, and you need to take your seat, or I will have you removed from this aircraft!"

The man mock saluted her, which made her put her hands on her hips and stare him down. Brian was annoyed on the flight attendant's behalf. Messing around like that on a flight was a terrible idea. Even Brian, who had never flown before, knew that.

Then, the man stopped in the aisle beside Brian and looked appraisingly down at him. Brian's mouth fell open as their eyes met. Brian had had instant crushes on strangers before, but he'd never felt his heart skip a beat when someone simply looked him in the eye.

Since Brian hadn't been out of the closet, even to himself, for more than a year, he hadn't had time to ruminate on what his *type* might be. He'd been attracted to all sorts of men, seeing the appeal in all races, sizes, and hairstyles. But this man was more gorgeous than anyone had a right to be. He was slender, though strong muscles rippled under his

marble-smooth skin as he gripped his expensive-looking leather carry-on bag. His blond hair was a little longer in front and buzzed short underneath in a style Brian quite liked. But the way he was dressed threw Brian off. A crisp, freshly ironed, white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up neatly was paired with a handsome, dark gray waistcoat with intricate silver buttons up the front and very well-fitted trousers. The man looked professional and completely at ease in his elegance.

“Excuse me, but my seat’s just there.” The man nodded with his perfectly pointed chin at the window seat.

Brian fought the urge to melt into his seat because surely a man like that wouldn’t speak so candidly to someone as basic as Brian in his t-shirt and jeans. But Brian unbuckled his belt for the second time and stood, allowing him to pass. The man stepped so close Brian could feel his warmth, and as he sat back down and re-clasped his buckle, he could smell a hint of coconut, lemongrass, and something a bit more masculine.

Brian realized the safety demonstration video was over, and his heart started to pound again as the plane began making weird, mechanical noises. Nobody around him, the beautiful man included, seemed to think it was strange, so Brian desperately tried not to worry. Then the man opened the window shade, and they were both caught in the light of the setting sun. Brian didn’t want to see anything as they took off, but the man’s skin shone so brilliantly in the golden light that it was hard not to glance at him under the pretense of looking out the window he absolutely did not want to look out of.

It was going to be an interesting flight.

* * *

MICHAEL UNDOED the top button of his waistcoat as the plane prepared for takeoff, relishing the way the cutie on the aisle kept pretending he wasn't staring right at him. He'd had a hard morning and a very long and uncomfortable chat with his company's now ex-lawyer, and he felt he deserved the ego boost.

His father had passed away last month, leaving everything to his only son and heir. The lawyers had been up his ass with documents to sign and meetings to attend to tie up all the loose ends. He'd scarcely had time to mourn, not that there had been much of a relationship between them. Lawyers of his father's class were like that. His work had been the cornerstone of his life, and he never had time for anything else.

Once the house was sold and he'd gotten his mother set up in a beautiful new condo close to her bridge club friends, Michael had decided to get rid of all the snooty lawyers he'd inherited. They didn't like the changes he was making to the company, or being fired.

One in particular—the one Michael had been fucking on and off for several years—really did not want to be let go. It seemed Andrew had been dreaming about being Michael's official partner, in and out of the bedroom, but the security of Michael's fortune was the only thing he was after.

To say that Michael had been disappointed was an understatement, but it certainly wasn't a surprise. Most people were put off by all the baggage and extravagance that Michael came with. He hadn't met anybody who could look beyond it and see him for who he really was. To be fair, Michael didn't think he could see that either.

This trip was supposed to help with that. He intended to do some soul-searching, or whatever it was one did to find who they really were. He'd never been on a vacation before that didn't, at least partly or mostly, have to do with work.

He was already unsure what to do, sitting in one seat for hours without a briefcase, paperwork, or anything to occupy his time. He should have brought a book. He supposed he could at least look out the window.

Michael had been on more planes than he could count, and he wasn't scared in the least, but the man at the end of his row, who he had started referring to as "Aisle Cutie" in his head, looked terrified as the main engines flared noisily to life. They were about to take off. Aisle Cutie gripped the armrests tightly, his knuckles several shades lighter than his skin tone. All his dark arm hair stood on end, and the brown eyes behind his nerdy but adorable glasses were wide with fright.

"Is this your first flight?" Michael asked, looking at Aisle Cutie properly for the first time without an angry flight attendant breathing down his neck. Yes, Michael definitely liked him. He had freckles scattered across the bridge of his nose and cheeks and just the tip of a tattoo peeking out around the neck of his faded t-shirt. Michael wouldn't even have worn such a garment to bed, but on Aisle Cutie, it was endearing. It fit him perfectly, showing off a lean and muscled torso. His dark hair was purposefully artless and messy, and wasn't he just the *cutest*?

Aisle Cutie turned his head to face him abruptly as if he were a puppet on a string, so rigid had fear made his movements. He attempted a smile, but it fell far short of his eyes. "Is it that obvious?"

Michael just smiled. This man could be his little project for the next nine hours. He held out his hand to Aisle Cutie, letting it rest on the seat between them. "Here, darling. Hold on tight."

At that moment, the plane jolted forward, accelerating down the runway. Aisle Cutie yelped and grabbed Michael's

hand without any preamble. “Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck,” he chanted.

Michael couldn’t help but laugh as the plane left the ground. Even after all this time, liftoff still gave him butterflies in his belly. Aisle Cutie squeezed his hand quite obscenely, but it was worth it. It had been a long time since Michael had done something as simple as holding someone’s hand.

* * *

BRIAN WAS DIMLY aware he was holding hands with the man in the window seat, but the rest of him was totally preoccupied with liftoff. How in the world weren’t the rest of the passengers freaking out right now? They all sat in their seats, looking bored, and Brian could not wrap his mind around it. With a fearful look out the window, he realized the plane was nearly sideways, doing some sort of turn, and that after a few short moments, the ground now seemed miles away. He could see trees, people, and cars, and everything kept getting smaller, and they were still *sideways*. How on earth was that okay?

He squeezed his eyes shut and held onto the man’s hand. If this was the end, at least he was less alone than he would have imagined five minutes ago. And had the man called him ‘darling?’

When he opened his eyes again, the plane had straightened out, and the man was now in the seat next to him. Brian had no recollection of him moving over and was surprised the flight attendant hadn’t yelled at him. Only fluffy, white clouds were visible out the window now. His entire body was shaking, but he was slowly calming down.

“Are your ears popping?” the man asked.

Brian turned to look at him. He was so close now he

could smell his aftershave and see his five o'clock shadow. Come to think of it, there *was* an awful lot of uncomfortable pressure in his ears.

"They are," Brian admitted. He'd been too desperately afraid of impending doom to notice it before.

"Try yawning, and I'll find you a stick of gum."

The man released his hand and bent down to rummage through his carry-on bag on the floor. Brian's hand tingled, instantly missing the pressure and comfort. His skin was a little sweaty from gripping the other man's hand so tightly as well, which the man must also be aware of. He clasped his hands in his lap self-consciously and looked down the length of the man's back as he leaned over, noticing that the crisp white shirt was almost untucking itself at the small of his back. Brian blushed and averted his eyes. He was supposed to be yawning.

Brian attempted it, feeling his ears pop uncomfortably. The man sat back and offered him the promised stick of gum. "Here. Chew hard. It'll help as we climb, but your ears will adjust once we reach cruising altitude, and you won't notice the pressure."

"Thank you," Brian said, accepting the stick of Juicy Fruit and removing the wrapper with still-shaking fingers. "You seem to know everything. You fly often, then?"

"Sometimes two or three times a week," the man said with a frown. "It gets old fast."

"I can't imagine this becoming routine," Brian admitted, feeling like he must be coming across as an uncultured dimwit to this well-traveled, beautiful man. "I mean, I've always wanted to travel, but I've been in school forever."

"Oh really? What are you studying?" The man seemed genuinely interested.

"Medicine," Brian replied, finally feeling like he had something of substance to say to this man that might

impress. “One more year of medical school to go. Then I start my residency, hopefully.”

The man smiled. “Ah. Well then, I am glad you’re taking advantage of your time to travel before your residency consumes your entire life.”

Brian found himself throwing his head back and laughing. He felt a little crazy if he was being honest. Here he was, in a death box in the sky, having a strangely easygoing conversation with a gorgeous stranger who had just single-handedly saved him from a nine-hour panic attack. They were flying high in the sky through clouds Brian could touch if the window was open. Part of him felt he must be stuck in a dream that was equal parts fantasy and nightmare. The notion gave him courage he otherwise might not have been able to muster.

“I’m Brian.” He presented his mostly-not-trembling hand for the man to shake.

The man looked at his hand, seemingly stunned, as if they hadn’t just been holding hands for the last five minutes. Slowly, he entwined his fingers with Brian’s, and the grip was warm and familiar. The contact made something turn over in Brian’s stomach, and he couldn’t decide whether the sensation was pleasant or not.

“Michael,” the man said, watching Brian’s face for a reaction. “Glad to be seated next to you for nine more hours, Brian. Just think, I could have been anybody.”

* * *

AFTER SEVERAL HOURS and several beers, Brian and Michael were still in the air, but now they had their noses pressed against the window. Brian was in the middle seat and not doing nearly as much nose-pressing. Michael grinned to himself. Brian had adjusted well, though it was funny seeing

the man's face filled with dread repeatedly as he remembered they were thousands of feet in the air. Michael could feel the man's warmth against his side as they looked out the window together. The armrest had been lifted so Brian could get closer. Michael was incredibly aware that nothing was separating their individual spaces.

"Is that really the ocean?"

The awe in Brian's voice was palpable. Michael realized, not for the first time that this man wore his heart on his sleeve, and he either didn't know it or didn't care. Michael rarely had dealings with people like Brian. All his life, he'd been surrounded by people who hid their true selves away, and Michael had learned to do the same.

"Yeah. It's still miles out. But isn't it beautiful?" Michael found himself asking. It was a thought he would normally have kept to himself. Even though it made him nervous to share such an opinion, he supposed the beauty of the view was a harmless thing to profess.

And it was beautiful. They'd been riding with the sunset all across the mainland and had taken off at precisely the right time to be caught up in the fading light for hours. The magic of the gloaming hour seemed to have bewitched him, and Michael had been letting more and more personal stuff slip out of his mouth. Now, they were about to start traveling over the open sea and would continue to for the remainder of their journey. The sky was orange, pink and purple, and the setting sun glimmered over the water in the distance. It was almost too bright to look at.

"Yeah," Brian agreed. "It's beautiful."

Michael turned to him. There was that nervousness again, making his voice shake, and his eyes grew wide behind their frames as he took in the ocean view.

"I once saved my best friend's sister from drowning," Brian continued, face reddening.

“Is that what made you want to become a doctor?” Michael asked.

Brian nodded. “Yeah. She was lifeless, like a doll. But then I did CPR, and she started moving again, and if I hadn’t been there, she might have...” His eyes filled with tears, and he took off his glasses to fiddle with them, just for something to do to hide the fact that he was about to cry.

Michael was utterly enamored with the easy way Brian shared his feelings and everything about himself. “I only became a lawyer because it was expected of me. And I hate it, actually. My clients are terrible, and everything I’ve done for them has been terrible.” Michael had meant to distract Brian but hadn’t meant to be so honest.

Brian put his glasses back on and looked at him. “Are you a terrible lawyer?”

Michael smirked. “No, I’m a great lawyer.”

“Oh, so you’re saying...” Brian looked confused as if he either couldn’t or didn’t want to put two and two together.

“My father was a corrupt lawyer for corrupt clients, and he taught me everything he knew. I went along with it for so long because I couldn’t imagine doing anything else, but then he got sick.” Michael’s voice wavered, and he realized he was sharing more with Brian than he’d ever shared with someone before. Part of him wanted to stop and close himself off again, but another part was caught up in the never-ending magic of the sunset and was desperate to tell Brian everything. “He had stage four pancreatic cancer, and he only had a few months to live. And last month, the day after he died, I officially dismantled the entire practice.”

“Holy shit,” Brian said, staring at him with wide eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right.” Michael met Brian’s gaze, feeling more vulnerable than he ever had. “It’s all so crazy. Going to Hawaii like this is crazy. I’ve never had fun in my life,”

Michael said jokingly, but he wasn't joking. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had honest-to-goodness *fun*. Sex didn't count, though there was an element of fun there too.

"Well, where are you staying? I'm pretty good at fun," Brian said, blushing. That blush was the sweetest thing, Michael thought. He was pretty sure Brian had no idea what he seemed to be suggesting.

"I'm staying at the Hyatt Regency," Michael said.

Brian laughed as he pulled his phone out of his pocket. "Well, of course you are." Michael watched him type for a moment, curious. Then Brian turned his phone around so Michael could see the map of Honolulu he'd pulled up. "You're not far from my Airbnb near Diamond Head."

Michael frowned. "What's Airbnb?"

Brian laughed again, and Michael felt himself grinning as well. It was nice to be laughed at in a manner that didn't make him feel like the scum of the earth, like every time his father had laughed at him. There was no judgment whatsoever in Brian's manner.

Brian explained about Airbnb and a myriad of other plebeian things Michael had never heard of before over the next couple of hours. Michael even admitted that his seat in coach had been bought by mistake, as he'd fired the guy who usually made his travel arrangements. Brian had laughed, and Michael had never been more grateful for a mistake.

Hours later, Michael awoke with a start when the captain's voice announced they were twenty minutes out from Honolulu and would begin making their descent soon. He couldn't remember drifting off and was shocked to find an older woman smiling at him across the aisle as Brian slept peacefully, nestled against Michael's chest, the top of his head fitting neatly under Michael's chin.

* * *

“SO SERIOUSLY, for real, my suitcase isn’t here?” Brian asked in disbelief. The woman behind the help desk shrugged without taking her eyes off her computer screen.

“I’m sorry, Sir. As I have stated, it will arrive on the next flight out in two days. There simply wasn’t room on your flight. If you like, we can call you when it arrives.”

“Yeah, okay. Thanks,” Brian said, turning from the desk and walking dejectedly away.

Michael was still standing near the baggage claim area, his hand guiltily clasping the strap of his enormous industrial-looking suitcase that had made it on board the airplane successfully. “I’m sorry. That’s happened to me a few times. They even lost my luggage *twice* on separate trips to Sydney. I can lend you some clothes if you’d like,” Michael said, looking awkward.

Brian had also felt awkward when he’d woken to find himself using Michael as a pillow. The other man hadn’t looked upset about it at all, though. He’d been looking down at him with a slightly guilty expression as if he’d been caught with his hand in the cookie jar but self-satisfied all the same. The man had been watching him sleep, and as Brian slowly adjusted to wakefulness, he hadn’t looked away or tried to hide the fact. But now they stood under the fluorescent lights of the airport baggage claim, and the surreal reality of their plane trip together had faded somewhat.

“Sure, I guess that would be okay.” Brian assessed Michael’s frame. Now that they were standing, he figured they were around the same size, though Michael was a little taller and lankier. “Thank you, but I don’t know if I would even know where to begin with that outfit.” Brian looked up and down the length of Michael’s body again, and when he reached his eyes, Michael was grinning.

“I didn’t only bring three-piece suits on vacation to Hawaii,” Michael informed him.

“Not only, huh?” Brian grinned back. “I can’t picture you in anything else.”

“Have you tried?” Michael asked.

Brian could feel himself blushing. It was something he couldn’t seem to stop doing around this man in the nearly half a day he’d known him.

In the cab on the way to Michael’s hotel, Brian suddenly grew awkward. The silence stretched for long minutes as they sat side by side in the backseat, watching the starry landscape dotted with palm trees pass by. Michael’s knee shifted and touched Brian’s, and they both jolted away in surprise.

“Hey, listen,” Michael began quietly, trying to speak low enough so the cab driver wouldn’t overhear. “Is this too much for you? I know we technically just met, and I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. I just thought it would be easier to pick some outfits to borrow in a more secure location.”

“Why?” Brian looked at him, not sure why his defense mechanism was to tease. “Do you have important evil lawyer documents you need to destroy inside your suitcase?”

Michael barked a laugh and looked away. “Good one.”

Brian knew he’d gone too far. He could tell by the flatness of Michael’s tone. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.” Brian let his knee bump Michael’s again, and at least Michael didn’t move away. “Honestly, I-I just came out to my friends and family this year. It’s been a process,” Brian laughed humorlessly. “I don’t know what I’m doing. But this isn’t too much. I’m just stopping by to borrow some clothes. And we’re going to meet up on the beach for lunch tomorrow. Right?”

Finally, Michael turned to look at him again, and his expression softened. “Right. Yeah.” His knee pushed back

against Brian's. "And you're going to teach this *formerly* evil lawyer how to have fun."

Brian laughed, relieved they'd been able to turn the awkward moment around. But now he'd said it out loud. He was gay. Not that he wasn't positive Michael already knew that, given their nine-hour flirt session and the fact that they'd semi-drunkenly fallen asleep as cuddled up as possible in two airplane seats.

"I've been out since I was thirteen, to everybody but my parents and their associates. Minus one." Michael rolled his eyes, then turned to look reassuringly at Brian. "It gets easier. I promise." Michael took Brian's hand for the rest of the cab ride.

Brian grinned as he watched the landscape rolling by, feeling that he might be learning a lot more from Michael than Michael would learn from him.

* * *

MICHAEL WATCHED with undisguised glee as Brian freaked out over the Penthouse Suite for twenty minutes.

"Michael, you have *three* balconies! You literally have a *bidet* in here! Can I wear one of the complementary pairs of slippers?"

Michael collapsed onto one of the couches, sighing tiredly. "You may wear them both. I brought my own."

Brian laughed, sitting on the opposite couch facing him. "Of course you did."

Michael looked scandalized but grinned all the same. "Trust me. Lots of people have worn those. They are used. Like bowling shoes." Michael scrunched his nose up at the thought.

"Don't tell me you've never been bowling before?"

Michael shook his head. "Nope. Never."

“Ah, well. You’re not missing out.”

“Exactly.”

Brian yawned, and it was contagious. Michael found himself following suit. It was still nighttime here, but it was already morning back home, and he’d been up for more than twenty-four hours. Michael couldn’t believe his argument with Andrew had happened in the same time period he’d met Brian. It felt like a lifetime ago already.

Mostly, he couldn’t believe Brian was in his hotel room, that the Aisle Cutie he’d first glimpsed back before they’d even boarded the plane was now here with him on his soul-searching vacation. Michael still intended to do his soul-searching, hoping meeting Brian would be a positive part. Not to mention, Brian had just told him he’d never been with a man before. Michael couldn’t be the first big letdown from a man in Brian’s life, right after he’d finally come out and started living on his own terms.

Michael liked him in a way he’d never allowed himself to like anyone. He watched Brian, who stood to walk over to the lanai that featured the best view of Diamond Head and the beach. He looked out with awe and disbelief at the view, and Michael felt his heart skip a beat.

He thought of what his therapist had said to him a week before he’d left. This trip had been her idea, after all. “Say yes to everything that comes along and feels right. Have every experience you want. Just let go.” And as terrified as it made him, Michael intended to do just that.

In the morning, Michael was once again surprised to wake up fully clothed and in the presence of a still-sleeping Brian. They were on separate couches, sprawled haphazardly because they’d passed out from sheer exhaustion. They’d never even gotten to the point of going through Michael’s clothes for Brian to try on.

He stood and quietly tiptoed to his suitcase, removing

two sets of more casual, beach-appropriate clothing and taking one with him into the bathroom. He took a quick shower and tried not to think about Brian, asleep on his couch with his shirt riding halfway up his chest, exposing a dark thatch of hair that ran in a line from his navel to disappear into his jeans. He turned the water temperature down significantly.

When he finished dressing and exited the bathroom, Brian was fuzzy-headed and confused in front of a full coffee and tea service that had appeared on the table.

“Uh, good morning,” Brian cleared his throat. “Room service just came with this.”

“Help yourself. Please,” Michael insisted, laying the second set of clothes beside Brian on the couch. He deliberated for a moment, then sat next to him. “I don’t know why they always bring tea. I’m a coffee drinker, myself.” Michael began to fix himself a cup with cream and just a little sugar.

“Thanks. Me too,” Brian added as he poured a cup and left it black, taking a noisy slurp. “Wow. Excellent stuff.”

Michael wrinkled his nose, sipping noiselessly at his cup.

“Sorry, I fell asleep here. We were sitting here talking, and all of a sudden...”

“Yeah. Jet lag will do that to you.”

Brian looked surprised. “Jet lag is a real thing?”

“Of course. We essentially went back in time nine hours. But it’s easier than if we’d flown to Europe. Losing time is a much bigger adjustment.”

“There’s so much I don’t know about the world,” Brian admitted sheepishly. “If I hadn’t been planning a wedding for the past five years, I could have seen so many other places before my residency starts.”

Michael nearly choked on his coffee. “*Whose* wedding were you planning?”

Brian froze, eyes wide as he stared at him. He seemed to

be holding his breath. Then he let it out slowly and placed his cup on the table. "My wedding. To my best friend's sister."

It all slowly clicked for Michael. "The girl whose life you saved."

Brian's face turned red, and he looked out the window at Diamond Head, now standing tall with the perfect blue sky backdrop. "Um, yeah. I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I called it off, obviously."

Michael set his cup down. "Brian, look at me." Michael didn't go on until Brian's eyes met his. "You don't have to feel bad about that. You don't have to feel guilty. And you don't owe me an explanation. We just met yesterday."

Despite his intentions to soothe, Brian looked like he was going to cry at Michael's words. "I know. I'm still working through some stuff over it. Not feelings for her or anything, but just... her family has been such a big part of my life, you know?"

Michael took his hand, but Brian seemed to be pulling himself together, much to Michael's relief. Not that he wouldn't have been there for Brian if he'd gotten upset. He just hoped they could focus on the positive and build something new for both their sakes. It seemed they both had a lot they needed to move past. "Didn't you say your best friend dropped you off at the airport?"

Brian turned to him with a watery smile. "Yeah. Lee has been great. He's kept me sane through it all and did his best to be impartial. I think Hannah and I both appreciate that. Moving on, though." Brian indicated the other set of clothes. "Are these for me?"

"Oh, yeah. They should fit you. Feel free to shower here."

Brian grinned. "Can I use your bidet, too?"

"Uh, sure. Knock yourself out." Michael rolled his eyes as Brian stood, picking up and inspecting the clothes.

"Won't we be sort of twinsies in these?"

Michael laughed, looking down at his brand-new green board shorts and polo. Brian's were red. "Hey. That was supposed to be my Thursday outfit."

"What, is Wednesday the same thing but in blue?"

"I couldn't possibly answer that." Michael blushed, rushing to pick up his coffee and take a long sip.

Brian laughed all the way to the bathroom, and Michael could hear him laughing after the door was closed.

* * *

THE BEACH WAS PERFECT.

The Pacific Ocean was a crystal-clear blue here, and Brian could see all the way to the bottom, which he liked much better than the murky northern Atlantic or the Great Lakes he'd visited as a kid with his parents. Pleasant little fish were swimming harmlessly around their ankles, and the beach seemed to stretch forever. The sun was bright but pleasantly warm, and with his sunglasses on, Brian could observe Michael without him knowing. The man had been uneasy about taking his shoes off to walk on the sand, but now, as they waded ankle-deep through the water, Brian caught the permanent smile plastered on the other man's face, the one he attempted to wipe off when he thought Brian might be looking but that he couldn't quite manage to rid himself of.

They walked through the water until they found a good spot, settling beneath a large, yellow, striped umbrella a few feet from the waves. Brian set down the basket of sandwiches and water bottles they'd brought for their lazy lunch. Michael spread out a couple of towels they'd borrowed from the hotel, even though signs all over the bathroom had warned them not to.

Brian looked over at Michael and noticed him looking pained. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Michael turned to him, pointing unhappily down at his feet. "How do you remove the sand?"

Brian laughed, and as he did so, he realized that no one else he'd ever met made him laugh so hard, wholeheartedly, and consistently. "We don't, Michael. The sand stays on us, in all our crevices, until we return to the hotel room to shower and wash it off."

Michael looked horrified. "There will be no sand in any of my crevices!"

"Sand has its ways. I think you'll be surprised. I mean, are you planning on getting in the water?"

"Of course. I'm here to swim at the beach."

"Well, will you use this towel here to dry yourself off?" Brian patted the towel Michael was sitting on.

Michael shrugged. "I mean... yes?"

"What's on the other side of this towel now that we've laid it out?" Brian grinned, sitting back on his elbows.

Michael gave him a dark look over his shoulder. "You're horrid. Here, make yourself useful and put some sunscreen on my back, please. There's always a place in the middle I can't reach." Without warning, Michael pulled his green polo shirt up and over his head. He folded it carefully so it didn't touch the sand and put it in the tote bag they'd brought along. He pulled out a tube of sunscreen from the same bag and handed it to Brian, then adjusted himself so the smooth skin of his back was facing him.

It was all so normal. Brian supposed applying sunscreen to your companion's back at the beach was perfectly acceptable, be they friends, family, or lovers. Still, Michael had suggested it and offered his back as easily as if they'd done it a hundred times before. In fact, this would be the first time

Brian had ever put his hands on another man's skin when he was attracted to him.

Brian had known from the instant he'd first seen Michael on the plane that he was attracted to him. But now, knowing him better, learning all his little quirks, and understanding how hard he was working to become a better person, Brian was drawn to him even more. The fact that Brian could now confirm Michael was fit as hell also had something to do with it.

He remembered the moment on the plane when he'd offered Michael his hand. He'd seemed surprised and a little wary at the offer of friendship, and Brian hadn't been able to make sense of it at the time, but he thought he understood now. Michael had been scared to commit to being his new, true self, even just for nine hours, and also afraid that maybe he hadn't done enough to better himself. That maybe Brian wouldn't like him once he found out. Brian understood that fear of judgment completely.

He uncapped the sunscreen and squirted a decent amount into his palm. Then he moved forward onto his knees behind Michael and slowly touched his skin. It was warm and just as marble-smooth as it looked. He rubbed the lotion in wide circles so all of Michael's back was covered evenly. He tried to be gentle, to speak without words and let Michael know how much he enjoyed doing this for him. He was growing hard inside his borrowed board shorts and Michael, of course, chose that moment to lean back against him.

Brian scrambled away, but not in time. Michael had undoubtedly felt him. But he only sighed and smiled at Brian over his shoulder. "That felt nice. Too bad I already applied it everywhere else back at the hotel. Want me to do you?"

With a gulp, Brian nodded. "You probably should. I don't want any weirdly shaped tan lines." In truth, Brian had been able to reach everywhere on his back in the hotel room. But

he was still hard, though he'd pulled his shirt off and laid down on his stomach to hide it, and he didn't want to be done with this low level of intimacy. Not just yet.

To his surprise, Michael swung one leg over and straddled him, sitting right on top of the globes of his ass. Brian had his arms crossed above his head, and his face was between his arms, hidden from view. He was glad because he'd moaned, and he had to bury the sound in the towel so Michael wouldn't hear it.

Michael was hard as a rock and his cock was situated right between Brian's cheeks, separated by layers of clothing. His erection strained against the fabric and pulsed against him. Brian thought the angle might be hurting him, but Michael leaned further into it, and suddenly his hands were on Brian's back, moving along his skin gently at first, barely touching, but then beginning to rock more deliberately with his palms, giving him a gentle massage. Michael's hands repeatedly returned to the tattoo on his upper back, but he didn't ask about it. Brian realized there wasn't even any sunscreen on his hands and began to laugh.

"What?" Michael asked innocently, leaning down to murmur into his ear. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Brian chuckled. He bucked his hips slightly, not enough that anyone around them would notice, but definitely enough for Michael to feel it. He heard the other man's breath catch, and Brian smiled. "It's just..." Brian was cut off as Michael finally slathered some actual sunscreen onto him. "It's just that after all this, it'll be at least ten minutes before I can stand up to go swimming with you."

"Same, darling," Michael admitted, and Brian shivered at the use of the same endearment from before. "Obviously. But that's okay. We'll just take our time. Let's talk about something truly unattractive for a while. Like, hmm—"

"Dolphins," Brian said suddenly, sitting up on his elbows.

Michael laughed, tumbling back onto his towel and lying on his stomach as he turned to face Brian. “Dolphins are terrible creatures who gang—”

“No, we are not talking about dolphins like that, even though it’s true. It bothers me. I used to have a pet dolphin before my father decided it was in his best interest to pull funding from SeaWorld. Let’s talk about koalas.”

Brian burst out laughing. “You had a pet dolphin? And seriously, *koalas*? What did they ever do to you?”

Michael stuck his tongue out at him. “Nothing to me, personally. But they shouldn’t exist. They are too stupid.”

“Michael, that’s terrible.

“No, it’s true. They all have chlamydia, and they just sleep and eat poison all day long. They refuse to leave their personal poison patches, even if there aren’t any koala bears there to mate with because they will only eat their favorite kind of poison that only grows in their personal poison patch. They’d rather die than eat anything else. They literally starve themselves if they’re taken into captivity and given any other type of poison. And by poison, you know I mean eucalyptus, right?”

“Oh my god, you’ve done it,” Brian laughed.

“Done what?”

“I’m ready to go swimming now.”

* * *

THE OCEAN WAS nothing like Michael had imagined. Somehow, they’d been transported directly into the perfection of a postcard beach scene. Everything was tinted the same bright blue and lazy yellow. With the warmth of the sand and the pleasantly thick, perfumed air, Michael couldn’t be sure he wasn’t on the set of a movie or sucked right into another world where this was the norm.

It was afternoon now, and Michael and Brian had found a water pump, thank goodness, to rinse the sand off their feet before putting their shoes back on. They were pleasantly full of the sandwiches they brought, and their swim clothes had already air-dried in the ocean breeze. Michael would have thought he'd feel gritty and disgusting and in immediate need of a shower, but walking hand in hand with Brian along a path beneath the banyan trees distracted him. They decided to walk toward Diamond Head and maybe even climb it if they arrived before the national park closed.

"That mountain is certainly a lot farther away than it seems," Michael nodded his head up the road at it, standing proudly at attention above the whole of Honolulu.

Brian had just exited a small roadside store where he had procured bottles of water for them. They were both a little sweaty from their walk, which had already gone on for over an hour, as they made their way past Honolulu Zoo and through a more suburban area of town. They continued down the road as Brian uncapped his water bottle and looked at him. "You know it isn't a mountain, right?"

Michael paused mid-sip, a blush coloring his already over-warm skin. "I assume you know what it is, then?"

"It's a caldera." At Michael's blank look, he smiled delicately and went on. "An inactive volcano with a crater in the middle."

A twinge of fear pulsed through Michael and a twinge of something else when Brian again took his hand as they continued down the road. "I've traveled all over the world but haven't learned anything about the places I've been," Michael admitted. "So many missed opportunities, right?"

Brian squeezed his hand reassuringly. "It's okay. I spent my whole life pretending. But I'm making up for it now, same as you."

A warmth having nothing to do with the temperature

spread through Michael then, and even though his feet ached and his pale skin was tingling because he hadn't reapplied sunscreen, every part of him felt good. He'd been actively using his body and mind in a way he never had before, and his muscles ached pleasantly as if happy they were being used. The warmth settled somewhere in his chest and extended out through his limbs, and he squeezed Brian's hand back, trying to share it with him. He breathed deeply as they finally approached the base of the mountain—caldera, he reminded himself—and felt that maybe, just maybe, he'd already begun to find what he was looking for.

An hour and a half later, he'd changed his mind.

"Brian, why are there *more stairs*? I can't! I'm going to die!"

Gruffly, Brian pulled Michael against the side of the path leading to the top of the caldera and out of the way of a group of much more hiking-savvy visitors to let them pass. "You aren't going to die," Brian said, with the air of someone tired of repeating themselves. "We're nearly there."

"That's what you said at the bottom of the last enormous staircase," Michael pouted, knowing he was being ridiculous, but he wasn't used to functioning with blisters forming on his toes and ankles and his muscles screaming at him for a break.

Michael watched curiously as Brian looked up and down the path on which they appeared to be alone. Brian nodded, seeming to have made up his mind about something, and then he was invading Michael's space and pushing him hard up against the muddy, rock-strewn wall of the caldera behind him.

All the wind was knocked out of him, and he was stunned at the sudden force Brian exhibited. At first, his instinct was to complain, to push Brian away because he was too hot and didn't want the contact, but then he felt Brian's erection pressed against his thigh, and he let his head fall back against

the rocks. Brian was gripping his shoulders hard and leaning into him with all his weight. His head dipped to nip hard at Michael's neck, and Michael hissed.

"You're so *insufferable* sometimes, I swear to God," Brian said breathily into his ear, and Michael couldn't help but rut up against Brian's leg. His arms had been dangling uselessly at his sides, but now he wrapped one around Brian's waist, and the other hand grabbed Brian's ass and pulled him even harder against him. "You're supposed to be having *fun*," Brian insisted, almost laughing, but his body shuddered against Michael's.

Grinning, Michael tilted his head forward and began to delicately kiss Brian's neck, lightly sucking and making Brian moan in his ear. "Oh, I *am* having fun," Michael said, licking a stripe up Brian's neck until he reached his ear. "This is an excellent reward for having endured so much hardship on the first day of my vacation."

Brian chuckled outright then and pulled back a bit to look Michael in the eye. Distantly, Michael could hear the sound of another group laughing and talking somewhere down the path. Before Brian could pull away completely, Michael cupped Brian's cheek in his hand and leaned forward, kissing him hard.

They'd played around, experimenting with the boundaries of this strange *thing* between them, but kissing full-on like this was something different. You didn't have to kiss to fuck, which Michael was well aware of, having been involved with Andrew for so long. He could count the number of people he'd kissed on one hand, and none of those experiences had been anything like this.

Brian's lips were soft, and his entire body seemed to freeze in Michael's embrace. Michael softened the kiss, coaxing him to kiss back as his hand gently gripped the back of Brian's head, pulling lightly on his hair. And the moment

Brian began to kiss him back in earnest, Michael felt as if the entire world had turned upside down around them.

They were both hard, and their arms were everywhere, grasping each other's clothing for purchase, leverage, anything. Brian was breathing hot and hard between kisses, and Michael could feel the other man's heart pounding against his chest. Or it could very well have been his own. Michael had never wanted another person so completely and without question.

Unfortunately, the moment had to end because the sound of footsteps was just around the corner. At the very last second, Brian pulled away, panting, and they had mere seconds to adjust themselves before the group rounded the bend.

Michael was surprised to see that one of the group members was the gray-haired woman from the plane. She smiled in recognition, eyeing their rather obviously debauched state and winking before ascending the staircase with the rest of her group.

After they had passed, Michael and Brian looked at each other and laughed at the absurdity of it all. Michael marveled at the strength of the older woman, who was doing the climb with apparent ease.

"Are you feeling any better?" Brian asked, his smile light, but his eyes filled with something much deeper and more complicated. Michael wondered at the never-ending moment he was caught up in with Brian. He couldn't be in love, could he? They hadn't known each other nearly long enough. He was almost positive that wasn't how these things worked, but then again, what did he know about love?

Michael thought about it and found he really did feel better. Adrenaline and the massive dump of dopamine now coursing through him had done wonders for his ability to climb more staircases. Wordlessly, Michael held out his hand

for Brian to take, and they climbed the last few sets of stairs together.

The view from the top was stunning. In all directions, he could see the ocean spreading out into infinity, and the unreality of the perfect, cerulean blue color was overwhelming, reinforcing the idea that Michael had, indeed, found himself trapped inside a postcard. Waikiki Beach snaked along the coast, dotted with umbrellas and beach-goers as small as ants. The breeze ruffled his hair, soothing his sore muscles and sweat-soaked skin.

As they wandered around all the viewing platforms, Michael felt proud of himself for making the climb. He thought it was all worth it for this spectacular view, but more than anything, he found himself watching Brian's joy. His eyes lit up as he recognized Michael's hotel, and he laughed when he realized he'd never checked into his Airbnb. Michael didn't think Brian would ever check in at this point. He didn't plan on being parted from Brian on this trip for any longer than necessary.

They found an old stone bunker from the last world war, and as they stepped inside and realized they were alone, they scrambled up against the stone wall, kissing again like desperate teenagers. Michael's back was to the wall again, and he loved the feeling of Brian above him, demanding his attention and presence. They parted just as a group entered the bunker and wordlessly decided it was time to go.

* * *

THE SUN WAS BEGINNING to set as they approached Brian's Airbnb. Michael had protested at first, but once Brian pointed out that it was much closer than Michael's hotel room, he nodded and let himself be pulled down unfamiliar streets as Brian followed his phone's GPS directions. The

entire time, Brian was moving on autopilot, just letting his phone tell him where to go and hoping it was correct. He appeared quiet and calm, but on the inside, he was bursting with so many feelings it was a wonder he could even function.

First, the sunlit flirtations on the beach, then the hidden kisses on the path of the caldera. Then, the stolen moments inside the old stone bunker at the top. They couldn't seem to stay away from each other. Brian was drawn to Michael like a drowning man to water. He honestly hadn't known that being with another person could feel like this. He'd always half-heartedly moved through all his sexual encounters with women, his mind elsewhere, but when he was with Michael, it was impossible to think of anything else. Today, he'd gotten his first kiss from a man. Brian had no trouble pushing Michael up against the rock ledge and ravaging him, but Michael had been the one who'd stepped up to the plate and pushed their lips together as naturally as if they'd already done it a million times.

As they neared the little house he'd rented, surrounded by ancient banyan trees and with its own pineapple garden, of all things, he stopped. The sun was lower in the sky now, and when he looked at Michael, he couldn't believe it had barely been more than a day. He'd spent that entire time in this man's company, from one sunset to another, and even though Michael's skin was a little redder from all the sun, it glowed just as gorgeously as it had the first moment he'd seen him in the light through the airplane window.

"This is really nice," Michael admitted as they reached the front door. "But how do we get inside?"

Brian counted the potted plants on the porch and looked underneath the fourth one from the left. As promised, there was the key. Michael's mouth fell open, allowing himself to be pulled into the house.

They didn't have time to admire the quaint details of the interior, the standard island rattan furniture, the green floral pattern repeated on every surface that required a cushion, and all the other amenities of home because Brian pushed Michael up against the back of the door the second it clicked shut. They fell together for the third time that day, now with the promise of complete privacy.

At that knowledge, Brian found himself shaking. Every other time they'd shared intimacy, it had been in public. Nothing could have happened, and Brian could remain a safe distance from the reality of it. This was different. This time, they would follow through, Brian knew, and he shook with equal parts anxiety and desire.

"Are you okay?" Michael asked, and even though Brian could feel Michael growing harder against his thigh, the genuine concern in Michael's voice stopped his lips from moving against his neck. Brian took a deep shuddering sigh and let himself melt a little into Michael, and he felt Michael's arms come around to hold him close. "Should we slow it down a little?"

"No," Brian insisted, shaking his head. "Everything's perfect." He felt Michael smile against his skin, making Brian relax even more in the man's embrace.

"I'm gonna go out on a limb here and assume you want to fuck me. Am I right?" Michael asked slowly. Brian felt Michael's dick throb against him and couldn't stop his own reaction. When he shifted his hips slightly, their cocks met through the fabric of their clothes, and a shock of surprise went through them both.

"God, yes. But I-I don't know what I'm supposed to—"

Michael pulled back and placed his hand on Brian's cheek again as he had on the path up to Diamond Head. Brian nuzzled into the gesture, feeling embarrassed and vulnerable.

"I've got you. Don't worry."

And God, Brian believed him. Knew Michael wouldn't judge him for what he didn't yet understand. Brian pushed forward and kissed him again, then dropped to his knees, wanting to make Michael understand just how much he appreciated his help and his companionship so far on this strange journey they were so unexpectedly on together.

"Brian, what are you—"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Brian raised one eyebrow as he looked up at him and dug his fingers beneath the waistband of Michael's shorts. He tried to exude more self-confidence than he had at the moment. He knew what he liked when he was having his dick sucked, so he had an idea of what he needed to do but was still nervous.

Michael looked down at him in surprise, and Brian knew it was now or never. He unzipped Michael's shorts and pulled them down, and for the first time in his life, he was face-to-face with someone else's cock. Michael was so hard he was already leaking. With each shaky breath Michael took, his cock heaved up and down, leaving a trail of liquid on his stomach. Brian ran his hand through the white-blond hair leading down to it and carefully wrapped his fingers around the base.

"Brian," Michael said. "You don't have to if you're not—"

Brian moved forward, not giving Michael a chance to finish. He licked around the head of Michael's cock, earning a deep sigh. Then, he put the whole head into his mouth, making sure his lips were covering his teeth as he licked just beneath Michael's opening. He found it required a lot more coordination than he'd imagined.

"Oh, my God," Michael muttered. "God, Brian."

The fact that Michael was still talking told Brian he wasn't doing enough, so he adjusted the way he was sitting so Michael's dick could slide in and out of his mouth more easily. He made a tighter grip around the base of his shaft

and wrapped his other hand around Michael's leg, grabbing his ass so he'd have something to steady himself with as he moved.

He leaned forward, letting Michael's dick go down his throat as far as he was able to take it, which was very nearly all the way. His self-esteem kicked up a notch or two as he slowly moved back and forth, letting the head slide past his lips before taking him back in again. Experimentally, he sucked around him, hollowing his cheeks.

"Ah, stop, stop," Michael moaned as he stopped Brian's movements with a firm hand on his forehead.

Brian removed his mouth and felt Michael shudder. "Was I doing it wrong?"

Michael laughed. "No, Brian. You're fucking amazing. I just don't want to come yet."

As he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, Brian allowed himself to be led to the bedroom by Michael, who seemed to know exactly where he was going, though neither had been there before. The room was small, but it had an amazing view. One entire wall was a window facing the exotic garden. Brian saw there was also a hot tub and fire pit.

Any other details about the room were lost as Michael led Brian over to the bed, and they climbed on top of the soft, white duvet cover. Brian's head fell back into the pillows, and Michael straddled him like he had at the beach earlier. This time, Brian was facing him and could see desire flashing hot in his eyes. Glancing down, Brian saw his still-hard cock and reached out to grab it.

Michael stopped him. "No. Clothes off." The other man grinned as he removed his shirt and leaned forward to help Brian pull his shirt off too. He kissed the edge of the tattoo on Brian's neck. "A dragon, huh? It's minimalistic. I like it."

Brian grinned, scooting up so he could pull down his pants and kick them away. Michael sat up slightly to make

room and watched Brian's cock jump to attention once it was freed. Brian found himself grateful to be able to talk. It distracted him from his nervousness and made him feel closer to Michael than just physically.

"It's sort of from Mulan," Brian murmured, wincing in pleasure when Michael lowered himself back on top of him. Michael's skin was hot against his, and the pressure of Michael's cock against his own was exquisite.

Michael burst into quiet laughter as he reached between them and took both of them in hand. "You have Mushu the dragon on your back?"

"God, that's amazing," Brian murmured, arching into Michael's hand slightly. "Um, it's not exactly Mushu. It's just..." Michael had started an easy rhythm with his hand, pumping them both.

"Yes?" Michael asked expectantly, with a devious smirk on his face.

Brian leaned up and kissed him, pulling Michael fully down on top of him. Michael let go of their cocks to steady himself as he lay atop Brian. Brian took a deep breath, turning his head to the side as he began to speak. "I was watching Mulan when I realized...you know, when I put it together, that I was..."

"Brian, are you telling me that Shang made a man out of you?"

"Oh, my God, shut up!" Brian laughed, turning red. "I actually just related to Mulan since she had to lie about everything she was and pretend she wasn't attracted to him. Why are we talking about this?"

Michael nuzzled into Brian's neck, kissing him delicately. "Because I want to know everything about you."

It was so sincere it made Brian's heart and cock, ache. He wanted to be inside Michael so badly. "We've got time for all the questions in the world later. Except for, well.

Shouldn't I be on top?" Brian blushed as Michael looked down at him.

"If you'd like to be. But this way might be a bit easier for your first time." Michael moved so that Brian's cock was situated between his cheeks. "I can help."

"Yeah. Yeah, okay," Brian agreed. He sighed in pleasure at the change in pressure when Michael turned slightly to pick up his discarded shorts. From one of the pockets, he pulled out a tiny bottle of lube and a single condom. They grinned almost shyly at each other then. Brian was pleased Michael was prepared because Brian definitely hadn't thought this far ahead.

Michael handed the condom to Brian and flipped the cap open on the lube. Brian watched him sit back on his heels and pour some onto his fingers. Then, ensuring he had Brian's complete attention, he steadied himself with his dry hand and moved his wet fingers to his opening. With two fingers, he prepared himself for Brian, breathing heavily and watching as Brian scrambled with shaking fingers to pull apart the condom wrapper. Michael's fingers moved slickly in and out, his arm stretched awkwardly to reach behind himself, and still, he managed to take the wrapped condom from Brian with his free hand and open it easily with his teeth.

Brian's breath caught in his throat. He had never seen anything hotter than this man before him, full of easy confidence and looking at him with such intensity. "Show off," Brian teased, earning him a pleased smile. Michael knew exactly how attractive he was, Brian decided, and he was using all his tricks on him. Brian found he didn't mind in the least.

Michael sat forward again. "I'm ready," he said in a low voice Brian hadn't heard him use before. With both hands, he

removed the condom from the now-open wrapper and rolled it onto Brian's straining erection.

"Michael," Brian said. "Please, I need—"

Michael understood. He moved into a kneeling position above Brian's dick and placed the head of it against his hole. Experimentally, he wiggled, and just the very tip of Brian entered him.

Brian's need to be inside Michael suddenly overwhelmed him. His hands shot up to grip Michael's hips hard and pull him down, completely sheathing himself. Wildly, Michael's arms moved forward to hold onto the bedframe.

"Okay?" Brian asked. "You feel amazing."

Michael nodded stiffly, eyes squeezed shut. "Fuck me, Brian. Go on."

Brian took a moment to savor the warmth of being inside the other man. He fit so snugly, and he'd slipped in beyond the tight rings of muscle without any hindrance. Anxiously, he hoped he could make this good for Michael too. There was a place inside he'd read that would stimulate pleasure, but he just needed to be at the proper angle.

And then Brian couldn't stop himself from moving, halfway out and back in gently, again and again, building in speed until he got the feel of it. Michael began moving his hips parallel to Brian's own so they slammed back together.

Brian couldn't believe the pleasure. He wouldn't last long at this rate. He was determined to find that place inside Michael, so he shifted down the bed a little and then thrust back up.

"Fuck," Michael moaned, his entire body jolting as if he'd been shocked. "Don't stop!"

Grinning at his success, Brian pumped back into him, harder this time, and Michael let out another strangled cry of pleasure. He was still holding on tightly to the bedframe and looking down at Brian, now with open eyes. Brian held on

tighter to Michael's waist and used all his energy to fuck him hard, his movements becoming quicker and a little sloppier, but the muscles in his legs were screaming from all of the exertion of the day on top of what he was doing now.

"Brian, I'm gonna come," Michael warned breathily, one of his hands moving to grab his cock. He pumped it a few times, then yelled out, coming in spurts, the thick liquid settling in lines across Brian's chest.

Brian gripped his hips harder, and with two more thrusts, he came inside Michael. His eyes squeezed shut as he rode out the wave of pleasure, feeling Michael settle on his chest in exhaustion. Brian's vision always blurred a bit after he came, and it could sometimes be disorienting, so he kept his eyes closed and wrapped his arms around Michael, both of them sticky and sweaty, but neither of them caring in the least.

"Thank you," Brian whispered into Michael's ear. "That was amazing."

He could feel Michael smile against his skin. Michael shifted, letting Brian's softening cock fall out of him, and Brian winced. But then Michael settled on his side and laid his head back on his shoulder.

"We're a mess. Should we take a shower?" Michael asked.

"In a bit. Just lay here with me a little longer," Brian said.

"Ah, you're a post-coital cuddler. I like that."

"Good." Brian pulled Michael closer, savoring the feel of another man's body against his, this man's body in particular, and just how right it felt to be with him here. He didn't want the afterglow of his first gay sexual experience to be over quite so soon. Not that he wasn't positive there would be more to come.

* * *

THE WEEK in paradise flew by. But as they say, time flies when you're having fun, and fun was something Michael was positive he'd been able to achieve. Michael and Brian walked hand in hand through the airport to their gate. Even though Michael originally had a different flight booked for the next day, he had bought them two first-class seats on Brian's flight. The extra legroom and service would be nice, and not spending another nine hours with Brian in the place they had first met was simply out of the question.

Of course, first class wasn't exactly where they had met. Michael watched Brian's reaction to his upgraded seat, imbued with a quiet happiness to have a man like this in his life who never took things for granted. As their flight attendant handed them their complimentary glasses of wine, he burst out laughing at Brian's dumbfounded expression.

Brian was so busy marveling at it all that he forgot they were about to take off. As the plane thundered forward suddenly, he reached for Michael's hand. Despite his fear, Brian managed to smile as the plane lifted off the ground, leaving Michael hoping with all his heart that he could hold on to this. That they'd be able to bring the magic of this trip back home with them. Mostly, he was worried about what would happen once the plane landed.

"Maybe we should have discussed this sooner, but where do you live?" Brian asked as if reading Michael's mind.

Michael sighed in relief at not being the one to have to bring it up. "That's a good question, actually. I just sold my childhood home. I'm staying at a hotel while I look for a condo downtown."

Brian whistled. "Lucky. I moved out of the apartment Hannah and I had together. I'm staying with my parents until the lease on my new downtown place starts."

"Stay with me," Michael said, not quite a question but an

idea he was throwing out. It didn't feel like too much, and Brian's grin proved he was right.

"Everyone is going to have so many questions about how we met, you know."

Michael didn't miss a beat. "What will you say?"

Brian looked him in the eye, squeezing his hand hard as the plane hit a bit of turbulence on the ascent. Michael squeezed right back, waiting for the answer.

"I'll tell them I fell in love on the plane on the way to Hawaii," Brian said.

"Oh," Michael said dumbly. "Well then, the truth it is."

"Is that the truth for you, too?" Brian asked quietly. "I know it hasn't been that long. You aren't under any obligation to—"

"Brian!" Michael stopped him and then leaned in until their faces were close. "I love you too, dummy. I didn't honestly know what love felt like until I met you. You've changed my entire life," he admitted, turning strangely teary. "But what happens when you realize I have no other real friends because I've been such a distant asshole for so long? When you realize my mother isn't a very nice person, and you figure out the price I really paid for all the nice things I have?"

Brian closed the distance between them and kissed him tenderly. "I've got you," Brian promised him. "I know who you are, and you're wonderful and *mine*, no matter what happens, Michael. People change, and we're both living proof of that."

"You're sweet," Michael said, laying his head on Brian's shoulder. "Too sweet."

But Brian wasn't listening. "And I didn't change your whole life. You were already changing it before I came along. There's a lot for you to be proud of, Michael. Don't be so hard on yourself."

“Easier said than done,” Michael admitted, feeling tired. “I’ll try. Thank you, darling.”

Brian smiled. “I love that nickname.”

“I know,” he replied, feeling his eyes drift shut. Brian shifted and put his arm around him. Sitting that way with the larger seats in first class was quite comfortable.

Michael used to dream of having someone like this in his life, but only at night. Only his subconscious would allow him to inspect the desires so directly. But now that Brian was by his side, Michael didn’t dream when he fell asleep on the airplane. He slept peacefully, content in the knowledge that his trip had been a complete success.

He could finally breathe. He could finally be himself. And he would do it with Brian by his side.

THE END

