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To my fan club members B & B, I know I'll always sell  
at least two books. Thanks to the ladies of BTP, I love  
me a challenge.



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# COPYRIGHT ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following quotation:

*‘whatever a moon has always meant and whatever a  
sun will always sing...’*

is from the poem ‘i carry your heart with me’

by ee cummings—author, essayist, playwright, poet



# CHAPTER ONE

---

Rian Tanaka wondered for the hundredth time how he got himself into situations like this. Ah yes, his crazy-ass best friend, that was how. Adjusting his cowboy hat, he looked out at the crowd of mostly screaming women. One in particular was the cause of his current ire, said best friend Emi Washington.

Emi was decked out in her cowgirl finest. Studded Western-themed bra, denim shorts that would make Daisy Duke proud, and calf-high Western-style boots. The matching hat and pigtails completed her look of urban cowgirl.

Rian may have been annoyed at being dragged to a live taping of *The Cindy Show* to see country singer Blake Channing, but the outfit Emi had on almost made up for the experience. Almost, because he too had to wear cowboy-themed attire and there was nothing more ridiculous than him dressed up like a cowboy.

“Come on, Rian, it’ll be fun. You know how *bad* *The Cindy Show* is. There are bound to be some serious people watching,” Emi pleaded the night before.

“Japanese men should never put on a cowboy hat and boots,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Half Japanese, Rian. You’re half Japanese, and even if your mom wasn’t Irish, I think any man looks sexy in a cowboy hat, boots, and tight Wranglers,” she replied, with a mischievous grin and a wink.

“Not going to happen, Emi. I mean it, not going to happen,” he said, giving her a firm look.

Yep, he really meant it, all the way to the damn store to buy his outfit, and then to the damn studio to watch the taping.

“Okay, y’all. Cindy has a special treat for all my cowpokes out there. Put your hands together for one of the sexiest buckaroos this side of the Mason-Dixon Line, Blake Channing,” Cindy, the show’s host, crooned to the audience.

He’d always thought the woman was beyond stupid, but from the safety of his couch it was tolerable. Who referred to themselves in the third person, except maybe a two-year-old?

“Doesn’t she mean west of the Mississippi? We’re in California, which is nowhere near the Mason-Dixon Line,” he hissed into Emi’s ear.

Frowning, she waved her hand at him. “Rian, we decided a long time ago there is no logic to what that woman says. Just enjoy the absurdity of it, cowpoke,” she replied, drawling out her last word and giggling softly.

Discreetly adjusting his package, Rian looked back out at the soundstage. His jeans were too damn tight, and his balls were going to fall off because blood circulation was being cut off. There was no way a man could ride around for hours with jeans like this on and not suffer some consequences.

It was his own damn fault, though. If he would just man up and tell Emi he'd been in love with her since puberty, he wouldn't have to take part in all her crazy schemes. Sighing, he plastered on a fake smile for the cameras, and tried not to think about how pathetic he was.

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Emi Washington was using all the willpower years of meditation had taught her to avoid the temptation to jump her best friend Rian Tanaka. On a regular day Rian was mouthwatering, with the tall lean body he got from his Irish mother and the dark sensuality he got from his Japanese father, but today he was smoking hot. The plaid short-sleeve Western-style shirt he wore emphasized his broad shoulders and muscular chest and arms. She really had to keep averting her eyes from how his jeans clung to his tight, firm ass and impressive bulge.

She thought the sexist part of the whole outfit was the hat. The black Stetson accentuated the square cut of his jaw, his sharp high cheekbones, and his midnight black almond-shaped eyes. The black hair peeking out the back of his hat at the nape of his neck made her fingers itch to touch it.

God, she was so pathetic. She'd been in love with Rian since puberty but couldn't tell him. Mostly because if it didn't work out, she not only had to worry about losing her best friend, but also about disrupting their families. Her grandfather, Joseph, and Rian's grandfather, Isamu, had been friends since the two both came to Los Angeles in the forties. Joseph migrated from Arkansas to give his family a better life, and Isamu emigrated from Japan to do the same.

Having both settled in the predominantly black community of Leimert Park in Los Angeles, they'd become neighbors and fast friends. Isamu owned a small grocery in the community Joseph and his family frequented, and Isamu used Joseph's skills as an accountant to help the business grow.

It was during World War II and the internment of Japanese people in America that their friendship became cemented. Fearing the seizure of his business and property, Isamu signed both over to Joseph while he and his family were sent away. Joseph made sure

the market was still running and the house was well cared for until the Tanaka family was released.

Emi couldn't mess up a legacy like that one. She loved Rian too much as a friend to risk losing what they had if taking their relationship to the next level didn't work.

"He's not that cute," Rian whispered into her ear.

"What?" she asked, startled by the sensation of his breath against her skin.

"Don't 'what' me, Emi. I see that glazed look you have on your face. What would *sofu* think if he knew his precious Emi was a naughty, naughty girl?" he teased, giving her one of his signature sexy grins.

Emi tried really hard to fight the blush that was blooming on her caramel-colored complexion. It wasn't Grandfather Tanaka she was worried about; it was his very sexy grandson.

"Jeez, Emi," he snorted, rolling his eyes and turning his attention back to the stage.

Sighing, she turned back to watch the performance and tried to focus on what was on the stage, because focusing on what was next to her never got her anywhere.

# CHAMPION 手冊

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Rian was trying really hard not to rip Blake Channings' arms off, but if Blake touched Emi one more time, Rian couldn't be held responsible for his actions. Coming to the taping had gone from tolerable to "rip my eyes out" before he could blink.

After his first set, Blake sat down to do his interview with Cindy, and Rian braced himself for inane talk show chatter. Tuning out, he didn't realize anything had happened until Emi was clutching his arm and screaming like a banshee in his ear. Before he knew it they were being led to the soundstage where Cindy and Blake were sitting.

"Well lookie here, pardner, it seems we've rustled ourselves two lucky winners," Cindy drawled in one of the worst Texas accents he'd ever heard in his life.

"Congratulations," Blake said to both Emi and Rian.

"Omigod, omigod!" Emi screeched, still clutching Rian's arm.

"Well, Blake, it looks like you've got yourself a fan in this little cowgirl," Cindy beamed, still using her lame accent.

“Mr. Channing, I am one of your biggest fans. Omigod, can I have a hug?” Emi continued to squeal.

Barf. Rian was pretty sure he tasted vomit in his mouth.

“Well, it’s the least I can do for one of my biggest fans,” Blake said with a slow grin.

Before he’d even gotten the words out of his mouth, Emi had launched herself into his arms. The pleased expression on Blake’s face as he embraced her had Rian gritting his teeth. The man hadn’t even grown up on a ranch; he was from Detroit, for God’s sake. The Lone Star cowboy thing was all an act.

Making eye contact with Blake, Rian gave him his best death glare. When Blake released Emi and gave her a chaste kiss on her lips, Rian knew Blake was sending him a message.

“I don’t think just a hug is enough for one of my biggest fans. I’d like to invite you backstage to my green room after the show. Oh, and your cousin can come too if he wants,” Blake said, meeting Rian’s stare of challenge with one of his own.

“Omigod, omigod! That is so cool. Rian, isn’t that so cool?” Emi turned, asking Rian over the noise of the audience, with her arm wrapped around Blake’s waist.

“I’m not her cousin,” he blurted out, still looking at Blake.

“Oh, but it says that on the card you filled out,” Cindy said, sounding troubled.

Rian had forgotten the show’s host. If it had been any other situation, he would have found her expression priceless. It seemed Cindy didn’t do well with interruptions to her rehearsed script. Looking frantically at the show’s producer, she seemed to be waiting for instruction. He wanted to feel sorry for her, but all his attention was on how close Blake was holding Emi.

“It said we are *like* cousins. We were raised around each other because our grandfathers are best friends. ‘Like cousins’—doesn’t make us related,” he answered Cindy but still focused on Blake.

“Oh well, that’s just fine, pardner,” she said with a relieved expression. As if on cue, she turned back to the cameras. “Not only do you get to go backstage after the show, you also get VIP tickets to Blake’s concert tomorrow night. What do you think of that, buckaroos?” Cindy said, doing a spot-on impersonation of Cowboy Curtis.

“Omigod, omigod! That is so cool!” Emi shrieked, launching herself back into Blake’s arms.

Where she seemed to be permanently attached from the moment they got backstage after the show. Okay, that wasn’t fair, but she was sitting far too close to him on the leather couch in the green room where

they were hanging out. Clutching the bottle of cold beer in his hands was the only way Rian could keep from reaching over, hauling Emi from beside Blake, and marching out. Well, that and knowing Emi was having the time of her life. She wasn't joking when she said she was Blake Channing's biggest fan.

Emi had no problem admitting she loved country music. Growing up she'd always been teased by their black friends about having her black card revoked. Marching to her own beat, she'd just brush it off and go on listening to what she wanted and doing what she liked. It was one of the things that helped make their friendship strong. Even without their grandfathers' history together, Rian felt they would've had a connection.

After his parents' divorce, he'd always felt like he was being judged by someone else's standards. When he was in the Japanese community he was never Japanese enough, and when he was with his mother and her family he was too Japanese. Having Emi be who she wanted to be and do what she wanted to do helped keep him centered. She was the guiding force that encouraged his dream of turning surfing into a career. He knew he'd never make it as a pro surfer, but he loved everything about the sport, so he'd decided to open his own surfboard design company, Tanaka Designs.

Still a young company, he'd made some solid contacts in the last couple of years that had him seeing far more black than red in his bottom line. He should probably also thank his accountant, Emi. Like her grandfather before her, she was helping a Tanaka business grow. She was integral to almost every facet of his life—except the next level, the one that would make them both friends and lovers.

“Well, if you're looking for a new board, Rian designs the best money can buy.”

The sound of Emi saying his name brought Rian out of his stupor. Looking up, he could see both Blake and Emi staring at him.

“I'm sorry, what?” he asked, pushing the brim of his hat up.

“Blake was telling me how much he loves touring in California because it gives him a chance to surf. I was telling him how you design some of the best surfboards around,” Emi said, giving him an expectant look.

He knew that look—that was Emi's “I'm about to make you some money so you'd better play nice” look. Rian may have loved designing surfboards, but the actual marketing and selling of them was not his strong point.

“Um, yeah. How long have you been surfing?” he asked, trying to be polite under the circumstances.

“I don’t know if you can call it surfing. I just paddle out there and hope for the best,” Blake replied with a self-deprecating tone.

Rian couldn’t help but chuckle in acknowledgment. He didn’t want to like the guy, especially with the way he kept looking at Emi, but he had to respect Blake for being honest about his surfing technique.

“Hey, I’ve been surfing since I could walk, and sometimes I feel like I’m doing the same thing,” he admitted, taking a swig of his beer.

“Tell me about it. When I started about five years ago I just knew I’d get it. Five years later and I still feel like a novice. Don’t even get me started on what happened when I tried it in Hawaii one year,” Blake said with a chuckle.

Damn, Rian thought, he could really like this guy.

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Emi tried not to stare as Rian talked, but she loved how animated he got when the subject was surfing. With his hat pushed back she could see the sparkle in his eyes. His passion for his designs was one of the things she found so sexy about him.

She knew she was lucky to be sitting next to one of the hottest male country singers of the moment. With his mop of curly brown hair, deep blue eyes, and dimples, there was no denying Blake was very attractive, but it was Rian she had eyes for.

Over the years, she'd tried to deny her feelings as just a schoolgirl crush. She'd had boyfriends, nice guys who catered to her needs in and out of the bedroom, but they never seemed to be enough. Now in her early thirties, she was tired of not having enough. She just needed to get up the courage to get what she wanted, and what she wanted was Rian.

"Now, if you want to see stellar surfing, you need to see Emi. She could have gone pro if she'd wanted to," Rian said, interrupting Emi's thoughts.

"You love country music, you watch NASCAR, and you surf. If you say you can cook I might just have to marry you," Blake said, with a wink and smile that made his dimples pop out.

"Your loss—she's a terrible cook," Rian replied with a laugh.

"I am not, Rian Tanaka," she shouted, reaching over and pinching him. "*Hō ga yoi, bakku toru ka kōkai suru koto ni yo.*" She laughed.

"*Watashi wa anata o tameshite hoshii,*" he replied, swatting her hand away.

“You can speak Japanese?” Blake asked, interrupting their usual playful banter.

Emi began to blush because she realized she’d forgotten all about Blake.

“Um, yeah. Our families are really close. My father jokes I learned Japanese before I learned English. That’s why my accent is better than Rian’s,” she answered, giving Rian a smug look.

“Okay, I don’t care if you can’t cook,” Blake said with a flirtatious smile.

“You won’t feel that way after you’ve had some of her food.” Rian chuckled.

“That’s okay, we can eat out.” Blake gave Rian a grin.

“Emi prefers to eat at home. That’s why I usually cook for her,” Rian replied, with less humor.

“That’s okay because I’ve got a chef,” Blake countered, putting his arm around Emi’s shoulder.

“I can actually cook just fine, thank you very much,” she said, addressing both men. Shifting, she moved from under Blake’s arm and gave Rian a hard stare.

She didn’t like how Rian was being all big protector. The only girl in a family of boys, she’d had men watching her since she came out of the womb. Add in the Tanaka men and she was surprised she ever got her cherry popped. She always expected more from

Rian, though; he never made her feel like some shrinking violet, until now.

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“I have to go to the restroom and then we’ve gotta go, Rian. Early day tomorrow, and with the concert it’s going to be a late night,” Emi said, getting up.

“Um, okay, sure. I’m ready when you are,” he replied, sensing she was pissed about something.

“Be right back then,” she said, walking out of the green room.

“I think she may be pissed,” Blake said, looking at the door Emi had just exited.

Blowing out an exacerbated breath, Rian took off his hat and ruffled his hair.

“So how long have you been into her?” Blake asked, taking a sip of beer.

“Since I realized why liking girls wasn’t so gross,” he replied with a sad grin.

“Wow, and she has no idea, right?” Blake asked, shaking his head.

“None,” he answered.

“Let me guess—you’ve never told her either.”

“Hell no, Emi is like family. As much as I want to, if we did try being a couple and it didn’t work out, it

wouldn't just affect us, it would really mess up our entire families," he said with a sigh of defeat.

"Um, then you won't mind if I ask her out?" Blake asked, looking Rian in the eyes.

"Of course I'll mind," he replied defensively.

"If you don't have any faith in the two of you, why deny her someone who could?" Blake said.

Rian was actually stunned speechless.

"Dude, it's not fair to block someone else who could make her happy if you don't believe you can do it," Blake continued.

"I could make her happy," he replied, regaining the power of speech.

"Really? Because when I mentioned you two being together, all you talked about was it not working out."

"I said *if*," he said, feeling even more defensive.

"Well, with a woman like Emi at my side there would be no 'ifs,' 'ands,' or 'buts.' There would only be always," Blake stated.

Rian could only stare at the other man. Damn, did he not have enough faith in his love for Emi?

"If you like her so much, what's with the pep talk?" he asked suspiciously.

"I write country songs, man—I know everything about losing your woman, finding your woman, and

then losing your dog and/or truck,” Blake replied, deadpan.

Rian couldn’t help it; he started laughing.

“You’re okay, dude,” Rian said, saluting Blake with his beer before he drank the rest of it down.

“Hey, I’m not that altruistic. If it really doesn’t work out, it’s only fair to let you know I’ll be there to pick up the pieces,” he said with a mischievous grin.

Smiling back, Rian put his hat back on and tipped the brim at Blake.

“Sorry, dude, there’s no more ‘ifs’ in my vocabulary,” Rian told him with a full smile.

# CHAPTER THREE

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Emi was so pissed with Rian she hadn't spoken more than two words with him since they left the studio in Burbank. When she came back from the restroom, he and Blake Channing were yukking it up like long-lost friends. Even though they were going to the concert tomorrow, Rian and Blake made plans to surf in the morning. Men, Emi thought; one minute they were posturing and beating their chests, and the next they were slapping each other on the back like members of some secret fraternity.

What really pissed her off was the fact that Rian didn't realize it didn't matter how hot Blake Channing was, or any other man, for that matter. All she wanted was Rian.

"You should probably stay at my place tonight since the concert is downtown," Rian said, breaking the silence in the car.

"Sure, that's fine," she said, looking out the passenger window.

"Cool, you can make me French toast in the morning," Rian replied.

"I wouldn't want to upset your sensitive stomach with how bad my food is," she said snidely.

“*Ritorugāru*, don’t be angry. I was only teasing,” Rian soothed.

“You were not teasing, and I’m not a little girl any more, Rian—I’m very much a woman now,” she replied, annoyed at the term of endearment the men in her family used.

Being the only girl had never bothered her because she’d always had Rian, who viewed her as an equal, except for tonight. Just thinking of his behavior got her angry all over again.

“I know you’re very much a woman,” he said, looking at her briefly as they pulled up to his building’s underground parking.

“Well, you weren’t treating me as one tonight in the green room with Blake.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“You’re right, I wasn’t. Actually, I don’t think I’ve been doing it for a long time. I know you’re a woman who can make her own decisions and choose what she knows is best for her.” Rian pulled into his parking spot and shut off the engine.

Turning, he looked at her intently. Damn him, she thought. If he’d denied it or given her some bullshit speech like her brothers, she could have stayed angry, but he had to be all rational. This was exactly why she loved him so much.

“You make it really hard for me to be mad at you, Rian,” she said with a smile as she reached out to squeeze his hand.

“Good—I’d much prefer to make you happy.” He lifted her hand and kissed her palm.

She couldn’t help the shiver that traveled from where his lips met her skin, all the way up her arm and straight to her clit.

“Are you cold?” he asked against the palm of her hand.

All she could do was shake her head no. She was afraid if she spoke, she might say something she’d later regret.

Smiling, Rian kissed the palm of her hand again. “Well, let’s go in before you catch a cold just in case,” he said, releasing her hand to climb out of his 1969 Ford Bronco. Taking a deep breath, she went to reach for her own door but was startled when Rian opened it for her.

“You’re really getting into your cowboy role. Since when do you open the car door for me?” She chuckled as she hopped out of the car.

“There are a lot of things I should be doing for you that I don’t,” he replied, shutting the door and moving into her personal space.

If it had been any other man she would have thought he was flirting with her, but not Rian.

“You’re so silly,” she said, shoving him playfully on his chest. When he pulled her into his body, she had to bite back a moan.

“Maybe before, but not anymore,” he whispered into her ear.

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After his talk with Blake, Rian wasn’t going to hold back anymore. If he didn’t have enough faith in his love for Emi, he didn’t deserve her. Taking her hand, he led them to the elevators. He pressed the up button and was happy to find the doors opened immediately. Walking them inside, he pressed his floor number while still keeping hold of Emi’s hand.

It was taking everything in his body not to back her up against the wall and kiss her like he’d always dreamed. He knew he was being cryptic, but just because he’d decided to take a leap didn’t mean he could go in guns blazing. There was too much respect between them for him not to let her make her own decision. He just wanted to make sure she decided on him.

When the elevator doors opened to his floor, he led a silent Emi to his door. He loved his loft, particularly because Emi had a major role in him purchasing it. Telling him it would be a great

investment, she'd also been a part of the designing phase when the building was being converted from a factory into housing units. Located in the arts district of downtown Los Angeles, the work/living space fit all of his needs.

Stepping inside, he closed and locked the door behind Emi. He kept hold of her hand as he led her into the kitchen.

"Thirsty?" he asked, finally releasing her hand as he walked over to the fridge.

"Um, I could use some water," Emi replied, tracking his movements.

Taking off his hat, he laid it on the counter as he reached for a glass in his cabinet. He grabbed two, then moved back to the fridge and used the built-in water dispenser.

Handing her a glass, he drank his as he ruffled his hair.

"You tired?" he asked.

"Um, not really," she said, sipping her water and watching him.

He couldn't help grinning as he took another drink of water. Emi seemed nervous. Rian just hoped it was because she wanted him as much as he wanted her, not because she was thinking of ways to let him down easy.

“Cool, I’m not that tired either. Want to change and watch a movie? Even though we were at the later taping, it’s still pretty early,” he said, placing his glass on the granite countertop.

“Um, sure. I’ll be right back.” Emi turned and scurried off toward his bedroom.

Watching her hurry off, Rian regretted having his bedroom closed off in the open floor plan of his loft. As much as he enjoyed watching her wear the outfit she had on, he would’ve really enjoyed watching it come off.

# Emi's Secret

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Emi finished off her water in one gulp and set the glass down on top of Rian's dresser. Opening the drawer he usually kept shirts for sleeping in, she pulled out an extra-large one with his company's logo. She couldn't help thinking Rian was acting really weird as she took her clothes off.

Though he was always affectionate, his kisses down in the garage had seemed a little bit more intimate than usual. Sighing, she wondered if it was just her own wishful thinking. It was time she let it go and realized they were only going to be friends.

She was an attractive woman and could get a man. Hell, Blake Channing was flirting with her back at the studio. Walking into the attached bathroom, Emi looked at herself in the mirror. The extra-large shirt ended mid-thigh and hid a body she was proud of. Never a gym rat, she got the majority of her exercise surfing with Rian.

At five seven she had the quintessential hourglass figure—full breasts, a small waist, and hips that flared out. She knew she turned plenty of heads whether she was in a bikini at the beach or in a suit in a board meeting. Her caramel-colored skin always had a healthy glow to it because of the time she spent in

the sun, and her tan brought out the gold flecks in her hazel eyes and the brightness of her even white teeth.

She pursed her lips; she'd always thought her mouth was a tad too big, but she couldn't really complain about the rest of her face. Undoing her pigtails, she fluffed out her sun-kissed curls. The natural highlights in her hair always drew comments from people. She was a good-looking woman; too bad it wasn't enough to attract Rian.

Putting toothpaste on her toothbrush, she started brushing furiously. "Are you using my toothbrush?" Rian asked, having slipped in without Emi noticing him.

Rolling her eyes, she continued to focus on brushing her teeth versus focusing on a shirtless Rian.

Stepping up behind her, he reached for his toothbrush and the toothpaste. She could feel the heat from his body and smell his unique scent of sun and sand. When he moved back slightly, she instantly missed his presence. Giving him a weak smile, she leaned over to rinse her mouth but stilled as her behind came in contact with his groin. She rinsed quickly, then moved away from the sink and the tempting feeling of him pressed up against her.

"Aren't you going to floss?" Rian asked, after he finished rinsing his mouth.

“What?” she asked, distracted by the way his back muscles flexed as he dried his face.

Rian had one of the best bodies of any man she’d ever seen. Standing at six feet, he had the lean, toned muscles of an avid surfer. His broad shoulders tapered to a narrow waist and six-pack abs, and his bronze skin only accentuated the corded muscles of his arms and incredible legs.

Emi could feel heat rushing through her body and causing her panties to dampen. Thoughts of running her hands over all of that firm smooth flesh caused her heart to rate to pick up and her fingertips to tingle with anticipation. What was wrong with her? She’d seen Rian with his shirt off on numerous occasions, but something was definitely happening tonight.

“Floss, babe? Don’t you want to floss?” Rian asked, tilting his head as he watched her through the mirror.

Emi hoped her blush wasn’t obvious. She really had to pull it together. She just couldn’t stop the sexual images that were flooding her mind as she watched Rian’s strong, nimble fingers pull out the desired length of string and break it off from the roll. Such a simple movement was making her even wetter.

“Um, yeah, sure. Could you hand it to me?” she asked, worrying her voice sounded a little too husky.

“Here you go,” he said, handing her the floss with a secretive smile.

As their hands brushed Emi felt an electrical current travel throughout her body. So shocked, she didn’t have time to stop the slight moan that escaped her lips.

“Are you okay, babe?” Rian asked, turning to run his hands up and down her upper arms.

“I’m okay,” she squeaked, stepping away from him.

“Really? Because you’re not acting like your okay,” he said, stepping back into her personal space.

She didn’t know what to do. The bathroom really wasn’t that big, and she was practically cornered against the wall and the ledge of the sink. She could always tell him she was getting turned on during one of their usual nightly rituals, and instead of talking about dental hygiene she wanted to talk about his penis inside of her pussy. Yeah, she should just tell him that.

“Jeez, Rian. I said I was okay,” she said, trying to sound nonchalant. “Actually, I changed my mind though—I really don’t need to floss. I’m going to go watch some TV.” She needed to get out of the room. Placing the floss on the counter and pushing past Rian, she headed out of the bathroom.

Once she was out of the confined space, she took a deep breath and willed herself to calm down. She could get through the night and treat it like it was any other night she slept over. Her libido was just going to have to calm down and realize years of friendship were more important than getting laid.

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Watching Emi leave the bathroom, Rian cursed softly and ran his fingers through his hair. This was not going as he'd planned. Okay, he didn't really have a plan, but he hadn't expected to freak Emi out. She looked like a deer caught in headlights. Fuck, maybe Blake was full of shit, and now Rian was possibly ruining one of the best friendships in his life.

He began to pace in his bathroom, thinking about the woman on the outside. Shit, he was acting like some adolescent boy. Emi was his best friend. He never kept secrets from her; why was he doing it now? Having faith in them wasn't just about seducing her, he thought. Taking a deep breath, he knew what he had to do: he had to talk with her and tell her how he'd felt all these years.

Walking out of the bathroom, he made his way to the living-room area where Emi sat on his couch watching a home improvement show.

“Hey Rian, look what they’re doing to this guy’s loft. We could totally do the same thing with yours,” she said, focusing on the TV.

Walking around the couch, he sat next to her and grabbed the remote and turned off the television.

“Hey, I was watching that,” Emi shouted, reaching for the remote.

“I need to talk to you.” He held the remote out of her reach.

“About what?” she asked, settling back on the couch.

He tried not to get distracted by the sight of her in his extra-large shirt and thigh-high knit socks she must have put on while he was still in the bathroom. Since she was always complaining about it being cold, Rian originally bought her a pair of the socks for practical reasons, but the sight of her legs in the garment always turned him on. There was a sexy sweetness about them that had him constantly fighting a hard-on—and it was a losing battle right now. Great; this was really not going to help his cause.

“Rian, what did you want to talk about?” she asked, giving him a quizzical look.

“*Watashi wa, anata o aishite imasu,*” Rian blurted out.

# CHAPTER FIVE

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“Um, I love you too, Rian,” Emi answered back.

“That didn’t come out right. I mean I *love* you, love you. Like a man loves a woman. Okay, that was pretty cheesy, but...” Rian trailed off, looking at her expectantly.

She was absolutely shocked. This was so not what she was expecting, and all she could do was stare back at Rian with her mouth gaping open.

“Um, you can say something at anytime. You know, ‘Oh Rian, this is the best thing you could have ever said to me. I love you too,’ would be preferable,” he said with a sheepish grin as he ran his hands through his hair.

“Oh, Rian,” she replied breathlessly.

She didn’t know what to say because so many things were running through her mind. She wanted to leap into his arms, but at the same time she wanted him to take it all back.

“You can’t...we can’t...I...” she stammered incoherently.

“So you don’t?” he asked, sounding dejected and looking at his hands in his lap.

“Of course I do, but...we can’t,” she said, starting to feel distressed.

“Why can’t we?” he asked, with a stubborn set to his chin.

“Well, because...because if it didn’t work out...I...” she continued to stammer, struggling with how to express herself.

“Babe, I know—for years I worried about us failing. I saw what happened to my parents when they tried to make a friendship more. Even though their split was better than most, they never got back what they once shared. It wasn’t until tonight I realized I had to have more faith in us. In what we have and what we can have.” Reaching over, he clasped her hands between his. “If you love me, then we have to believe that’s enough,” he finished softly.

Looking into Rian’s eyes, she saw both hope and passion. She felt so overwhelmed by what he was asking of her she started to cry.

“Babe, I don’t want you to cry. If it’s too much I can wait until you’re ready. If it’s not what you want, I’ll still love you and be the best friend you could ever have.” Rian pulled her onto his lap and gently stroked her back as she cried on his shoulder.

Sniffing, she pulled back so she could look into his eyes. “I do love you, Rian. God, I’ve probably loved you since I was thirteen, but I always worried it was just a schoolgirl crush. As a woman, I know it’s more. I just can’t imagine my life without you.” She brushed a

lock of hair from his forehead. "I guess I'm just so afraid of not having you that I'll take only a part of you," she finished with a small shrug of her shoulders.

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Rian was really trying hard not to jump up and down in a victory dance. All he could think about were the wasted years they'd spent denying what they shared. Running his hand up and down Emi's back, he knew he still had to take it slow. Even though they were talking, Emi seemed a little skittish.

"*Watashi no ai*, you will always have all of me," he told her softly.

"So now I'm *my love* instead of *little girl*," she said with an impish grin.

"You are 'whatever a moon has always meant and whatever a sun will always sing,'" he answered, quoting her favorite poem by e.e. cummings.

"Now you're just showing off," she whispered, leaning in to kiss him softly on the lips.

Rian knew he should have let the kiss stay chaste, but the feel of her lips on his was too good. He felt energized and alive and wanted it to last just a little longer. Wrapping one arm around her waist and bringing his other to tangle in her hair, he deepened the kiss. When Emi moaned and wrapped her arms

around his neck, he knew he was fighting a losing battle.

Running his tongue against the seam of her mouth, he entreated her to open up to him. When she did, he didn't immediately plunge in; he'd dreamt of this moment for years, and wanted to savor having her in his arms and feeling her lips against his.

Snaking his tongue in Emi's mouth, he played with her tongue and let out a groan. She tasted of the toothpaste they'd both used, minty and fresh, but there was also something else he knew was uniquely Emi.

Shifting, she broke away from him to resituate herself on his lap. She straddled his thighs, leaned in and continued where they'd left off. The new position allowed his hands to run freely over her body and under her shirt. Squeezing her lush hips and firm ass, he trailed his hands up to her waist, where he stroked her soft skin. Moving farther up, he ran his thumbs along the sides of her full breasts.

Her slow rocking on his lap turned his modest hard-on into a full-blown rock-hard erection. When she bit down gently on his lips, he was afraid he was going to come in his pants like some teenage boy.

"Mmm, you taste good," Emi murmured against his lips, trailing kisses along his jaw line and down his neck. Nipping at the skin on his neck, she ground

down on his lap, and Rian squeezed her ass as he moaned with pleasure.

“God, Emi, that feels really good,” he whispered as he continued to run his hands over her body under the shirt she wore.

“Here, let me help you with that,” she said, leaning back on his lap and removing the shirt.

All he could do was stare in awe at her exposed flesh. Her teardrop-shaped breasts were topped with berry brown nipples that begged him to suck on them. Her skin was one continuous shade of bronzed caramel because of her penchant for sunbathing topless.

Bringing his hands up, he dragged his finger along the side of one of her breasts. Making his way toward her nipple, he circled it with slow deliberation.

“Omigod, Rian, please,” Emi said with a breathy moan as she clutched her hands in his hair.

Looking up, he stared into Emi’s hazel eyes, now sparkling with desire.

“Emi, this is it. We do this and you are mine. I want *us*, and I will do everything in my power to make sure it happens. Babe, I need to know you want it as much as I do. I need to know you’re going to take this to the next level with me,” he said, staring intently into her eyes.

Grinning, she leaned over and gave him one of the most passionate kisses he'd ever experienced. Pulling back, she stared deeply into his eyes and answered, "I already have, Rian. I already have."

# CHAPTER SIX

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Stretching, Emi let out a moan of contentment. She was wonderfully sore in all the right places. They'd made love all night into the early morning, stopping only when there were no more condoms. Emi called in sick for work because there was no way she was going to make it through the day.

"You're sure your dad won't be mad?" Rian asked her as he stroked his hand across her belly.

"Please, my dad is always complaining I never take any time off," she replied, arching into his touch.

"Mmm, good. I get to have my wicked way with you all day," he said, leaning in to kiss her.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pulled him down until he was on top of her resting between her thighs. The feel of his erection on her stomach had her juices flowing.

Groaning, Rian leaned in and began to nuzzle her neck. "No more condoms, babe," he murmured as he kissed her.

Pulling back, he rolled over and swung his legs over the side of the bed. When his phone beeped, he picked it up off the side table and chuckled as he read the text message.

"Who is it?" she asked, feeling a bit curious.

“It’s Blake. I texted him I wasn’t going to make it out like we planned,” Rian said, standing up and walking toward the bathroom.

“Oh, that’s kind of cool you and Blake are making plans to hang out,” she said, openly ogling his body.

“Yeah, we have a few things in common. I’m going to take a shower and then make a condom run,” he said, waggling his eyebrows.

“You do that,” she replied with a chuckle. Snuggling back into the covers, she hadn’t realized she’d fallen back asleep until Rian kissed her and whispered he would be back soon.

She’d just murmured an acknowledgement and lightly dozed for a while. Rolling in the bed, she caught a whiff of Rian’s scent, and immediately their night together came flooding back to her. She wrapped herself in the blankets as she replayed the previous night of lovemaking.

After she’d reassured Rian she was serious about taking their relationship to the next level, he latched onto one of her nipples and did things with his mouth and tongue she didn’t even think were possible.

“Rian,” she cried out as she felt the early tingles of an impending orgasm. She’d never come from just her breasts being stimulated, but if Rian kept working his magic, it was definitely going to happen.

“God, you taste so good,” he murmured against her skin as he trailed over to her other breast.

Pulling his head closer, she held the fine strands of hair in her hands. “More, Rian, please, more,” she said, not caring that she was begging.

Suckling even more fiercely, Rian reached down and began to rub her clit through the fabric of her panties. She felt as if she was being shocked with pure pleasure. Bucking against his fingers, she rode on a wave of ecstasy straight into what she considered an amazing orgasm.

Chuckling, Rian began to stand, causing her to wrap her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck.

“If you thought that was amazing, wait until you see what else I have in store for you,” he said, lightly swatting her butt as he walked to his bedroom.

Blushing, she realized she’d said the word out loud.

Stepping into the room, he walked to the bed and gently placed her down.

“You’re pretty confident, aren’t you?” she teased, pulling her socks off. The hungry way Rian stared at her turned her on even more. Her body’s arousal level was shooting through the roof. Lifting her hips while on her back, she pulled her simple white cotton boy shorts off.

“God, you’re so sexy,” Rian said with awe.

“Even with simple white cotton panties?” she asked, twirling them on her fingers.

“Especially with simple white cotton panties.” He looked at her as if he was memorizing every inch of her body.

Tossing her panties off to the side, she leaned back on her elbows and opened her legs. “I think you’re a bit overdressed,” she said, looking pointedly at his pajama bottoms.

“You’re right,” he replied, releasing the string that held up the loose-fitting pants. Emi couldn’t help licking her lips when she saw Rian in all his naked glory. He didn’t have a lot of body hair, except for a dark trail that started below his navel and disappeared into the thatch of dark hair surrounding his penis. And what a penis it was, she thought.

Long and thick, it pointed straight up now, released from the confines of his pants. When he walked toward the bed, she watched as it bounced as if in anticipation of where it was going.

“God, you’re beautiful,” she said, reaching out for him.

“Hey, isn’t that supposed to be my line?” Rian chuckled, crawling along her body.

“We can share it.” She smiled, running her hands over his back and along his shoulders.

Leaning down, he kissed her softly on her lips. "Sounds good to me," he replied against her mouth.

"Rian," Emi moaned, arching into his body as he trailed kisses from her mouth to her jaw and down her neck.

"Mmm," he murmured, kissing her collarbone.

Shoving at his shoulders, she pushed him up so they could look into each other's eyes.

"Rian, since we were friends for so long, that means we get to skip all the awkward early stages of a relationship and say what we really want, right?"

"Um, yeah I guess. Why?" he asked suspiciously.

"Well, I have something I want to say, but I don't know if I have to doctor it up, or if I can just be my blunt self." She chewed at her lip nervously.

Rolling his eyes, Rian propped himself up on his forearms. "Emi, you don't have to be any different. Just tell me what you want," he said, using a tone that had usually annoyed her in the past. But as they were about to embark on something that would change their lives forever, it actually brought comfort.

Smiling, she said, "Okay, good. Rian, as much as I love foreplay, what I really need now is for you to put on a condom and fuck me senseless."

She worried briefly that, judging by the shocked expression on his face, she'd maybe been a little too explicit, but before she could even blink he'd jumped

off of her, gotten a condom from the nightstand, sheathed himself and was lying between her spread thighs again.

“This is so cool,” he said with the boyish grin she’d loved for so long and pushed into her to the hilt.

Arching, she let out a cry of pleasure.

“Omigod, Emi, you’re so tight. Did I hurt you?” he asked through clenched teeth, not moving.

“God no, but if you don’t start moving I might hurt you,” she said, wrapping her legs around his waist and digging her nails into his shoulders.

Looking into his dark almond-shaped eyes, she was almost overwhelmed by the love reflected in them. “So cool,” he whispered as he leaned down to kiss her and began to slowly rock in and out.

If she thought he was masterful with his hands and mouth, they paled in comparison to what he did with his penis. His slow, steady pace touched parts of her pussy she hadn’t even known existed. Just when she was getting used to the cadence of his thrusts, he switched the tempo and began a faster, harder rhythm.

Pushing in and out at an accelerated speed, he simultaneously started whispering the most erotic things she had ever heard in Japanese. The combination of the two was too much. She tried really hard to hold on and prolong her orgasm, but she’d

wanted to be with Rian like this for so long, she was falling before she even knew she was flying.

“Rian,” she cried out as one of the most intense orgasms made its way from the very heart of her womb to every nerve ending in her body.

Continuing to pump harder and faster within her, Rian quickly followed, calling out her name in a loud guttural manner.

“So cool,” she panted once she had enough oxygen to speak.

There was a pause before Rian began to shake with laughter, causing a chain reaction in her.

Lying in the bed thinking about their first time, Emi couldn’t help giggling all over again. She stretched once more, then rolled over and looked at the time. Sighing, she realized she was going to have to hurry and get up to shower before Rian got back. She hoped he got breakfast on his way from the market because even though they were going to take their relationship to the next level, cooking was really asking way too much of her.

**JE**



# JANET ECKFORD

Like most great superheroes (or super-villains, depending on who's telling the story) Janet Eckford lives a double life. By day Janet is a mild-mannered crusader for justice (or nefarious deeds, depending on who's telling the story) and by night an indestructible creator of prose (or pathological liar, depending on who's telling the story) while munching on her favorite cookies—oatmeal raisin. A native West Coaster who hails from the sunny state of California Janet, has loved the romance genre ever since she convinced her dad it was required reading when she was eleven. Janet believes love shouldn't have a color code and strives to create stories that represent that belief.

Send her your praise and adoration and she will return it in kind.

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