

Ty Undone (working title)

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Email: writerkai@proton.me

Website: <https://www.sub-vert.site/>

Chapter 1

Rooster Mike screamed.

Ty didn't need to look to know the red feathered, strutting bastard was right outside his door. And that bird knew exactly what he was doing. Ty lay in his bunk, staring at the plywood ceiling, plotting Mike's demise.

Ring around the rosie, pocket full of posies.

Rooster Mike's gonna fly, way up in the sky,

He's got a rocket strapped to his thigh,

Gonna fly this Fourth of July.

Next to his bunk, the red numbers on the old Sony alarm clock glowed 5:47. He'd found a sticker on the bottom: *Made in Japan MFGD 1979*. The thing was twice his age.

Mike hollered again, an extended cockle doodle doo.

That's it. I am going to strangle the fucker. He picked up his phone to ask google: "how many firecrackers does it take to dismember a chicken?"

It was all pointless really, and time to rise and shine. He threw off the covers and swung his legs onto the floor. His bare feet met the cold linoleum.

The room where he was staying was small, dark, and smelled industrial from the fertilizer and deisel oil. It was a walled-off space at the back of a large warehouse. But it was his. No roommates, no bunkmates. Nobody. Just him and the hum of a mini-fridge and the rattle of an ancient window AC. He grabbed a couple of chorizo tamales from the fridge, stood at the counter and munched them down. Next, a shower. He grabbed his towel, put on sandals and a robe, and headed around to the front of the old building. There was a single door to a tiny bathroom and shower.

Once inside, he wedged a forty-pound bag of sand against the door—the lock was busted—and there was no way he could handle having someone walk in on him. The hot water heater was broken so he got ready for the cold spray. He jumped in and out of the stream: suds up, and rinse, repeat, and out.

Back in his room, he tied his damp, dark hair back into a ponytail though some of it fell around his face. He pulled on his stiff overalls and a loose, old gray long-sleeved shirt. Isabella had given him a floppy sun hat with an enormous brim. He looked like a scarecrow clown. Perfect, all set.

This Tuesday morning, the sky was getting light, brightening at the edges with desert oranges and reds. The big white greenhouse thermometer already read seventy-nine degrees. It would be one hundred by noon.

Isabella was already out in the yard, trailing a long hose down the aisle of hibiscus.

"Good morning, boss."

She turned the spray toward a thirsty shrub. "Hey there, handsome. Did you get some breakfast?"

"The last two tamales."

"Okay, Rose is making more today." She scanned the yard. "Okay, what's the plan today? Can you finish up the Agaves?"

"Sure."

"And then put them up front. Maybe they'll sell."

"Got it."

"And where's your water? Drink a lot all day, okay? I don't want either of you passing out."

"Yes, yes, I'll hydrate. Gotta keep my lovely complexion. And I got my morning ice bath."

She laughed, shaking her head. "So the heater is still out. I can call the guy."

"Don't bother. I want to be low maintenance—so you'll keep me around."

"Sure, Mr. Low Maintenance, let's get busy. A lot going on this week." she teased, spraying a little water near his boots. "And anyway, we keep you around as our diversity hire."

"Oh, I know! I check all the boxes, right?" Ty's tone had some extra sass.

"All of them." She paused over a struggling gardenia. "Sweetheart, grab me the shears?"

Ty jogged to the desk, found them and brought them back. "You know, what am I going to do when there's no one calling me such terms of endearment? Sweetheart, honey, dear? And homemade tamales. Maybe you and Rose should just adopt me?"

"I'd love that. I'll ask her. Then we could get rid of the damn cat. He's so old and can't make it to the litter box." She paused. "You are house-trained, right?"

"Maybe. It depends."

Isabella laughed. "No matter." She smiled back, the wrinkles around her revealing. "You'll just be our miracle love child." She turned back to the plants, humming the opening notes of the Supremes' "Love Child."

Ty headed to the potting stand and got set up for the rest of the Agaves. In an hour, the place would feel like a baking sheet. At least he was in the shade for a little while.

Chapter 2

A Honda Civic beeped in front. Maya hopped out, leaned in to give her girlfriend a kiss, and breezed through the side gate and over to the counter. She tossed her bag down and hit the switch for the ancient desktop and monitor.

"Good morning, people."

Isabella looked up from her papers. "Happy Tuesday."

Ty leaned against the counter, eyeing Maya's empty hands. "Wait. Where's Matcha Mama's coffee?"

"Line was too long." Maya replied.

Ty looked at her and then at Isabella. "Oh no, boss, we're in trouble. Maya without her triple latte is... like a day without sunshine, or Charlie without his crack."

Isabella nodded. "Sure, I'll make a fresh pot."

"I don't know. That may not be enough. She might need an IV, or rehab."

Maya narrowed her eyes on Ty, her best vulture glare. "Starting early today, are we?" She peered at his wet hair. "Nice time in the shower? How are those goosebumps?"

"It was brisk. I like it."

Maya shook her head just talking to herself. "Weird. This kid's weird." She watched the monitor and POS come to life.

"It's fine. I like a good jolt in the morning."

"I bet."

"You two are too much." Isabella sighed. The big clock showed 7:02. "Are we ready?"

"All systems up here. And I do need coffee." Maya yawned and then pointed at the front.

"Go open the gate, runt."

"Runt?" Ty repeated quietly. "How nice. You know, I know a word that rhymes with... Oh, never mind."

He grabbed the keys and jogged over to big gate. He unlocked the chain and pushed the backstop aside so the suspended gate could slide open. The metal rollers screeched, echoing against the morning traffic.

From behind the fence, he dragged an A-frame sign, "Bella Adobe Garden Center", up to the edge of the county road.

Ty returned to the counter for his gloves. Maya showed Isabella something on her phone.

"Hey, girlfriend." Maya waved him closer.

"Shut up. What now?"

She turned the screen. The photo showed the three of them standing in front of the counter—Miguel must have taken it last week.

"I showed this to a friend last night, and she pointed at you and said, 'Oh, she's cute. What's her story? Is she single?'"

Isabella looked closer at the photo. "No way. Really?"

Ty leaned towards Maya, reaching for his gloves. "Oh, you're entertaining this morning. Can I borrow some makeup?"

Maya ignored him and continued. "Yeah, so I had to tell her, 'So sorry, that girl's a boy, and you're not his type.'"

"Maya." Isabella swatted her arm. "Don't be mean to Ty."

"What? I thought it was funny."

Ty just continued with his "not funny, bitch" glare.

Isabella turned to Ty, her expression softening. "Don't listen to her, sweetheart. You're a sweetheart, with a kind spirit. That's what matters."

"Thank you, boss." He grabbed his gloves and turned to Maya. "I'll deal with you later."

A half an hour went by, and Maya had another tray of seedlings ready. She brought them over to Ty as he continued with the re-potting.

A pearly white Range Rover pulled in, ignoring the parking spots and stopping right in the main entrance. A woman in glitz and bright blue yoga pants spilled out, sunglasses perched on her head, big hair, with arms waving, shouting into her phone. Her lips looked like angry pillows.

Maya froze. "Oh no. Trout pout. She's all yours." She did a 180 and walk-ran over to the counter.

The woman ended her call and spotted Ty. She called to him, needlessly insistent: "Excuse me! Can you help me, please?"

Ty wiped the dirt off his gloves on the front of his bib and walked over.

"Sure."

She stopped, staring at his name tag. There was just a single letter 'T'. This seemed to short-circuit her brain. She pointed at the tag.

"And what's your name?"

She was actually asking *what are you?*

"It's Ty."

"Okay, Ty..." She still couldn't figure it out. "I need three of those Ocotillos. The big blue ones. And four bags of the good garden soil. Not the generic stuff, okay? Can you load them in the back? Right away, but be careful. Put some plastic down first. I can't have dirt in my car. I just had it detailed."

"We don't use plastic," Ty said. "I can get you a tarp and you can bring it back."

"That's too much trouble."

Isabella appeared with a stack of recycled cardboard liners. "We can place the pots in these."

The woman addressed Isabella now, ignoring Ty. "Fine. But tell... her? him? ... to be careful. I don't want a mess."

Isabella and Ty shared a look. He shrugged and went for the loading cart.

He got everything loaded and secured. The moment the hatch clicked shut, she was back in the car, on her phone, and peeling out, throwing dust everywhere. music blasting as she peeled away.

"Happy lady," Ty watched the dust plume.

"Charming." Isabella gave a soft head shake and went back to the counter.

Ty grabbed a paper towel from his back pocket and wiped his face. The heat was already rising off the gravel. Maya was with another customer—an older Mexican woman in a sun hat—chatting away in rapid Spanish.

"Is Miguel coming in?" Ty asked Isabella.

"He'll be here Thursday and Friday. We have those saplings and a wedding delivery. Also, by then, the mulch should be here. About ten pallets, so eat your Wheaties."

"Got it." Ty flexed a skinny arm. "Mr. Muscles can handle it! I'm gonna get ripped, right?"

"Doubtful, sweetheart." Isabella smiled to him.

Chapter 3

Mid-morning and Maya cranked up the volume on a boombox radio and ranchero music blasted across the yard. The nursery lot sat between some open land so there were no neighbors to complain. The oompah bass thumped through dry air. Then the oscillating, baritone DJs screamed away in manic Spanish between jarring car-dealerships and mattress sales.

"I'm going to try and learn Spanish. I took it in high school." Ty yelled over the music to Isabella. He leaned against a stool.

Isabella nodded. "Good idea. You'll pick it up fast. Take the old laptop and watch some videos. But keep it plugged in—the battery's shot."

"Aren't you worried he'll watch porn?" Maya looked up from her work, deadpan.

"Maya, enough." Isabella attempted a look of disapproval.

Ty flashed Maya the finger as he gulped his ice water, and then waved to her.

"Yeah, that's about what I'd expect from a twelve year old." Maya shook her head, then went and switched the radio to a mellow pop station. "I need a break from this. Shit, it's hot."

Ty was back with the potting, up to his forearms in the potting mix, when gravel crunched near the gate. A pristine, old Tacoma rolled to a stop.

The driver stepped out—trim, corporate, mixed-Asian he guessed, with dark hair a bit long. He wore regular jeans and a fitted shirt. He scanned the yard and saw Ty at the stand.

"Hi, excuse me." The man's voice was warm, uncertain. "I'm looking for some plants—actually, a bunch—for planters on a balcony."

"Of course." Ty peeled off his gloves. *Great.* He must look like a total hick: dirt-stained, smelling of fertilizer, sweat dripping off his chin under a sombrero-sized straw hat.

He tried to sound professional. "What kind of plants are you thinking about? You said for a balcony?"

"I'm not sure, but it needs to be something I can't kill. Plants don't seem to last more than a month with me." The man smiled.

Ty relaxed a fraction. "Ah, so you are one of those: a Grim Flower Reaper, admitting to Floral Abandonment and Planticide."

The man blinked, startled, before letting out a laugh. "Wow. Okay, yeah, I guess that's accurate. So should I just buy a couple of artificial planters?"

"On a balcony in Tucson? The sun's UV will turn them to dust." Ty gestured for him to follow. "Whatever you get, you just have to provide some water at least. We can email you weekly reminders."

Ty led him down the main aisle, pointing out the hardy varieties suitable for large boxes.

"It's a large balcony, and I haven't put anything out there. A missed opportunity." He smiled again. "I'd like something nice to look at when I'm on Zoom calls."

Ty nodded. "Natives are your best bet: hardy, low-maintenance." Ty stopped in front of a row of flowering shrubs. "These *chuparosa* would be perfect. They bloom almost year-round." He turned, offering a quick smile. "If you water them."

"Chuparosa?" He repeated the word carefully. "That's a pretty name. What does it mean?" "Hummingbird flower."

Ty looked at the flower as the man reached out, brushing the top of the red bloom with his fingertips. "Gorgeous. Okay then. Let me figure out what I want and I'll let you know. Is this the right email?" He held up his phone. Ty squinted in the sun to see the screen as the man watched him.

"Yes, that's it."

"Great, thank you."

Ty nodded back. The man headed back to his truck.

Chapter 4

By late morning, Ty needed a short break and went to the counter. The other two were there under the metal awning. A huge overhead fan blew the dry air around. Isabella perched on a stool, phone pressed to her ear, stuck on hold with a supplier. Maya sat opposite, decimating a bag of chips.

She pointed a salty finger at Ty. "What did that guy want? The one in the Tacoma?"

"Some custom planters for his balcony."

"You were chatty."

"Shut up."

Maya smirked and crunched another chip. She nudged the donut box on the counter.

"Hey, eat that last one."

Ty peered inside. One lonely jelly-filled remained. He shook his head. "Nope."

"Why not?"

"It's got a butthole."

Maya choked and coughed out a chip. "What?"

Ty held up the pastry and pointed to the injection site.

Maya stared at him. "Are you from fucking Mars?"

Isabella hung up the phone. "What now, you two?"

Maya thumbed at Ty. "Did you know that donuts have buttholes?"

"Really?" Isabella stayed calm, looking over the top of her glasses.

"Not all of them!" Ty protested. "Only these, the jelly ones!"

"Show her," Maya ordered.

He held up the donut and displayed the sphincter.

Isabella sighed, shook her head, and went back to the invoices.

"And Ty has a new friend," Maya announced. "A cute guy was here and they 'connected'."

"You have a death wish." Ty turned to Isabella. "Boss, if I wanted to bury a body, where's a good spot? Out past Marana?"

"Sure." Isabella didn't look up from her paperwork.

"I'm not afraid of you, stick boy. I outweigh you by twenty pounds." Maya rolled up her sleeve and planted her elbow on the counter. "C'mon. *Mano a mano*." She grinned. "By the way, have you ever had your hormone levels tested?"

Ty raised himself up on the stool and glared.

"Both of you, stop!" Isabella groaned. "And Maya, that's mean. You can't say that. It's harassment." She looked at Ty. "Dear, please don't report us to the state."

"He wouldn't do that." Maya faltered a moment. "Right?"

"I haven't decided," Ty now sensing an opportunity. He let the question hang a moment and then turned to Maya: "Bring me a double hummer latte every morning for two weeks, and I'll think about it." He grabbed his gloves and hat and strutted off across the lot.

Chapter 5

Wednesday morning. The alarm broke through a nightmare.

Darkness. A desolate two pump gas station: dim lights, flickering neon, a buzzing burnt out sign. This was the middle of nowhere and he was standing there, starving, and wearing nothing but a towel, as if he'd just taken a shower. Where the fuck was he? It felt like 2:00 am with no one for miles. And it was cold. Standing at the door, he tried to pull it open. At the top, a little bell jingled. He kept a tight grip on the towel but his ass was hanging out and his bare feet stuck to the greasy, black floor. But he had to eat something. Right Now. He stood in front of the coolers in the back. All the food looked stale and rotten.

He grabbed two packaged burritos and headed to the checkout. A fat, greasy man in an A-shirt leered at him. "Let me see it. Are you a girl?" Ty tried to scream. The man yelled back, face contorted, "No shirt, no service! Little faggot, get out!"

Ty gasped. In bed, in the dark. Fuck! Nightmares... Where am I? Lying soaked in these old sheets. Okay. Tucson. Isabella's place. Safe.

He exhaled, heart hammering against his ribs. No one else was in here. He grabbed the side of the bed and held on.

Three years ago. His high school. Syracuse, New York, in November.

Another dumb day at school. It was a Thursday, seventh period. He had Phys Ed. He always waited in the bleachers until everyone was out of the locker room. He didn't want to listen to a bunch of shit while he got dressed. And he was in and out. His last period was homeroom, so who cared if he was a few minutes late. All dressed now, he headed out the short hallway to leave. Something moved behind him, and a pair of gorilla arms locked him down. In a vice, he was lifted off his feet. Ty struggled, twisting around. He saw who it was: Matt Fuller, the captain of the wrestling team and an enormous, arrogant asshole. And one of Ty's main tormentors. One of his massive paws was clamped over Ty's mouth. Was he fucking around?

"Stay quiet, bitch!" He hissed in Ty's ear. His breath stunk. This didn't feel like a joke.

Matt carried him back into the locker room. The door to the supply closet was open. Ty kicked and tried to yell.

"Shut the fuck up, pussy." Matt's sweaty face pressed hard into Ty's bare neck.

He heaved Ty into the dark, tiny room, and Ty fell into the shelving. The door slammed shut. Darkness, illuminated only by the thin slice of light under the door. But Ty could still see this guy's face and his eyes: crazy, hungry, hate.

"I've got something for your skinny little ass."

Matt punched him in the gut. Ty buckled; air vanished from his lungs.

"Stop!" Ty wheezed.

Matt punched him in the face.

"You sound just like a little bitch. Come here!" He grabbed Ty's hair, forcing his head down toward his crotch. "You like this, right?" With his free hand, Matt shoved his sweatpants down. "Jesus, I'm hard!"

Ty scrambled. He grabbed a shelf for leverage. Matt yanked his hair harder. Ty's right arm came free.

He drove his fist into Matt's balls.

Matt didn't let go. Ty hit him again. Harder. This time he made contact.

Matt cursed, gave a loud grunt, and went fetal, falling over against the wall.

Ty broke free and lunged for the door. He burst into the hallway, vision blurred by tears. He flew across the courts. A freshman gym class stopped to watch him.

"What the hell!" some teacher yelled at him.

Ty made it to the side doors, not looking back, and sprinted around the side of the building. He waited there a few minutes, trying to catch his breath and stop his sobbing. No one seemed to be coming. He sprinted next to the bus garage. He waited another minute and then ran for the woods.

His backpack was still in the locker room. *Leave it.* He wasn't going back. He cut through the woods to a side street, checking over his shoulder every ten yards. Report it? No point. The dean would blame him. Matt's parents owned the car dealership. They were royalty. Untouchable. Ty was nothing.

But he was done.

If he stayed, Matt and his friends would be waiting tomorrow, or the day after. He was dead. Seriously, this time they'd kill him.

Ty reached his street and made it to his house and crept in the front door. His dad, like always, was in the back room, Fox News blasting. Ty stuffed clothes into a gym bag. He took his summer cash stash—a couple hundred bucks—and slipped out the back door. The 8:10 p.m. Greyhound to Cleveland.

He texted Kenny: *I got attacked. Matt Fuller this time. I'm leaving.*

He took a selfie and sent it to Kenny.

Post this on my Instagram tonight, okay? Then delete the account.

It seemed like a hundred years ago. There was Cleveland, Michigan, Chicago, Rockford, and Madison. Every stop put more distance between him and that locker room.

Chapter 6

Thursday, 6:00 AM. Ty rolled over and silenced the alarm. No rooster and no dreams this time.

He spent the morning in the back lot with Miguel. The old ex-hippie operated the Bobcat, dropping pallets of mulch while Ty unloaded the bags. Next came the massive terra cotta pots. By noon, Miguel and Isabella had left for deliveries, and Maya was manning the phones.

Heat radiated off the gravel. Ty wiped sweat from his forehead and headed to the counter for water.

The gray Tacoma pulled in.

Ty recognized it immediately: the guy from Tuesday.

The guy jumped out and walked toward the gate.

"Hi again," Ben said.

"Oh. Hi." Ty took a slow swig from his water bottle, keeping his face neutral. "Welcome back."

Ben stood there a moment, posture stiff. "Say, I wanted to ask...kind of out of the blue. Would there be a way that you could build planters? Wood ones? They would be fairly large. I have specific sizes in mind. Do you do that kind of thing here?"

Ty softened. The guy seemed shy. Awkward, even.

"I remember you asking about that. I mentioned it to Isabella, the owner. She said it was no problem—we have a local carpenter we use. But she's out on an appointment right now."

"That's okay. She seems busy. How about you? Would you be able to help?"

"Not sure." Ty paused. "I'll ask her. I'm new here. You'd have to be patient."

Ben nodded, looking relieved. "That's okay. No rush."

"Alright. We'll let you know."

"Great. By the way, I'm Ben. Ben Nakamura." He glanced at Ty's grimy nametag.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Ty."

"I wondered what the T stood for."

Ty looked down at his chest. "Oh. The 'Y' fell off again. No wonder that lady asked if I was Tina or Theresa."

"Oh. Really?"

"Yeah." Ty shrugged. "It's fine. Takes all kinds. I'm used to it." He smiled at Ben. "Yep, that's me. Missing the 'Y'. Like I am missing the 'why'." He motioned with his hands. "Or the...why what? Like, why get up in the morning?" He realized he was rambling. "Or wait—maybe a Y chromosome? Yes!"

Ben was staring at him and he felt his cheeks flush. "Sorry. I sound like I'm disturbed. Or possessed."

Ben actually laughed, then grinned. "No, no, you're fine. That was... funny." He looked back out at the nursery aisles. "If it's okay, I'll just look around. I want to check out the plants."

"Sure. Take as long as you like. Let us know if you have any questions."

Ten minutes later, Ben returned. He hesitated, then reached into his pocket. "I think I see some I like. Can I give you my card? Then you call or text me? That way I'll have your number. I mean, so I can send you the measurements."

Ty looked back a moment. "Sure." Ty grabbed a pen and a nursery brochure. He scribbled his cell number and handed it over. "I'll talk to Isabella and let you know. Nice to meet you."

"Nice meeting you. Thanks."

Ty watched him walk back to his truck.

Maya appeared at his elbow. "Business or pleasure?"

Ty didn't look at her. "Don't start. Business. I only do business."

"I won't touch that one. Anyway, that's not what my Spidey sense was saying."

"Your Spidey sense can go snuff itself."

An hour later, the nursery's big flatbed truck pulled in through the back gate. Isabella and Miguel came up to the counter. Maya and Ty were there.

"Guess who came back looking for Ty," Maya said.

Ty glared at her. "He wasn't looking for me."

"The cute guy from Monday?" Isabella asked.

"Jesus, you two are such nosy people." Ty spun away on the stool.

"That's right. I am your nosy big sister. Here to make sure you stay a virgin until Prince Charming arrives."

"God help me. Marvelous." Ty rolled his eyes.

"So, what did he want?"

"Custom planters. Wood."

"Okay. Does he know sizes and how many? We'll have Tony build them. So sure, we can do that. You want to work on it?"

Ty shrugged. "If that's okay, sure. He said he'd send measurements."

Isabella nodded. "Okay, once we get it, we can see what he's thinking."

That afternoon, Ty's phone buzzed. A text from the new contact. Attached were photos and a file with dimensions.

Ty walked over to where Isabella was sorting invoices. "Okay, here's what he sent."

Isabella peered at his phone screen. She zoomed in on the floor plan, then scrolled through the photos. "Wow. Nice. Ask him to email these. You and I can sit down tomorrow and go over them."

"Will do."

Chapter 7

Friday morning, Ty walked out first thing and headed over to the counter where Isabella was going through some printouts.

"Your guy sent an email," Isabella said. "Let's take a look."

She spread out the sheets containing notes and a balcony layout, then grabbed a pad of graph paper. "Let's get our bearings." She sketched quickly—drainage layers, gravel depth, soil composition. "You want the planter to balance with the plant. Account for growth. Don't let one plant overtake the others, above or below the soil. You can't put goldfish in with a Betta."

"What?" Ty got lost on that last one.

She tapped the laptop screen, pointing to Ben's sample photos. "See how clean these are? That's what he wants. Low profile. Modern. Minimalist. He also wants some tall cylinders. This will look nice."

She handed Ty a ruler. "You sketch it out. Calculate the volume in cubic feet. I'll check your math. How did you do in Geometry?"

"Aced it." He smiled and took the ruler. "I actually had good grades." By mid-morning, he had a bunch of rough drafts.

Isabella looked over his shoulder. "Good start! Can you reduce the width here? And let's give these edges a slight rounding. Try one more. And we'll go over it tomorrow."

That evening, Ty walked to Ana's Diner, sketchpad tucked under his arm. The heat had finally broken, leaving the sun to paint the adobe hills in shades of burnt orange.

The diner was quiet. A young couple sat in the corner, illuminated by the glow of their phones. Ana stood behind the counter, wiping down the coffee maker.

"Hey, stranger." She grinned. "Where you been? Haven't seen you since...?"

"Monday?" Ty slid onto a stool.

Ana poured him water without asking. "Sounds about right. The usual?"

"Yeah."

She called the order back to the cook, then leaned her elbows on the counter, eyeing the pad. "What's that?"

"Planter designs. For a customer."

"Look at you. All professional."

A platter of Pollo con Mole arrived minutes later. Ty ate slowly, sketching between bites. Ana moved around the empty tables, humming along to the radio, letting him work in peace.

He finished quickly, not wanting to keep her past closing. The walk back to the nursery was cool, the air filled with the buzz of cicadas. He slipped through the side gate, crossing the dark rows of plants toward the floodlights near the barn.

Back in his room, he tossed the sketchpad on the table and downed a glass of cold water.

What was on his mind? The project, or the guy? It had better be just the project. Isabella had trusted him with it, despite his lack of experience. He sat a bit longer with the sketchbook. He thought about the way Ben had walked the aisles. The way he paused, staring at random things—a leaf, a pot, a shadow. He looked at things like he could sink into them.

Look at me. Sheesh. There I go again. Elliptical orbit. Just circling. In Earth's lower orbit, do you know how much space junk there is? Screws, spent rockets, paint chips, dead satellites. And when we send people up to the space station, they're endlessly bombarded by space trash, all of it traveling at thousands of miles a second. How? And why? My dad—back when he was still a human, so when I was seven—had a favorite saying when things started spiraling: "Full count, and Babe Ruth hits one outta here. There it goes, ladies and gentlemen, over the left field wall." That's me. Over the left field wall.

Ty kept at the planter plans. He'd meet with Isabella in the morning. She'd take a look and tell him what to fix. By Saturday, Isabella declared the plans ready. Ty sent the email to Ben. Ten minutes later, his phone buzzed.

Ty, these look great. Can we get together and discuss them?

Ty stared at the screen. He hadn't expected a meeting. Why not just pick one? Or call Isabella?

Fine. He didn't mind.

Sure, he texted back. Monday? It's my day off.

Okay. Perfect. Lunchtime. Thanks, Ben.

Chapter 8

Normally, Ty didn't like Mondays. There was not much to do since the nursery was closed. Although Sunday nights were fun since he could stay up late doing sketches or trying to learn Spanish, with K-pop blasting while he drew. When he got tired, he could watch an old movie and fall asleep.

But this Monday, he had a "business" meeting. *Yeah, right.* Anyway, he arrived at Ana's at 10:55. He'd actually put it in his calendar app: "11 a.m. Project Meeting with Balcony Guy." "Balcony Guy" was safer than "Ben," and "Mr. Nakamura" felt like a character from a play. He smoothed the front of his generic white T-shirt—fresh out of the wrapper—and checked his jeans. The only pair he had that weren't beat to shit.

Ben was already there, sitting in the back booth. Ty's booth.

Ty smiled. "Hi. You're in my seat."

Ben was checking his phone and then looked up. He had that look of being deep in thought and somewhere else. But he recovered and gave Ty a wave. He hadn't caught what Ty said. Two cups of coffee were on the table. "Thanks for coming. I got you coffee. Is that okay?"

"Perfect." Ty slid into the opposite bench. "Sorry, have you been waiting long?"

"No, you're on time. So, it's your day off?"

"Yeah. No problem."

Ben sipped his coffee, then opened his laptop and turned it so they could both see. He scrolled through Ty's email. "I think I like this one." He pointed to the low-profile platform design.

"Good. That was Isabella's favorite, too. Did you check the measurements and proportions?"

"Yes. And I saw your note about irrigation. I'm not planning on running pipes. I doubt the building would allow me to install them. I'll just try and be diligent. Change my ways from... what did you call it? Planticide?"

"Right. We'll remind you."

"Yes, I'll stick to it. I plan on turning over a new leaf..." Ben froze. "Oh. Sorry. Dumb pun."

Ty gave a quiet smile. "No, no. Perfect."

Ty relaxed, leaning back against the vinyl booth. He watched Ben scroll through the other images. Probably he should be looking elsewhere, but too bad. Anyway, he shook himself a bit and focused back on the laptop.

"So," Ty said. "If you're set on the design, I can contact the woodworker for a quote."

"Fine by me. When will you need a deposit?"

"Talk to Isabella for that. I'm just the hired help."

"So you'll do the planting?"

"Yep. That'll be me."

"Good." Ben nodded. He closed the laptop.

"Super. This will be fun." Ty started to gather up the papers.

"Hey," Ben said. "If you're not busy... can I buy you lunch?"

Ty paused. "No, no, you don't have to do that."

"I know. I'm just offering. I'm going to stay and order something."

Ty looked at him. "Are you sure?"

"Of course."

"Okay then. I guess. Then you won't have to eat alone."

"Right," Ben smiled. "Although I usually eat alone."

"Me too."

"It's 'lunch for the loners' then. Have you eaten here before?"

Ty suppressed a smile. "I eat here just about every night. Ana is sick of me. I don't tip."

Ben laughed, a warm, genuine sound. "Then what do you recommend?"

"Pollo con Mole."

"Perfect."

Ty went to the counter to tell Ana. When he returned, Ben leaned forward. "How long have you worked at the nursery?"

"Just a month. I've only been in Tucson that long."

"Really? Where were you before?"

"Wisconsin. Rockford. Chicago. Cleveland." Ty listed them off like train stops. "I'm just hopscotching around. Have been for a while."

"What? Really? How old are you?"

"Twenty."

Ben's eyebrows shot up. "No way."

"What? I look like I'm forty? Or twelve? Anyway, I grew up in Syracuse. Left three years ago." Ty kept his voice light, carefully neutral. "Kind of ran away. And started working seasonal gigs as a landscaper or at garden centers. Even a blueberry farm. That was fun. So I do three months here, six months there."

"You left home at seventeen?"

"Yeah." Ty picked at the napkin dispenser. "Problems. School, family. The usual."

Ben nodded. He didn't press, didn't offer pity. "Sounds rough."

"Yep. But I'm getting by. No longer on the run." Ty raised a brow to underline the joke. "And Isabella is wonderful. She's my new mom. Best place I've been. I hope I can stay."

"I hope so too."

"I'm learning a lot," Ty continued, eager to shift the topic. "She gets into the science of it. Plants and climate here are totally different from the Midwest. It's intense."

Ben studied him. "And the sketches... did you do those?"

"Yes."

"They were very good. Where did you learn?"

"Always drew stuff. Got in trouble in school for doodling instead of listening." Ty shrugged.

"Took some art and drafting classes. You know, gay boys gonna be artistic. It's my therapy. Keeps me off of the industrial grade Prozac."

He waited for Ben to flinch.

Ben just smirked. "Yeah. Okay. Sure." He shook his head, smiling. "I wish I was half as mature as you at twenty."

"You're funny. I'm sure you've always had your shit together."

"Nice of you to think so. I guess I put up a good front."

Okay, Ty thought. We covered the backstory without hitting my landmines.

Ana arrived with the food. She set the plates down, glancing between Ty and the stranger in the suit. "Here you go."

"Ana, this is Ben," Ty said. "He's a customer at Isabella's."

"Oh, really? Okay." She gave Ben a look that said *I'm watching you*, then softened. "Well, enjoy, boys. Need more coffee?"

"We're good, thank you," Ben said.

They dug in.

"What about you?" Ty asked between bites. "You mentioned you moved from Denver."

"Yep. Here for a project. At least a year. We have a big client in town and I need to meet them regularly. I hate flying and it was a good time for a change. So far, I like it."

"Just you?"

"Like, am I married? Nope. Just me." Ben laughed. His eyes smiled again. "Thinking about getting a dog, though."

They finished eating, Ben wiping his plate clean with a tortilla. "Want to get going?"

"Yep," Ty said. "Thanks again."

Chapter 9

The next day, Isabella confirmed Ben's order. "Carpenter says three weeks to make the planters. He's got to order the wood. Congratulations, your first project."

Ty was back in his room at noon, taking a break from the sun. His phone buzzed. A text from Ben.

Hi Ty, can we meet again Monday?

Ty stared at the screen. Was something wrong? Did Ben change his mind about the order?

Is there a problem with the order? he typed back.

The reply came instantly. *No, that's all good. Just wanted to hang out.*

Ty lowered the phone, his brow furrowed. *Hang out?* He didn't want to overthink it, but still. Or rather, *why not?*

Okay, he typed.

The rest of the week dragged by. The glare of sun had Ty's shirt stuck to his back after half an hour. There was not too many customers but he kept busy with the potting and pruning. The nursery hummed with its usual rhythm—Maya bitching about the heat, Isabella humming along to the radio, the occasional customer wandering in for a potted cactus or a bag of soil. And a new supply of tamales from Rose.

Monday, just before 3:00 PM, Ty headed out the door. The nursery yard was quiet. The air was still, and the sun seemed relentless. How did the plants handle this heat? He had texted Isabella and asked her if she wanted him to water them.

He left through the side gate and headed to the diner. Ben was already waiting out front when Ty walked up.

The place was empty. Ana had some piano jazz playing quietly from a speaker, adding to the lull of a Monday afternoon.

"Hola, Ana!" Ty called out. "It's me and a friend."

"Ty?" Ana's voice came loud from the kitchen. "Hi, honey! I'll be out in a couple of minutes. Grab a seat!"

Ty grabbed a menu and they slid into the same booth. The vinyl squeaked as they slid in across from each other.

"So," Ty started, hands resting on the table. "What's up?"

"Not much. Just thought we could meet up. You know, just not eat alone. Anyway, thanks."

"So you are still fine with the design?"

"Of course. It looks great." Ben's voice was quiet.

Ty waited.

"Was there something else?" Ty kept his voice professional, guarding the perimeter.

"No, not really. Everything's good. How about you?" Ben shifted in his seat.

"Same old, same old. The sun here is turning me into leather purse, or maybe alligator." Ty smiled back. His phone sat face up. The screen glowed with an old painting: a Modigliani portrait of a woman with an elongated neck and vacant eyes.

The air felt thin. Without the blueprints between them, it felt awkward.

"So what's new with you?" Ty asked.

"Not much. Our client here in town can be a pain in the ass." Ben winced. "Sorry. That wasn't very professional."

Ty laughed and teased. "I'm offended. Truly."

Ben smiled back and picked up the menu. Ty watched him. A strand of dark hair fell over his forehead; Ben smoothed it back with a quick, careless motion.

"Do you want a beer?" Ty asked.

"Oh? Sure."

Ty slid out of the booth and walked to the cooler, grabbing two icy bottles of Modelo. He popped the caps on the opener mounted to the counter and carried them back.

"Self-service?" Ben asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Didn't you know? I sub here as a waitress." Ty set the beers down with a flourish. "Be sure to tip, honey."

The words hung in the air.

Shit. Ty thought. Brief panic flared hot in his chest. *Too gay.* Too loud. He sounded like a caricature. He froze, waiting for the look—the cringe, the pullback.

"Sorry," Ty muttered, staring at the bottle. "I mean waiter. I'm a waiter. I'm usually not so... obvious."

"Ty."

Ty looked up.

Ben's eyes were bright, crinkled at the corners. "Not a problem. Yes, I'll leave a good tip."

Ty inhaled, his chest relaxed. "Right. Okay." He took a long sip of beer. "So. What about you? Where did you grow up? School? Brothers, sisters? Give me the dossier."

Ben laughed. "Okay, okay. Sure." He nodded at Ty's phone. "Modigliani? École de Paris, right?"

Ty glanced down at the screen. "Yes. So you know some art history?"

"A bit. Are you a fan?"

"That sounds funny. 'Are you a fan of Amedeo Modigliani?' Like asking if I'm a fan of Taylor Swift or Chicago deep-dish pizza."

Ben laughed. "Wow, okay, maybe. In fact, I did take some classes. And Modigliani was a favorite. I love his paintings. And he had a crazy life. So sorry, I guess I'm a *fan*."

"Fine." Ty pretended to pout.

Ben continued. "Why do I feel like, sitting in this booth here at Ana's, this is one of the few discussions of nineteenth-century painters."

"You don't know that. Toulouse-Lautrec might stop by a couple of times a week."

"The bigger question: how does a gardener know so much about French painters?"

"He was Italian."

"Fine, yes, he was Italian. A point for you. But he was at the École de Paris at the same time as Picasso, Chagall, and Soutine. And you did not answer the question."

"Yes, for a kid from Syracuse. I know a lot about that stuff. My mom was really into art history. The Impressionists and everything before and after. My mom's favorites were an earlier group—Matisse, Derain, Vlaminck. I remember the paintings, but I get the terms mixed up."

"The Fauves," Ben nodded.

Ty smiled. "Okay, yeah, those guys. Anyway, my mom had books, and we'd watch NPR. And we'd go to the museum with Uncle Lou."

"Uncle Lou?"

"Yes, he wasn't really an uncle—a family friend. Oh, not really, just my mom's friend. My dad couldn't stand him."

"Why?"

"He was gay. That was enough. But he and my mom were best friends. Since college."

"Okay."

"And you?" Ty asked. "Have you always lived here?"

"No, no. I grew up in San Diego. My dad's American-born Japanese; my mom's Danish. Well, sort of. My grandparents are in Munich now, but she was born here."

"A Euro-Asian."

"I guess. For all the labels are worth."

"So what do your parents do?"

"My dad's an electrical engineer. Works for Rockwell."

"Never heard of them."

"Big defense contractor."

"And your mom?"

"Interior designer. She has a small shop with her twin sister, my aunt. So I got two moms. My real mom is the Alpha."

Ty laughed. "Any brothers or sisters?"

"Nope. How about you?"

"One older sister. She's still back in Syracuse. How did you end up here?"

Ben traced the condensation on his beer bottle. "I was in Denver for a while after college. Left for a year to finish my master's in Japan."

"So what kind of work do you do now?"

"Visual. Branding, UI, UX. I've been with this company about three years. We landed a big client here in Tucson, and they wanted someone in town."

"You like it?"

"I like Tucson. It's quieter than Denver. Less... showy. The client here is a complete nutjob."

Ana finally came out from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. "Sorry, guys! I was right in the middle of making the biscuits."

"Hi, Auntie. This is a friend, Ben."

Ana looked Ben over, her sharp eyes softening into a smile. "Hi, Ben. Nice to meet you. You boys hungry?"

"Starving," Ben said and pointed to the menu. "I'll have the green chile chicken burrito."

"Make it two," Ty said.

Ten minutes later, Ana dropped two heavy ceramic plates on the table. The burritos were massive, smothered in melted cheese and green sauce.

They ate in comfortable silence, the only sound the hum of the refrigerator.

Ty polished off his plate and leaned back. "Can I see some of your work?"

"It's on my website. Mostly old stuff. I'll send you the link later."

"Send it now."

"No." Ben grinned.

"Fine." Ty scowled playfully, returning to his phone. He pulled up an image. "Here. David Hockney."

"Swimming pools," Ben said, nodding. "Great stuff. I have a book of his. I'll bring it for you sometime. I have one of his *New Yorker* covers in my hallway."

Ben paused. He looked at Ty, gaze steady. "Hey. Would you like to go to dinner sometime?"

Ty blinked. "Sure. I guess." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't really do anything around here. Just work and sleep."

"There's a Tex-Mex place, El Rancho Rancho. Have you been?"

"Nope. Funny name." Ty swirled the last of his beer. "Can I change it?"

"I guess. If it makes you happy."

"Rancho Rauncho?"

Ben nodded, a big smile. "Rancho Rauncho. Definitely. I like it." He leaned in, lowering his voice. "Let's pitch them a new marketing campaign... the slogan: 'Get Raunchy at the Rancho.'"

Chapter 10

Thursday evening. After a quick shower, Ty headed to the Raunchy Ranch.

It was a fifteen-minute walk. He rounded the corner and spotted Ben outside, phone pressed to his ear. Ben was pacing, his free hand chopping the air. He looked up, catching Ty's eye, and offered a tight, apologetic wave.

"Hey," Ty said, stopping a respectful distance away.

"Hi, sorry." Ben pointed to the phone. "Yeah, I'm sure we can get it fixed. They're just not understanding how the keywords work. I'll straighten it out tomorrow, okay?" He listened for another second, jaw set, then tapped the screen to end the call. He exhaled, a long, ragged breath. "Sorry about that."

"No worries. If you need to make another call, I can wait. I'll just sit over there on the curb. No rush."

"No. Absolutely not. They treat everything like a cardiac arrest. Let's go inside."

The "Raunchero" was one of those Mexican places that cried out, "Gringo! It's Fiesta Time!" Lights and loud music, lots of color and decor, piñatas hung from the ceiling, sombreros on the walls, and big murals with sunsets and burros by the pueblos.

Ben asked for a booth in a far corner.

"I'm starving," Ty said.

"Sure, let's order."

The waitress came by. Ty ordered the Bistec Ranchero, and Ben decided on Carne Asada. And some margaritas.

The waitress brought the drinks in two minutes.

"They must have them on tap," Ty said.

Ben leaned in, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "When do you turn twenty-one?"

Ty hunched over, his furtive eyes scanning the dining room. "Shhh! Not 'til October. But keep it down! *They* are always watching. You know they've been after me. Ever since that diamond heist in Miami!"

Ben nodded gravely. "I see. Yes, I heard about that. Someone smuggled a million-dollar necklace out in a potted cactus."

"Exactly!" Ty smacked his hand on the table.

"You're proud of yourself, huh?" Ben smiled at him.

"Maybe." Ty took a long sip of his drink. "I looked at your webpage. Really cool. I like the charcoal drawings. They're more abstract."

"Yes, those were for my master's degree. I haven't updated that page in ages." Ben swirled his drink. "Feels like a lifetime ago."

"Right. I can see that. Being twenty-nine. Oh, your next birthday, you'll be... 'old'."

Ben's eyes narrowed. "Sure. Fine. And on your next birthday, you'll finally be shaving."

Ty smiled into his glass. He felt the weight of Ben's gaze across the table—steady, unblinking. He didn't look up, afraid of what he might find there. Instead, he raised his glass.

"Let's toast. To me becoming a grownup." Ben raised his glass and they clinked.

Ty downed half the margarita in one go. "Yum."

"Careful, Godzilla," Ben cautioned. "Will I be invited to this birthday party?"

"There won't be a party. Nobody's gonna know it's my birthday. Well, maybe Kenny."

"Kenny?"

"My friend from high school. The only person back in Syracuse I still talk to. Well, sometimes I hear from my mom, when she's doing better."

Ben nodded slowly. "What about people here? Isabella would throw you a party?"

"Maybe. Especially if she and Rose adopt me."

"What?" Ben missed the joke. "Okay, right. So, it's October, what day? I'll remember."

"You mean your phone will remember."

"Do not separate the man from the machine."

Ty laughed; the tequila warmed his smile. "I like that both of us say shit that makes zero sense." He risked a look at Ben. He was looking back at him, calm, sitting back and relaxed. Enjoying this too.

The food arrived—platters full of steak and gravy with rice and beans, and a small covered dish with tortillas.

They ate with the focus of starving men. Five minutes later, Ty pushed his clean plate away. "Oh god. I need to loosen my belt." He drained the rest of his drink. "I haven't had margaritas in a long time."

"Like what? Since the Korean War?"

"That was my grandfather." Ty smirked.

"Right." Ben studied him. "So tell me more about Syracuse."

Ty shrugged, eyeing the empty glass. The alcohol made the memories easier to handle. "I left in November of my junior year. The place sucked. Winter sucked. Everything sucked. My mom was always in bed, sick. My dad... he hated his job, his life, his son. He drank and threw tantrums every night, slamming doors, yelling about the Communists. Or the socialists. Or the immigrants. Or the fags." Ty picked at a napkin. "Having one for a son... well, that just made it special. He kept calling me 'trans.' He had no idea what it meant. He watched Fox News until his brain rotted."

"Your mom was sick?"

"Yep. Depression. Not the mild, manageable kind. She was in and out of the facility and then she started to stay with my aunt. That was better for her but not for me. And my sister went MIA. She's in her thirties and married to a creep. But we were never really close. A big age gap." Ty sighed. "I just want to go live in Spain."

Ben was quiet. He didn't look away; he didn't offer platitudes. He just listened.

Okay, Ty thought. The tequila was buzzing in his veins. *Do it now.*

"Ben, I have a question."

"Yes?"

"Actually, I just want to... clear something up."

"Okay." Ben set his glass down.

"We're just buddies here. Hanging out, right? A couple of dudes having dinner?"

"Sure, I guess. What do you mean?"

"I mean, you know I'm not straight, right?"

"That's funny. You said that in the negative."

"Sure, sure. But you are? Straight, I mean."

"Yes."

"Just straight?"

"Ty, come on." Ben shifted, looking uncomfortable.

"Sorry. Okay, never mind. Look, I just don't want to misread things. You know. I don't socialize. I haven't for a long time, so hanging out here is great, but I don't want it to get weird." Ty paused. "By the way, you don't have to buy me dinner."

"Okay." Ben looked at the table, then back at Ty. "But I *can* pay. I see how hard you work, and I asked you. Don't worry about it."

Ty studied him. "Sure. Okay. I just wanted to make sure you understand why I'm asking."

"Yes." Ben hesitated, the pause a bit too long. "I don't know."

"And?"

"And what?"

Ty's shoulders slumped. *Were the margaritas making English difficult?* "Okay, to which part of what I said are you saying 'I don't know'?"

Ben looked cornered. He smoothed his hair back, a nervous tic. "Ty, sorry. Yes, I understand your question. I understand the confusion. I'm not trying to be cryptic. So yes. We're just hanging out."

"Okay. Done. Topic done." Ty forced a smile. "Except, can I ask one more thing? You seem pretty comfortable being around... you know, queers. Mollies."

"Molly?" Ben blinked. "Who? You? Where the hell did you get that word?"

Ty pretended to be defensive. "It's a real word. Maybe a few hundred years old. Back in London. Look it up."

Ben shook his head; a genuine laugh broke the tension. "Yeah, I've heard it. That's hysterical." He leaned back. "To answer your question: yes. I am quite accustomed to hanging around different 'folks'. I mean, in college, I was a Fine Arts major. Half that school was gay. In the summer, I worked as a bartender at a trendy restaurant—all the waiters: queer. My mom's a decorator. Do the math. I used to think, *Oh, I'm weird. I'd much rather*

hang around with my gay buddies instead of the frat boys. Hooters and sports bars are not my thing."

Ty nodded. "Got it. So you were surrounded. The token breeder."

Ben shrugged. "I guess. My closest friends, even now, they're of that persuasion. Wait 'til you meet Charles."

Ty flashed a small, tight smile. He placed his napkin on the table, signaling the end of the interrogation.

"Okay. All good?"

"Yes, sir."

Chapter 11

Wednesday arrived still quiet. The weekend had come and gone without a word from Ben. *Fine*, Ty thought, hauling a heavy pot off the flatbed. *Maybe the "are you straight" conversation scared him off.*

Better to get the weirdness out of the way now.

The nursery yard was a kiln. They had spent the entire morning unloading a delivery of nearly a hundred potted cypress seedlings. Ty, Miguel, and Maya moved in a sweaty, dusty rhythm—lift, carry, set, repeat.

By 1:00 PM, Ty's shirt was plastered to his back. He wiped grit from his forehead and checked his phone.

A missed call. *Ben*. And a text: *Give me a call.*

Ty walked to the cooler, grabbing a water bottle.

Maya leaned against a stack of pallets, wiping her hands on her jeans. "Isabella says there's another delivery coming."

"Great." Ty twisted the cap off the water. "Can't wait."

He hit callback and held the phone to his ear.

Ben picked up on the first ring. "Hi. How are you doing?"

"Wilting," Ty said, leaning into the shade of the awning. "Like a burning bush. But without Moses, or the Ten Commandments. Why the hell would anyone live here?"

"It's fine. As long as you have AC."

"Thanks, jerk."

"Me? Maybe." Ben's voice was light, teasing.

"No. Definitely."

Ben laughed. "Hey, quick question. I have a friend who's having a gallery opening this Friday."

"Gallery?"

"Art gallery, noob. Would you like to go?"

Ty hesitated. He looked down at his boots, caked in mud and fertilizer. "I don't know... I think I'd feel weird. And I have nothing to wear. My wardrobe screams 'displaced sharecropper'."

"Come on. Just wear jeans and a T-shirt. It's fine."

"Clean ones?"

"Preferably."

"Are you sure?"

Ty looked up. Maya was watching him from across the counter, eyebrows raised, chewing on a straw.

"Yes," Ben said. "Come on. You'll have a good time."

"Okay. Deal. It's a date."

The words hit the air and hung there.

Ty froze. "No. No, I mean... not a *date* date. A plan. Yes. It's a plan."

Ben was laughing now, a warm sound in Ty's ear. "Yeah, yeah. Whatever. See you then."

The line went dead.

Ty lowered the phone. Maya was staring at him, a wicked grin spreading across her face.

"What?" Ty snapped.

"A date, huh?" She arched her wrist missy-like and pitched her voice up high and breathless. "*Tee hee, it's not a date! Sorry!*"

Ty narrowed his eyes. "Hey, later, girl, do you want to go for a little drive in the desert? I have some chloroform. Just let me get the rope and a shovel."

"Sounds like Workplace Intimidation," Maya said, crunching on her ice. "I'm calling HR."

Chapter 12

Friday night. Ty stood by the main gate as the gray Tacoma pulled up. Ben's hand lifted to wave, then faltered mid-air. The truck rolled to a slower stop than usual.

Ty took a breath and smoothed his hands down his thighs. He had decided to go for it. *Why not?* It was an art gallery. Might as well try and look the part.

He had spent a couple of nights roaming through thrift stores after work. A nice baggy pair of dark linen slacks, fitted at the waist, and an open tan silk top, unbuttoned, with a low black tank top. He'd borrowed eyeliner from Maya and pulled his hair back into a loose bun, letting a few deliberate strands escape to frame his face. A bit andro-femme for sure.

He opened the passenger door and jumped in. "Howdy, cowboy! Thanks for the lift!"

Ben didn't say anything. He just stared.

Ty's smile wavered. "What?"

"You said you didn't have anything to wear." Ben's eyes traveled from the sheer collar to the loose linen trousers. "You look like you're making a scene on Rodeo Drive."

Ty let out a nervous laugh. "I don't know about rodeos, but this is what you get when you go twink-thrifting in Tucson."

Ben kept looking. "Wow."

"Is that a good wow, or... something else?"

"I just wasn't expecting..." Ben seemed to trip over the words. "...this."

"If it's too much, I can change," Ty said, his hand reaching for the door handle. "I can throw on jeans and some flannel. Give me two seconds."

"No." Ben started the engine. "No, it's fine. It's great. Let's go."

Downtown Tucson was busy for the start of the summer weekend. It took a bit of cruising around before Ben found a place to park. People were out, walking about, past the boutique shops and restaurants, with warm colors of the sunset reaching windows as they walked past.

The gallery was up ahead—a large converted old factory loft with floor-to-ceiling glass. Light spilled out onto the sidewalk, silhouetting some people standing in front of the entrance.

Inside, light jazz floated over the low murmur of conversation. The space was cavernous, "gallery white" walls stark against the polished concrete floor. In the main room, the art was large-scale—abstract landscapes where horizons dissolved into stencils and patched shapes.

Ty scanned the room. The crowd was a mix of two worlds: older couples in gowns and wraps and tailored suits, holding wine glasses by the stems, contrasted with clusters of animated youngsters, a mix of hipsters and la-las with their asymmetrical haircuts.

Ty felt a little less like an alien.

Ben saw a couple, waved, and walked to them. Ty, not sure, trailed behind.

"Hey, how are you guys?" Ben shook hands with them. Jesse, a man in his forties with a friendly, grounded vibe, smiled back. "Excellent." His wife, Meiko, offered a warm smile, though her eyes lingered on Ty with a mix of politeness and intrigue.

Before introductions could be made, a man in a studded vest and shimmering gray slacks—cut loose and high-waisted—swooped in. He planted a kiss on Ben's cheek.

"Look who's arrived! Bentley! How have you been?"

Ben laughed, looking genuinely happy to see him. "Hi, Charles. Wonderful. This is Jesse and Meiko. I work with Jesse. And congratulations on the opening. It's a nice turnout."

"We're pleased. Blake's already sold one of the landscapes." He shook hands with Jesse and Meiko. Then he spied Ty half-hiding behind Ben. "And who is this?"

Ben stepped aside. "Oh, yes, this is Ty. He works at a nursery. I told you, 'I am having some planters made for my balcony.'"

Charles raised a perfectly groomed eyebrow. "Really? So, Ty, you are a *gardener*?" He extended a hand. "It's nice to meet you." He held the handshake an extra few beats. "And how long have you and Ben been *friends*?"

"Stop it, Charles. He's a good kid."

"Okay..." He locked his gaze back on Ben. "Sure, he's also gorgeous."

Heat rushed to Ty's face. He looked at the floor.

"Charles, Jesus!" Ben warned. "Don't embarrass the poor guy." He turned to Ty, concerned.

"Sorry, I didn't warn you about this guy."

Ty recovered, forcing himself to look up and smile. "It's fine." He gestured to the main wall.

"So these are your paintings?"

"Yes. What do you think? Do you like them?"

"Very much," Ty said quietly.

"Ty actually knows something about art," Ben said. "He's a fan of Ecole de Paris."

"Aren't we all? Well, we must chat later. Excuse me all, I'm on schmooze duty. Ta-ta!"

Charles swirled away. Ty stayed by Ben for a moment, but as the conversation turned to other matters, like office politics, Ty wandered away. He moved off towards another room where clusters of smaller paintings were displayed.

Ben finished catching up with Jesse about the latest office news. Then Jesse and his wife headed out for dinner. Ben stood alone for a moment, surrounded by small circles of conversations and restrained laughter. He scanned the room for Ty and found him in one of the side rooms, moving slowly along a wall of smaller paintings. Ty was hard to miss. How he moved. And Ben was finding this evening easy. Trying to make sense of how things had suddenly become more obvious—to him at least. He didn't want to make

sense of it. He felt it needed to be pushed out of his head. Forget it. He gave a little headshake and headed over to the small wine bar counter and grabbed two glasses of red.

Charles materialized next to him.

"So, Bentley. Ty's your date?"

Ben turned to him, keeping his expression calm. He had expected this. "Charles, please, don't start. He's a nice kid. I brought him because I knew he'd like it. He doesn't know anyone here. He's smart. You should talk to him."

Charles arched an eyebrow. "Yes, Ben, sure, okay. Let's go with that. But let's just say, maybe a handsome guy, like you for example, was to be a bit adventurous, or even... *ambidextrous*... they might find him, well, more than just 'nice'."

Ben looked at him, then laughed and shook his head. "Ambidextrous? Charles, I know you know what that word means?"

"Yes, and don't quibble, dear. The point of language is conveyance—of a message—and I am confident that you got it."

Charles winked, grabbed a fresh glass, and pirouetted toward a group of guests.

Ben looked up, and Ty was walking back his way. Ben handed him a glass as Ty reached him. "Here, hopefully, they don't card. So, what do you think?"

"Thanks." Ty took a sip and peered at Ben over the rim of his glass. "It's a blast. Really fun. The paintings are cool. And I love just watching all these people. I feel like I've landed in Never-Never Land."