

Evernight Publishing



# NEXT TO YOU

REBECCA BROCHU



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# **DEDICATION**

For you, as always.

# NEXT TO YOU

## *Romance on the Go* <sup>TM</sup>

Rebecca Brochu

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### Chapter One

Ricci slumped down in his seat as the day finally caught up with him. He'd spent hours out in the sun hauling materials and overseeing the construction of the building his company was working on. Ever since Aldo, his site manager, had left him high and dry, Ricci had ran himself ragged in an effort to stay on top of the paperwork and other problems that always arose on a build site. On top of that, he'd let one of his guys drive his truck, and Drake had somehow managed to total the fucking thing. Ricci was pissed about the truck, but he was undeniably thankful that Drake had managed to walk away from the crash without a scratch. That still didn't change the fact that Ricci would have to ride the subway until he could get another vehicle.

The only problem was that almost all of his money was tied up in either the new job site or the house he'd finally broken down and bought. As he was currently in the middle of restoring said house, a new truck wasn't in the cards for him at the moment. Ricci knew he could get one easily on credit or through a bank loan, but after growing up poor and living hand to mouth through college, the idea of having yet another monthly bill before the current job he was on was fully settled didn't sit well with him.

He knew he could have gotten Drake to give him a ride, out of guilt if for no other reason, or he could have asked one of his other men to take him home each night. Odds were they would have been glad to. The crew he employed were all close and got along fairly well, but he lived a good distance away from both his main office and the current building site. His house was all the way on the outer edge of the city, and the idea of asking one of them to go so far out of their way every day until he got himself sorted out was something he'd been reluctant to do. The majority of his men had families, and he'd never felt right keeping any of them out longer than absolutely necessary. So, instead, he'd resigned himself to an undetermined amount of long, exhausting subway rides and finally getting some mileage out of the Metro Card he renewed every year no matter what.

It seemed as if it had been one thing gone wrong after another for Ricci, and he was desperate

for a hot shower, a beer, and a goodnight's sleep. He pressed his neck against the hard edge of the seat and tilted his head back until he could stare at the ceiling of the subway car. He let his thoughts drift as he kept an eye and a portion of his attention on the rest of the passengers and tried to relax as best he could. He had a long ride ahead of him until the end of the subway line, and then he'd still have to catch a bus or walk for the short last leg of the journey.

Ricci blinked lazily, mind hazy and drifting, when someone cleared their throat softly to the right of him.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" The voice was low and soft but distinctly masculine with the barest hint of an accent. Ricci shook his head sharply to clear his mind and then forced himself to look up. The man standing beside the vacant seat was tall and lean, his shoulders wide and his skin pale but healthy looking, shades lighter than Ricci's own olive complexion. His hair, a disheveled halo of mahogany spikes, framed his thin face and tired golden eyes attractively.

"I said, do you mind if I sit here? Everywhere else is taken." The man adjusted the strap of the messenger bag that hung from his shoulder and swayed forward slightly with the movement of the train. The ends of his long black wool coat flared out around him enough for Ricci to get a look at the white padded chef's jacket the man wore but not enough for him to make out the name that was embroidered on the chest in golden thread.

The man cleared his throat again, and Ricci was jolted out of his daze guiltily. He forced himself to sit up and reach over to grab the small backpack he'd placed in the seat beside him earlier. The guy looked as exhausted as Ricci was, and he felt like an asshole for making him repeat himself.

"Sorry, man, my mind was elsewhere. Sit." He gestured towards the open seat with a wave of his hand.

"Thank you." The man practically fell into the open seat and the scent of burnt sugar and chocolate wafted off of him and over to Ricci who had to force himself not to inhale too deeply.

The stranger settled into the seat and Ricci found himself stealing small sidelong glances at him from out of the corner of his eye. His gaze was drawn to the man's hands, to his long and narrow fingers; the nails were shaped into smooth ovals and clean unlike Ricci's own dirty and oil streaked hands. The man made Ricci feel hyper aware of his own body. Of the way that his arms strained against the material of his durable flannel shirt and his thighs bunched out against the worn material of his old jeans. Of the way his own dark hair curled around the nape of his neck and brushed the collar of his work shirt. Ricci was especially conscious of the way he knew he smelled, like sweat and grease, and that he was surely sporting matching rings underneath his own green eyes.

The sort of awkward and yet comfortable silence that was only possible on public transport grew in the air between them. For the first time in a long time Ricci found himself wanting to start a conversation with a complete stranger on the train. Normally he tried his best to stay in his own space whenever he traveled this way. He tried to make himself as nonthreatening and as respectful of other people's privacy as possible. Ricci blamed his exhaustion on his bag being in the seat beside

him instead of on the floor in the first place. Despite all of that, despite his habit of keeping his head down and his mouth shut, he wanted to strike up a conversation with this guy.

The chef beside him leaned back in his seat like Ricci had earlier and closed his eyes with a heavy sigh. Ricci felt the urge slip away from him when he once again saw how obviously tired the stranger was. He leaned as close to the window beside him as he could and tried to let his mind wander off again. After a while, his eyes felt as heavy and gritty as they had before, and he could feel himself begin to drift off no matter how hard he tried to fight it. Between one breath and another, he drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Ricci woke up slowly as his body fought him to hold on to the last lingering threads of sleep. He blinked carefully a few times in an attempt to bring his eyes into focus and was unable to help the way his body tensed when he felt the warm weight of someone leaning against his side. Ricci carefully turned his head and had to force himself not to jump in surprise when he practically buried his face in thick, dark brown hair. For a moment he was confused but then the smell of burnt sugar and chocolate wafted up to him. He realized with a flash of clarity that the chef, the guy who'd caught his attention so easily earlier, must have fallen asleep as well.

A light snore caught his attention and the still sleepy grin that broke across his face was purely a reflex. Strangely unperturbed about the idea of some strange guy falling asleep on his shoulder, Ricci took a second to look around the subway car. He was surprised to see that it was almost empty and a quick glance at the watch on his wrist confirmed the fact that it was later than he'd thought possible. He'd fallen asleep on the subway many times before but never long enough to really matter, never more than a few minutes of quick sleep before his instincts woke him up. He'd never slept the entire ride through. Just then the announcement went out over the loudspeaker for the end of the line, and it hit him with a jolt that the guy on his shoulder might have missed his stop.

“Hey, man, wake up.” Ricci carefully nudged the guy's head with the shoulder it rested on. He wanted to wake him up, not scare him, and even though Ricci knew he was in a situation where he had every right to be upset, it was the last thing on his mind. Instead, his mind was stuck on the fact that he was actually comfortable enough to fall asleep beside a complete stranger in the first place. He must have been way more exhausted than he'd thought earlier.

“Come on now, wake up.” Ricci reached his other arm over to tap the chef on the shoulder. The man groaned low in his throat, and Ricci could just see the way his nose crinkled in displeasure as he burrowed his face deeper into his shoulder. Ricci had a perfect view of the way the guy's shoulders stiffened a few seconds later. He knew his seatmate had finally figured out that something obviously wasn't right.

“You finally awake?” Ricci figured he'd cut the guy some slack and make an effort to break the silence and hopefully diffuse the situation before it could get too awkward. He watched, amused, as the guy slowly raised himself up off of his shoulder so that he could look Ricci in the face. His golden brown eyes looked better than before, like the little bit of sleep they'd both gotten had done him a bit of good. After he blinked a few times in obvious surprise, Ricci could see the awareness

returning to his face.

“I am so sorry.” The stranger whispered, accent more apparent thanks to the sleepy rasp he had developed. Ricci watched in fascination as the tips of his ears flushed a deep red in apparent embarrassment. “I don’t normally fall asleep on strangers on the Tube, I swear.”

Ricci could see the guy was building up to some sort of heartfelt apology and he was too tired and too aware of the fact that his seatmate was also exhausted to worry about it.

“Look, don’t worry about it. It’s the end of the line, so we need to hurry up and get off.” Ricci stood up slowly and waved his hand towards the window where the platform was just coming into view. “Besides, I fell asleep too so there’s really no harm done. Just hope you didn’t miss your stop.”

“Oh no. I’m afraid I’ll still have to take a cab to get back to my flat afterwards. Unfortunately.” The man frowned slightly as he climbed to his feet, adjusted his bag, and straightened out his coat in a few short movements before he turned his attention back towards Ricci. “Thanks for being so good about it all.”

“It’s the subway, I’ve seen people do worst things than fall asleep.” Ricci didn’t feel like being charming or overly polite, so he went for blunt and hoped he didn’t come across as too much of an asshole.

Silence fell between the two of them as the train ground to a halt and the doors slid open. Ricci rolled his shoulders and slung his pack over his back. With a slight nod towards his former seatmate, who smiled slightly and gave him a two figured wave in return, Ricci made his way out onto the platform and towards the stairs. He tried to put the guy out of his mind, tried to focus on thoughts of home, of a hot shower and slipping naked into the cool sheets he’d picked out and spent far too much money on. Alert in a way he hadn’t been on the train since he was up and moving about, Ricci tried not to think about how good the guy’s warm weight had felt against his side, how he’d smelt sugar sweet and delicious.

He tried not to think of the fact that the train ride he’d just had was the first time he’d just *slept* with someone else in what felt like forever. He tried not to think of how good it felt despite the fact that it had happened with a complete stranger. He tried not to focus on the thought that he should have at least gotten the other man’s name. It was a once in a lifetime thing that Ricci knew the odds of it being repeated were slim to none, so he tried to push all of it out of his mind.

Still the smell of burnt sugar and chocolate stayed with him until he got home and slipped, freshly showered and heavy eyed, into his bed.



## Chapter Two

Ricci made sure he was on the train at the same time the next day and kept his eye out for the chef despite telling himself it was a onetime occurrence. When the ride passed without him catching sight of his wayward seat companion that night and then the next, he gave up hope and did his best to forget about the odd occurrence. He chalked it up to a possible missed connection and vowed not to get stuck focusing on some guy he'd only seen once.

Two days later and once again almost unbelievably exhausted, Ricci slumped down in his seat on the train and was proud of the fact that he didn't immediately watch the door for any sign of his stranger. He made sure his bag was respectfully at his feet before he turned his head and watched the walls of the subway tunnel pass him by until he had to close his eyes to keep from getting dizzy.

"Hello again." A soft, tired voice spoke from beside him. Ricci turned and to his surprise saw the chef standing in front of the vacant seat beside him.

"Do you mind again?" The guy gestured towards the seat as if asking for permission, and Ricci quickly nodded even as he noticed that the stranger still looked as exhausted as he felt despite the time that had passed. "I'll try not to fall asleep on you this time, I swear."

"I didn't know being a chef was so exhausting." Ricci winced as soon as the words were out and hoped he hadn't insulted the guy. Exhaustion sometimes made him unbearably blunt.

Fortunately the man just dropped down in the seat beside Ricci and chuckled lightly as he rubbed tiredly at his eyes.

"Normally I think I'd be offended, but you look as exhausted as I feel so I'll chalk that comment up to tactless but genuine curiosity." Ricci watched as the guy lifted his head to smile and stick out a friendly hand. "Also, I'm the only *pâtissier* at a shop that normally has two, so I believe I'm entitled to being exhausted. Oh and my name is Layton, Layton Callis."

"Ricci DeAngelo, an equally understaffed and overworked contractor. Nice to officially meet you." Ricci smiled as they clasped hands. Layton's grip was firm and his skin was cool. Ricci felt another flash of interest at the way Layton's long thin fingers curved around his own.

"I figured it would be best to introduce myself since I like to at least know the names of the people I sleep with." Layton ran a hand through his hair as he spoke, and Ricci couldn't help but track the movement as it made the already disheveled spikes even wilder. Then, as if he suddenly realized what he'd said, Layton's face flushed a deep red. "I-I mean...I-I didn't... not that we... Shit."

Ricci tossed his head back and laughed harder than he had in weeks. Even more than before, when he'd had the memory of how good Layton felt pressed up against his side, Ricci found himself charmed by the way Layton stumbled over the words.

"I had the exact same thought the other night when I got off the train, so I'm pretty sure that makes us even now." Ricci said this in hopes it would calm Layton down. To his pleased surprise it seemed to actually work.

"Oh thank God. I thought I was going to get punched again or something." Layton practically melted in the seat beside him, and Ricci had to stifle another amused yet sympathetic snort at how tired but relieved the other man looked.

Layton's legs were spread wide, his hair was wild and his eyes squeezed shut, the skin beneath them dark with exhaustion, as he slumped in the seat.

Ricci was so distracted by the sight, it took a moment for what the other man said to sink in. "Wait, that happens a lot? You getting punched by strangers on the subway?" He asked half horrified and half intrigued.

Layton cracked open one eye and peered over at Ricci blearily before he sighed and let it drift closed again.

"More often than I like to admit or acknowledge because it makes me sound far creepier or rude than I really am. Remind me to tell you about the old woman and her umbrella sometime..." Layton's voice was faint and drowsy sounding, and when Ricci looked over at him, he was shocked to see his chest rising and falling in a gentle, even rhythm.

"Layton?" Ricci called his name softly. He arched a brow when the only reply he got was for Layton to drift closer to his side as the train shook. Soon, Layton's head was once again resting on his shoulder. Ricci thought about trying again, thought about reaching out and shaking him awake. Then he focused his attention on the dark circles beneath Layton's eyes, on the way his face looked younger, less pinched and more natural in his sleep. He didn't have the heart to wake him, not with a similar sort of exhaustion nipping at his own heels.

It was strange, letting a guy he'd met once sleep on him in the subway. Ricci knew it was, but it didn't really faze him. Instead, he carefully reached down to unclip his phone from his belt. He thumbed through his apps until he could set an alarm for right before the end of the subway line, then he put it back in its place. Ricci tipped his head to the side and inhaled the sweet smell that wafted off of Layton for a few seconds before he leaned back again, careful not to disturb his seatmate.

They were both obviously exhausted, and Layton's warmth at his side was a welcome and comfortable change that put something inside of Ricci at ease. So since Layton had willingly approached him again after their first meeting, Ricci decided to take advantage of the situation. He was going to operate under the assumption that he wouldn't wake up with an angry *pâtissier* going for his throat and get an hour or so of much needed sleep. If it did by some chance cause a problem, he'd take care of it when he woke up.

## Chapter Three

After his alarm went off that night Ricci woke up from a surprisingly restful, if distressingly short, sleep only to spend the next five minutes staring at Layton's slumbering face on his shoulder.

The curl of warmth and want that twisted through his chest only took him partially by surprise. Ricci knew his urge to talk to Layton that first night came from the distant echo of attraction he could feel even then in the pit of his stomach. He had been too exhausted at the beginning of that first ride to have more than a faint interest in anyone around him. At the end, he'd been almost too focused on getting home, but he'd still noticed Layton.

After it happened a second time, this time willingly on his part, Ricci couldn't help but think about the strange situation he'd ended up in. He wasn't really surprised by the curl of attraction that twisted through him as he looked at Layton, face soft and hair wild. Hell even the memory of his slightly accented and sleep rough voice perked Ricci's interest.

Beyond that was the fact that Layton fit almost painfully into the category of guy Ricci had always been helplessly attracted to despite his best efforts. He'd had a type even as a teenager, and having Layton sit right down beside him was too much to ignore. Ricci had come to terms with his sexuality years ago, had dated men and women with a fluid kind of ease during and after college although none of the relationships had lasted long enough to really note. Now, two years since his last real relationship and months since his last hook up, Ricci found his interest piqued to record-setting heights despite his exhaustion and everything else going on in his life.

He stared at Layton for a bit, reluctant to wake him up, but Ricci knew that he would have to. Finally, when he could wait no longer, he reached out, wrapped his fingers gently around Layton's shoulder, and shook him lightly.

"Layton." Ricci kept his voice low and calm, ignoring the urge to tangle his fingers in his seatmate's hair. Layton groaned and curled closer to Ricci's warmth like he had that first night. Ricci had to tamp down on the automatic reflex to curl his arm around Layton's shoulders and draw him in closer. "Wake up, man. We're at the end of the line."

Like the first time, he saw and felt the moment Layton came back to reality and realized the position they were once again in.

"Me saying 'I'm sorry' is probably beginning to lose some of its effectiveness by now, isn't it?" Layton sounded almost sheepish when he finally pulled back and pushed himself upright in his seat.

"Hmm." Ricci hummed low in his throat as he stood and stretched his arms above his head.

He was still tired, but the nap had done him a world of good. He felt almost astonishingly refreshed considering. “I think it’s unnecessary mostly. I could have woken you up, but I figured it’d be a waste for the both of us. I followed your lead and passed out.”

“Well I hope it was as good for you as it was for me.”

Ricci barked out a short laugh as Layton’s ears flushed when he seemed to realize just what he’d said.

“You know, that whole getting punched thing is sounding more and more realistic since you seem incapable of filtering what you say.” Ricci liked it though, liked the way Layton obviously said the first thing that came to his mind like that. That sort of honesty and wit was something he had always found appealing and he found himself flirting without really thinking about it. “Luckily, I happen to like that. Makes things more interesting.”

“Really?” Layton asked, voice low and interested and eyes brighter than ever before as he stood and followed Ricci through the train doors and out onto the platform.

“Yeah, really. Makes moving things along easier since you learn all sorts of interesting things about a person.” Ricci smiled as he looked Layton over slowly and obviously. “Can be sexy in certain situations.”

Layton grinned back at him, but whatever response he’d been about to make was cut off by an almost brutal looking yawn that Ricci was obligated to immediately echo.

“Damn.” Ricci muttered as he shifted his bag on his shoulder. “Looks like I’m more tired than I thought I was.”

“Obviously the nap wasn’t enough to keep me going for too much longer either. I hate to cut such an interesting and illuminating conversation short, Ricci, but my bed is calling my name.” Layton seemed genuinely reluctant to leave, and Ricci found he felt the same way.

“Yeah, I need to head out, too.” Ricci jerked a thumb over his shoulder towards the exit that went in his direction. “Be careful and...uh...I’ll see you tomorrow night?”

Ricci asked the question hesitantly. He wanted Layton to say yes, wanted the chance to see him again, to talk with him, maybe to get to know him a little better or hell just have another chance to nap together on the train. He knew it was kind of pathetic, and maybe kind of creepy, but he was pretty sure he could get addicted to it. The feel of waking up next to Layton.

“Yeah,” Layton said with a smile before he turned to go. Relief and anticipation rushed through Ricci with surprising strength. “I’ll see you tomorrow night. Maybe this time we can have a full conversation without either of us passing out.”

“Maybe, but if not I’ll still consider it time well spent,” Ricci called out. He heard Layton’s light, appreciative laugh echo back to him from across the room. He set out for his bus stop with a smile on his face and a sense of eagerness he hadn’t felt in too long.

That night, when he crawled into bed, he didn't even try to fool himself into believing that Layton and their light flirtation wouldn't factor into his dreams.

## Chapter Four

In the end, the nap arrangement did cause a problem, just not the one that Ricci had vaguely had in mind at the beginning. Instead, his impromptu decision to let Layton sleep and to take a nap himself seemed to create some sort of strange pattern they were both reluctant to break after that second time.

Layton showed up on the train just as he said he would the next night and sat down beside Ricci, who'd been sure to save him a seat, without asking. They talked for a few minutes that night. Ricci mainly spoke about his company and his house. Layton talked about the extensive application process the shop he worked at had to go through in order to find a new *pâtissier* to take some of the workload off of his shoulders.

Like before the conversation petered out relatively quickly as Layton soon drifted off to sleep. A small bump in the track put Layton's head on Ricci's shoulder once again, and Ricci didn't bother to try and pretend like he didn't like it. Instead, he once again set his phone to wake him up and let himself slip off to sleep as well. When they parted that night it was the same as before, light flirtation mixed with a heavy dose of yawns, and for Ricci particularly good dreams that night.

It happened again the next night, and then the night after that as well, and kept on going until the end of the week. Every time they grew more comfortable with each other. They chatted about different things. The conversations were mainly about work or a book or occasionally whatever game they'd both missed seeing that night. It was never long before one of them drifted off to sleep. The alarm on Ricci's phone was set to automatic after a few days, and they took their practically scheduled nap with each other without either of them making a single effort to change things.

Then Layton came onto the train one night, face troubled and shoulders slumped. Ricci, tired and stiff from work, was immediately on alert.

"What's the matter?" He wasted no time on pleasantries and simply asked the question straight out as soon as Layton had collapsed into his customary seat.

"I'm not going to be taking the Tube this weekend. Since I'm working so much without the help I really need in the kitchen, the owners have started closing the shop on the weekend. Just until they find a new *pâtissier* to work with me. I'd forgotten until I left for the day." Layton worried his bottom lip with his teeth.

Ricci wanted to reach out and run the pad of his thumb over the skin, but he managed to stop himself as Layton's words registered.

He was off too, the job site shut down for the weekend thanks to him being overworked and a forecast for heavy rains. He hadn't thought about not seeing Layton, had gotten so used to the train

rides and the naps already that he'd started plugging them into his daily routine without much thought. Ricci frowned; he was displeased at the idea of going two days without seeing Layton even if he knew it was ridiculous.

"I'm off, too. I'd completely forgotten until you said something," Ricci said as he looked at Layton. "You'll be back on Monday right?"

"Of course, Monday." Layton nodded to Ricci and then settled in for their nap. Ricci tried to get comfortable, tried to let himself doze off and enjoy his extra hour of sleep like he'd been doing for the past week. He felt like he was on edge, like he couldn't get comfortable no matter what he did as the knowledge that he wouldn't get to see Layton until Monday hit him. The way Layton's face was pinched in his sleep, the way his shoulders were still stiff, showed Ricci that he wasn't the only one affected.

He did finally manage to doze off for a few minutes towards the end of the ride, but afterwards the goodbye he shared with Layton was stiff and oddly uncomfortable. Ricci reminding himself on the walk home that Monday would come quickly. He also thought about the fact that not having Layton around shouldn't ruin his first two days off in what felt like forever. He'd use the time to get caught up on his sleep and to work on the house a bit. No big deal.

Except, as it turned out, it was a big deal.

Ricci tossed and turned the entire weekend. He was tired, but sleep was difficult to come by. He forced himself to stay in bed for as long as possible in the hopes he'd be able to get comfortable eventually. It didn't work and by the time Monday night rolled around and Ricci saw Layton stagger, pale and obviously still exhausted, onto the train, he could have cried tears of pure joy.

"You look like someone ran you over, Ricci." Layton mumbled as he flung himself into the seat behind Ricci.

"You know, I think I'd almost rather they had. I spent the entire weekend almost completely unable to sleep." Ricci could feel his eyes begin to grow heavy and the tension drain out of him as the scent of burnt sugar and chocolate enveloped his senses.

"Me too." Layton said back, voice barely more than a mumble as he laid his head against Ricci's shoulder without any hesitation. "This weekend was hell."

"Yeah..." Ricci could feel it as sleep closed in around the edges for both of them. Instead of fighting it, he allowed it to push him down. He'd not had a decent hours sleep since Friday, and he refused to miss a minute now.

They both dozed off and later barely managed to stumble their way off the train before splitting up and going their separate ways on the platform. That night when he finally crawled into bed, Ricci slept so deeply he was almost missed his train to work the next morning.

The rest of the week passed in much the same way. They fell back into the routine from the

week before, talking lightly for a few minutes before they settled in for a short nap. Ricci with his pack hooked around his foot and Layton with his messenger bag hugged to his chest.

After a few days, Ricci had to face facts. Once he gave it some real thought, it didn't take much to connect the dots despite the fact that it seemed farfetched. He'd already grown used to having his nap with Layton, to falling asleep for at least an hour each night beside his warm body. Now he actually dreaded the next weekend since it would mean two days of no Layton, which would apparently translate into an entire weekend of no sleep at all.

Unsure of what to do, Ricci carried on like normal as best he could. He soaked in the moments he spent with Layton. He couldn't stop thinking about what it would feel like to really sleep beside Layton, to wake up in the morning and find Layton beside him in his own bed. To have his sheets slowly start to smell like burnt sugar and chocolate. To be able to wrap himself around Layton's back at night and to kiss him awake in the morning. He went home each night with memories of Layton's scent and the phantom heat of Layton's body against his side.

When Friday finally came again, Ricci was filled with dread and almost desperate for a way to keep the previous weekend from repeating. He was restless and so was Layton. They were both barely able to settle into the nap like always and when they finally parted ways on the platform, Ricci could see his own reluctance reflected easily in Layton's eyes as they went their separate ways.

Ricci only made it a few feet towards the stairwell before his resolve crumbled. Mind suddenly made up, he turned on his heel and backtracked a bit until he could see Layton at the end of the stairs on the opposite end of the subway shuffling towards the exit.

"Hey!" Ricci called out to his seatmate and did his best to ignore the curious looks the few stragglers in the area gave him. "Layton!"

"Ricci?" Layton looked back over his shoulder at him, face a mixture of confusion and surprise with an eyebrow raised in question.

Ricci ignored the way his heart felt like it was going to beat out of his chest and quickly jogged over until they were standing a little too close together to be casual.

"What's wrong?" Layton sounded worried, his eyes wide and mouth pulled down into a frown that made Ricci wince.

"Nothing, nothing's wrong. I just ... God I don't want to sound fucking creepy or anything, but I was thinking I could give you my number?" Ricci ran a hand through his hair and tried to ignore the urge to tuck tail and run due to embarrassment. "Just, you know, in case you can't sleep this weekend either."

Layton stared at him for a long moment and the frown on his face morphed into an expression of surprise. Ricci felt his face heat and had to force himself to keep speaking. "That way you could call me and we could ... I don't know meet up for a nap or something?"



When he didn't get an immediate answer, Ricci took a large step back and away from Layton and began to curse himself in the back of his mind. He'd messed it all up, had ruined whatever it was he'd thought was beginning to build between him and Layton by coming on too fast and too clumsily. Despite the strange arrangement they already had, he shouldn't have assumed that Layton would want to make it anything more than what it already was.

"I'll just go. It was a stupid idea anyways. I hope I'll still see you Monday?" Ricci phrased it like a question but didn't stick around for an answer. Instead, he turned tail and made to leave even as he refused to acknowledge the fact that he was actually running away.

Just then, before he could take more than a few steps, a hand snagged the edge of his shirt and he was jerked to a halt. Ricci slowly turned around and was surprised to see Layton behind him, one hand still on his sleeve as the other held his phone out.

"You took me by surprise is all. It sounds like a lovely idea, Ricci. Can't hurt anything at least, and I've been meaning to get your number for days now." Layton had a small smile playing around the corners of his mouth, and Ricci let out a completely unsubtle sigh of relief but couldn't bring himself to care.

"Great. That's great." Ricci grinned lightly as he took the phone from Layton's outstretched hand, plugged in his number, and then quickly sent himself a text before he handed it back. "Just call me, or text, whichever you'd rather do, and we'll do something or go somewhere. Or hell we can just meet up here and ride the train until it closes."

"I'd like that. Honestly, I wasn't looking forward to spending another weekend in my flat too tired to go out and yet unable to sleep. At least with you I know I wouldn't ruin our relationship by falling asleep." Layton full out smiled at Ricci as he tucked his phone back into his pocket.

Ricci wanted to bundle him up and take him home with him right then. He knew he couldn't, but he still wanted to.

They stood in silence for another moment, both once again obviously reluctant to part. Ricci was the one who moved first. He adjusted the strap on his bag, gave Layton another smile, and turned to move back towards his end of the platform. When he turned to look back at the bottom of the stairs, Layton was still watching him from a distance.

## Chapter Five

Saturday proved to be as miserable as Ricci had feared it would be. He'd had little to no sleep the night before unlike he usually did after a nap with Layton. He found himself awake late into the morning, unable to drift off as he turned his last encounter with Layton over and over in his mind.

He had finally given up on getting any real rest sometime around dawn. He had instead crawled out of bed and spent the rest of the morning going over paperwork. Then he'd painted the downstairs bathroom, which was something he'd been putting off for weeks.

When night finally rolled around, Ricci showered, ate, and crawled into bed, intent on trying to go to sleep early. He hoped that if he lay down early enough that no matter how long he tossed and turned, he'd eventually fall asleep with enough time left before morning to get some decent rest. He gave up after about three hours and with a frustrated punch to his pillow sat up and reached for the remote to his TV so he could watch cop drama reruns in a daze.

An hour or so later, he was pulled back to reality when his phone rang. When he managed to scoop it up off of his side table, he was surprised and pleased to see the caller ID flash Layton's name at him.

"Hello?" Ricci aimed for casual, but he was sure he sounded a bit too eager.

"Ricci? I hope I didn't wake you? I know you said to call, but it is rather late." Layton sounded hesitant.

"No, no I'm awake." Ricci rushed to reassure him. "Been trying to get some sleep, but I gave up a while back actually. You?"

"Ah, I'm in the same boat I'm afraid. I was wondering if your offer of getting together was still open despite the hour?"

Ricci could hear the low drone of the same show that was playing on his TV in the background before it went quiet.

"Sure. You have anywhere or anything in particular in mind?" Ricci fumbled with his phone until he could hit the speaker button. Then he rolled out of bed so he could hunt down something clean and warm to throw on while he waited for Layton's answer.

"I hope I don't come across as terribly blunt or out of line, but I was hoping we could go back to your place and sleep." Ricci froze for a moment too long and only snapped out of it when Layton called his name again. "Ricci? I didn't overstep, did I? That was something that was seriously on the table, right? If not then we can just pretend this entire conversation didn't happen."

“Are you sure you want to come back to my place? I mean, we can do whatever you want to, but I don’t want you to be uncomfortable or anything.” Ricci desperately wanted Layton to say yes, to say he wanted to come to his house. He wanted Layton in his bed, wanted his scent on his sheets and his pillows. This was his chance to have everything he’d been thinking about for days now.

“I’d invite you back to my place, but to be perfectly honest it’s tiny and well you’re entirely too large for my bed. Plus, I’d love to see the house you seem so proud of. I’ve been imagining it since you talked to me about it, and I was hoping to get the chance to see it sometime.” Layton’s voice was low and soft.

Ricci heard the rattle of keys in the background, and the knowledge that Layton was just as eager as he was hit Ricci full force. “Sounds like a good idea to me, Layton,” he said.

“I could hire a cab if you’d be kind enough to give me your address.”

Ricci debated over it for a second before he made a noise of disagreement with Layton’s suggestion. “It’d cost you an arm and a leg.”

“It’ll be worth it. The last thing I want to do is have to sit at a bus stop at this hour or anything of the like.” Layton sounded determined and Ricci’s resolve quickly crumbled.

“Fine but I’m at least paying for half the fair since you’re the one doing all the traveling.” Ricci rambled off his address and listened to Layton repeat it back to him as he kicked the shoes he’d been about to slip on back into his closet and made his way downstairs.

“If you say so. I’ll be there shortly.” Layton replied and then the call was over.

Ricci took a deep breath, looked around his messy and half-finished house, and immediately went to work straightening up. He did the best he could and was thankful that he was a relatively neat person even as he berated himself for being so nervous.

He passed the rest of the wait in a state of agitated and impatient excitement. Ricci paced until he finally forced himself to go back upstairs and sit on the end of his bed and stare uninterested at the television. He didn’t even bother to try and act casual as he jogged down the stairs and towards the door when the chime sounded.

When Ricci opened the door, he was greeted with the sight of Layton wrapped in his regular black coat and what looked like comfortable sweatpants with his messenger bag slung over his shoulder.

“That was fast. I figured I’d be waiting on you for a while since it’s so late.” He looked over Layton’s shoulder and noticed the taxi had already pulled away. “I told you I’d split the fair.”

“Did you? Must have slipped my mind. You can split a bill with me some other time if you’d like.” Layton smiled up at him and Ricci’s mind went blank for a split second before he stepped back and ushered Layton inside.

“Ignore the mess if you can. I’ve got the hall, the kitchen, my room, and the two bathrooms done at the moment, but everything else is still a mess.” Ricci ran a hand through his hair as he turned and hung the coat and bag Layton had stripped off and handed to him on the hook by the door.

“As long as your bed is in one piece, I don’t care at the moment. Not to be rude but I came to take total advantage of your sheets, not for a dinner party.” Layton grinned up at Ricci, eyes dark and obviously tired.

Before Ricci could say anything, Layton stepped into his personal space. He reached up and wrapped a long fingered hand around the back of his neck, pulling him down into a soft but still heated kiss.

Ricci groaned, reached out, and pulled Layton closer with one hand as the other snuck up and buried itself in Layton’s wild hair.

Ricci was quick to take control of the kiss and pushed his tongue past the barrier of Layton’s lips with ease so he could explore the wet heat of Layton’s mouth. He tasted clean and cool like mint, and Ricci wanted to kiss him forever. He was tired and in no shape to go where this was leading, but he didn’t want to stop. Especially when Layton began to give back as good as he got, pushing his tongue up against Ricci’s and dueling him for dominance of the kiss.

Thankfully, Layton took the choice out of his hands and broke the kiss with a soft sound.

Ricci closed his eyes and sighed long and deep as Layton reached up and ran the palm of his hand across his stubble-covered jaw and then leaned in and pressed another kiss to the center of his chin.

“I’ve wanted to do that for ages. Since I saw you that first night actually,” Layton confessed.

“Me too.” Ricci cleared his throat when he heard how raspy his voice had become, but Layton just smirked up at him.

“I’m wearing my pajamas, I’m desperately attracted to you, and I’ve had maybe two hours of sleep in the past twenty four hours, so I can’t do much about it at the moment,” Layton said, his voice steady and quiet even as he pressed his forehead against Ricci’s collarbone. “I want to sleep beside you without any interruptions, no alarms, and no end of the line calls. Then when we both wake up, I’d like you to touch every inch of me at least twice. Agreed?”

“Agreed.” Ricci couldn’t think of any other answer he’d want to give as Layton finally stepped back. “You can kick your shoes off down here if you want. And I like the right side of the bed.” Ricci turned, made sure the door was locked, and then grabbed the now barefoot Layton by the hand and led him up stairs to his bedroom. He watched Layton look around, watched him take in the frankly indulgently large bed with approving eyes before he turned back towards Ricci.

“With a bed this big you may never get rid of me, Ricci,” Layton said as he stripped off the large sweater he was wearing to reveal a pale but nicely toned chest before he sat down on the left

side of the bed.

“I’m beginning to believe I won’t want to if we’re being honest here.” Ricci followed suit and stripped off the shirt he’d tugged on earlier over his sleep pants.

Layton arched an appreciative brow at him as Ricci made his way around the edge of the bed, hiked up the edge of the blanket, and crawled in.

Once he was settled, Ricci waited for Layton to do the same and then he reached over and clicked the bedside lamp off and plunged the room into darkness.

A few seconds passed in total silence and then Ricci sighed low and long, rolled onto his side, and reached out so he could tug Layton closer. He settled him into the curve of his chest. Then he buried his face in Layton’s hair and felt the tension in his shoulders completely drain away for the first time in what felt like forever.

Layton hummed approvingly in front of him and settled deeper into Ricci’s hold without any complaints.

Ricci closed his eyes and listened to the steady sound of Layton’s breathing. He was asleep within minutes.

## Chapter Six

Ricci woke to an empty bed, the sound of approaching footsteps, and the distinct scent of coffee. He felt the edge of the bed dip in as someone sat down, and he had a moment of confusion before memories of Layton rushed back to him and he opened his eyes to peer groggily at the figure beside him on the bed.

“Good morning, or well afternoon.” Layton’s cheerful and still rough voice sounded out. Ricci grunted back as he sluggishly rolled over far enough to rest his head against the mattress and wrap an arm around Layton’s waist.

“Coffee,” Ricci rasped out as he squeezed the sharp line of a hip that Layton’s low slung pants had exposed.

“You’ll have to sit up for that, and I hope you like it black and strong enough to peel paint, because it’s the only way I know how to make it.” Layton teased as he sipped his own coffee for a few seconds and then placed the mug on the bedside table. Ricci finally gathered himself enough to unwrap his arm from Layton’s waist and sit up so he could take the mug Layton held out to him.

The first sip scalded the inside of his mouth a bit, but Ricci gulped the coffee down like it was nothing. When he was done, more awake than before and decidedly more rested than he’d been in weeks if not months, he finally took a moment to really look at Layton. He was still shirtless, pale chest bare and leanly defined. Ricci could just make out a line of freckles across the sharp cut of his shoulders in the early afternoon light that was filtering in through his curtains.

“I’m going to kiss you now.” Ricci blurted it out and watched Layton’s eyes go wide and then soft and hot. He reached out and put the empty mug on the bedside table beside Layton’s.

“If that’s how you react to coffee, I’m definitely going to have to cook breakfast...” Layton’s teasing was drowned out as Ricci pushed forward and kissed him.

It started slow, just like the kiss from the night before. Ricci teased the seam of Layton’s lips with his tongue, licked at the corners of his mouth leisurely for a moment before he swept inside. He chased the taste of coffee around Layton’s mouth, learned the curve of his teeth and the wet, hot strength of his tongue all over again. It was good, better than any kiss Ricci could remember at the moment. It only improved when Layton pressed closer until Ricci was forced to lean back completely against the headboard so Layton could crawl forward onto his lap.

They broke the kiss slowly and stayed where they were for a moment, faces pressed close as they both panted for air. Layton moved first. He slid his hands up the wide expanse of Ricci’s chest and then down over the curve of his shoulders as he ducked his head so he could place nipping kisses

on the base of Ricci's neck.

Ricci groaned and tipped his head back to give Layton better access while he clenched one hand in the sheet beside him and trailed the tips of the fingers on his other hand down Layton's bare back until he could palm the curve of his ass.

Layton whined, a sweet high-pitched sound, when Ricci squeezed his ass lightly and then he set his teeth to Ricci's skin harder in response.

Ricci bucked his hips upwards as he hissed at the sting. They both groaned low and long when the rapidly hardening jut of his cock pressed against Layton's through the thin fabric of their sleep pants.

"You said I could touch you." Ricci's pulled Layton closer to him with the hand on his ass and finally untangled his other from where it had begun to claw at his bed sheets. "I really hope you meant it."

"I meant it." Layton's words were broken by the way he panted against the curve of Ricci's neck. "I definitely meant it."

"Good." Ricci took control suddenly and surged up off of the headboard. Layton's eyes widened in surprise, and Ricci used that to his advantage. He flipped them over until Layton was beneath him, long pale body stretched out length-wise across the massive expanse of his bed. Layton's sleep pants sat so low on his hips they might as well have been off, so Ricci hooked his fingers in the waist band and pulled them down as far as they would go. They tangled Layton's legs together at the ankles, but Ricci didn't let them stop him.

He pressed one of his knees down against the mattress between the inviting spread of Layton's thighs. Then Ricci swooped down for another kiss even as he reached out and wrapped one hand around the long, heavy weight of Layton's cock. The head was flushed a dark, angry red, with beads of pre-come already glistening at the top. Ricci wanted to swipe his tongue across it, wanted to have Layton's taste burst across his tongue unhindered and unobstructed. He held back, reminded himself that safer was smarter when it came to both of their health and instead contented himself with jacking Layton off for a few minutes. He went about it almost leisurely until Layton was twisting and bucking his hips up into Ricci's grip with ever mounting urgency.

Ricci watched, fascinated, and hardly realized he'd brought his free hand down to palm his own cock through his pants until Layton lashed out, caught him by the wrist, and tugged his hand away.

"Yours too," Layton said, more of an order than a request as he arched his neck back and reached out to tug impatiently at Ricci's pants.

Ricci reared back and moved away so he could quickly pull them off, and Layton took the opportunity to kick his own completely away. Ricci twisted again, reached for his bedside table, and wrenched the drawer open so he could rifle through it long enough to toss a tube of lube and a string

of condoms up onto the mattress beside Layton.

“Ambitious aren’t we?” Layton grinned at him as he held up the condoms between them.

Ricci laughed, happy that they were comfortable enough with each other to joke, that they’d already fallen into that space when it had sometimes taken Ricci’s partners weeks, months, to get there.

“I’ve had plenty of sleep for once, so yeah I think I might just be.” He grinned as he crawled back up the bed so he could hover over Layton again and lean down to steal another, sweeter kiss. Ricci slotted their finally bare cocks together with a downward push of his hips. They both moaned and the kiss turned heated and deep as they pressed against one another, their way eased by the fine sheen of sweat that had sprung up on Layton’s stomach.

“Now.” Layton finally panted out this single word a few minutes later. Ricci didn’t even think to protest, just pulled back and reached over so he could grab the tube of lube and lay it on Layton’s chest.

“You do it.” Ricci said as he sat back on his heels between Layton’s spread thighs.

“Fine, but you’re returning the favor next time,” Layton said as he popped the lube open, messily slicked up his hand.

“Sounds like a plan to me.” Ricci had no problem with the idea, or the fact that ‘next time’ implied that Layton didn’t intend for their encounter to be a one-time affair.

“You’re refreshingly accommodating.” Layton took a moment to grin at Ricci, pale face flushed and eye bright. Then he canted his hips up so he could reach properly.

“No.” Ricci stopped him before he could work a single finger inside. “On your stomach. I want to see.” Just the thought of watching Layton finger himself open, make himself slick and loose and ready was enough to make Ricci’s cock twitch and his balls draw tight in want.

Layton huffed but slid up a little on the mattress so he could flip over onto his knees. Ricci was quick to brace him with a steady hand on his hip, but his mind went blank when Layton pressed a slick finger tentatively against his own rim.

Ricci watched Layton play for a minute, arm stretched around his back in a way that made his lean muscles bulge as he circled and then pressed one slick finger slowly inside of himself.

Ricci heard Layton hiss when he sunk his finger in to the last knuckle. Ricci lightly squeezed the hip he still held in his grip in support but made no other move to interfere. He could feel Layton tremble as he slowly slicked himself up inside, his wrist working slow and steady as he began to add a second finger. He could tell the moment Layton brushed up against his prostate from the way his breath stuttered and his body went ridged for a moment.

Unable to simply spectate anymore, Ricci let go of Layton’s hip and used the excess lube that



slicked the other man's skin to press one of his own fingers in alongside Layton's two. Layton keened, a low wounded sound, and his breathing went ragged as Ricci felt his muscles tighten and flutter around his finger.

"You alright?" Ricci asked as he stroked his free hand up the pale expanse of Layton's back to gentle him.

Layton nodded, a short jerky movement, but Ricci didn't move until Layton's breathing evened out and the rhythmic movements of his finger started back up again. Then he managed to find the rhythm that Layton had established and worked his own, thicker finger deeper into Layton's body. They moved together in relative quiet, only the wet sound of their hands and their breathing filled the room until Layton finally broke the silence.

"I'm ready." His voice came out as a breathy pant.

Ricci wasted no time. He pulled his finger from Layton's warmth with one quick motion. He then reached over and ripped a condom from the bottom of the string he'd grabbed earlier. His hands fumbled a bit when he tore it open, but he managed to get it smoothed down the length of his cock with little difficulty before he reached back out for the lube and made sure he was good and slick.

He gripped Layton's hip with one hand and wrapped the other around the base of his own cock to steady himself and he pressed slowly into Layton's ass. The ring of muscle gave with only a slight push, and Ricci paused for a second to give Layton a moment to adjust. Layton just huffed and pressed his hips back against the pressure of Ricci's hand.

"I'm not going to fucking break, Ricci." Layton practically snarled and Ricci stopped trying to be gentle.

He pushed forward hard and didn't stop until he hissed out a long breath as he finally bottomed out. Layton inhaled sharply, and his body clenched around Ricci's cock.

Ricci's hips thrust forward once more. Layton cried out with him, a choked off sound that made Ricci's eyes clench shut. Ricci didn't give Layton a chance to adjust again; he just pushed his hips tighter against Layton's ass with another harsh thrust. He pulled back until only the tip of his cock was still inside and then Ricci pushed back inside. He tested out a few angles first, until he paced his thrust just right so that he hit that spot inside of Layton that made him twitch like he had before. Ricci laughed, low and dark and pleased, when he found it and then set up a harsh rhythm that was at odds with their earlier almost playful foreplay.

Layton's arms gave out on him quickly, but Ricci pushed him back down when he tried to get his balance back and instead draped himself over Layton's back so he could lick and suck at his earlobe. Layton's hips shove back to meet him at the gesture and Ricci didn't try to gentle his pace at all after that. He pushed as deep into Layton as he could with each thrust, setting up a rhythm that was both hard and exquisitely slow.

Layton's hips tried to match Ricci's pace at first, tried to keep up with the hard, heavy thrusts

that Ricci had fallen into. He stopped, went rigid and then almost limp, when Ricci wormed a hand between him and the mattress and wrapped his palm around Layton's steadily leaking cock so he could stroke him from base to tip.

Ricci stroked Layton as best he could in time with the thrusts of his hips. He could feel his own orgasm building, could see sparks on the edges of his vision. His spine had begun to tingle. Layton wasn't far behind him, cock gone ridged and thick in Ricci's grasp as his muscles fluttered around Ricci.

"Come on, Layton," Ricci prompted, vision gone hazy as his hips trembled and lost some of their insistent rhythm before he got himself back under control. He didn't have long left, wouldn't be able to hold on through much more. He wanted Layton there with him, wanted him just as wild and frenzied as he felt. Ricci moved his hand faster, alternated between hard squeezes and light barely there strokes as he worked his cock deeper and harder into Layton's body.

Layton's hips bucked back onto Ricci's cock after one particularly hard thrust and he cried out suddenly as he stiffened. Ricci felt it the moment Layton shattered. He felt the way Layton's muscles tensed and clamped down around him, the way Layton's cock pulsed a split second before he spilt over the circle of Ricci's hand.

It only took a few more off rhythmic thrusts for his own orgasm to rip through him, sending bright starbursts of light off behind his tightly clenched lids. Finally, when his hips stuttered to a halt, Ricci carefully pulled out of Layton. He pinched the condom, pulled it off, and with a slightly painful twist managed to land it in his bedside trash can before he flopped down onto the sheets beside Layton's sprawled, still form.

They laid there beside one another and panted for a moment before Layton flailed a hand out until he could rest his palm over Ricci's still rapidly beating heart.

Ricci barely summoned the energy to turn his head enough to look at Layton, who had the side of his face pressed deep into the mattress and his eyes closed.

"I have to say..." Layton managed to slur the words out. "I never expected insomnia and a few hellish work weeks to lead to this."

"Complaining?" Ricci felt wonderful, body loose and mind calm. All he really wanted to do was drift off to sleep again with Layton's warm weight beside him.

"Only if you expect me to do anything that involves not going back to sleep at the moment."

Layton sounded as sleepy as Ricci felt, and the realization made him huff out a small laugh. "I think anything else can wait." Ricci reached up and grabbed the hand Layton had rested on his chest so he could twine their fingers together as his eyes drifted shut.

Layton never did get around to cooking, but Ricci was sure there would be plenty of opportunities in the future. After all, if he had his way about it he would wake up with Layton next to

him in bed on a regular basis from now on. He'd found the absolute best cure for his exhaustion, and Ricci wasn't about to let him go any time soon.

The End

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