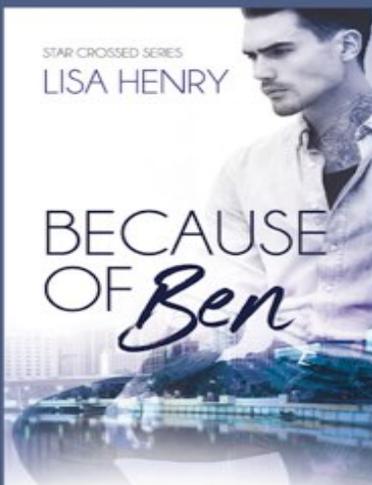


HEARTS & STARS



BECAUSE
OF *Ben*

BONUS STORY

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A “BECAUSE OF BEN” BONUS STORY

LISA HENRY

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Jimmy was the sort of guy who should have sent Ben running on sight. He was massive, bearded, and wrapped in black denim and leather. He was covered in tattoos and those few parts of him that didn't appear to be inked were ringed or studded. But Ben, to his credit, didn't even blink as Marco introduced them.

"Great to meet you, man," Jimmy said. The wheels on his stool squeaked as he pushed it closer to the chair with his foot. "First time?"

Ben nodded.

"You've got that look," Jimmy said. "Okay, so give me an idea of what you're after, and I'll do up some sketches for you."

Within half an hour Ben was nervously drawing his T-shirt over his head, revealing swathes of smooth unblemished skin, and staring at the chair like it was something out of a medieval torture chamber.

"Come here, baby." Marco pulled him into his embrace, and chafed warmth into his arms. "It's okay to change your mind."

Jimmy turned back to his workspace, giving them some privacy.

Ben chewed his lip, his eyes wide. "I want to." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Does it... does it *hurt*?"

"It's different for different people," Marco said. "It's a bit like a cat scratch for me. Sometimes gets too much if it's a long session, but it's not so bad." He grinned. "Some people like it. And some people get turned on by it. Ain't that right, Jimmy?"

Jimmy laughed. "Oh yeah. I've got some stories."

A flush rose on Ben's cheeks, and Marco worried he'd given him something new to panic about.

"You'll be fine," he said. "If you want to do it, you can do it. If you don't, you don't have to."

"Okay," Ben said. He twisted his T-shirt in his hands. "I just... I just get in the chair, right?"

"Right." Marco kissed him, and Ben's breath shuddered against his lips. "And I'll be right here holding your hand."

Like holding his pretty boy's hand was ever a goddamn hardship.

Marco flipped through Jimmy's latest portfolio while Jimmy prepped Ben and then applied the stencil. He looked up again when Jimmy said, "How's that?"

Ben's brow was furrowed, a slight divot appearing at the top of his nose as he studied the mirror Jimmy was holding up. He rolled his left shoulder, biting his lip as he studied the design Jimmy had placed just underneath the dip of his left clavicle. A star, that matched the one on Marco's hand, except Ben's had an "M" in it. "Marco?"

"Fuck." Marco cleared his throat. "Looks amazing, baby."

Ben's smile was beautiful. He nodded at Jimmy. "Okay," he said. He drew a deep breath. "Let's do it."

Marco grabbed Jimmy's spare stool and positioned it on the other side of the chair. He unpeeled Ben's fingers from the arm of the chair,

and linked them through his own. "You're in good hands with Jimmy. He'll even pierce your nipples if you want."

"Marco!" Ben laughed, flustered, but it wasn't a no. Ben loved Marco's nipple piercings so much that it probably wouldn't take much to talk him into a set of his own, but Marco didn't want to talk Ben into anything. Didn't ever want Ben to feel like he had to do anything to make him happy. The tattoo had been Ben's idea, not his, and Ben had been working up his courage for months now, because he had a lot of bullshit to wade through because of his background. Hell, the kid was a week shy of turning twenty-two, and he'd still never had a beer. The fact he was even in Marco's life, let alone his bed, was a goddamn miracle.

Ben didn't look at Jimmy as he got himself set up, but his jaw clenched when he heard the first buzz of the gun.

"Take a breath for me," Jimmy said. "And let it out again slow."

Ben made a faint sound of surprise at the first touch of the needle, but he didn't flinch. He squeezed Marco's hand a little tighter.

"Not as bad as you were expecting, right?" Marco asked softly.

"I..." Ben wrinkled his nose. "I don't know. It doesn't hurt, but it doesn't *not* hurt."

"Yeah." Marco rubbed his thumb over Ben's, smiling at the way Ben's gaze was drawn to the star on his hand. "The trick is to just feel it, not think about it."

Jimmy dabbed a smear of blood away from Ben's chest, his black nitrile gloves stark against Ben's pale chest.

"That doesn't make any sense," Ben said.

"Sure, it does. You just breathe, and you let it go through you."

Ben's cheeks colored, and Marco knew he was thinking back to a few nights ago when Marco had bitten his nipple when he'd asked. He'd been so *shocked*, but then Marco had done it again, and he'd

arched hard against him and almost come, panting and moaning as he rode the sting. Yeah, his pretty boy was discovering some things about himself, that was for sure. He didn't have a single reason to be scared of a little pain, but he didn't quite know it yet.

"It's gonna be so pretty, baby," Marco told him above the drone of the gun. "It's a handspan, isn't it?"

Ben made a questioning sound.

"I'll be able to put my hand over your heart, and touch your star. Might even be a song in that somewhere, huh?" He'd let the words swirl around in the back of his mind for a while, until they were ready, and a melody trailed behind them as he drew them out again. "Stars and heartbeats."

Ben blinked back sudden tears, and Marco didn't think it was from the sting of the needle.

"You remember what I told you about my tats?"

"The music of the spheres," Ben said, his voice hardly more than a whisper above the noise of the gun. "That God is a composer."

"Yeah," Marco said. "Back in those days, they thought the sun and all the planets revolved around the Earth, but they were wrong. Turns out it's a star at the heart of everything after all."

Ben smiled at him faintly and nodded, his shoulders relaxing at last. He blinked lazily at Marco, like he was teetering on the verge of sleep. Marco knew that dozy feeling well. Jimmy was great at what he did. There was no dipping in and out of pain with Jimmy. No stopping and starting, which was the worst part. He got you in the zone and kept you in it. Marco held Ben's hand the whole time though, just in case he needed it.

BEN LIKED SLEEPY SEX. Something about being warm and held while still drifting a little, maybe, and letting pleasure slowly build. And Marco liked to indulge him. Ben was stretched out on his side, the early morning sunlight falling across his skin and making him glow like some creature from another world, magical, ethereal, and way too fucking precious for Marco to touch. Marco touched him anyway, propping himself up behind him on one elbow, and sliding a hand down his flank. He craned his neck to watch him slowly wake.

“Good morning, baby,” he murmured when Ben slowly blinked his eyes open.

Ben turned his head to show him a sleepy smile. The sunlight brought out the smatter of faint freckles on his nose.

“You want me to keep touching you?”

Ben nodded, and closed his eyes again. He stretched, and then relaxed again. “Yes, please.”

Ben was lying on his left side, his new tattoo hidden by the mattress. Since the tattoo had healed, Marco had made sure to worship it appropriately. He loved the way that Ben’s breath shuddered out of him whenever he traced the star with his tongue and sucked up a nebula of marks around it. Marco wrote entire symphonies in the moments Ben let him worship him.

He leaned down to nuzzle briefly against that hidden space behind Ben’s ear—warm skin and the soft tickle of hair—and then rolled over briefly to grab the lube off the nightstand. Then he went back to touching Ben, long, soothing caresses that kept him lulled on the edge of sleep.

“So beautiful,” he murmured, and Ben made a small, content noise. He was pliant and warm when Marco shifted his right leg up, bending his knee to help him stay in position. Marco slicked his fingers up and slid them into the crease of Ben’s ass. Ben moved his leg

slightly higher, sighing as he opened himself to Marco's touch. Marco took a few minutes to make sure Ben was ready for him, and then notched the head of his dick against his entrance.

Was there a better way to wake up in the morning than by lubing up and sliding into his pretty boy? No way in hell. Ben was hot and tight even when he was relaxed like this, shifting his shoulders to snuggle back against Marco, to get as much skin-on-skin contact as he could. His eyes were still closed, but he was biting the smiling curve of his lower lip.

"Feel good?" Marco asked as he bottomed out.

"Mmm." Ben clenched around Marco's dick. "'s' nice."

There was a time not that long ago when Marco's ego would have stung at being called anything less than fan-fucking-tastic by whoever he had his dick in, but this wasn't fucking—loud and energetic and wild—this was making love, and love was allowed to be slow and soft and nice.

Marco eased slowly back down onto the mattress, putting his arms around Ben. They rocked together gently, spooning. Marco ignored the urge to go faster, harder. He rested his left hand above Ben's heart, fingers splayed against Ben's tattoo. His star, tattooed on the webbing between his thumb and forefinger, lined up with Ben's.

He jerked Ben off slowly with his right hand, still rocking into him. Ben squirmed a little, and made a faint noise, but he didn't ask Marco to go any faster, so Marco kept it slow and gentle. There were no fireworks in the end, just Ben shuddering softly as he came, and melting further into Marco's embrace.

Marco pulled out carefully, and finished himself off in a few quick strokes against Ben's back.

"Sticky." Ben laughed faintly into his pillow.

“Mmm.” Marco pulled him back into his arms, leaving a trail of kisses on the soft hair at the nape of his neck. “Love you, Ben.”

“Love you,” Ben echoed.

Marco’s hand found Ben’s chest again, and he closed his eyes. Later, they’d shower and have breakfast and start the rest of their day. But for now, he just wanted to stay in this quiet, peaceful moment where he could hear Ben’s breath, and feel his heartbeat, and their stars were perfectly aligned.