



Gamer's Choice

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance

Description: Neko-Ren Ellison: Love wasn't in the cards for me. My first relationship ended with a dramatic event, and police involvement. Needless to say, I wasn't keen starting a new one. But a knock on the door one random night changed everything. After exchanging some witty banter through my closed oak door, safety first, I threw it open to find an exquisite bearded man, hair tied back, muscles on display... all-in-all, my fantasy come to life. I wove elaborate dreams around the two of us within minutes, yet my illusion shattered when I learned he was straight. But the protective and intense man became a fixture in my life, and no matter how many times I tell myself he's not available, I stubbornly hold out hope.

Graham Norris: I'm screwed. I can't figure out what shocked me more. The realization I'm not only attracted to a man, but to my dazzling, openly gay, younger next-door neighbor who makes every protective instinct in me flare. Or at the ripe old age of thirty-four, I'm stupidly fighting against my one chance at happiness. Despite my grumpy and staid personality, the brilliant and funny man introduced me to his world, his family, and worked his way into my heart. The more I'm immersed in everything Neko, my desire for him only grows. Yep, completely screwed.

~Descriptions of domestic violence and stalking, includes abuse from an ex-partner, descriptions of an attempted assault with a weapon. Please avoid if the subject matter is triggering.~

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Chapter 1

Neko-Ren

I don't know why I did this to myself.

The situation was not tenable. I hunched my shoulders close to my ears, spine frozen in place and arched away from the back of my ergonomic chair, and if I tensed any more, I'm sure I would sprain something.

My gaze darted around the darkened room and I listened out for any signs of the upcoming attack, and I realized I hadn't spoken in several minutes. I found a locker for a momentary reprieve and slipped inside.

But as I opened my mouth, hoping whatever words I spewed forth came across as witty and brilliant, the ghost girl who'd stalked me for two hours popped up in front of my hiding space with no warning, baring her teeth with a growl.

To add to my humiliation, she surged toward me with a screech. An embarrassing scream punched up from my chest and past my throat as I shoved the headphones from my ears and covered my eyes with my hands.

I listened to my heart thumping hard in my chest, worrying me for a long minute, until the rhythm decreased and my fear dissipated.

It's not real. Sonot real.

By the time I opened my eyes, I caught sight of the screen as the fake blood dripped down from the top of the monitor and the words ‘Game Over’ flashed at me.

My eyes tracked up toward the camera and I said, “Well, that’s all I have time for today. Yes, I’m going to pass the last few minutes off as though they never happened. The game link will be in the description below. I hope you enjoyed that as much as Echo will, and I’ll catch you next time. Later.”

I held up two fingers, flashing the peace sign, my signature, and stopped the recording before reaching for the stainless steel bottle I kept handy. With the last remnants of the ice-cold water swirling around, enough to sustain me and sooth my sore throat until I dragged myself downstairs for a refill and cooked myself dinner, I tilted the bottle back and swallowed.

My best friend, who was the greatest editor I’ve ever known, was waiting for my text. She’d handle everything for the upload of the video.

It’s ready for you. Don’t laugh too hard.

Got it. I’ll laugh the right amount, thank you very much.

I shook my head and stood.

Like me, Echo started her career because of an interest in something she loved. She cut her own movie trailers, including proper voice overs, and they were so much better than what a normal Hollywood production churned out.

When I started gaming online, she offered to edit my videos, which involved me rambling through whatever game I was playing, hoping whoever watched paid more attention to the game than my acne covered face and squeaky voice. My excuse for the awkwardness... I was sixteen.

Since then, I've developed into a lanky, long-limbed, acne-free, deep-voiced man who enjoyed speaking to others through the internet and connecting them to a community they are proud of. I thank the deities above I moved past puberty without causing harm to myself or others.

But Echo followed my channel and realized before I did that I'd gained subscribers at a steady rate. She promoted herself to my full-time editor when we were nineteen. Although she has her own successful channel, a fashion and beauty one, I keep her busy with my upload schedule.

My stomach growled, and I shot a glance at the clock. Two hours past my normal recording time. I stretched my arms over my head, hearing the usual popping sounds in my joints from whenever I sat too long at my desk.

Done for the day, I tucked in my chair and reached over to shut off the three monitors, but as I turned to exit, I noticed my opened office door.

"Well... fuck."

Although my house was on the corner of a cul-de-sac with a gigantic yard surrounding it, I attempted to keep my profession from bothering my neighbors. So I closed the door whenever I recorded because I'm not quiet. And when I remodeled the house a few years before, I added soundproofing to the entire top floor.

I'd chosen to buy the house because the bedrooms were on the second floor. The rooms were spacious enough my setup was away from the windows, and the bonus had been the rest of the place. Curved doorways, wooden floors throughout, the modern kitchen that included a farmhouse sink along with the dual oven gas range, and the sunroom that faced the backyard.

The three-bedroom house was enormous for only me. But my family lived close by

and on the weekends, and sometimes during the week when mom and dad hounded them about homework and the possibility of their interest in either boys or girls, my parents weren't picky, my twin sisters stayed over with me.

It wasn't as if I had a social life they could interrupt. I'd tried years before, and it turned out to be a disaster, so I'd given up. Instead, I concentrated on my career. And when I wasn't working, I divided my time between Echo or my family.

Tired of my depressing thoughts of being alone with no man in my bed, I headed out of the room and downstairs, wondering what I might make for dinner. After, I would indulge in a true crime YouTube marathon.

The moment I hit the last step, a knock from the front door stopped me in my tracks. At close to nine on a school night ruled out my sisters dropping in for a visit, and Echo was busy editing. Curious, I padded closer.

Thinking myself stealthy in my woolen-clad feet, I stopped about a half a foot in front of solid oak and placed my hands on the smooth wood before inching forward. Through the peephole, my eye focused on a solid figure facing away from me. He was tall, so my tired brain played out a fantasy where a gorgeous man realized he could no longer live without me and was waiting outside to declare his feelings.

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But what's the likelihood of that?

Still freaked out from being immersed in a horror game and catching the damp chill of the night air from the thunderstorm earlier, I opened my mouth and forced words through my tight throat.

“You are unfamiliar to me, so before I open this door I have to ask, are you a serial killer?”

Yeah, my conversation skills rock.

The man turned toward the door, but his height prevented me from seeing any defining features. The deeper voice on the other side answered, “Um, that's a new one. I'm not, but I don't know if you're going to take my word for it.”

“Shit! You make a good point. Well, let me ask you this? Are you here to use my phone because your car broke down and your mobile ‘died’?”

My dumb ass used air quotes as if he could see me. To be honest, I'm surprised I'm still alive.

The stranger huffed out a snicker. The sound did not send flutters of pleasure through me.

“Are you always this suspicious?”

My head nodded up and down before I slapped my forehead and replied, “I think

that's what an untrustworthy, immoral man would say, using reverse psychology to make me feel guilty for being unhelpful, which would make me lower my inhibitions and let you inside."

The man had the nerve to laugh, a deep, throaty, sexy sound. He asked, "You read that in a book, right?"

"Well, I didn't read it, per se, I heard it in an audiobook from a retired FBI agent about how following your instincts could save your life and the only reason I listened to it is because both of my sisters refused. I admit, it scared the poop out of me, but if I can keep them safe, I would do it again."

"That's fair, I suppose. But no, I'm not here to harm you and I'm not a criminal. I heard a scream and thought it was a woman in distress, so I wanted to check."

My hesitation forgotten in that moment, I jerked open the door and glared at the chest in front of me.

Sometimes I hated being short.

I gulped as my gaze traveled upward until I met amused gray eyes, one eyebrow raised in question.

"I knew that would do it." The tall man who I would love to climb said.

"Shit, did I say that aloud?"

Another chuckle and I forced myself to look up again.

"I would ask what you thought, but I believe you told me everything I needed to know when your eyes took on a sudden twinkle as you looked me up and down."

I groaned.

“So, did the scream come from here?”

A breath huffed out of my chest and I said, “Yes, I forgot to close my door before I began the recording session, but you still shouldn’t have heard me, um... scream like a perfectly respectable twenty-four-year-old man.”

“Well, I was speaking with Mrs. Chang and she mentioned you left one of your windows open.”

“Oh,” I held up a finger, “excuse me one sec?”

I rushed up the stairs, grateful Ri forced me into signing up for the total conditioning class we took three times a week, and I shut and locked my bedroom window. When rain clouds rolled in before dawn, I’d lazed in bed and listened to the drops pinging off the roof.

As I jogged back down, I noticed him leaning against the doorjamb, looking casual.

Although I’m shorter than the average man at five and a half feet tall, I estimated my visitor at a foot taller. He wore a tight, white and gray henley, emphasizing the warmth of his golden skin and the muscle definition underneath.

But what my eyes focused on now that I put some distance between us was the trimmed tawny beard that emphasized the cut of his jaw and... oh, thank the gods above for creating this man for the lowly people of this earth such as myself to look upon; the loose, messy bun tied on the top of his head, strands sticking up in all directions.

Despite feeling the complete opposite, I went for unaffected yet casual and blurted

out, “I would say on a typical day I’m not like this,” I waved my arms around, as if my exaggerated movements would explain, before I continued, “But, yeah, I won’t start off with a lie between us.”

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When I realized what I insinuated, I stifled a groan and flipped through my imaginary file of ‘things to say when you’ve said something awkward’ to move this conversation along.

Nothing came to mind.

My hand shot out. “I’m Neko-Ren Ellison. But everyone calls me Neko, except my mom, who loves to use my entire name, because she thinks it’s similar to my personality. A contradiction.”

The flash of white teeth as his lips stretched open made me choke on the quick inhale of air. But when he wrapped his warm hand around my own, our palms nestled together, I let out a breathy sigh.

His smile widened as he leaned closer.

“I’m Graham Norris. To put your mind at ease, I moved in next door two weeks ago.” He tilted his head toward his left. “I’ve met all the neighbors, except for you, so I thought I’d drop by and introduce myself.”

Grateful he overlooked my embarrassing reaction to his touch, I said, “Yeah, I don’t go out much since I work at home as a gamer and streamer. The only time I’m outside is when I’m forced to by my nosy, yet well-meaning family.”

I watched his reaction to my answer. People either didn’t understand what I did for a living or their eyes lit up as they wondered, aloud, how successful I was. Success and popularity meant money, or so they believed.

Instead, Graham glossed over it. “So, the scream?”

“Yeah, it was a horror game. They are the most requested on my channel because I think they like to see me freak out over every sound and movement.”

His chuckle set off firework explosions in my belly and I worked hard not to let it show. But the way Graham studied me made me believe he understood how much he affected me.

A loud bark broke the silence between us, and I leaned sideways to look past Graham before I waved.

“Good Evening, Mr. Oren and Miss Goldie.”

“Hello there, Neko. Mr. Norris,” Mr. Oren said.

When she heard her name, the four-year-old goldendoodle trotted over and I scratched her behind her ears while reaching for the treats I stored in the console table next to the door. I kept them on hand for all the neighborhood dogs. When I offered it to her, she sat and gently grabbed the treat between her teeth.

“Such a good girl, Goldie,” I said as she ate her treat. She gave me a quick lick on my thumb before she joined her owner for their nightly walk.

It was then I realized how rude I’d been. “Oh, I didn’t mean to make you stand outside this entire time. I was about to cook dinner. Would you like to join me?”

“Sure, I mean, if you don’t mind?”

Without thinking, I reached for his forearm and squeezed. I bit back a dirty sound when the muscle underneath flexed at my touch. My grip held firm when I caught his

scent, black pepper and cedar.

Unclenching my jaw, I said, “Think of it as a welcome to the neighborhood get-together where I’ll ask you inappropriate and invasive questions in an awkward attempt at what my dad calls social interaction.”

The deep laugh made my nether regions tingle.

Down, boy!

Not put off by my verbal ineptitude or my weird gestures of friendliness, Graham said, “Great, I’m looking forward to it.”

I hesitated a second before I let go of his arm and waved him inside. After locking the door, I set off toward the kitchen as awareness pulsed inside me at his nearness.

With a glance in the pantry and the refrigerator, I asked, “Would you like a chicken Parmesan sandwich with fruit and chips, or would you prefer grilled pork chops with apple chutney and rice pilaf?”

Making a mental note for another grocery delivery soon, I noticed the prolonged silence in the room. When I turned to face Graham, I covered my mouth to hide my smile. His stunned expression made him look, if it was even possible, more handsome.

“Um... chicken Parm sounds good. But you’re making it, like, out of a box, right?”

I shook my head. “Nope, I already cut up the fruit when the groceries arrived and the chips are easy to make and store. I have to pound out the chicken a bit and bread it before baking it, and the marinara has to heat, but everything is from scratch. No, that’s not true, I didn’t make the provolone that will melt on top.”

Graham nodded, still dazed for an unknown reason, and I set to work. I asked, “Do you cook?”

“I can follow a recipe, but I stick with eating steamed veggies and sautéing lean proteins because it’s easy.”

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“That sounds... well, I guess if you season everything, it wouldn’t be so bad. I like variety in what I eat, and since I stay at home all the time, it’s easier to make it.”

Graham smiled and shook his head. “It is boring, but before I moved here, I woke early and went to bed by eight, so cooking never appealed.”

I grabbed the cut fruit from the fridge and the chips from the pantry. Opening both containers, I dumped the chips into a crystal glass bowl, the one container big enough to hold them, and slid both toward Graham.

“Oh, a fork.”

I opened the drawer of my kitchen island, which doubled as a breakfast bar, and pulled out utensils for two, placing them on the cloth napkins, before sliding a set to the older man. “Please, help yourself.”

The oven beeped, and I jumped. It was the one annoyance of my kitchen setup, but I dealt with it because the dual oven and gas stove was worth it.

As I opened the door and slid the tray with the breaded chicken inside, I heard a moan from behind me. I won’t lie, I hoped my tiny bubble butt caused the reaction in the man, but when I straightened and turned, it was to see Graham’s arms wrapped around the fruit bowl as he gazed at the contents with longing.

“What... how did you?”

“It’s the mango and guava juice. When I cut up the fruit, I squeeze half a mango over

the mixture and add a splash of guava.”

“Yeah, most people don’t eat healthy, at least not someone who’s on their own at your age. How did you learn?” Graham asked.

I swallowed, hating that something I felt proud of accomplishing being tied to something awful.

“You don’t have to tell me.”

The worry in Graham’s voice and his stillness on the other side of the island made me brave. He wasn’t asking to pry.

“I was fifteen when I started my first channel, but because of two copyright strikes within the same year, they shut it down. When I was sixteen and better versed in what I could include in my videos, I started Neko-Ren, my channel now. Mom shoved food in front of me when I would forget to eat, but when I moved into this house at twenty, I found it easier to eat junk and drink sodas or coffee than cook. But at that age, you’re pretty resilient. I...”

Something on my face must have given him a clue, because he’d straightened up in his chair. His jaw ticked and his eyes narrowed.

“Compounding my unhealthy lifestyle, I met a guy, my first boyfriend, close to a year later. I started neglecting everything; my channel, my friends and family, and even my health. At first, I thought he cared about me and worried for me, which is why I cut back on everything but him. He didn’t live with me, but he was everywhere, all the time. I couldn’t breathe.”

I swallowed and continued. “Six months I stayed with him. My weight dropped to ninety pounds, and that’s when the emotional abuse ramped up.”

“How did it end?”

I flinched and said, “That’s a story for another time. But I learned after that to take care of myself, eat right, and get enough sleep.”

Graham unlocked his fists and walked around the island. Without pause, he pulled me into a hug, surrounding me with his warmth and scent. My heartbeat, which sped up thinking about that time in my life, slowed at his touch.

But I noticed the awkward way he wrapped himself around me, allowing me to press against him. His hands skimmed my shoulders and his back was ramrod straight.

“You don’t comfort many people, do you?”

“What I want to do is find the fucker and make his body disappear, but to restrain myself from demanding answers on his whereabouts, you get this?”

I smiled into his soft shirt and almost moaned when I inhaled. My instincts screamed for me to climb his body and wrap my arms and legs around him, seeking more of the comfort he’d forced himself to give me. So instead, I stepped back.

“That’s... sweet of you, Graham.”

“I’m not. Trust me. My ex-girlfriend, who, next to you, is the kindest person in the world, says I’m a closed-off asshole who doesn’t ‘do’ human emotions.”

Rather than letting out a primal scream, or throwing a tantrum at the unfairness of confirming Graham’s sexuality, I smiled awkwardly and took another step back.

I breathed a sigh of relief when the timer beeped, giving me even more distance from the comfort Graham offered. I cut open the ciabatta rolls and placed the baked

chicken on one side, dousing them in marinara, before topping it with several slices of provolone and placed the tray back in the oven on broil.

“What happened to the guy?” Graham asked.

“A neighbor mentioned he moved out of town, but I don’t keep track of him.”

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I leaned down to peek in the oven and spotted the sauce bubbling and noticed the rolls were a light golden brown. Removing the tray and switching off the oven, I plated our sandwiches, tearing off fresh basil from my herb garden and adding the leaves on top of the melted cheese.

As I sat down next to him, the silence spiked my anxiety, so I started rambling.

“When I started taking my life back, I structured everything; from bedtime and a wake up time, eating at least twice a day, which meant I learned how to cook to save time, to how many hours a day I recorded or streamed. The act of making a meal relaxed me after sitting for hours on end, so I started doing it every day.”

Graham relaxed his tense shoulders as we both devoured our dinner. For a reason I couldn't explain, feeding him made me... happy. And to have someone other than my sisters enjoy something I made gave me a sense of satisfaction.

The conversation moved onto lighter topics and before I knew it, a yawn escaped and I pressed my hand to my mouth to cover it.

“I'll take care of the dishes,” he said.

“Oh, no, no worries. Most of it will go in the dishwasher, anyway.”

While he placed the dishes in the sink, I grabbed a glass jar and packed the fruit away. When I turned, my mouth opened to thank him for the best night I had in a long while and to hand him the leftovers, but I stopped short when my fingers brushed his chest.

“Um, here you go.” I pushed my hands forward, but since there wasn’t room between us, my knuckles dug into his chest.

Graham studied me for a long moment before breaking the silence.

“Thank you for dinner. But I’d like to point out you didn’t get to ask your questions like you’d planned on.”

I smiled, taking the opportunity as presented. “Well, I’m guessing that I’m going to feed you dinner every night until I do.”

“That might take a while. Months. All you know about me is that I’m not here to harm you.”

“And you have an ex-girlfriend who called you, well, I won’t repeat it.”

“Yeah, Hensley’s great and she made a good point. Look at how I reacted when I tried hugging you.”

“It’s a step in the right direction. I see it as a learning experience. Take baby steps and before you know it, you’ll become a big, cuddly, touchy-feely—”

“Okay, let’s not push it.”

A sharp laugh escaped before I covered my mouth with my hand. With a bit of hesitation I asked, “So… dinner, tomorrow night say, seven this time?”

He nodded. “Yeah, but sometime, I’ll need a list so I can go grocery shopping. I don’t want to eat all your food.”

I flapped my hands in warning. “Don’t say shopping. If my mom hears that, and trust

me, she has ears like a bat, you'll disappear with her for half a day and come back with food for a year."

With a laugh, he turned toward the door. "Thanks again for dinner and I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yep. Good night, Graham."

After I shut it behind him, I leaned against it like a love-struck teenager and sighed.

Chapter 2

Graham

My eyes darted toward the clock on my laptop as I listened to the ramblings between the two companies close to the end of their negotiations. Lawyers, executives looking to make a name for themselves, and translators found a rhythm that left me sitting back and listening for anything not contract related.

I'd done my job; allowing the company in Japan to keep their brand and their employees, while a branch of the company opened in the United States, and waited for the meeting to end.

"Mr. Norris, are there any other issues we have to discuss?"

"No, Mr. Ito."

With a nod from both CEO's and the lawyers giving a date for the completed, filed paperwork, the call ended. I leaned back and sighed. Aware I had an hour and a half before Neko expected me for dinner.

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Butterflies erupted in my stomach whenever I pictured the younger man. All day and through my meeting, Neko popped up in my thoughts often.

And even at that moment, my mind flashed an image of him in the light pink hoodie he'd worn the day before. The sleeves draped past his wrists as his long, thin fingers played with the cuffs. There was a pattern I recognized as he continued the rhythm throughout the night. His actions so ingrained, his fingers moved without conscious intention. But his hands fascinated me and I failed to tamp down the sudden desire to feel them on my skin.

The pink material hung off his body, the color complimenting his pale skin tone. It emphasized his narrow torso, which fueled my imagination, picturing what was underneath. Would his chest have hair? Are his nipples pink or brown? What would he do if I slid his black tights down his legs, exposing him to my view, before I touched him everywhere?

I was taller and more muscular than the younger man. But I didn't make the mistake of judging him weaker. I caught the easy effort in which he took the stairs and how hard he'd gripped my forearm, leaving behind the ghost of his touch when he released me. But his size compared to mine, fuck, was a turn on.

Never had I looked at a woman and fantasized tossing them onto a flat surface or pinning them to a wall and fucking into them with deliberate movements. I'd never lost my head during sex. My control reined in, because while I wanted my partner's pleasure, desire never overtook reason.

With Neko, those possibilities flashed images that left me wanting. I'd never hurt

him, but the fantasies of using his strength along with mine as we lost ourselves in overwhelming sensations, made my body pulse with need. Would he let me pick him up and hold him close as I devoured his mouth with my own?

And those constant thoughts were the crux of the problem.

I believed I was straight. Shouldn't I have known before of my attraction to men? But then again, when have I ever met anyone as beautiful and as funny as Neko?

With the questions swirling in my mind, I closed down the video chat and admitting to myself my curiosity peaked, pulled up Neko's videos. I sorted them by date and remembered Neko saying he dated the bastard for six months, about three years back. I clicked on one from that timeline and jerked in my chair when I traced over Neko's face on my screen.

He was gaunt, dark circles under his eyes, his complexion sallow. But what made me growl aloud was how every noise made him flinch, as though he expected an attack at any moment.

As he relaxed into the game, a loud pounding on the door echoed, and his entire body shook with fear. I wanted nothing more than to protect him. Behind him, the door burst open and an angry man, older than Neko, turned his rage toward him.

A hand clamped down on Neko's throat and squeezed hard enough for the younger man to cry out in pain and pull back, trying to escape the painful grip. My blood boiled as the man yanked him out of his chair.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Neko stayed silent while I simmered in rage. Through Neko's fear, he held eye contact with the man.

“I told you to be ready for dinner fifteen fucking minutes ago. And where are you, up here playing your stupid video games again? I’m sick of your shit, Neko. Go get showered and dressed. You’re not fucking up another night for me like you always do.”

It was then I spotted colorful flashing to the right of the screen. Although there were a lot of words, I caught the gist. Neko streamed the video live and his viewers were shouting they were calling the police.

My eyes didn’t leave the screen as I followed Neko’s reaction to the man who hurt him. When he let go of his neck, I felt a sense of relief, but it was short-lived. When Neko dropped into his gaming chair and rubbed at his throat, the man reared back and punched him. Neko’s head snapped back and wrenched in a way that sickened me. And the sound so loud, time stopped as I sucked in a breath, vibrating in anger.

A cry of fury on screen was faint before a tall, elegant woman with dark hair tied in a bun flew into the room with an aluminum baseball bat and landed a blow right on the man’s knee. The crack as it met bone was audible, but a cry of pain drowned out any sound as he dropped to the ground and curled in a fetal position.

“How fucking dare you, you fucking lump of shit? I told you what would happen if you ever laid a finger on him.” She pointed at his face, her own red and fierce.

“Echo?”

Neko’s timid voice, sounding damaged and hollow, broke my heart. I heard sirens as Echo stepped over the writhing pile of shit and seized her friend in a hug so tight; relief swamped me for the first time since the stream started.

There was a flurry of police activity as they stormed into the room, but they froze when the downed man screeched at them.

“Arrest this bitch, she fucking hit me with a baseball bat.”

“Ma’am is that true?”

“She was protecting me. He... hit me, punched me in the face after... my neck.” Neko slid down the collar of his sweater, exposing his long, delicate neck, where he displayed a bruise darkening a sickly red splotchy color in the distinct shape of fingers. “I have it all recorded and my chat witnessed it.”

“Yeah, we received a flood of emergency calls about this situation. I’ll review everything at the station...” The cop nodded at Neko.

Before I heard anything else, I shot out of my chair and down the stairs before I hesitated and stared down at what I was wearing. A button-down and a tie along with a ragged pair of sweats. Rushing to my bedroom, I shed everything, even changing my boxer-briefs, before I dressed in a pair of jeans and a pullover. After almost falling on my ass jumping up and down on one foot, I sat down and noticed my hands shook as I slipped on my socks and shoes.

Reaching for my wallet, cell, and keys, I locked up and then sprinted across my yard, hopped the row of bushes that separated our lots, and was breathless by the time I reached his door.

After a deep, cleansing inhale, I knocked on his door with a restraint I didn’t feel.

Neko opened it with a wide smile on his face. “Graham, I was thinking—”

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Not waiting another moment, I lunged forward and scooped him up, tightening my arms around him. I buried my face against his neck and found his pulse, which relaxed me.

His arms flung around my shoulders and his legs crossed behind my back, making a noise of surprise, but settled into my hold. Because I had him in my arms, safe and sound, I huffed out a relieved breath and held on.

After a few minutes where I calmed down and regained my senses, I found Neko's body shaking against my own. I freaked out, thinking I hurt the younger man with my rough manhandling of him, and loosened my arms. But I didn't let him go. I didn't think I could for a long while.

He glanced up at me and a wide smile met my curious gaze.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Um." Eloquent, Norris.

Neko's expression fell as he searched my face. "You watched it." But then he paused and continued, "But... this isn't the reaction I expected. I thought you'd be mad—"

"At you?" I growled.

"No, because of the situation. But the look on your face when I answered the door makes sense now. It was a cross between wanting to kill someone and worry for me. Concern won out."

“I still want to kill that fucker. What’s his name?”

“Donovan.”

I scowled but froze when Neko cupped my cheek and whispered, “He’s not worth it. What you saw was the first and only time he put his hands on me in violence. He went to court and pleaded guilty to the charges. Not to mention, he had a limp from where Echo broke his kneecap.”

“Still doesn’t make me feel better,” I pouted.

“I know. I learned, much later, what coercive control was and how it started at the beginning. He chose where we would eat, what theatre we watched movies at, and trust me, no one wants to sit on your ass for two hours as you drive to the City before sitting on your ass for another two hours watching the movie, and he even dictated how often we spoke on the phone.”

I melted even more when he used his exasperated tone. It made his brows furrow, his lips flatten out, and his nose twitch, and I couldn’t help but think it was cute.

“He even wanted me to send him a certain number of texts per hour, and he always counted. He worked on separating me from my friends and family, keeping me isolated and alone, dependent on him. But because we didn’t live together, although he asked many times to move in, there were certain aspects of my life he didn’t have access to. He never cracked the code for my cell, I didn’t allow him near my computers, and I never took him anywhere near my family home.”

“How did he get in that night?”

“He admitted during his interrogation to taking my key two nights before the incident and having it copied.”

“Did you—”

Neko nodded. “Yes, I’ve changed the locks. And added an alarm. Do you... are you usually this protective of people?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, Graham, love, sweet cheeks. I’m draped around you because you haven’t released your hold on me since you arrived and we’ve been giving the other neighbors a reason to stop and stare.”

If he thought I would drop him when he reminded me of the position we were in, he was in for disappointment. But him calling me a nickname, when no one in my life ever had, warmed me through.

Smiling, he patted my cheek. “Well, I cooked a roast and veggies for most of the afternoon and baked fresh oat-wheat bread to go with it. Are you hungry?”

“Um.”

Again, you’re brilliant Norris, you fucking idiot.

Neko reached for the front door, straining in my arms as he reached out. He cheered aloud when he pressed his fingers to the wood and closed the thing with a satisfying thunk. Without releasing him, I reached back and flipped the lock, smiling when Neko tilted his head toward the kitchen with a wink.

“Since you’re not letting me down, and I need to go check on the roast. If you could...”

Without a word, I walked us past his vast living room and into the kitchen. I inhaled,

savoring cooked meat and spices warming the room.

“One question, and I’ll let you down.”

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Neko's hazel eyes widened before he nodded.

“Why do you keep the video up?”

“Because there are teenagers who watch my channel, along with men and women, who are going through the same experience. Even if they don't, it's a subject in our society we don't talk about. We keep abuse and violence hidden, as if victims should be ashamed when manipulators and abusers target them and make their lives a living hell. The six months of videos before that one, you can see how I deteriorate. Instead of hiding it from my viewers, I admit I'm scared and don't know what to do about it, which was therapy for me. Also, I mention organizations, phone numbers, and other helplines in the description and at the end of the video. I'm hoping they help.”

I swallowed and asked what I didn't want to contemplate. “Did he... push himself on you?”

Neko shivered in revulsion, but shook his head. “He never forced himself on me, but we never went past... a certain point. I think he enjoyed seeing me beaten down more than he wanted me. And I wouldn't let him touch me after a while.”

“Fuck! I hate that I'm bringing these terrible memories up for you.”

“It's part of my life, Graham. I tell my chat all the time they are worthy of love and no one should treat them with anything other than respect. And I get questions about it from newer fans who found the video. If I get through to one person, I don't mind the reminder of that time in my life.”

I nodded, understanding. “Okay, I’m going to let you down. But I’m... I need to be close. After watching him hurt you, I...”

“It’s fine. We can take our food and watch something on TV. Do you like true crime?”

“Are you being serious?”

“Well, I’m of the mindset that the more of everything I can learn, the more I’m prepared for the unexpected. I’ve binged watched courses on finance, biology, writing... well, you name it, I’ve searched for information about it. Or I will. But true crime captured my interest.”

I nodded, agreeing to anything as long as it involved Neko. I watched him plate the pot roast, and then he took the potatoes from the pot, mashed them and added butter, cream, and fresh dill, before plopping mounds of the creamy side next to the meat. The carrots, onions, and slices of fresh baked bread finished the dish.

We picked up our dinner, and he led me past the living room into a windowless family room with a gigantic TV, game systems, a Blu-ray player, and a comfortable leather couch.

I watched as Neko placed his plate on the sturdy wooden coffee table in front of the couch before he turned to me.

“What would you like to drink?”

“I’ll go get it.” I figured the room without windows or a door that led outside left him secure.

“Sure, can you fill the bottle next to the fridge with ice water?”

I nodded and strode toward the kitchen, finding his bottle and filling it up. I searched through two cupboards before I found a glass and poured myself the same. The tightness in my chest loosened as I spotted him, crossed legged on the couch, as his thin fingers searched his phone for videos to watch.

Tonight, he wore a black hoodie with a rainbow striped heart in the center along with heather gray sweats and chunky white socks. I missed the black tights.

“Here you go.” I handed him his drink and absorbed the heat from his touch as our fingers brushed together.

“Thanks. How about we watch the Great British Baking Show while we’re eating? We can get into the other videos later.”

I shrugged. “I’ve never seen it.”

His hand opened over his heart, and he exaggerated a gasp. “Well, we’re going to rectify your egregious oversight of the greatest show ever made with season one and work our way through.”

“I guess. If you think it’s necessary.”

I chuckled as he slapped my arm.

Unable to shake the uneasiness of what I witnessed, I sat closer to Neko than necessary. Instead of inching away, he leaned his shoulder against mine and started eating as an upbeat theme song surrounded us.

About the time they were going to start the technical challenge, we’d finished dinner, which was delicious, and Neko relaxed his entire body against my side. He had both legs bent, knees pressed together and tilted toward me. It felt natural, so I lifted my

arm and he settled his head against my chest.

“You’re so warm.”

“And you smell amazing.”

He chuckled at my observation, sending vibrations through me, and I dropped my hand to his waist and held him closer.

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For a while, my mind and nerves settled, Neko safe in my arms. But a question rolled around in my brain until I could no longer contain it.

“Have you dated anyone since...”

Neko blinked up at me, and the soft smile on his lips made my heart race in my chest. At no time in my life had anyone understood me and the reason I was stoic, but with one look, he made me believe I wasn't as much of a mystery as I thought.

“No, no, I haven't. I... it's not as though I'm afraid of history repeating itself. It's more that I don't trust I have good judgement in men and I'd end up picking the same type of predator.”

“Oh, sweetheart, I don't think you have poor judgement. And all men aren't like that fucker.”

The endearment slipped from my lips, but it was as natural as breathing. This man, who'd been through hell and changed his entire life while keeping his beautiful personality and sense of humor, made me crave... more.

“But how do I know? That part paralyzes me into inaction. Echo wanted to introduce me to a friend she met at VidCon, but I froze and shook at the mere mention of him.”

He trembled against me at the thought of an introduction. And the last thing I wanted for him at that moment was to live in fear.

“Hey.”

When he glanced up, I urged him closer to my side and rubbed my hand up and down his arm.

“Whatever you decide, whenever you decide, I will be there to help you through it. I’ll even sneak into the restaurant and be close by, whenever you need me. We’ll come up with a signal and if you feel distress, I’ll get you out of there.”

He closed his beautiful eyes, and I stared at the elongated eyelashes fluttering against the soft skin on his face. He inhaled a deep breath, and when he exhaled, his body melted further into mine, no longer shaking.

“You’re... I wish I met someone like you before.” He sent me a look filled with longing, which made me want to give him anything in the world, including myself. But until I worked out my sexuality, it wasn’t fair to promise Neko more than friendship.

“I hate feeling weak and defenseless, although my sisters and Echo made sure I learned how to take care of myself after. And then I celebrate my sisters are only fourteen and they aren’t interested in dating, but I know that will change. Then there’s Echo. I can see you two getting along.”

Another frown turned his mouth down.

“I’m an emotionless shell of a man who doesn’t know how to connect with humanity, so I doubt she’ll see me as anything but your friend. But I respect she has a mean swing.”

He laughed, which lessened the pressure on my chest. I’d known the man for a day and a half, and already, I wanted to do whatever I could to make him happy.

“What about you? Have you thought about getting out there again?” Neko asked.

I scoffed. “No, I... well, to be honest, I’ve thought more about relationships in the past two days than ever before. And I figure it’s not a question of who I find, but I need to think on what I want.”

I grew quiet. From the moment he opened his front door, something about Neko called to me. When I fell asleep the night before after hours of tossing and turning, the one thing that settled me into a peaceful sleep was thoughts of the man next to me.

And when I was alone at my house, getting ready for the meeting, he was on my mind the entire time, making me feel restless. Thinking back on the day spent alone, I was eager for the time to pass. A sense of longing I’d never experienced before overwhelmed me until I closed my eyes and reminded myself I would see him in a few hours. But when I watched him attacked in his own home, everything changed for me. I wanted to protect him, spend time with him, and take care of him.

Was I falling for Neko?

The strong feelings he brought out in me were... surprising. But I needed to examine them when my emotions weren’t so all over the place.

“Hey, I didn’t mean to pry,” Neko said. His hand rubbed up and down my chest, which calmed me, along with his words.

I enjoyed when he didn’t hesitate around me. He leaned against me as I sat close to him, and with his gesture of serenity, it showed me how caring he was.

“No, you can ask all the questions you want, it’s not like I haven’t done that with you. But since meeting you, a lot of what I believed about myself isn’t true any longer and I need time to sort my thoughts.”

“I understand. But at least we’re friends, right?”

“Yeah, we’re friends.”

At that, he yawned and blinked. “Excuse me, I guess I’m more tired than I thought. The change in season, from summer to autumn, makes me want to wrap myself in a blanket and cuddle.”

Wondering if that was a hint, I cleared my throat. Neko tilted his head, but didn’t meet my eyes.

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“Do you want me to leave?”

He nibbled on his bottom lip before mumbling, “Um, no.”

I used my thumb to remove his swollen skin from his teeth before I said, “Do you want to sleep upstairs or down here?”

“Here’s fine, on the couch. I’m too tired to climb the stairs and change before brushing my teeth. But I have mouthwash in the bathroom across the way.”

I laughed, pulled him tight to me, before I pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Do you have an alarm code?”

“I do, but I arm it from my cell.”

Nodding, I grabbed our plates from dinner and took them into the kitchen. I rinsed them before stacking them with other dirty items, and called out, “Do you want me to start the dishwasher?”

“Yes, please, the tabs are under the sink. Thank you, Graham.”

By the time I walked back in, after swishing mouthwash before joining Neko, a few minutes passed.

He waited until I was back in the room before he pressed a few buttons on his cell and the lights in the hallway dimmed and the ones in the TV room shut off. He then set the device down on the coffee table and moved his hands to the hem of his hoodie.

I hadn't noticed the cursive writing earlier which read, 'dudes just taste better.'

When he revealed his toned, almost hairless chest, with defined pecs and abs, my mouth watered.

Fuck, darker nubs. That knowledge would live in my head each time I stared at his chest.

His fingers, which I grew obsessed with over the past two days, moved to hook the waistband of his sweats and he shimmied his hips as he slid them off, revealing long, toned legs and bright purple boxer briefs.

But when he plopped, face-down, onto the couch, I shook myself out of my perusal of his body and willed my own to relax.

"Find space around me since I'm not moving. Can you grab the blanket in the closet behind you?"

A chuckle escaped my throat, but I stripped off my clothes and went to search the closet. I pulled out a plush blanket and turned. Neko hadn't moved from the awkward position he landed in. I took a deep breath, placed the covering on the top of the couch where I could reach it, and scooped up the lightweight man, tucking him against my chest. I turned so my back would be against the sofa, and lowered the both of us to stretch out on the wide couch.

The sound of a sigh echoed through the room before Neko scooted closer, his back and legs against my front, and I draped an arm around his waist. His head tilted at a weird angle, so I slipped my arm underneath his neck and his soft hair brushed against my skin.

"You have more chest hair than I thought you would?"

I had no clue how to respond to that. “Is it bothering you? My hair and while I’m on the subject, me holding you while you sleep?”

“No, no, no, no... oh, did I say no?”

I huffed out a laugh, and I sensed Neko’s smile.

With each breath he took, it brought him closer to me, and my skin tingled at his touch. When I lifted him in my arms, I realized there was no hesitation on my part at both of us being undressed with no breathing room between us. Instead of overthinking the explicit trust he’d given me, my eyes drooped at his warmth and his scent. The beast that raged at the sight of him being abused relaxed.

“Good, because I don’t think I’ll stop being less protective of you.”

“You’re very sweet, Graham.”

His words slurred, and before long, his deep, even breathing made me smile.

And then I realized defining my sexuality and trying to figure out why I’ve never felt this way wasn’t important. What mattered was the surge of affection whenever his attention focused on me. Or the way he smiled, drawing me nearer and nearer to losing my heart to the man. Neko was beautiful, intelligent, sexy, and I wanted to say he was mine.

Would I be able to ask him if he felt the same?

Chapter 3

Neko-Ren

A loud thunk followed by giggling sounded in the quiet house, but I snuggled back into a warmth that surrounded me from head to toe, ignoring anything not in my immediate area.

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There was a fleeting understanding in my brain alerting me to the time, which was way too early in the morning, before I stopped caring when an arm tightened around my waist and a spicy scent alerted me that it was Graham's defined chest pressed against my back. I melted into my cocoon.

I've tried to become a morning person in the last few years, but I'm still slow out of bed. Most mornings after the humongous task of standing upright, I stumbled down the stairs in search of a strong cup of coffee. While the elixir that gives me life brewed, I forced myself to drink a glass of ice cold water.

But at that moment, lying against Graham felt perfect, and I refused to budge.

"Someone's broken into your house."

I savored the rumble of his sleep roughened voice and stopped myself from shivering before I answered. "You don't seem too worried about it?"

"It's not my house."

"But what if they're secret ninja assassins who are here to avenge something you've done in your past, and I'm collateral damage? May I remind you I'm pretty. What if they want to kidnap me after they finish with you?"

Instead of laughing at the remote possibility I'd dreamed up, Graham shrugged. "Are there any ninjas who giggle when they're breaking in? Also, how would they get in if I watched you set the house alarm on your phone last night?"

“These are deep questions for so early in the morning. But I have to say, if they are ninjas, they could get in anywhere. They’re stealthy, live in the shadows, and oh, did I mention their ninjas?”

“You either like the word or dreamed of it when you were younger?”

“I wanted to be one until I found out the reality. There’s a special school, and you’re recruited young, where they break you down and build you back up to be an elite assassin. Anyway, by the time I learned about ninjas, I was too old to be one. Oh, and not an orphan, it’s another requirement.”

And that did it.

Graham hugged me before he buried his face against my neck and laughed. Our improvised bed shook as I remembered falling asleep in the TV room on top of Graham. Or next to him. Whatever, it didn’t matter.

“You two are ridiculous. Who’s in there with you, Neko?” Riku asked.

“Someone’s in where with whom?” And that was mom.

Blinking open my eyes, I marveled at us cocooned in a blanket. I tilted my head back and caught Graham’s eyes, sparkling from his laughter, before I turned in his arms. His hold stayed firm, but in my new position, I could read his face.

“Why are you allowing people to invade my home?”

“Well, I’m guessing their family and you gave them a key.”

“Not to use at what I’m guessing is butt-ass early in the morning on a Sunday when I’m working on my beauty rest.”

At that, one of my sisters ripped the blanket down, exposing our heads. Mine was perched on Graham's arm and his was on a throw pillow I knew for a fact wasn't comfortable.

"Do you have a crick in your neck? Is your arm asleep from my big fat head?"

"No, I'm good. But I have to say it's bright in here for a room with no windows." And to verify, he squeezed me tighter and relaxed.

My mom thumped my forehead, gentler than she did when I was out of line, and said, "Don't call yourself fat, Neko-Ren, you know I don't like it."

Graham snickered at that.

"My head, mama, not the rest of me."

"Are you naked under there? Did you guys have sexual intercourse on the couch?" Yuma asked, "because if you did, I'mneversitting there again. You might as well buy a new one, Neko."

"There's nothing wrong with sex, Yu." My dad added.

"Uh-uh, I didn't say there was. There were fluids exchanged and although it's treated leather, who knows what kind of kinky stuff they got up to and where things... landed."

I groaned from this embarrassing conversation. But Graham enjoyed it a great deal, judging by the way his eyes traveled from person to person as they spoke.

"That's my dad, George, mom, Reo, and my twin sisters Yuma and Riku."

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“Nice to meet all of you,” Graham said.

They all nodded before dad said, “I’m sure these two were safe. Now, do you want to introduce us to your boyfriend, Neko?”

Mom slapped dad on the arm and he corrected, “Neko-Ren Ellison.”

“There are so many things wrong with this conversation, I don’t know where to begin.”

“Well, while you’re trying to explain it, will you make me the peach orange scones and a cup of your strong coffee?” Riku asked.

Mom sucked in a breath. “You’re too young for coffee, Ri.”

“Oh, shorten her name.”

“Do you want another thump?”

I shook my head. “No, and thank you.”

“Good. We’ll be in the kitchen and give you time to make yourselves presentable. Or kiss good morning.”

“Neko’s boyfriend is plenty presentable. Look at—”

Dad yanked Yu out of the room, and the others followed them.

Graham cleared his throat. “Do I want to know what she was about to say?”

I groaned and shook my head. “Yu is a bit of a wild card. Most of the time she’s studious and conscientious of other people’s feelings, but sometimes, the craziest things spew from her mouth, stunning us all. I’m still not used to it after fourteen years. And sorry they assume you’re my boyfriend, I’ll correct them when I work away at Ri’s scones and make a full breakfast for the rest of them. What do you feel like eating?”

“I’m good with whatever you make. I’ll even help.”

With great reluctance, I wanted that understood; I wriggled toward the edge of the couch to get up, misjudged how much room I had, and rolled right off onto the floor, face first.

“Oh, shit. Are you okay?” Graham asked.

“Don’t worry about me, save yourself. You might make a run for it, because there’s nothing but an inquisition in your future. Probing questions about your sex life, your relationships, and gasp, your job.”

I lifted my head and watched as Graham shook his. “You make a mediator sound like being a porn star. Trust me, it’s way less exciting.”

Waving my hands in a panic, I said, “Don’t say porn star, they can hear you and they’ll posit you fuck people for money. Not that there’s anything wrong with that.”

“Too late. I’m telling mama,” Ri said.

My head jerked to see my sister smiling in the doorway. I glared before I growled, “There will be no scones for you if you do. I will never cook for you again, young

lady.”

“So, Neko’s boyfriend, are you in straight or gay porn?”

“It’s Graham, and I don’t think I have the look of a porn star, but if I did, I’m thinking gay porn is more my thing.”

Ri giggled, but I shot to my hands and knees before standing and staring at the man I slept with the night before. Okay, not slept with, but who cuddled me, all while thinking he was straight.

“What? What do you mean gay is your thing? Hello, your ex-girlfriend.” I slapped my hand over my mouth and closed my eyes on a sigh. “Never mind. There goes my mouth spewing forth shit before my brain has time to catch up.”

“I think I’m offended. It sounds like you don’t think I’m cute enough to be gay?”

“No,” I elongated the word for a second before I continued, “You are...”

So I paused for a long moment and ran my eyes down his naked chest, taking in the hair on his pecs and a trail that ran down his stomach and disappeared under his boxer briefs. I licked my lips and maybe drooled. The blanket hid his legs, but I could imagine—

“I’m?”

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“Um, I don’t know how to answer that question without being a creeper,” I paused, before I continued, “well, I seem like one anyway so I’ll say you’re a wet dream, drenched in a Jake Ryan fantasy.”

He chuckled and asked, “How do you know about Jake Ryan?”

As Graham shucked off the blanket, I fanned myself. Unable to tear my gaze away, I studied the muscles of his calves and thighs. Almost groaning aloud when he dressed, covering everything I could’ve seen the night before, but instead, I fell asleep. I cleared my throat.

“Are you serious? Jake Ryan is the hottest thing from those teen movies from the eighties and nineties and I love the butterflies I get when he’s leaning against his Porsche, waiting for her near the end of the movie.”

Graham, dressed and looking all sexy in the clothes he wore the day before, thought about my answer for a minute. “Yeah, I can see that. He had the ‘bad boy’ thing going on, but when he asked about her at the party, that was sweet.”

“There you go again. You’re not a heartless human. You’re a cuddle bug deep down and you feel comfortable enough with me to let it out. I’m honored.”

“Neko!”

With a sigh, I moved out of the room to make breakfast, but Graham’s hand on my elbow halted me. “While I love how the purple looks against your skin, put on a shirt if you’re going to cook. And I’d recommend pants.”

“Fine, I won’t tempt you with my nakedness.” I slid on my pants before wiggling into the hoodie, so I might have misheard Graham’s next words.

There was a scoff followed by, “Well, that ship has sailed.”

When my head popped out of the material, I asked, “Say what now?”

His smile made me stupid for a moment before he shook his head.

“Nothing, let’s go make breakfast before your sister throws things.”

They walked out of the TV room and toward the kitchen.

“How did you know?”

“I’ve eaten your cooking.”

“Don’t start saying adorable things, Graham. You know what it does to me?”

He huffed out a laugh as we arrived in the kitchen with my family acting... weird.

Mom and dad were sitting on the stools near the kitchen island with marionette smiles as they stared at the two of us. My sisters were going through cabinets and pulling out sheet pans, pots, and a skillet where on a normal day, they slumped at the breakfast table, faces buried in their phones, ignoring the world.

“Okay, you’re freaking me out.”

“What do you mean, sweetie?”

“First, you never call me that, so stop it. Second, my sisters don’t do manual labor,

and there's another thing, but since it's...seven in the morning, I don't have the brain capacity to infer what it is."

Graham placed his hand on my lower back and without thinking, I leaned into his touch. I wondered if the video he'd witnessed and his protective instincts were keeping him close. Even if it were the case, I'd take it.

"Well, I got a call last night after Bob and Nancy watched your neighbor here dash across his yard, jump the tall hedges, and pound on your door, so we're here showing concern."

I rolled my eyes and said, "He watched the incident last night."

That was all my family needed to hear.

"Oh...oh." Mom said.

"What?" Graham asked.

At that moment, Echo wandered in from the front and moaned, "Coffee?"

"Did they call you this morning?"

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“Yep, I did on our way here,” Riku said.

I sighed and broke away from the group and Graham’s touch to start. I inserted a filter and scooped in rounded grounds of delicious Swiss coffee, before I added cinnamon and nutmeg and started brewing.

“Who’s the hottie?” Echo asked.

She seated herself next to Yu at the breakfast table. Both of my sister’s had given up the pretense of helpfulness when I called them out. I smiled at the familiar sight of Echo leaning her head on her hand, her eyes closed.

“He’s Neko-Ren’s neighbor, who rushed over last night after seeing the video.” My dad puffed out his chest and smiled at Graham.

“And we found them this morning snuggled on the couch together, naked, after they had sex last night. And he’s a gay porn star,” Ri whispered.

“Huh.”

There was a long silence.

“That’s it?” Graham asked.

“To each their own. Whatever you want to be is fine with us. As long as you’re happy and safe, especially if you’re sleeping with Neko-Ren,” Mom said.

I laughed at Graham's baffled reaction to my parents supporting him and Echo's lack of reaction and said, "Graham's a corporate mediator. He thinks he doesn't have the looks to be in porn. I disagree with that assessment. But as a complete surprise to me, because I thought he was as straight as an arrow, he would do gay porn. And we didn't have sex last night. We met two days ago when I accused him of being a serial killer."

"Well, that's disappointing." Echo said.

"Which part?" Graham asked.

"I've never met a porn star before, and Neko didn't have sex last night. I've been trying forever to find Neko a man."

He huffed again, unsatisfied with the answers he was getting, "Aren't you worried, you know, after what happened to him with Donovan? I've known him for two days and I want to fight the world so I can protect him."

A round of aw's rose in the kitchen and my mom hopped off her chair and hugged Graham.

"Well, based on your reaction when you left your house tells us everything we need to know," Dad said.

Mom asked, "What did you do last night when you arrived?"

"He opened the door and I..."

"You, what?" Yu asked.

"I picked him up off the ground and hugged him until I thought he was shaking from

fear, but he was laughing at my reaction. But when he realized I watched the assault, he comforted me and explained the relationship and the abuse. Not getting any comfort from his explanation, I grilled him about the locks around the house and the alarm.”

“It was about a half hour before he put me down, but that’s because I had to check on dinner.”

“And I refused to leave after.”

I scoffed. “I think I fell asleep, and you maneuvered me until you fit on the couch behind me.”

He shrugged. “Maybe? But that doesn’t explain how you guys are so accepting—”

“There are signs we’ve learned to look out for,” Reo said.

Graham’s brows furrowed. “Like what?”

“Abusers at the beginning are charming, almost as if they are overdoing the attention because they need you to fall under their charisma and overlook potential warning signs. There will be a lot of praise, superficial compliments such as how beautiful you are and how good you look together, but no true emotional connection.

“They won’t allow you to see your family or friends, so everyone showing up and waking us wouldn’t be acceptable. When I was with Donovan and I got a call from anyone, he’d pick up my phone and check who was calling, and he wouldn’t ‘allow’ me to answer. Then he’d accuse me of not being invested in the relationship if I even glanced at my phone. The guilt trips were severe, and they came out of nowhere.”

“Why do I want to kill him even more now?” Graham asked.

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“Because you’re a normal guy, hot stuff, who has no desire to control Neko into doing or being what you shape him to be. You accept him as he is,” Echo said.

I sighed. “I know you’ve worried about me since then. And if I wanted to date, I would have.”

“No, you wouldn’t have, babe. You don’t trust yourself with men.”

My mom gasped. “You never told me that.”

I shrugged and started chopping the fresh peaches and the dehydrated oranges for the scones. My hands kept busy; I kneaded the mixture, rolled it out, and cut them before placing them on the sheet trays and washing the top with a bit of milk.

Graham waited until I slid the tray full of twenty-four scones into the oven before he hugged me. What can I say? I bake when I’m avoiding uncomfortable conversations.

“Are you okay?” Graham whispered.

“Yeah?”

“Echo looks devastated. Why don’t you comfort her as I get the rest of the stuff for breakfast out of the fridge?”

With a nod, I turned and strode toward where my best friend sat, her face buried in her hands, and pulled her up and into a fierce hug. “You know I don’t tell my parents everything, and it’s not a secret that I’m afraid of getting into another relationship.

Why are you upset?"

"I introduced you to that asshole."

"But you also stuck around when he tried to get me to push you away and warned him about hurting me. Hell, you saved me that night. There's no reason to feel guilty. He hid his entire personality in the beginning and unless you've seen it before, how were you supposed to know?"

"You're trying to make me feel better," she joked.

"I'm done wasting time on him. You're right, I should get out there, but I have to do it in my own way."

Graham growled and both our heads spun towards him, but he busied himself with slicing open the bacon package before laying them out on a foil-lined sheet tray.

"You okay there, extra hot?"

"Yep." The word was short and curt.

I turned back and raised my eyebrow in a silent question. She wiggled her eyebrows at me and purred, as if I wouldn't get her suggestion. I kissed her cheek. "I love you, E."

"Love you, too, sweetie. Stop, you're going to make me ugly cry and you know I won't do that in front of witnesses."

With one last squeeze, I moved toward the pantry to pull out the brown sugar mix I used for the bacon. When Graham moved to wash his hands after laying out enough meat for an entire banquet, I paused.

“You don’t mind spicy, or sweet, do you, Graham?”

“Both is fine. What are you doing with that?”

“It’s a mix of brown sugar, a pinch or two of cayenne pepper, chili powder, and black pepper to make the bacon candied.”

I won’t lie. The low groan that escaped his throat at my answer had a shaft of longing settle in my groin, suddenly grateful I wore a baggy hoodie and loose sweats. Mesmerized, I watched him as he closed his eyes and leaned his head back, taking a deep breath, before opening them and piercing me with his gray orbs.

About to jump into Graham’s arms after forgetting about his not-so nailed down attraction to men, I licked my lips and sucked in a breath as his eyes flashed down, tracing the movement. A loud groan rumbled in my throat at the heated look. But before I pounced, I jerked back into reality when Ri announced, “I want poached eggs with breakfast.”

“Right, eggs... breakfast. Okay,” there was a beep, and I blew out a sigh, “coffee’s ready.”

There was a rush toward the coffeemaker. But mom arrived first, pulled out mugs for all seven of us, and poured out the carafe until it was empty. There were clinks as the twins added sugar, a splash of milk into my parents, and Echo taking hers black, like me.

“Graham?” I was proud my voice cracked only a little at the end.

“Black, please.”

Mom slid his cup toward him. It grew quiet in the kitchen as we all sipped the

caffeine we required to live. Well, I did, at the ungodly hour on a weekend morning.

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Even though minutes passed without much conversation, my sister couldn't leave anything alone. Yu said, "I think Ri piped up because she could feel the sexual tension between you two and wanted to put a stop to it as soon as she could before you scarred us for life and all she could think was food."

My face heated, and I couldn't deny Ri's observation. I ignored both of them and finished the bacon, setting the pan aside. I cut up potatoes into half-inch squares and put them in a pot to boil before I sautéed them.

"What do you need me to do?"

"Can you break four eggs into separate ramekins? You'll find them in the cupboard two doors down. Also, scramble another six, and leave two more out for fried eggs. How would you like yours?"

"It's a lot of work, so I'll take scrambled."

I paused and blinked at the man who had a lovely blush on his cheeks, but before I spoke up, my dad said, "Graham, if you want to fit into this family, which I suspect my wife already adopted you, be as blunt as possible and demand what you want when you want it. Otherwise, the twins will destroy you."

Graham glanced over at my sisters and they both nodded at him, heads tilted down, with creepy mirrored smiles etched on their faces. "You two should star in your own horror movie."

"Thank you," both of them said at the same time.

“Um, over easy, please. Otherwise they’ll sacrifice me during the next full moon.”

We all laughed, although it seemed Echo fell asleep again on the table. Nope, she lifted her head enough to sip at her coffee.

The more we worked together, side-by-side, Graham relaxed.

“I’m surprised my family hasn’t scared you off yet.”

“How about your family, Graham? Do they live close?” Mom asked.

Fuck. I never asked him. “I’m sorry, I didn’t ask you about your family. We’ve been so busy talking about... well, you know.”

“Yeah, that and watching the British baking thing last night. But we’ve only known each other for eight hours, so I’ll excuse you for not getting my life story.”

“Who knew you were such a smart ass?”

Graham laughed, the deep, resonating sound sent good chills up my spine. I smiled at him.

“Your influence, I’m afraid.”

I fanned myself and with my best impression of Blanche Devereaux, which wasn’t good, I said, “Why, I never.”

“Focus, Neko-Ren.”

Graham covered my embarrassment as I once again flirted with the man who my attraction was growing with each breath. “My family and I aren’t close. They live in

Orinda, California, where I grew up. They're both professionals at making others miserable, or psychologists as my mother calls them."

Mom asked, "They don't call to check in to see how you're doing?"

Graham shook his head. "I'm the family disappointment because I didn't get a degree in something useful, which means I'm not a doctor or a medical professional of any kind. I told them I was a business major, and that was that. We haven't spoken in... twelve years."

My heart couldn't take it. "I'm going to move you in and we'll all bombard you with all the love you've missed out on. I'll teach you how to cook and the twins will show you inappropriate TikToks that will make you laugh until you cry."

"And whenever you need parental advice, there's George here. I'll only tell you what I think you should do," mom said, "which might I add, I'm right about."

"Gee, mom, way to make him feel comfortable enough to come to you," Yu said.

Instead of looking horrified by that idea, I mean he seemed to like my crazy family even after their weird and invasive introductions, he nodded with a smile. I couldn't keep mine off my face.

"Thank you. I'd like that."

Graham and I finished cooking breakfast, and I brewed another pot of coffee to go along with it. As we sat down at the dining room table, I watched Graham and hoped he didn't become overwhelmed by all the noise and the change of topics every thirty-seconds. But his posture and the small smile on his lips told me he enjoyed all the craziness.

My mind wandered to Graham's earlier words and the way he stared at my lips. Was he hinting of his attraction toward men? Or was he trying to shock my family? I wasn't thinking something I did brought out a side of him he'd suppressed, but there was a bit of hope Graham thought of me as, well, tempting.

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“You okay?” Graham whispered.

My eyes darted up and met his sparkling ones. With a quick flick down to see his smile, I met his gaze again and nodded.

“I’m thinking too much again.”

“Hey, please don’t waste your time on that dickwad. He isn’t worth it.”

“Oh, I wasn’t thinking about him. I’m... curious about your earlier statement?”

He leaned closer, studying my gaze. “Despite my dismal dating history, I’m remembering when men caught my attention. But bringing up my parents earlier, I realized I never pursued a relationship with a guy because of them.”

My brain worked on the correlation, and when I found several possibilities, I asked, “How so?”

“Every interest I had, from football to art, they never encouraged me. It was immature or beneath the Norris family. But when my best friend, Henry, came out his sophomore year of high school and they found out about it, they sat me down and were remarkable. They explained love doesn’t see gender and if I fell in love with a boy, they’d be okay with it.”

“Hm? So you think you repressed a part of yourself because they were accepting of it?”

“It makes sense now, that I’ve had distance from them.”

“Congratulations,” I said.

“What? Why?”

“Because you’ve discovered a part of yourself. I think that deserves celebration.” I kissed him on the cheek.

“Thank you.”

We shared a smile that made my heart feel lighter.

Chapter 4

Graham

When I became cognizant, or closer to reality, as I jerked awake to the shrill beeping sound coming from somewhere in the darkened room, I rolled over to protect his sleeping body as my sluggish brain searched out the source of the noise. I blinked, and then again, until I focused. For a long few seconds, I stared at the orange button on his phone, alight atop his nightstand, until I slammed my hand down on the annoying device, somehow shutting it off.

“What?” Neko asked.

I sagged because the offending sound stopped, melted into his warm body, and snuggled my face into the back of his neck.

“Why do you have an alarm for eight on a Saturday morning?”

“I... there’s something, but I forgot. Tired, still, shush.”

There’s a reason two people who hated mornings shouldn’t become a couple. Not that we are together in that way, yet. And not that I haven’t thought about it every waking moment while spending each night in his bed, craving his kisses and touches more than my stupid brain believed I was ready for. But then again, my analytical side stopped me from pursuing anything until I was ready.

Well, that cleared shit right up.

My mind roused from my previous state of dead asleep the more I ran the Neko equation around and around in my head. The hesitation, I could admit in the early morning with the man in my arms, was not Neko, but the change it would cause. In the few weeks we’ve known each other, I’ve felt protective and happy, I’ve laughed more, and become part of a family.

What if I lose him by being me? Which meant boring, self-centered, meticulous, and used to being alone. All the things a rational person wouldn’t want in a partner. On top of all of my shining qualities to tempt the man, I’m also ten years older than him.

Come to think of it, our age difference doesn’t bother me. Hell, I might look like a daddy, especially when we stand close to each other, but it had more to do with my height, my hair, beard, and muscular body. And from the way I don’t express emotions with ease.

Shit, again, not making myself shine here.

Until Neko, I never would have considered myself to have an addictive personality. But here I am, again, sleeping with the object of my obsession after a late night of watching his old let’s plays, not in a hurry to head home and sleep alone, in a bed where I’m not surrounded by the essence of citrus and baked goods.

Yes, I understood I rented the house next door, but I've stayed overnight a total of fourteen times. My excuse, I'd moved in and hadn't met Neko during those first two weeks.

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But after breakfast with his family, the lazy Sunday turned into competitive board games around the dining room table, and then movie night with butter and cheese popcorn, in which Neko made from scratch, because of course he did. It was late and while Reo and George headed home to ‘sleep in their own bed, thank you very much,’ the twins crashed upstairs in the guest bedroom and Echo took the couch.

“Remember to have a camera rolling if you two are going to have sex.” Echo said.

“Why would we do that?” I asked.

“It will make it easier to break into porn if you have an audition tape.”

“Uh-huh. Because I want a reason for people to see Neko naked. We’ll get right on that.”

“I won’t mention how jealous you sounded right then. Does the sarcasm suggest I won’t be watching you two have sexy times soon?”

I shrugged and turned to see Neko snoring softly. Even with his neck bent in a weird and uncomfortable position as he leaned against the arm of the couch, I thought him beautiful.

“Time for bed, sweetheart.”

Neko blinked awake long enough to stand and stagger one step, before he sagged against me.

I lifted him in my arms and planned on carrying him up to his room and leaving soon after. But standing there while he brushed his teeth and performed his moisturizing routine, an act mesmerizing when he explained his step-by-step process, left all thoughts of tucking him into bed with a kiss on his forehead before I'd head to my rental, alone, in serious doubt.

"There's a new toothbrush in the cabinet," Neko said as I stood there, leaning against the door.

"I was going to brush when I got back home."

"Oh."

There was an exorbitant amount of disappointment in his abbreviated response, along with the pout, and then the tears welling up in his eyes. Okay, that last one didn't happen, but it would've played along with his ploy to get me to stay. Hell, he could've nodded toward the bed and I would have stripped and climbed in without hesitation.

With a sigh, forced exaggeration, I pushed off the door and headed closer, seeing him brighten with each step. I opened the cabinet and snagged a blue toothbrush and brushed my teeth after he'd finished.

We stripped down to our boxer briefs, sank into the obscenely comfortable mattress, and moved into the same position we woke in earlier that morning.

"Why the hell would we sleep on the couch instead of in this bed?"

"I fell asleep, and you didn't want to carry my deadweight upstairs. Or something like that."

“Yeah.”

With whispered goodnights, we drifted off. The energy spent keeping two fourteen-year-olds entertained all day exhausted us. Not to mention Neko brought out a competitive side of me I hadn't realized I possessed.

Over the next few weeks, we developed a routine. Monday through Friday, Neko cooked breakfast after we dragged ourselves out of bed. I cleaned the dishes as he headed upstairs to record for the day. After I finished, I'd snag another cup of coffee and head over to my house for whatever meetings I had scheduled. Neko'd given me a key after breakfast and also downloaded the security system app on my phone.

“For you to come and go as you please,” he purred before he winked at me.

My eyes narrowed. “It's strange you said it in that way. But I know you gave me permission to enter your home because you don't want to climb back upstairs more than once or twice a day. It's not for my convenience.”

“Damn, you caught me.” His fingers walked up my chest until he reached my beard and gave it a gentle tug.

At that point, I didn't care if the house was on fire, as long as he didn't stop touching me. And when I growled, he stood on his tiptoes and kissed my cheek.

A chuckle escaped his throat as he pulled back and said, “Have a good day, love.”

After staring at his ass climbing the stairs, cutting off my view when he disappeared around the corner, I made my way back to the kitchen. I shook my head, gawking at his lovely bubble butt was not my proudest moment.

I stopped any hesitation about invading Neko's home whenever I finished for the day,

too excited to see him. We cooked together, talked about our lives, even mine, because he drew it out of me despite my arguments my life was boring. He told me more about how thrilled he was when his mom announced she was pregnant after trying for years, and how his dad fainted in the doctor's office when his mom informed him they were having twins.

It was hard not to smile the next time I saw George. Then Neko acted out the scene, putting the back of his hand against his forehead and dropped onto the couch, while I left the room when I couldn't contain my laughter.

My mind kicked into gear when I realized in a few hours, he'd needed to be awake to host a charity livestream.

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“Neko, sweetheart, time to get up.”

“Mmm. No, I don’t want to. Can’t make me.”

“We have to make breakfast before you go live. Remember?”

He lifted his head off the pillow and glared at me. Well, he tried. Eyes glazed with sleep, he slow blinked at me several times, before he buried his head underneath the covers.

“You’re a meanie, doing meanie things, so early in the morning. Whatever the day, I can’t remember which one it is today.”

“Well, I’m not the one who scheduled the charity livestream for a Saturday.”

Silence floated between us for a long minute before Neko huffed out a put-upon sigh, flipped onto his back, and jackknifed into a sitting position. All the while, I watched the play of his muscles as he moved. I licked my lips and held myself back from covering his body with my own and devouring him. Barely.

“Are you okay?”

Define, okay? “Fine. Why?”

“Well, your throat rumbled enough it shook the bed and you can’t take your eyes off my naked chest.”

“It’s a nice fucking chest, but I’m focused on your abs... remind me to thank your sister.”

Neko’s ringing laugh made me smile, and his torso shook in a way where I became fascinated.

“Well, since I’m the one who sweats my cute little ass off when we go to a class, shouldn’t I get the credit for putting that look on your face?”

About to agree with his assessment about his ass, we were interrupted when Neko’s cell erupted. He rolled his eyes at the device, then snatched it from his nightstand.

“Yes, I’m up.”

“Up as in showered and ready for breakfast, or are you still in bed with Mr. Hot Pants?”

Unable to contain my laughter, I moved to the edge of the bed and stood, smiling when Neko didn’t answer. I turned to see his eyes tracing my naked back and my ass covered in blue cotton, but it was the pure desire on his face that made my cock swell. Without knowing my exact reason, I turned and watched his eyes widen, all his focus on my hard cock as he licked his lips and let out a low, desperate groan.

“Neko-Ren, do not ignore me.”

I flinched at the sound of his angry best friend.

“But... but, he’s standing on the other side of the bed, most of his skin on display, and right in the center of all that yumminess, his hard, throbbing... Echo?”

Confusion etched on his face as he glanced at the screen. “That bitch hung up on me,

not letting me finish my thought. After she woke me up. No, wait, I was awake,” he blinked at me, “why am I awake?”

Heat flared through my body. Again, his focus wasn’t on my face. He directed his entire speech at my dick.

I rounded the bed and lifted him into my arms, biting back a moan when the blanket dropped off, giving me the perfect view of his elegant legs before they wrapped around my waist. With Neko tucked against me, I walked toward the ensuite shower and without setting him down, I turned on the faucet and savored our skin pressed together as the water warmed.

He fought with himself to stay awake, keeping his eyes open although he laid his head on my shoulder with a sigh.

“With the promise of copious amounts of coffee and fluffy eggs after our shower, I’m hoping your brain will kick in and you’ll remember you have a charity live stream in two hours.”

With reluctance, I set him on his feet and reached for our toothbrushes. We made quick work of cleaning our teeth, even rinsing with mouthwash, before he turned to face me, his expression contemplative.

Neko murmured, “You were hard. Was that because of, you know, morning wood?”

“Nope.”

“Was it because you had a sexy dream?”

“Nope.”

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“Oh, fuck, did I rub on you while we were sleeping and you had lurid thoughts featuring a stacked blonde woman with plush lips who was sucking your dick?”

“Why is she blonde in this scenario?”

His face fell, and guilt swamped me. I never wanted to hurt Neko, even with an innocent comment, but I’d managed. Words wouldn’t placate him, even though I was teasing. Instead, I stepped closer and tipped his face up to meet my gaze.

My eyes glanced down at his lips and he groaned, tongue flicking out and wetting them.

“I want to kiss you.”

A gasp escaped his throat, and he whispered, “Yes.”

Kissing Neko-Ren Ellison was unlike anything I’ve ever experienced, and everything I never dreamed I could have. His lips were indescribable. Soft, pliant, yet able to send me to my knees if he denied me what I’ve craved for weeks.

I used my lips to part his, sucking in a breath when the sensitive corner of mine scraped against his morning stubble, before our tongues met in a mutual duel, stoking fantasies of tasting him for hours. Days. Until the end of time.

Yes, I’ve heard the descriptions. Fireworks, explosions, even electricity skittering along the surface of the skin along with waves of pleasure following. But with Neko, it was all that and more.

My entire being throbbed, my cock pulsed, and I felt untethered. Yet for a single instance in my life, the sense that every decision I'd made allowed me in the same orbit of this fabulous man in my arms, and I pledged to the gods above I would believe in fate for the rest of my existence.

I swallowed Neko's moan, giving him one of my own as his hardness pressed against my stomach. I hadn't realized I lifted him in the air and pressed his back against the cool shower tile until then, and knowing how limited our time was, I broke the kiss and set him on his feet.

Helpless to resist him, I knelt down and nuzzled the obvious outline of his girth through the last of his clothing with my cheek. With deliberate movements, I shed his boxer briefs, smiling at the bright red concealing my target until Neko whimpered.

"Lean against the wall, sweetheart, and hold on to something."

"Wha—"

Never having sucked another cock before, I'd no clue what to expect. Questions such as would the weight of his cock on my tongue and his aroma freak me out? Would he want to shove it down my throat and make me choke? And why did the thought turn me on? From the enthusiastic groans and moans from the porn I watched made gay sex look... well, fun and pleasurable.

But I swallowed the head of his dick without hesitation before I moved to lick the slit and moaned as the salty-sweet taste registered. Circling the tip with my tongue, I used tentative movements until Neko's narrow, nimble fingers slid through my strands before taking ahold of the loose, messy bun at the back of my head in a rigid grip. Something about his strength at the same time my mouth worked to make him fall apart made me groan, sending vibrations through his cock, and he tightened his hold.

As he clenched his hand against my scalp, I took him deeper, tonguing the base of his cock as my lips pursed around him. No clue if I was giving him pleasure, I pulled back with deliberate pressure around his length, before plunging back in again.

“Fuck, Graham!”

The next time my mouth traveled to the tip, I glanced up at him; cheeks flushed and the muscles of his chest and arms bulging from holding himself back.

“Is this okay?”

His black pupils hid the hazel color of his eyes, and his jaw clenched as he worried his bottom lip with his teeth.

“You’re trying to fucking kill me, or I’m going to wake up to another fantasy unfulfilled.”

“No, sweetheart, I promise. You are very much awake, and me on my knees, worshipping your hard cock is because I can’t live another day without touching you the way I wanted from the beginning. I’m sorry it took me so long to realize what I knew all along.”

I stood, unable to be apart from him, and pulled him in for a scorching kiss. When he met my lips without hesitation, I used my free hand and shucked off my boxer briefs until I managed to free my dick. I then encased my cock along with Neko’s in one hand and stroked.

His hips shot forward, and the feel of skin on skin almost brought me to my knees. I continued plundering his mouth as my hand moved on its own, stroking both of us as Neko kept fucking into my grip. Before long, we both panted with our pleasure and my arm slipped around his lower back, the tips of my fingers brushing against his ass,

as I held him tight.

“Graham. Close, so fucking close.”

Anticipation swelled in my chest, proud in knowing my actions would lead to his gratification. The next stroke up sent him over the edge. With a low moan, he tensed in my arms before he threw his head back and screamed my name, his come landing on my stomach, leaving me wrecked.

“Oh, fuck, you marked me. That’s... you are the sexiest fucking thing ever. You’re mine, sweetheart. I’m... fuck.”

I came with a roar, head dizzy with pleasure I’ve never experienced before. Neko was my anchor, and as I held him close and listened to his panting breaths cooling my shoulder, I lost a piece of my heart to the man.

Four hours later, I sat in Neko’s TV room, smiling as I watched my man laughing whenever a jump scare frightened him, but I noticed his happiness at playing the latest horror game while taking the time to talk to those in his chat. So far, he’d raised close to a quarter million dollars for several LGBTQ+ charities. Neko’s goal was a half a million dollars.

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I stood and made my way toward the kitchen. Neko planned to continue until he raised all the funds and I needed to take care of him. Which meant the man would eat regular meals, even if it was my cooking.

While still not a great cook, I'd learned a lot in the weeks we've been together. Neko's a patient and wonderful teacher, which makes me less intimidated to cook something for him.

I'd started the rice cooker at breakfast after remembering to soak the sushi rice the night before. So with that taken care of, I took out the marinated meat and started the burner. I grabbed one of the bento boxes and filled one of the two largest sections with rice until it overflowed. The meat was sliced so thin; it sautéed within a minute. I filled the smaller sections with kimchi, pickled radish, fish cake, marinated tofu, and nori. Neko made the side dishes and kept them on hand in case either of us were hungry and neither wanted to cook.

With the lid in place, I filled another steel bottle, this one around sixty-four ounces, with ice water and headed upstairs. My plan was to drop off the food, not disturbing Neko more than necessary.

I listened at the door, and it was quiet. From the many videos we'd watched, I knew Neko didn't handle scares well. So, with great care, I opened the door and tilted my head, peeking inside. The monitor showed him in a dark corridor, head sweeping left and right at a fast pace as he searched for something. I knew he couldn't hear me because of his headphones, so I contemplated the best way to get his attention.

Neko paused the game before his eyes darted toward his chat window and he sat up

straight. “Are you sure? Does he look scary, like he wants to stab me to death?”

Words flashed on the monitor to his right and whatever they said made him turn around. He smiled when he spotted me in the doorway.

“Hey, sorry to bother you. I wanted to bring you some food, but didn’t want to disrupt your stream.” I leaned my head back and stuck the food and water bottle through the slot of the opened door.

Again, Neko surprised me when he grasped my wrist in his long fingers and pulled me inside his studio. Instead of releasing me when I stumbled inside, he directed me to a chair next to his and pushed me into it.

“Perfect timing. I was about to wet myself and now, I can eat and ignore the little demon child trying to kill me for no good reason other than I exist.”

If I thought his chat was nuts when they noticed me, the velocity increased tenfold, all because Neko pulled me into the room. When Neko cleared his throat, I gazed over at him and noticed the smirk as he opened the lid to the box.

“Oh, this smells so good and it feels like forever since you cooked me breakfast. Thank you.”

Without waiting for an explanation to his audience, he picked up the chopsticks I’d included with a dexterity which amazed me and piled on kimchi, radish, a thin strip of meat on the rice, before he lifted the food and took a huge bite. The moan escaping from his throat made my back ramrod straight and my cock twitched in my sweats.

“Oh, shit,” I whispered.

“What?”

“I’m a little underdressed for being on your stream.”

Without answering me, his eyes perused me from head to toe, which caused a current of heat to lick up my spine where it settled near my groin.

Neko blinked at me, another adorable mannerism that had my heart melting each time I saw it. He shoved another bite into his mouth, set the box down, and leaned forward to read the text on the screen.

“They want to know if you’re a male model?” he shook his head before he answered, “No, he’s a mundane. He works in business. You know the type, white buttoned down shirt, two-toned unimaginative ties. But I agree with you, he would be great as a model.”

Instead of taking offense to being called normal, I lifted his food and nudged the box into his hands. “You need to eat, sweetheart.”

Not meaning to let my pet name for him slip, my eyes widened as I glanced up at a calm Neko, who took bite after bite, sipping water every so often, with a smile on his face. He turned back and read the next comments, before he looked at me, his face a mask of seriousness.

“They want to know who you are. Curious buggers, they want to know more about your connection to me.”

“Um, I know we didn’t have time this morning to talk about it, but I want us to be together. I want you to be my—”

“Boyfriend?”

I nodded and then stopped, and his eyes widened. Before Neko’s face fell, I said, “I

was thinking more along the line of a partner. But if you want to say boyfriend, I'm fine with that."

"Partner it is then," he said before he kissed my nose.

Both of us looked away from each other to stare at the chat scrolling so fast, I didn't catch a word. "How can you read any of that?"

The grin, quirking the side of his mouth, did crazy things to my heart, and I noticed his voice dropped an octave when he winked and said, "Lots of practice."

He turned back to the camera and said, "One question at a time. This man, Mr. Hot Stuff as Echo named him, is Graham. And yes, that is the only name you will be getting. Our story is he moved next door about three months ago, deposited by pod people, or you might know them from the national colloquialism, aliens. Because in the realm of what's possible, this hotness on a platter served up for little ole me is highly improbable. Anyway, he heard me scream after I might have gotten scared playing a horror game and knocked on my door to check on me. He fell in love with me at first sight and that's his entire story, you inquisitive people."

Everything he mentioned was the truth. Although I didn't have a clue until I kissed him that he'd become my world. My feelings for him swelled the moment he opened the door with his cheeks flushed and a glare aimed my way.

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Why would I want someone else when Neko; the wondrous, funny, brilliant, sensual man smiling and teasing his audience, was mine?

“They want you to answer the next question,” Neko said. He shoved in another spoonful, and when I glanced down, he’d all but finished.

“Do you want more?” I asked.

“No, I’m stuffed. Thank you for this, I’ll show my appreciation later.” Neko leaned forward and without pause, I met him halfway and captured his lips in a kiss that grew out of control. We both realized then where we were. With great reluctance, Neko straightened and I followed. He blinked, and I laughed, cupping the younger man’s cheek, and giving him another peck.

“What do they want to know?”

He finished the last of his lunch and glanced at the screen. “Well, for one, they want to know how old you are?”

“Thirty-three, about to turn thirty-four... soon.”

“How soon?” Neko asked.

“Tomorrow,” I whispered in his ear.

His spine straightened and there again went the blinking before he narrowed them. “We’ll be talking about that after the stream.” Turning back to the chat, he asked,

“Have you ever married?”

I shook my head.

He narrowed his eyes and read, “Are you an asshole like the last one?” His eyes widened before he addressed his chat, “Hey, people, not everyone is like Donovan. I’m glad you are aware of my past, but go easy. Graham’s a streaming newbie, and these are personal questions.”

“I’m nothing like that...” I leaned closer, inhaled his lemon scent, and asked, “can I curse?”

“Yeah, we’re good here.”

I leaned back and growled, “Yeah, nothing like that piece of shit.”

Neko leaned forward and laughed. “They say of course you’re not, you brought me food and didn’t protest when I reached for you and dragged you inside.”

I wriggled my brows when he glanced up at me, beaming.

He turned back, and his eyes narrowed at the next question. “What are your intentions toward Neko-Ren?”

Something about the question made me pause. “Is that your mom asking? Because if it is, I’d rather answer her in person than somewhere I can’t gage her reaction to the answer.”

A scoff escaped his throat before he paused, making sure the question wasn’t from Reo, before he shook his head. “Nope, after the Monopoly game, or maybe Clue, but the day after we’d met, she asked me what three colors I liked. I rattled off

cornflower blue, pearl white, and royal purple.”

“Why three colors?”

“For a wedding, at least it’s what she told me when I’d asked later. Why are your eyes widening? Please don’t freak out, I’m not proposing, and I’ll protect you from my family if they try to force us to a church or the courthouse. Or better yet, we’ll run away until wedding fever dies down or my mom snaps back into sanity, whichever comes first.”

I whispered, “You… have you thought about getting married before?”

He answered in the same low voice, “I hadn’t thought about it, but I wouldn’t discount it if, for instance, we dated for several years and you asked me. Or if I got a crazy idea in my head to tie the knot one Thursday afternoon and found a justice of the peace, but then if we did that, my mom would thump me on the head and the guilt trip from the twins would be interminable.”

“I vote for the second one, that way we don’t have to plan anything or wear stuffy formal wear, and we can invite your family to the courthouse, so that solves one problem.”

Neko’s answering smile held me captive for a long minute until he jolted and glanced back at his monitor. His mouth dropped open before his hands came up as he gasped, and I looked around to see what stunned him. It was then I noticed the donation levels.

He’d raised over a half a million dollars.

Because he’d finished eating and his chat seemed happy, I grabbed his morning empty water bottle and the dirty dishes. I stood but leaned over, capturing his lips in a

brisk kiss, and said, “I’ll let you get back to your stream. Congratulations, sweetheart, you did it and I’m proud of you.”

He beamed at me, glancing down at my lips, before he rolled his chair closer and started thanking everyone who contributed.

“This community is the best and your donations will help a lot of well-deserving people. And like I promised, here’s mine. Oh, and Graham?”

“Yeah?”

He turned toward me and said, “Chat says they enjoyed meeting you and suggested they would be happy if you dropped in more often to the streams.”

I smiled. “I enjoyed, well, responding to their questions and if you want me for the next one, I’ll be here.”

With one last look at my Neko vibrating in his chair because of his excitement, I shut the door behind me and headed toward the kitchen. Before I cleaned up and made my lunch, I pulled out my phone and contributed anonymously toward the charity.

Supporting Neko and loving him went hand in hand. And when he squealed and shouted a few minutes later, I couldn’t keep the smile off my face.

Chapter 5

Neko-Ren

I sighed in relief when I ended the most successful charity stream of my career. Although we made goal hours before I’d hoped, I’d already asked Miles, Brody, and Wyatt, all three successful streamers in their own right, for a group game, thinking we’d raise more money if I got the others involved. It worked, but at the end of the day I sat there, exhausted.

The door opened, and I heard Graham’s voice, “Are you doing okay?”

Without getting out of my chair, I swiveled around and lifted my arms. “Is it still Saturday?”

His deep laughter washed over me before he hoisted me into his arms, and I buried my face against his neck, inhaling. With his hands cupping my ass, Graham encouraged me to wrap my legs around his waist, and I complied.

“I love being this close to you and your heavenly scent. I know I said at breakfast I wanted to pick up where we left off this morning because it was the best experience of my life. And I meant it. I’ve never come as hard before and want you more than ever. But I don’t think my body’s working right after sitting so long, even with the breaks you reminded me to take—”

Because of my normal conversation style, which was saying everything on my mind without censoring myself, Graham lifted my head and pressed a kiss to my mouth, putting a stop to the reasons we couldn’t have sex. I wanted Graham more than my next breath and relaxed into the kiss. When his tongue licked my bottom lip, I moaned as it sent shivers of pleasure through my tired body.

When we broke the kiss, he pressed his lips against my forehead in a gesture that made my heart melt in my chest.

“Don’t take what I’m about to say out of context, which I know you will before I explain, but I need to say it—”

I whimpered, not able to contain the sound in my throat, but relaxed when Graham tightened his hold on me.

“It was selfish of me to act on my desire for you this morning, on a day important for you. But I can’t drum up the guilt. Everything we’ve shared and all that’s coming for us in the future, I’d never regret time spent together. Even if we rushed into intimacy

this morning.”

“Oh... oh, you don’t want to forget about our... well, our kiss. And having your mouth on my dick. I mean, it’s shocking the first time you do it, although you have one of your own. I mean, putting another man’s... well, you know, in your mouth is an intimate act and you have to care about someone in order to do—”

The soft press of his lips stopped my verbal diarrhea, and I sighed, grateful I hadn’t scared him off.

Despite my fear about dating and relationships, on a psychological level, I understood it wasn’t because I fell fast or my horrible taste in men. But to make myself vulnerable, let a man in and share my crazy life, exposed me in a way that made me not trust my decisions.

And then I met Graham. Our relationship was effortless.

There was no missing who I was; the over-sharing, emotional, clingy, touchy-feely man whose comments were more inappropriate than not. I didn’t have a brain-to-mouth filter, although my words never embarrassed or hurt anyone else because I rambled about myself when I became nervous. And through the weeks of spending every day together, Graham didn’t mind. Or at least I hadn’t alienated him, yet.

Of course, all of which I said aloud without conscious thought.

“Why does anything on your list have to be negative? It’s who you are. Before I met you, touch for me was casual and required. It wasn’t natural for me to hug anyone, much less allow myself to crave physical release, which this morning wasn’t,” Graham said.

“I didn’t think it was.” It was an honest observation.

Without another word, he turned with me in his arms and walked me down the hall to our bedroom. He'd drawn the blinds and lit the lemon sugar cookie candles, the flames flickering throughout the room. My eyes drooped as the comfort and warmth surrounded me. But as he laid me down, my eyes flew open and I reached for him.

The answering chuckle did nothing to ease the thoughts of Graham leaving me alone, but his actions did. He tucked me under the sheets, moving the comforter within arm's reach, and followed me in. I breathed easier when he embraced me.

"Do you think I'm becoming dependent on you?" I asked.

A growl rumbled up from his chest and became vocalized as his arms tightened around me. "No, you're independent and dazzling, and were so before you met me. I'm lucky because you allow me in your life. You give me permission to care for you when you need to eat or sleep, bringing out a side of me I'd buried deep inside. And you gave me time to contemplate what you meant to me. But by saying that, the possessive side of me wants to continue to take care of you, protect you, and when the time is right, tell you how I feel."

I opened my mouth, wanting to clarify a few things, but I yawned hard and my jaw cracked before tears welled up in my eyes. My thoughts became jumbled and after I wiped my eyes, they closed.

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 7:58 am

“Graham?”

“I’m not going anywhere, sweetheart. Sleep and then we’ll make dinner and talk.”

“Okay.”

It wasn’t the stillness of the room nor the smell of cookies that woke me, but I missed the warmth I’d gotten used to in the last few weeks when it wasn’t beside me anymore. I opened my eyes, breathing out a long breath when the familiar room came into view.

“You slept longer than I expected, but that’s good.”

I turned onto my back and noticed Graham leaning against the headboard, reading something on his phone.

“You didn’t have to stay in here the entire time, but I appreciate you being here as I came back into awareness.”

He held up his cell. “No worries. After you fell asleep, I texted Echo letting her know you were out cold and then your parents, who stopped the twins from coming over. Reo says there’s no guarantee about tomorrow. They’ll want to congratulate you when they see you next. And I’ve been reading. Did you know there is a wide variety of male-male romantic fiction? I downloaded several books and this one I’m reading is fascinating.”

I laughed and stretched, moaning aloud at the satisfying sensation when my back and

shoulder popped. “Yeah, I’ve read them for years. They melt my heart into a puddle when they have a wonderful happy ending. Did you get a steamy one?”

“I’ve never read a romance before, but since I’ve experienced you getting off from my touch, which took me over the edge, I would say the book is on point.”

Rather than going back to his reading, he leaned closer and kissed me, a brush of his lips against mine, and I melted. My stomach chose then to embarrass me and rumbled. But instead of being deterred, Graham smiled.

“Let’s go make dinner. What do you feel like tonight?”

“What about a pesto pasta mixed with toasted breadcrumbs and grated Parmesan along with cheesy garlic bread? The herb garden is growing out of control and I need to use the pine nuts before they go bad.”

At his nod, I scrambled out of bed and glanced down. “When did I get naked?”

Graham choked and faced me after he stood. “It’s unfortunate for me you’re not. But you shed your tee and sweats about a half an hour after you fell asleep, mumbling about being hot. You dropped back into bed, all of it without opening your eyes, and started snoring when your head hit the pillow.”

A loud scoff escaped my throat, followed by another one, and then another for good measure. “I... do... not... snore.”

He paused with a smile on his face. And it was then I realized the dramatic change in Graham since he’d come into my life. When I opened the door to the stranger on the other side, I couldn’t have fathomed the connection we shared or it growing into what it was.

It was the modest, everyday occasions when we cooked together, laughed at something stupid we watched, or talked into the night because we craved to learn everything about each other that brought us closer together. Our connection seemed everlasting.

Even in the loud times where Ri and Yu demanded Graham take part in board games and pouted when they lost, where mom and dad tried talking him into moving in with me, believing he wasted his money on rent for the place next door when he spent every night with me, or all the times Echo worked on embarrassing him with inappropriate sex questions or making up new and horrendous nicknames for him, I sensed Graham ingrain himself even more in my life.

I couldn't imagine living my life without him.

“Okay, you're freaking me out here. Do you need more sleep before we eat because you've shut down in front of me? The reason I'm not rushing you to the hospital is because I can see you breathing. Neko?”

I turned to him and blinked. “I realized something. You're not planning on leaving, right?”

His brows drew down in confusion, giving me a fierce look that never failed to send my pulse skyrocketing. “Are you asking me to leave?”

Making myself dizzy from the outlandish question that stopped my heart and the force I used when I shook my head, I said, “No! That isn't what I meant. I wanted... want... Fuck, I'm messing this up. Okay... okay, I'm—”

Not waiting for me as I fumbled with finding the right words, Graham cupped my cheek with his hand, sliding the other one down the naked skin on the side of my torso before snaking his arm around my back and tugging me closer. My breath

caught and held when he ducked his head, his rugged and handsome face filling my vision. I exhaled as his sharp gray eyes scanned my face; the purse of his lips, his sharp jaw, the furrowing of his eyebrows, all his thoughtful concentration on me. It was heady.

“Unless you’re asking me to leave, there’s not a force in this universe—”

“No, you leaving is the last thing I want. Graham... shit, why is trying to express what I feel for you so hard. No pun intended, I swear.”

He morphed from a fierce protector willing to fight even me if I had an inkling of doubt about us, to the lovable, sensual man who surprised me into silence when he swallowed me down in the shower.

“What do you want to tell me, sweetheart?”

With great courage and riding on the hope swelling in my chest at his sincere expression, I whispered, “I’m falling for you, Graham, because you’re impossible to resist. I tried to stop myself, with all honesty I did. When you told me about your ex, I lectured myself not to encourage the huge crush I was developing on you, but then we grew closer and I knew it was a lost cause. Yes, I can admit, although it’s been weeks since it happened, I manipulated you into staying over when you mentioned heading next door after our day together. But I’m thrilled you’ve spent every night since next to me, and even though you are closer to me than anyone in my life, I still didn’t allow myself to believe.”

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I blinked up at Graham, studying his face for any sign my admission drove him away from me.

With solemnity that had me holding my breath, he said, “Staying away from you would be a feat impossible, even for the gods. And I am mortal. There wasn’t a chance in hell after you aimed your smile at me. Not even putting up a fight when I saw you as a fucking sinful temptation, addicted before I kissed you. Yes, at first, I wouldn’t allow myself to admit my feelings for you, despite me being drawn back to you time and time again, but you’ve opened the floodgates.”

“Maybe it’s because I’ve bewitched you with my continued presence and you don’t feel...”

When he moved back and gave me one of his teasing smirks, I watched in silent fascination as his fingers reached up and removed the hair tie, letting his locks flow, and I fumbled over giving him another excuse for.... um... I couldn’t remember.

He walked toward the dresser and placed the band on top, inserting distance between us. Unable to stop my reaction, I sucked in a breath when he turned his attention back to me. The soft locks framed his face with streaks of ash blond running through his caramel tresses, becoming more defined around his temples, making him look roguish.

“What...” I cleared my throat and started again, “what are you doing there, Graham? Because I want to inform you, if my reaction and my high-pitched voice hadn’t made it clear, I’m about thirty-seconds from bounding over the bed and tackling you. I’m imagining holding you down, stripping you, and exploring every inch of your skin

with my mouth and tongue.”

The silence stretched between us, broken by my harsh breathing and punctuated by the periodic rumble coming from the older man separated from me by a king-sized bed. His eyes traced over my naked skin; chest, arms, legs, before he centered on my cock, struggling against the constraining confines of sturdy boxer briefs, anticipating what I’ve only dreamed would come next.

“You know, sweetheart, I’m not confused or under a spell. I know who I want.”

I held my breath as Graham thought about his next words.

“Would I scare you by admitting I’ve envisioned pinning you down flat on your back before I worked you open with my fingers, feeling your pretty hole flutter around me, before I removed them and fucked my dick deep inside you until you couldn’t take the stimulation any longer and released all over me?”

A protracted groan slash whimper escaped my throat, and I stood frozen to the spot as a detailed vision of Graham carrying out his desire played in my mind. Not remembering even moving, I scrambled onto the bed, lying in the middle with my head resting on two pillows, waiting.

“Oh, please, right now. I mean now, Graham!” I flinched at my demand and paused, before I said, “Sorry, I let my craving for you override my, well, you know, sanity. But I want you more than my next breath. Lube is in your nightstand drawer. Please.”

Rather than reaching for the requested item located within a foot of where he stood, he captured my gaze with a minuscule tilt of his lips. Then my heart stopped when he reached for the hem of his faded green tee and pulled it over his head, exposing his torso. Okay, I’d dreamed about touching his naked skin, wondering at all the hard planes and ridges I’d find, but nothing compared to the reality of Graham fucking

Norris.

“Are you okay, sweetheart?”

My gasp sounded loud, even to my ears. “Oh, thank the gods I didn’t choke on my tongue. But it was a near thing. Wow, you are... spectacular.”

My comment didn’t elicit the reaction I expected. Graham, instead of continuing with the strip tease or even pinching his nipples between his thumb and forefinger, bent and put his hands on his knees as a loud howl of laughter echoed through the room.

He continued for a minute and thirty-five seconds. I counted.

“This is what I was talking about. You, Neko, are a wonder.”

Something must’ve shown on my face because he crawled onto the bed until he held himself over me, staring into my eyes with a sparkle to his own and a wide, beautiful smile etched on his face.

I held myself back even though I wanted to reach out and caress his shoulders and chest.

Graham blew out a breath and became serious. “I’ve laughed more, spoken more, and lived more during my time with you than any other in my entire life. With you, I’m confident in myself, not doubting my emotions, or overthinking. When I’m with you, I’m the real me. Your protector, because I know you are my entire world. I’m the man who will love you with fierce intensity because you taught me everything I needed to know about connecting with another human being, and I’d give you forever if you’d have me.”

For once in my life, words escaped me. But needing him close, I wrapped my arms

around him, opening my hands on his back and tugged him down onto me. I searched for his lips and when he turned his head and captured mine in a scorching kiss, my body melted into the bed.

Something about seeing him shirtless with his nakedness pressed against mine escalated into scrambling to remove the rest of the offending material, his sweats and...

“Dear deities of perfection and beauty, is this a regular occurrence, you without underwear? And holy hotness, look at the cut of your hips, and the fucking trail... I can’t even.” I captured his gaze and held it in mine. “Please tell me this isn’t a dream? I won’t wake up to find that from the time we met until now is an elaborate figment of my imagination?”

The brilliant answering smile jolted me out of my delusion, tearing my attention from his face and down the taut muscles of his gorgeous form. But it was the impending kiss which snapped me back into reality. I watched in awe as he tilted his head, keeping eye contact as he lowered himself, an excruciating inch at a time, before his plush mouth left me gasping in pleasure.

He broke off, even as I clutched at him, desperate for his exquisite lips although I knew he offered me so much more. As his beard brushed against the sensitive skin around my throat, I moaned and leaned back, giving him access to whatever he wanted.

“You, my Neko, are temptation incarnate. The way your skin leaves an impression on my fingertips, as though I’d know who you are by your softness alone.”

He lifted my hand and pressed a kiss to my palm as my heart raced in my chest. The sincerity in which he displayed his awe at being able to touch me allowed me to realize what I craved.

“Graham?”

His eyes were unfocused as his head tilted in response. The seriousness of our declarations and the perceived luck at finding each other was the catalyst for my next demand.

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“Would you mind fucking me until I forget my name?”

He reared back, sitting on his thighs. I’m not ashamed to admit my focus shifted from his gorgeous face to the girth of his cock, curved up with the tip resting on his stomach. I swallowed. Earlier that morning in the shower, I’d lost my ability for coherent thought when our dicks slid together, which excused me from getting a good look at it. But now, I found it difficult to look anywhere else.

A whimper escaped my throat, and I palmed my length in my hand. Despite the embarrassment I should have felt staring at one part of his anatomy above all others, there wasn’t a way I could tear my gaze away from his magnificent—

“Neko, if you’re going to continue staring at me and licking your lips while those addictive sounds keep coming from your throat, I won’t be responsible for my actions.”

“Well, it’s a bit of a shock. And besides, I wasn’t hiding a... monster in my pants. You know the wondrous thing attached to you is bigger than my forearm, right?”

A smile lit up his face, and he shook his head. “I want to do something that I think you’ll like. Do you want to try?”

“Yes, please, for the love of all that is good and holy.”

With my permission, he looped his arms underneath my thighs and dragged me closer to him. The soft sheets against the heated skin of my back caused my spine to arch. Or then again, it might have been his touch. Whatever it was, I wanted more of

Graham.

My eyes widened as he lay in between my splayed legs, his thumbs rubbing circles along my inner thighs and moving toward the one spot I needed him to touch. What I predicted he would do flew out of my mind, along with every other cognitive thought or function, when he maneuvered my legs back until my knees neared my ears. The position curved my back and lifted my ass, leaving me exposed.

“Fuck, you’re so fucking hot like this.”

I responded with either a grunt or a desperate moan, not caring because Graham’s next move had my cock twitch in a frenzied need to come.

He flattened his tongue against my entrance and licked a wide swath across my hole and toward my taint, where he stiffened his tongue and I choked back any sound threatening to escape. He trailed back down, and when his tongue swirled around my pucker, I whimpered for more, becoming a panting mess.

The tip of his finger circled my entrance and sent shivering pulses of bliss through me. When he added a second to tease me open, I held my breath, certain I could lose consciousness. But when he licked inside me as his fingers held me open, his tongue delving in without hesitation as he stroked my hip with his free hand, I shouted his name and came on my chest.

Graham stilled and watched, stuck in the same position with his tongue inserted in me. When he groaned, my dick spluttered out another pulse of come at the sound alone.

“Fuckity fuck!” I became eloquent right after my brain oozed out the head of my cock.

My entire body froze when he lifted his free hand and ran his finger through the pool on my stomach, examining it with deep contemplation. I paused my internal freak out and observed his movements in silence and wide-eyed anticipation until he sucked the digit into his mouth.

“You—”

“Uh-uh, nope, no talking because I can’t handle your deep, sexy, Barry White voice right now because I’m not coming again until you’re deep inside me.”

He snapped his mouth closed, but there was a definite smirk lifting the side of his face.

Breathing a sigh of relief when Graham flicked open the lube and coated his fingers, I groaned and pushed my hips down when he slid one inside. I watched him; memorizing every nuanced expression until two of his fingers were in. He brushed against my prostate and my hips shot up, seeking more stimulation as my eyes slammed closed.

Time blurred as my body hummed in a constant swell of bliss, taking me higher and higher. My world centered on Graham; his touch, the ragged sound of his breathing, and his complete concentration on mastering my body and denying his own pleasure.

“Ready?”

I nodded, unable to find my voice, but gasped when he lifted me with an ease I found myself in awe of and maneuvered both of us, settling himself on his back. Thinking he wanted me to ride him, I lowered my arms and legs.

“No, sweetheart, drape yourself back against me.”

“What?”

He lowered me onto my back, our torsos crisscrossed, and I moaned when his next breath washed over my lips. When his cock brushed the crease of my ass, I stopped figuring out where he wanted me and rubbed myself against him without shame. His lips pressed against mine and when I blinked at him, the desperation in his gray orbs made me realize what he wanted, which was what I needed.

I sat up, reaching for his lubed cock with one hand and guided him to my eager hole. We both moaned as he pressed past my puckered entrance and with the amount of preparation, he sank inside with ease. My breath caught as he stretched me, but I soon realized the width of his cock skimmed against the one spot that made me shiver and beg, driving the burn away.

Once he bottomed out, Graham guided me back, his one arm holding me around the waist, as his breaths came out in pants. I turned my head toward him, awed by the carnal position we found ourselves in, and my heart stuttered. He looked... shattered and completely whole at the same time.

“You’re magnificent, Graham. I’m surrounded by you and I’ve never felt safer or more loved.”

His lips crashed into mine and we lost ourselves in a searing kiss. I sucked in a breath as his hands landed on my hips and squeezed. When his cock rocked back and forth, and the tension built inside me, I sobbed my pleasure into his mouth.

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The position was intimate, but it also allowed Graham freedom to maneuver me. He lifted my hips and on the next stroke; he slammed up into me as he forced my body down, the resulting buzz making my cock twitch.

“I can’t get enough of you,” Graham said.

His hips rolled up, driving inside me, as I mumbled words of encouragement. Or at least I hoped they made sense. Tingles of sizzling heat throbbed throughout my untried body as I clenched against his cock.

“Oh, fuck, yes, harder, Graham. Take me and make me yours.” The thrill of being fucked, letting go and being controlled as he took pleasure from my hole and body, turned me into a filthy-mouthed slut.

“Your cock sliding inside me, stretching my hole, punishing my prostate... better than the maddening daydreams that took me over the edge as I palmed myself in the shower after sleeping in your arms. Do you know how many times I wanted to swallow your cock and moan in encouragement until you shot down my throat?”

My head dropped back on his shoulder with a sob of gratification when his hold tightened and his thrusts sped up. My legs spread wider and when he drove himself up I rolled my hips, feeling him swelling inside me, leaving me a shivering mess.

He grunted and said, “Is this what you wanted, sweetheart. My cock, opening you wide as you clench against me.”

I closed my eyes and gave him a filthy moan in response.

Dazed from the constant thrum of need, he sat us both up and flipped me around until I straddled his thighs, him still deep inside me as he stood. With each step he took toward the chaise in the corner, my cock rubbed against his taut stomach and his dick bounced deeper inside me, almost pushing me over the edge.

As he sat us down facing each other, I registered the softness of the fabric as my back brushed against the chair. I glanced down, noting my legs stretched wide over his open thighs, his one knee bent on the lounge itself. His other foot, planted on the floor, gave him leverage. Graham's new intimate position allowed a closeness where I peered into the depths of his gaze as my arms cloaked his shoulders.

I pressed my mouth to his and in a breathy moan, said, "I won't last much longer. I can't take your obscene descriptions of me wrapped around your hard, aching member."

A growl echoed throughout the bedroom as my ass ground into his cock, sparking a blinding pleasure, making me cry out. I repeated the movement, and barked out a curse when Graham rocked back and forth, punching his shaft at the perfect angle which started the familiar tingle in my balls.

"Fuck, love, I'm going to come all over you. I'm going to squeeze you so tight you won't have a choice other than come inside me. And I'm going to feel your cock expanding... fuck, you're so fucking hot."

Graham kissed me before he pulled back and panted out, "Me taking you bare, fucking my come inside you, and watching your gaping hole take everything I give you—"

My head dropped back, and I screamed his name as my body tensed and shivered. After the initial shock of my unexpected release, I forced my eyes open as I marked Graham, watching the streaks of white coat his perfect skin and wiry chest hair.

When a rope landed on his nipple, I lifted my hand and flicked it with my thumb.

Graham's hands scrambled up to cup my cheeks, holding me close and licking inside my mouth as I absorbed his moans. I clutched at him and sank down on his cock, reveling in the swell of his dick as it pulsed inside me, coating me, and marking me as his.

Has anyone died from such an intensive orgasm? I guess the answer was no by the way my heart tried to beat out of my chest and the harsh breaths ripped in and out of my throat. Exhaustion weighed me down and I sagged in Graham's arms and mumbled something against his neck.

"Neko?"

Unable to answer, I sighed and promptly fell asleep.

Chapter 6

Graham

A soft soundbrought me awake in an instant. I blinked open my eyes and glanced down. Neko lay in my arms with a possessive hand on my thigh and the other splayed around my forearm, locked around his chest.

Yesterday changed everything for me, both in fundamental and surprising ways.

Happiness thrummed through me as my eyes traced over Neko's beautiful features. The subtle brush of his eyelashes against the softest skin I've ever touched, the purse of his lips no longer swollen but still tempting, and his unruly hair giving him an ethereal beauty. Pride swelled in my chest because this exquisite man accepted me into his life, allowed me to love him, and shared his family and friends with me.

“What are you thinking about?” Neko asked.

Not able to keep the smile off my face, I leaned down and kissed his cheek. “Should I tell you? I mean, you fell asleep on me after our mutual orgasms.”

He turned in my arms, releasing my thigh, but not my arm. He pressed my forearm to his chest and shivered as the cool morning air skimmed over him. I reached for the comforter and tucked it around both of us.

“You’re always cold,” I observed aloud.

“Not when you’re sleeping with me. I love you’re my personal furnace, and bonus points for me this morning because you’re naked. So am I, but that’s not as important. How long did we sleep?”

I smiled. “Well, after cleaning you up, which I can say you were most unhelpful with because as soon as I headed to the bathroom, you curled into a tight ball and wouldn’t unfurl even for a warm washcloth. I managed, after warming you with the heated blanket, and then dried you with a fluffy towel. By the time I tugged you close, it was about midnight. It’s ten now.”

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“I’m surprised no one’s encroached on us. Oh, shit, I take it back, every horrible thing I’ve done and every snide thing I’ve ever said. I’ve opened Pandora’s box and The Dark Prince of Pain will bring his Cenobites... now that I think about it, the twins are worse.”

The loud pounding on the door startled Neko, who squeaked and tightened his grip on my arm. Despite his stature, he had a strength which surprised me when he yanked me on top of him and put a finger to his lips. “If we stay quiet, they’ll believe we aren’t here.”

An indelicate snort escaped me before Neko placed two hands over my mouth, and with wide eyes, whipped his head back and forth.

“Listen Graham, love of my life, my juju-bee, you cutie patootie, and other cloyingly disgusting nicknames I will dream up later when my brain kicks back online when your nakedness... what was I saying. Oh yeah, I do not want anyone in my family to see me in the buff. Other than the incriminating baby pictures of me in the bath that mom thinks are cute. They are not. And not to mention your fine self. I do not share, even if it’s... you... you’re... you are... Where was I?”

“Where you and Graham are naked and he’s on top of you,” Yu said.

We both froze; me because I was so enamored with how Neko’s mind worked and the fact that yes, I was on top of him and felt every inch of his skin pressed to my own. I dismissed the worry of being caught by his family in a compromising position, because it didn’t bother me. I found my dream and my future, everything else was superfluous.

“Okay, which one of you criminals-in-training learned how to pick a lock?”

“That would be me?” Echo laughed at Neko’s directed glare.

With reluctance, I moved to Neko’s side, keeping the blanket up by our necks, as we both stared at the gathering near our bedroom door. The twins both smiled at us with devilish smirks and Echo held herself up by gripping the dresser, bent at the waist, the other hand pressed over her stomach as she howled in delight.

“What’s going on?” Reo asked.

Neko lifted his head and placed his mouth close to my ear before he spoke. “Oh, this is perfect. The morning after I lose my virginity in the most torrid experience of my life, and I mean scorching and unbelievably fucking hot. Ahem. Anyway, despite wanting to experience it again because truth be told you are adept at making me come so hard, I passed out, but we can’t. Because we’re stuck in a nightmare and I’m getting hard again. Fuck... that’s wonderful!”

His exasperation at the situation kept the smile widening until my face ached. “Then I won’t tell you what I planned to do to your beautiful and pliable body this morning. We’re going to wait until we’re alone.”

“You fucking tease,” he said. Although his eyes narrowed in a glare, he wasn’t mad.

Neko’s voice rose as he asked, “What would it take for you, my loving family who loves me more than words could ever express, to leave us alone until next weekend?”

Curious, I glanced over and the twins were shaking their heads while Reo and George gave us warm smiles. Echo, holding both hands over her stomach, rolled her eyes.

“Nope, you promised us cherry cheesecake stuffed waffles along with chorizo

breakfast tacos.”

“I never promised.”

“Oh, shit. Yu’s eyes are watering, she’s about to burst into tears, sweetheart.”

“Don’t let her manipulate you,” Neko growled.

A tear escaped and ran down her cheek as she sniffled, and I freaked. “Oh, no, Mayhem, it’s okay. If you give us ten minutes, we’ll make you breakfast and I’ll froth the milk for your coffee the way you like.”

With a smile that reached her eyes, Yu wiped the tears from her cheeks before she grabbed her twin and escorted her out of the bedroom, followed by Neko’s parents. Echo stood there with a brow raised, waiting for something. When I realized what, I shook my head.

“Despite your earlier suggestion, there was no recording last night and no, we’re not practicing for job opportunities. I was out of my mind once he was naked... um, never mind. We’ll be down soon.”

“I’m discouraged by your attitude, oh naughty hot one,” Echo chastised, but then smiled at Neko, “But I’m proud of you, sweetie. No judgements, but did you bugger him good or was it the other way around?”

“We—”

“Yeah, interesting tidbit we learned last night. I think Neko’s a Dom and I’m more than a little submissive. Well, if the spanking and the ball gag were anything to go by.” I shrugged.

Without answering, her face became a mask of pure horror, and she stumbled out of the bedroom and down the stairs. We watched in silence as she left.

I glanced down at Neko when a shriek of laughter escaped his throat. Observing his happiness, which made him glow, becoming more radiant in my eyes, broke down another layer I'd built up against the world.

“Oh, you said it with a straight face, too. And now I can't breathe,” he gasped for a few seconds before he added, “fuck, I love you so much.”

“Well, that's good because you're not getting rid of me.”

I lifted him and walked toward the shower. With Neko's miles-long naked skin on display and his dick perking up in interest, I needed a distraction before we forgot about our visitors and became lost in each other.

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“Well, at least they didn’t show up last night after your nap.”

Neko glared. “I want to point out...” His eyes traced down my body from my shoulders, chest, stomach, concentrating on my cock for longer than any other place, before moving back up, losing his complete train of thought.

I used the advantage of his shocked state and turned on the water, waiting for the right temperature before I guided the younger man underneath the spray. While he studied me, I washed his hair, being careful of his eyes, and reached for a washcloth on the bench seat. I scrubbed him down, even being rewarded with a moan as the water washed the soap from his body and down the drain.

His hands landed on my chest and I sucked in a breath as he splayed his fingers, the touch hot and pulsing, until he bent them and clawed at my chest. The bite of his nails against my skin drew an instant reaction, and I hissed out his name.

“Do you like that?”

“Fuck, sweetheart, I can’t explain how much.”

“It... it doesn’t hurt?”

I shook my head. “The sharp sensation snapped me back from the hazy desire your touch draws out of me, making me crave more.”

“Huh, so, if I were to ask you to say... spank my ass as I ride your cock, or tease my nipples—”

I devoured his mouth, cutting off his suggestions and saving my sanity. But as he moaned, I jerked back and panted.

“You’re trying to kill me, aren’t you?”

Tapping his fingers down my chest, he blinked up at me, an innocent expression on his face. “Why, pookie, I would never do that. Besides, I ensnared you in my trap, you cuddle monster you, why the fuck would I get rid of you?”

“You can’t request that I spank you when we’re about to, you know, interact with people you’re related to and love you as much as I do.”

“Okay, sugar lips. Let’s dry off and get dressed. I promise I’ll behave. Until tonight, then all bets are off.”

As we walked into the kitchen, Ri said, “About time.”

“Hey, it’s his birthday. He needs more time to get down the stairs at thirty-four.”

A chorus of ‘happy birthdays’ and a whirlwind of hugs greeted me. Reo promised to take me shopping in the afternoon for whatever present I desired, no matter how long it took.

During a break in the celebrations, I leaned over and whispered in Neko’s ear, “You’re a horrible boyfriend.”

“Yes, yes, I am snookums. But it’s a day to celebrate.”

“Graham, your phone’s been buzzing for the last fifteen minutes and it’s driving me crazy because I can’t figure out the code to unlock it and I’m without the right equipment to hack it,” Ri said.

“At least you’re honest about it, Chaos. And the code is zero three thirty-one ninety-eight.”

“Damn it, I should have guessed you’d choose Neko’s birthday. You’re sappy like that, aren’t you, big guy?”

Not even able to deny it, I shrugged and went to grab the waffle mix we’d made last weekend with the knowledge the twins requested Neko make them the second weekend of every month. The chorizo tacos were a surprise, but since Neko stocked everything, I knew we’d have what we needed.

“Can you check to see whoever is trying to bother me?”

Yu snatched it from Ri’s hand and her tongue shot out as she sang out a taunt. When she entered the code, her eyes widened.

“Grahamster, you have like thirty e-mails. Is that normal?” Ri asked, peering at the phone over her twin’s shoulder.

“Sometimes, but a flood of them on a Sunday is abnormal. Can you read one?”

“Dear Mr. Norris, your recent actions aren’t representative of our future business and we’re ending your retainer. Although it’s been several years since we last worked together, we wanted to inform you we will not be extending you another contract in the future.”

Yu paused and tapped through the emails as I stood there, wondering what actions they were writing about. I was on retainer with several dozen companies. The initial contract I signed with all of them states they base future negotiations on the ever changing business environment. It sounded as though they ended the retainer and wanted nothing further to do with me because of an unspecified reason.

“Can they do that? Not laying out a defined reason they are letting you go?” George asked.

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I started whisking the waffle mix with the eggs, vanilla extract, buttermilk, and cinnamon. Neko's stomach rumbled, followed closely by mine, reminding me we hadn't eaten the night before.

"Well, they're at-will contracts, so they can release me without a reason."

Yu cleared her throat. When I glanced up and spotted her devastated look, I stopped mixing and strode over to her, pulling her into a hug. "What is it, Mayhem?"

Her voice broke when she said, "They are all similar to the one I read. The emails, I mean. What's going on?"

I shrugged, not concerned. "Can I see my phone for a second?"

When she handed it over, I scrolled through the emails. Most of them informing me they regret their decision, but I forced their hand. All except the last one, Mr. Ito from the manufacturing company I'd worked with several weeks ago, who assured me I earned my place and he'd engage my services in the future. I handed it back to Yu.

"It's not serious. Yes, something happened prompting them to send me notices of termination, but I've done nothing wrong. Don't worry about it."

Neko wrapped his arms around me from the back and I turned, searching his face.

"Sweetheart?"

When he sniffed, I cupped his face and searched his tear-filled eyes. "Why would

they do this to you? I've heard you during the meetings, you're the most professional one there. Without you, they'd become ultra-masculine dipshits."

I laughed at his apt description, but I needed to reassure him. "Sweetheart, my job isn't like yours. I don't have an emotional connection to it because I work with different people each time. And to be honest, it's not like I enjoy what I do. But I majored in business and I'm taking advantage of my degree."

"Do you think it's because of the stream yesterday?" Echo asked.

We turned toward her voice to find her eyes glued to her own phone, glaring at the device. "No, I don't see how coming out on a stream would affect—"

"That fucking troll," Echo shouted.

Neko stiffened in my arms as he shot a worried look toward his best friend.

"Is this my fault?"

A chorus of shouted denials rent the air, and Neko flinched. He turned to face me, his expression shattered.

"I dragged you in the room when you were trying to drop off food and didn't even prevent the nosy questions from coming."

With a shake of my head, I said, "Neko, you could ask me to do almost anything and I wouldn't say no to you. You did nothing wrong yesterday during your stream. If I didn't want to be on camera, I would've told you and I know you would've respected my decision."

In a voice which broke my heart and I vowed never to hear it from him again, he said,

“But I didn’t even ask you.”

“Neko, sweetheart, I refuse to let your ex or anyone else ruin the perfect day we shared yesterday. It was fun, to be on your stream and seeing you in your element, having fun and interacting with the people who support you. I wouldn’t change anything about it. If a company doesn’t want to work with me because I came out and admitted my feelings for you, then fuck them. Who wants to represent a company with a narrow-minded, fucked up ideal?”

Neko thought about it for a long moment before he took a deep breath and relaxed his tense shoulders, even granting me with a smile.

“You’re right. I can’t control how others perceive a situation. But I can control this. You should stop renting the place next door and move in with me. I’m not telling, but asking. You can save on a place you’re never at and well, I…”

“Okay.” I shrugged. The decision wasn’t a difficult one to make, and it wasn’t as though I hadn’t thought about it before. But if I asked to move in, it might pressure Neko into a situation he’d agree to without serious thought. I would never take away his choices.

A swell of pride and love threatened to burst out of my chest when he cupped my cheeks in a tender gesture and pressed a slight kiss to my mouth. “Thank you, love.”

I leaned my forehead against his. “There’s nothing in the world I wouldn’t do for you.”

Echo asked, “How did you know I was talking about Donovan?”

With a quick kiss, Neko walked around the kitchen, snagging eggs, white cheddar, potatoes, and chorizo from the fridge, before yanking out several sprigs of cilantro

from the herb garden. Once depositing those items, he snagged tomatoes, red onion, avocados, and corn tortillas from the pantry.

“You, my best friend in the entire world, never kept an emotion to yourself. Who else could set you off with little effort?”

“Don’t you want to know what he did?”

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He held up a finger before he poured himself a cup of strong black coffee and drank it down.

“Go ahead.”

“He hacked Graham’s social media—”

“What social media?” I asked.

“Wait, how do you know it was Donovan?” Neko asked.

“I found the IP and traced it.”

Something sounded sketchy when she trailed off and started tapping away on her phone. She held it out for us to see. The account was under my name, but the photos linked to the accounts were old ones of me and my ex, Hensley.

“Why?” I asked.

Echo’s eyes scanned the text and spoke as she read. “This says she’s your wife and you’ve admitted, in a public and definitive way, you’re cheating on her.”

“Do you know her?” Neko asked.

“Yeah, she’s my ex.”

Neko turned wide-eyed toward me, a look of shock on his face, before he scoffed. His

disbelief turned into hysterical laughter as he pointed at the screen. Echo turned the phone around and stared at the picture.

“Holy shit balls, hot tamale, you have great taste in women. She’s gorgeous. Platinum blonde hair, what, at least five eleven, long legs, and... are you fucking kidding me, she’s a model. Like, Paris, London, New York kind of famous.” The twins and Neko’s parents walked behind Echo as they continued to search through the fake accounts.

Although in the privacy of my own thoughts, I could admit my fantasies in the past weren’t exactly sexual. For me, it wasn’t the outer package which attracted me to them in the first place; it was a connection to one person I didn’t share with anyone else.

When I met Hensley, she wore a form-fitting dress, six inch cherry-red heels, but it wasn’t her outfit which drew me. It was when she’d lifted a wriggling puppy into her arms and let the little thing lick her face while she laughed before she landed on her ass as she continued her cooing. I approached her, and we talked about our separate childhood dreams to adopt a dog, but it turned out neither of our parents allowed such ‘nonsense’ as mom called it. That had started our relationship. And less than a year later, we parted as friends.

But Neko, by being himself and laughing to near hysteria as his eyes darted between me and Echo, was the one who elicited an entire side of me I never believed I’d see. By being himself, he had me believing in soul mates, forever after, along with all the good, mundane, and difficult times to come.

“Sweetheart, you need to breathe.”

“I... can’t. You dated... you... her and you.”

When kissing him didn't work, I hauled him close and whispered in his ear, "You are my forever, Neko."

He sobered at my words and allowed me to continue.

"Even before we admitted what was palpable for weeks, I knew we belonged together. You are the light and laughter in my life, and although we're far from knowing everything about each other, I envision nights lounging in bed or snuggling on the couch as I discover the sum of what makes you, you. We have our entire lives to catch up on all the time we missed before we met. And I, for one, know not to ignore fate when someone as dazzling as you—"

The doorbell echoed throughout the house. "I didn't know you even had one of those."

Neko glanced at me, wide-eyed, and said, "Me either. Anyone who comes to the house are those who already have keys. We don't order takeout and they drop the groceries at the back door. No clue who that might be."

"We'll see who it is," the twins responded.

"Um, is that a good idea?" I asked.

George, without a word, strode from the room to monitor whoever stood at the door.

I leaned over and whispered in Neko's ear, "We'll finish our discussion later. I prefer after you're naked and panting. But know you're mine as much as I'm yours. Nothing will change that."

"Okay, I'll stop getting all teary-eyed at, well, everything."

“It happens whenever there’s a threat. Instead of getting mad, you have an emotional response. It’s natural.”

When he relaxed and smacked a kiss against my cheek, we both turned back to breakfast. I finished mixing the batter and started creaming the cream cheese, lemon juice, powdered sugar, and sour cream together. With that done, I opened one of the homemade jars of cherry preserves, warming the contents in a pan on the stove.

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By the time I finished, Neko diced the potatoes and blanched them, grated the cheese, and whisked the eggs. He held the skillet, ready to start the chorizo, when we heard footsteps come back into the kitchen.

“It must have been—”

A familiar feminine voice cut through whatever I was going to say. “Graham Norris, as I live and breathe.”

The effect on me was instantaneous. I reached for Neko and whirled him around in front of me, using him as a barrier between me and Hensley, who stood there in a pale gold designer pant suit, killer heels, and a matching trench draped over her arm. A gold and black clutch swung next to her as she tilted her head and graced me with a mischievous grin.

But it was Neko who’d snagged my attention, stiff in my arms, as I clutched him against my chest. He held up the unopened sausage tube in one hand and in the other, a skillet. When he glanced back at me, his eyes were wide and his mouth gaping open and closed, similar to a fish out of water, and I lost it.

Slinging my arms around his chest, I buried my face against the back of his neck and shook both of us as I cackled. The look, shock with a mixture of awe and a flare of jealousy, morphed his face into the cutest expression I’ve ever witnessed.

Neko huffed out an outraged breath. “Cupcake, I hate to break this to you, but a fucking model has graced us with her presence and I’m holding a tube of ground Mexican sausage and a frying pan like a dumb shit, while you use me as a human

shield. Why the fuck are you laughing?”

Along with my deep laughter, a tinkling sound joined me and we both glanced over at Hensley, leaning against the counter with a wide smile on her face as she studied both of us.

Echo, materializing out of the ether for all I knew, stood with a steaming cup of coffee in her hands and narrowed her eyes at Hensley.

“Please state your business. Because if it’s getting Graham back, I’ll stop you. Trust me, I’m nastier than my five-foot ten-inch height, glassy, unfocused eyes, and messy hair might suggest. Then there is Neko’s mom, Reo, who I’ve seen claw a bitch’s eyes out like Uma Thurman in Kill Bill. I would give an example of her husband George, but he wouldn’t hurt a fly...”

“Nope, I wouldn’t. Besides, if Neko wants his man, he’s the one who’ll have to go full-bitch, not me.”

“What—”

“Hey, why didn’t you pour the rest of us some coffee?” Ri asked.

“Oh, before all that, there are the twins, who might look innocent, but know more ways to hide a body dreamed up from their twisted imaginations alone than even the most talented serial killers.”

“Don’t you fucking encourage them, E! You know they’ll take pride in that,” Neko hissed.

As he poked the sausage toward his best friend in order to make a point, Neko glanced down and huffed out his frustration before he dropped everything on the

counter.

“Too late,” they said in unison.

“Stop doing that. You two are worse than the twins in *The Shining* and you’re not even identical,” Neko complained.

Not knowing Hensley like I did, they stared at her, the placid expression on her face not giving away any emotion.

“You’re not freaked out?” Echo asked.

“By what?”

“Huh,” Echo murmured.

I found myself so ingrained in Neko’s life that I understood Echo’s one word held a wealth of meaning. She walked back toward the kitchen table, taking a deep inhale of the coffee in front of her before she drank down a colossal gulp, and rested her head in her hand.

“Great, now that we’ve moved past the embarrassing ‘the new love interest’s family is nuts and they don’t mind showing it,’ would you like to stay for breakfast... I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name,” Neko said.

“Oh, it’s Hensley Drake-Bannerman. It’s nice to meet you, Neko-Ren.” Her hand shot out and Neko moved on instinct. When she squeezed, he let out a scant squeak.

“Um, you know my name?”

“Yeah, I’m a total fan. I’ve watched all of your videos over the past year, but I’m a

few weeks behind. I have to say you're more gorgeous in person, which shouldn't be surprising. You have perfect skin."

"Thank you," both his parents said.

"Um, I shouldn't say thank you because you are a goddess and you have a history with Graham, which makes me feel catty toward you. But I'm also confused because you know who I am and you've given me two of the best compliments of my life."

Neko gasped when she beamed at him and yanked him in for a fierce hug. He stiffened in her hold for a few seconds before he lifted his arms and circled them around her back. His head tilted against her shoulder before inhaling. And then he moaned.

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“Nope. Nope, no, no, no, you... Hensley!”

I eased Neko out of her arms and without worrying about an audience or my ex; I captured his lips in a searing kiss. If I wasn't noble and my conscience hadn't nagged at me to feed my man, I would have whisked Neko upstairs and laid my claim to him in the most primal way possible.

“Oh, yuck, please, not in front of the children,” Yu whined.

“I'm hungry. Are we ever going to eat?” Ri complained.

“Good job, husband of mine. We make fine looking kids,” Reo chuckled.

“That we do,” George sounded proud.

There was a loud snore from Echo before her head dropped off her hand. By some miracle, her forehead landed on the hand flat against the table, before she continued snoring.

And then there was Hensley, who stood there, cackling at the top of her lungs.

Fuck my life.

Yet, with the man I wanted above all others in my arms, it was perfect.

Chapter 7

Neko-Ren

I floated through the next several minutes as Graham directed me toward the stove and I cooked up breakfast. I swayed into Graham whenever he stood close, because his last kiss blew my mind. He left me panting with a semi I struggled to hide in a pair of leggings. But the hoodie draped past my thighs, covering me. With desire thrumming through me, I'd almost forgotten about the reason for his distraction.

It was a good thing I had years of experience with cooking, because after dicing up three avocados and red onions while sautéing the sausage, I glanced down to find the food laid out, ready to serve, and I couldn't remember doing so. When we sat down, Graham finished with the dozens of waffles, unplugged the iron, and snagged the maple syrup from the fridge. I only remembered his ex when she sat next to me.

I blinked at her. "Oh, Hensley, I'm sorry. I didn't ask you if there was any food you can't eat."

Her plucked and perfect eyebrows furrowed, and she asked, "Is this because you think I starve myself?"

"No, I'm not insinuating anything, although I've known you for about an hour and all that I've gleaned is that you smell fucking fantastic and your face is symmetric and enchanting. The reason I asked is that I don't want to find out the hard way along with the added fun of an epinephrine auto-injector in the thigh that cilantro makes your throat close up, leaving you gasping for breath. Full disclosure, wheezy sounds freak me out, and I'm telling you now I'd pass out before we could rush you to the hospital or call for an ambulance. I'm shit during an emergency."

"Isn't that the fucking truth? You don't want Neko by your side when you're dying. Graham would be calm. And the twins would demand the job of jabbing you in the thigh. So, if you are allergic to cilantro, by all means," Echo growled.

I blinked at my best friend and noticed the irritability coming off her in waves. “I love you too, E.”

Her answering smile made me relax.

“Quite a dramatic speech, but no, I’m not allergic.”

“Thank fuck, because we can eat now. Right?” Ri scowled at me.

“Yes, Chaos, we can eat. Here are the waffles your brother promised you,” Graham smirked, passing the plate over to the twins.

The multitude of tacos created, scarfed, and moaned over made my head spin and in the middle of the melee, I stood to make another carafe of coffee and started another set of waffles. By the time we finished eating, I’d drooped against Graham as he rubbed my back in a soothing way.

My average charity streams were anywhere from four to five hours long, but with yesterday’s clocking in at eight and a half hours, exhaustion made my movements slow and reckless. Even with the four-hour nap and the entire night’s sleep.

Curiosity was the one thing that kept me alert.

“How did you know Graham was here?”

Hensley smiled. “His parents called me Saturday night and weren’t making sense, saying something about him outing himself and a younger boyfriend. I told Charles he was mistaken, but Holly insisted. I was in New York and since it’s an hour and a half drive, I headed this way after the fashion shoot. They told me Graham’s home address, but the place was dark with no sign of life. I peeked through the window and noticed he doesn’t even have a couch. I figured I knock on the neighbor’s doors and I

lucked out.”

“It’s because he’s lived here since they met,” Ri said.

“What? You... talk to my parents? And they know where I live?”

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“Yeah, I first spoke to them two months after we started dating. I was curious because you never talked about them. We’ve spoken every few months since then.”

I studied Graham’s face for any signs of distress or anger.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m surprised. But then again, I’m not. Why didn’t you tell me you spoke to them? Or asked me about our relationship?”

“You’re not open with your emotions and anytime I brought up family, you changed the subject or walked away. It was the way you were about everything in our relationship. Anything you didn’t want to talk about, you’d shut down and I didn’t get anywhere, even more so if I pushed. When we broke up, they told me they worried you would end up alone and miserable.”

There was a pause as Hensley studied Graham’s face. “Huh.”

“What?”

“Let me guess? You’re nothing like that with Neko here. You told him about your parents...”

“The morning after they woke up on the couch, leaving behind their man juices because of their all-night gay sex marathon, which Neko hasn’t replaced even though we agreed it’s disgusting,” Ri said.

“Nothing happened on the couch.” My words did nothing to mitigate the inscrutable stares we were getting from the family.

“But you had sex last night, which makes me so proud, so proud,” Echo sniffed.

“Yeah, Neko lost is virginity. Woo hoo,” Yu taunted.

“How do you know that, you evil miniature—”

Graham kept his eyes open as he slammed his mouth down on mine. Without breaking contact, he murmured against my lips, “Words hurt, sweetheart, don’t be mean.”

I blinked at our weird position, forgetting all about the constant embarrassment of my family knowing too much about my life, and smiled against his lips. “Does this mean you’re done with breakfast and ready to kick everyone out and head upstairs for some naked fun time?”

“What about the Donovan problem? You never answered me earlier,” Echo said.

The man I wanted to see naked, seduce, and fuck to within an inch of our lives, growled at the reminder of my ex doing stupid shit and lifted me onto his lap and surrounded me with his warmth. Since I was sitting with my legs draped over his thighs, I buried my face into his neck and breathed in his spicy scent.

“You two are sweet together,” Hensley said.

“Thank you,” I murmured.

“What has he done? Created several fake social media accounts with old pictures? There’s nothing I can do about that, and they aren’t incriminating. If he wants to

prove that I've only dated women, I supposed he's managed it," Graham added.

"Despite the rumor going around that you're married and cheating on a supermodel, he might track you down and hurt Neko," Echo sounded worried.

"The room where Neko records hasn't changed, other than a few gaming and movie souvenirs he's added through the years, so the fucker knows where he lives. If he's stupid enough to show his face, Neko won't be within shouting distance of the man, because I'm never far from him. And I promise to call you and wait to kill him until after you arrive. Then we'll decide where to bury the body."

Ri cleared her throat as Yu gave Graham a malevolent smile.

"We don't want to kill him. There are much more humiliating and life-destroying ways we can get back at him. Like... I know his middle name and his social security number, along with his credit score, every debt he's accumulated over the past ten years, along with his weird addiction with 'beanie babies.' He's spent close to a quarter million dollars on this hobby, all of which he displays in his bedroom. He even has a sleep schedule where he rotates them out on a week by week basis," Yu added.

The twins turned their heads and did some sort of twin-speak, before Ri suggested, "It would be a shame if his house burned down."

I lifted my head from Graham's shoulder and let out a tremendous yawn I covered with my hand. But my eyes watered for a moment, and using a finger, I wiped the tears that leaked.

"You two are the most brilliant and conniving minds of the century. Should I expect a knock on the door with some government agent coming to recruit you for some covert, unauthorized, clandestine, Jason Bourne shit?"

“Maybe.”

I glanced at Echo, who sat back with her arms crossed over her chest, a satisfied smirk on her face.

“Wait. Does he still live in West Hartford?” Echo asked.

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“Yeah, he never left. He still has the restraining order against him, but he lives on the other side of town working as an accountant for a furniture manufacturer. I’ve tracked his phone from time to time, and it doesn’t come within fifteen miles of us,” Ri answered.

Graham stiffened underneath me and I glanced at him, worried at the stormy look on his face. His focus was internal, and for a few minutes, I let him think through his idea. When he caught my gaze, I nodded, wanting him to tell us his conclusion.

“Has he been in a relationship since their breakup?” Graham asked.

“Two since Neko, but they didn’t stick around for longer than a month. The most recent ended this summer. Before you ask, no hacking involved. His exes were vocal on their social media about his out-of-control behaviors and that’s made him stay away from them.”

“Well, shit, not what I wanted to hear. He’s focused back on Neko. But since he hasn’t broken the restraining order and we can’t prove he created my fake account—”

“Yes, we can,” Ri said.

“Not by legal means, we can’t. If we report him and say we have proof, he’ll know where the information came from and expose you. Neko should call to report this incident, because it might violate his restraining order. But in the meantime, we need to document everything and if anyone were to come across him, call the cops and get somewhere safe.”

“How do you know so much about this?” Echo asked.

“I contacted a lawyer.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I was playing a hunch. He didn’t seem the type to be logical enough to move on, and he played his hand by posting about me and not Neko. I’m guessing, although I can’t verify, he found out about me, contacted the companies I worked with, which is easy since my work history is online, and gave them the information about my supposed ‘wife’ and the stream last night. Which means his obsession ramped up after learning about me. I’m a threat to his happiness.”

“Well, that’s fucked up,” Hensley said.

Finished talking about my ex and his motives, I stood. Today was my partner’s birthday, and I wanted to do something special for him.

“Mom, dad? Can I see you in the living room?”

Graham’s hold tightened until I leaned in and kissed him. “I’m fine.”

He nodded, blowing out a breath, and ran his fingers through my messy hair. He captured my mouth again and deepened the kiss for a moment, before he stood and said, “I’ll start the dishwasher.”

I walked up to mom and asked, “Can you take Graham out with you and the twins for some shopping? They want to dress him up anyway, and it’ll give me time to make a birthday cake and his favorite dinner.”

“Of course, Neko-Ren.”

“And dad, I know this is last minute, but there’s two stores in the mall that carry what I need. Can you grab several things for me there? Here’s my credit card and I’m texting you the list, and if you see anything else for the twins, add that too.”

“You’re a good man, son.”

“I didn’t know until last night it was his birthday. It appears he never celebrated.”

With a long hug from both of them, I put my phone back in my pocket and headed back to the kitchen and started the soapy water for the pans. Graham glanced over and raised an eyebrow, and I gave him a beaming smile. I hoped my surprise made celebrating his birthday a tradition from now on.

“Graham, let’s go.”

I loved that mom wasn’t giving him an option.

“Where are we going?”

“The twins and I are taking you shopping while Neko stays behind and grills Hensley for information about you.”

“Um.”

“I’ll lock up behind you and set the alarm.”

“And I have a butcher’s knife handy in case I have to stab someone.”

Graham grimaced and glanced at Echo. “Good, I guess. Okay then, I’ll get my shoes on and then I’m ready to go.”

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I leaned my shoulder against his chest, hands dripping over the sink with soapy bubbles, and lifted my head for a kiss. My heart skipped a beat whenever he gave me affection without hesitation, and my mouth lingered, savoring Graham's touch.

"I'll see you in a few hours? They'll bring me back, right?"

A laugh punched up from my gut, and I nodded my head. "Yes, they'll bring you back and we'll have dinner together before they leave us alone for the rest of the night." I emphasized my suggestion with what I considered a saucy wink, but might have appeared to be an eyelash in my eye.

"Are you flirting with me?"

A sigh escaped my throat. "If you have to ask, I'm not doing it right."

Before Graham chanced a reply, Ri and Yu grabbed his arms and marched him out of the kitchen, and I glanced at Echo. When I caught her eye, I laughed.

"You think he'll survive?" Echo asked.

"He'll be fine." And I knew he would be. His patience knew no bounds, and although he acted as though the twins scared him, he confided in me how nice it was when they treated him like another big brother. And seeing how protective my sisters were with Graham, I knew they felt the same.

I finished up the dishes and pulled out both the all-purpose and cake flour, and the other ingredients for three cakes and frosting, including a pound of strawberries,

several lemons, the poppyseeds, and the cocoa powder.

“What are you doing?” Hensley asked.

“I wanted to surprise Graham with a three-tiered birthday cake with buttercream frosting and homemade lasagna, because it’s his favorite.”

The blank expression on Hensley’s face warmed my heart. Although we’d known each other for a short time, Graham confided in me about things he’d told no one else. Somehow, it also made me sad for Hensley, and I reached out and squeezed her hand.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m happy that... he’s happy. I’ve never seen him smile as much as I have today. When we broke up, it was sort of cordial. There wasn’t any yelling on his part. I screamed, telling him he was an unfeeling, emotional void, among other nasty things I can’t repeat.”

I pulled her into a hug and when she sniffled, held her tighter. Echo, not able to stand anyone in distress, stood and hurried over, wrapping her arms around both of us as we swayed together.

“He agreed with your assessment and told me so when I met him. You don’t have to feel guilty, Hensley. I know he wants the best for you. Are you happy?”

Rather than my statement being soothing, she sobbed against my chest. I met Echo’s pained face, and without speaking, we squeezed Hensley tighter and I rubbed her back. As she released all the emotions she must’ve been holding in for a long time, she sagged against me and Echo.

“I’m sorry—”

“No, angel, you never have to apologize for having a good cry. I have one of those at least once a week,” I told her.

“It’s just the question, about being happy. No, I haven’t been in a while.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked.

Echo added, “I promise not to judge or be an obnoxious shrew about it.”

“Let me wash my face and then, yeah, I’d love some advice.”

I nodded and led her past the living room and to the stairs. “The bedroom is up and to the right. If you need to shower, towels are in the cabinet behind the door, and you can raid whatever’s in the closet or the drawers.”

“Are you sure?”

“Hensley, you are welcome here. Anytime. I’d like to think we’re friends now and I’d do anything for my friends.” I squeezed her hand and gave her to be what I hoped was a reassuring smile. “Take your time and we’ll be in the kitchen when you’re ready.”

I hugged her for support, before she gave me a watery smile and headed up the stairs. With a heavy heart, I turned and shuffled toward the kitchen. I hoped that whatever bothered the beautiful woman, we could somehow help with.

When I heard the shower turn on, I smiled as I rejoined Echo. “Hey, E, how are you doing?”

“If I haven’t said it in a while, I love being part of this crazy family.”

“I’m glad you chose me to be your friend. Thanks for standing up for me earlier.”

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Echo waved it off like she'd done in the past. Even after I sobbed on her weeks after the assault, she was there for me without comment. Her quiet steadiness helped me when nothing else could.

I went back to the cakes, losing myself in the rhythm of chopping the strawberries, grating the lemon peel, juicing the lemons, and sifting the cocoa powder, mixing each ingredient into the separated batter, before pouring them into three cake tins. I knew Graham liked variety and didn't mind trying anything new, hence the lemon-poppysseed cake, but you couldn't go wrong with traditional chocolate. The twins liked anything sweet, but I knew he would love the tart strawberry mixed with the sweetness of the buttercream.

I opened the door before sliding the cakes into the oven and set a timer. As I started mixing the buttercream frosting, Hensley came back into the kitchen, a little hesitant, wearing a pink hoodie and gray leggings with her hair pulled up in a messy bun. It made her even more beautiful, but I said nothing because I thought her emotional upheaval had something to do with her career.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better, thank you. Do you need any help?”

“Nah, all that's left is the pasta, but that's more kneading than anything else.”

“You make everything from scratch?”

I shrugged. “I learned the hard way to take care of myself and discovered I'm

sensitive to preservatives. If I make it, I know where it comes from.”

“So the sauce and the cheese?”

“Yep, I make everything. Well, that’s not true, the Parmesan is the premium Italian kind, but that’s about it.”

“I feel inferior.” Hensley said it in such a small voice. Another pang throbbed in my chest.

“We all have our talents, angel. I’m sure we couldn’t do what you do.”

“And that’s the problem, I think. I’m not sure I want to be a model any longer.”

“There’s nothing wrong with changing careers. You need to do what makes you happy,” Echo chimed in.

Hensley grew quiet and when I stopped the mixer to check on the frosting, I glanced up to see her biting her lip.

My best friend continued, “We won’t judge you. Some people think what I do, editing Neko’s videos while I run my fashion and makeup channel, isn’t an actual career. We get lots of flack from people who don’t understand, thinking their opinions matter.”

“You mean your mom and stepfather?”

Echo flipped me off, and I laughed. When Hensley made a small noise, we looked over to see her working her bottom lip with her teeth.

“It’s kinda what I want to do. I play a lot of games on my downtime, but since travel,

photoshoots, and fashion shows run me ragged, I have little time for it.”

“Oh, you want to be a game streamer?”

“It’s a pipe dream. I’m not as good as you.”

“Nothing you want bad enough is unreachable. Everyone has a niche and everyone is at a different level of skill. I scream like a drama queen and wet myself because my viewers like me playing scary games. But I also love long let’s plays where I’m fifteen videos in, encompassed by the story, and distracted by hours of side missions because I don’t want the game to end. Both types of videos are popular. When you start your own channel, you’ll find what suits you and if you enjoy it, do that. Besides, no one cares about your skill level as long as you’re having fun and you’re genuine.”

Echo said, “And I can edit your videos.”

“We can also help you build a rig that’s powerful enough for any game you want to play and introduce you to other streamers when you’re ready. We can all play together to get you exposure.”

Hensley sighed. “You make it sound so easy.”

I swiped a bit of the frosting, checking for sweetness and consistency. Satisfied with it, I used a spatula, getting most of the frosting off the whisk attachment, before I held it out.

“What do you think?”

They both swiped globs of frosting and I laughed when Echo, then Hensley, moaned aloud. I put the frosting in three containers, adding pureed strawberries to one, lemon

juice and vanilla to another, and the third cocoa powder, folding the flavors in and then storing the containers in the fridge until the cakes cooled.

“To be honest, starting off making videos or streaming is tough because you’re learning. But we’re here for anything you might need.”

“My manager says it’s a horrible career move because I’d have twelve-year-olds or creepy old men as my only followers. I don’t care about the money because when we were together, Graham taught me how to invest and save, so I have a healthy nest egg. But I want something for myself.”

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Echo moved toward the fridge and pulled out the pitcher of guava juice and poured out three glasses. I took a long drink before I set it aside.

I poured a mound of AP flour onto the counter, cracking open five eggs and adding four additional yolks, while slowly incorporating the eggs into the flour with a fork. When the dough absorbed all the liquid, I ditched the fork and started kneading.

“Do you want to try a stream?”

“How?”

“My old computer, which is completely decked out with a newer graphics card, is sitting upstairs unused in a closet. If you’re comfortable, we can set it up in the studio upstairs next to my rig. Then, if you want, we can pick out a game for a stream and as we’re navigating our way through it, I can introduce you to my chat. They’ll be curious about you and ask intrusive questions, but they’ll be supportive. If you find it comes natural to you, then we can make a plan for you to become a full-time streamer.”

Hensley sat back, thoughtful, and I set the dough aside. In the meantime, I cooked the ground beef, pork, and lamb, along with chopped onions and garlic. After the vegetables softened, I stirred in the marinara, sliding the lid on top and setting it aside. In another bowl, I added the dairy together and left it to chill in the refrigerator.

With dinner ready to assemble, I removed the cakes from the oven when the timer beeped and set them on the cooling rack. I glanced at the clock and knew Graham and the rest would be a couple more hours, which gave us free time.

“Do you want to head upstairs and check out my setup?”

Nodding, Hensley jumped up, excited. It was the first time since she'd arrived that I'd seen true happiness etched on her face as she shifted from one foot to another in anticipation. With a chuckle, we headed upstairs and this time, I led her to the left.

I booted up and turned on the three monitors before I raised my desk. Once I logged in, I let her explore. She opened the device manager, reading the system specs, before booting up a game. “Perfect.”

Chuckling at her reaction, I guided her into my gaming chair and lowered the desk.

“We'll come get you for dinner.”

“Oh, well, no, I can come downstairs and help,” Hensley protested.

“Don't worry about it. See if there are other games you might like and the twins will hunt you down when it's time to eat.”

She turned back and started a new game. “Thank you,” she murmured.

I squeezed her shoulder and headed back down, Echo leading the way.

“Do you think she'll take our advice?”

“Judging by her reaction to the game, yeah, I think she might. We'll make sure she doesn't become overwhelmed with all the comments and negativity. She's a lot like Graham; strong, independent, and stubborn. But those will be her strengths if she goes after what she wants.”

Echo sniffed, and I glanced at her, curious.

“I feel so mature and helpful. It’s almost as though I’m an adult.” There was a long pause with me smiling at her when she threw up her hands. “Nope, the moment’s fucking passed. Thank the deities above. No one needs to deal with a mature me.”

Dad arrived then with the gifts for Graham, three rolls of wrapping paper, snagging the gift tags I kept in my closet in the hallway. Attached to his wrists were several balloons with floaty ribbon in a variety of bright colors. He set the gifts down on the dining room table before he allowed the balloons to float about the room, and I felt a thrill because he found the items on my list.

“Wow. I may have thought I sent you off with an impossible task.”

“Well, there was a not-so-stellar moment when I distracted a twelve-year-old with some of my finest acting. I told him Taylor Swift was signing autographs at the other end of the mall.”

I pulled him in for a hug and said, “Thanks, dad.”

He gave me a quick squeeze before letting go. His eyes threatened to spill with tears.

“I’m happy you two found each other. Although you were happy before, with him, you’re... well, it’s everything we wanted for you.”

“Ah, no, we’ve gone through this. I can’t stand it, the emotion, it’s too much,” Echo whimpered before she surrounded us, pushing us back together.

We laughed, the seriousness broken, and I started toward the table to wrap the gifts before dinner went in the oven and the cakes were cooled enough to be frosted and assembled.

Anticipation thrummed through me as I waited for Graham to come home.

Chapter 8

Graham

I unlocked the door and entered the code for the alarm at the same time the twins barreled past me. They dropped the various shopping bags in the corner and headed toward the part of the house everyone congregated. I convinced myself it was because I savored the delicious scents wafting from the kitchen that I stood rooted inside the front door, and not because of any hesitation on my part to venture further on into the house.

George met his wife as she shut the door and set her own shopping aside. They kissed before heading toward the TV room, dropping onto the couch and closing their eyes.

I craved Neko in the few hours since I'd left, but something about Hensley and Neko being in the same house left me cold and that was the reason for my hesitation. But as Neko exited the kitchen, my body heated as my gaze ran over his peach hoodie, my favorite black leggings, leaving his feet bare, which elevated my heart rate.

“Hey, love bug, there you are? You doing okay?”

The world righted itself when the man in question nuzzled his face into my neck and breathed me in as I enveloped him in my arms, holding him close.

“Yeah, I'm good, although I'm the proud owner of a henley in every color, some of them I can't even pronounce, three pairs of jeans that according to Ri, 'molded around my ass perfectly,' and a new pair of boots and sneakers, both of which I didn't need, but bought because they picked them out for me. Anything interesting happen?” I asked with hesitance.

Both because I didn't have a clue what my ex and Neko spoke about and second, nerves struck whenever I thought about the box tucked away in my left side jean's pocket.

Neko beamed at me before glancing upstairs.

"I can't wait to see those ass-hugging jeans. But to answer your question, yeah, I think so. Hensley opened up to me and Echo, telling us she's unhappy with her career. She wants to get into game streaming and mentioned it to her manager. He was less than supportive. But I think she's personable and also the way she took to the games, she loves it, so both Echo and I offered to help her."

I froze and Neko blinked up at me; the smile sliding from his face.

"What?"

"You're going to help her?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't we? Both of us know how scary it is putting yourself out there in the public eye, and I thought I could get some of my friends to support her as well. Echo offered her editing services."

The smile slid off his face at my next question.

"So, she's going to be sticking around?"

He blinked at me, stepping back, and said, "She didn't let us know her plans, so I can't answer that question. Are you uncomfortable with it? I mean, I felt jealous and inferior when she first arrived, but there doesn't seem to be any feelings between you and her any longer, so I thought we could be friends. But here you are tense and with a frown I've never seen before pulling down your lips, and I can't help but think it's

because of me.”

Fuck!

“No! I’m—”

Instead of listening, he opened the gap between us and lowered his head. He rubbed his eyebrows before he pinched his nose and nodded.

“Yeah, you’re right. It wasn’t my place. I’ll still help her, because I gave her my word, but I’ll try to put distance between us. I’m... I’ll check on dinner.”

My heart squeezed the breath out of me. Before I unlocked my jaw and body or was able to reach for him, he turned, dejection coming off him in waves, and headed toward the kitchen. I took a deep inhale.

Get your shit together, Norris! What the fuck are you doing? Don’t ruin it!

When I walked into the kitchen, my eyes focused on the balloons and the brightly wrapped presents on a side table. Featured in the center of the dining room table was a three-tiered, frosted cake with three candles sticking out of the top, not yet lit.

The twins glanced between me and Neko when they sensed tension in the room and left without a word. I stared at Neko, who split a French loaf in half before he mixed garlic butter with herbs, concentrating on spreading the butter on both loaves. With the bread finished, he removed the lasagna from the oven, the smell fragrant, and my mouth watered.

I walked around the island as Neko slid the bread in the oven and then turned, opened the fridge, and removed the veggies needed for a salad. He kept his hands full until I reached for them, setting the items on the island, and pulling him into my arms.

“I’m trying to find the words—”

“You don’t have to. I was wrong, and I understand now.” He glanced up and although his eyes were bright with unshed tears, he smiled. “Let’s eat and celebrate your birthday.”

“Thus, the reason it’s pointed out that I am, in all actuality, an asshole. But for you, I want to explain my reaction.”

With a short laugh, he wiped his eyes, and I breathed a sigh of relief because he stayed close.

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“If you haven’t noticed, and I mean, I don’t know how you couldn’t, but I’m absolute shit at showing emotion. And when Hensley knocked on the door along with her news that she’d spoken to my parents more than I have in the past decade, well... It’s ridiculous, me being hurt because a part of my life I’d left behind came back with a vengeance.”

His warm hand stroked my cheek before cupping it. “Rejection, in any form, hurts. Sometimes you bury it deep, but it’s still there.”

“It’s the reason I freaked out. Hensley and my parents, they’re two of my apparent failures. Although for both, I walked away and didn’t look back once they let me know they didn’t want me anymore.”

Neko swallowed, and his eyes widened at my words.

“Oh, love, what we have...” He shook his head, “Whether they’re romantic or between family, relationships take work. Between both parties. You walked away from the life you knew in California for your sake. It’s not selfish to want the best for you. And I see now. You’re wondering if you’re capable of loving someone without ruining it. But my question is did you ruin your relationships, or did you want an existence different from them which made you incompatible and you did the right thing by moving on?”

His understanding relaxed the tension in my chest.

“It’s not logical. I shut myself off from those who chose another path apart from me.”

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong insulating yourself or changing your life in order to protect your mental health. I’m one gigantic emotional nerve, I cry at the simplest things, including commercials. Instead of losing yourself in sentiment, you judge any situation based on rationale.” He paused for a minute. “Does it bother you she’s here?”

Rather than spouting out nonsense in a knee-jerk reaction to the surprise of my ex arriving on my boyfriend’s doorstep, I thought about it. Hensley, despite her career and a few of the friends she surrounded herself with, was down-to-earth and as practical as I was. Although it took me several months to get over it after she broke it off, there wasn’t any residual emotion tied to our failed relationship. I thought of her as my friend, and granted I hadn’t contacted her since we split, but I still counted her as one.

“No, and I’m pleased she opened up to you about her career. It’s a strange feeling, you two being in the same space...”

“But?”

Our mouths met in a tender kiss and devolved into a mesh of lips and tongues and sensation. I absorbed his moans and loved the pinch of his fingers digging into my waist, grounding me. As we broke apart, both of us panting, I said, “I want you all to myself.”

“We have all night and,” he blushed and stammered before he continued, “I want to see your reaction to your presents.”

“How did you find time to buy them?”

He winked, which set my blood alight. I loved the playful Neko.

I snagged a quick kiss and murmured against his lips, “I’m going to enjoy the next few hours because it’s important to you I celebrate my birthday. But tonight, after everyone has gone home and we’re alone, I will touch and kiss and lick every inch of skin until you’re vibrating with need for me. Then, I’ll sink into your beautiful and willing body, making love to you until your orgasm strikes and you shake with its intensity.”

Before he answered, Echo walked in with Hensley, both of them smiling, and asked, “Why is Neko flushed? Please tell me you didn’t do it on the kitchen counter. It’s unsanitary.”

“Yeah, in a full house including my parents, Graham’s ex, my best friend and the twins, I somehow seduced Graham, and we achieved mutual orgasms, all the while clothed, in less than ten minutes from the time he arrived home. I’m brilliant!”

I laughed and leaned closer, a little breathless because he called his house our home and replied, “Yes, you are.”

He hugged my waist and smiled against my lips and whispered, “Happy birthday, love.”

“Thank you, for everything.” I paused, not sure if I should tell him, but unable to keep it to myself. “Although I didn’t plan this, I have a surprise for you later.”

His brows drew down as the edge of his mouth tipped up in a smile. “I know, you promised—”

“On top of all that. Trust me, it’s going to be life-changing.”

“With you, I know that’ll be a good thing.”

There was a rush when the oven beeped. Neko pulled out the garlic bread and cut up the lasagna while I filled the glasses with ice and put out an assortment of drinks. None of us imbibed in alcohol, so I grabbed soda, water, and iced tea.

The conversation stalled and then stopped altogether as we took a bite of the lasagna. When the sauce, noodles, and cheese melted on my tongue, I moaned, unable to keep the sound from escaping my throat. Although I'd eaten dinner with him every night and adored all the new tastes I never experienced before, the pasta ranked up there with the best thing I ever put in my mouth. Okay, a close second, but I wouldn't be able to sustain myself on Neko alone.

The entire group of us became ravenous and demolished the pasta, bread, and salad. When Echo swiped some frosting from the cake, my attention focused on the sweet-scented, exquisite creation. Each layer decorated in a different color; light pink on the bottom, yellow with blue ribbons around the middle, and then a dark chocolate with chocolate shavings on the top.

"E, it's Graham's cake. He should get to taste it first."

Echo growled at me, the words 'happy birthday' rumbled out of her throat, before she crossed her arms and said, "Well hurry. This tower of sugar has been tempting me since you made it."

Neko giggled as he lit the three candles on top of the cake and brought it closer to me. When I stood, leaning down and pressing a kiss to the top of his head, he whispered, "Make a wish."

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The simple phrase made me freeze. Because never in a million years could I have dreamed Neko, perfect for me in every way, into my life. Half the time, I considered my time with him as finite, because similar to other relationships, time and my closed off nature would rear its ugly head and Neko would eventually throw me away like everyone else.

But then he reached for my hand, weaving our fingers together, squeezing once. He lifted his head and the stunning smile he saved for me alone graced his features and I relaxed. I promised myself I'd do whatever it took to make this man happy and make him mine. Our relationship eternal, and it was my literal wish. Neko and I forever.

With a smile toward the man I loved above even my own life, I closed my eyes and blew out the candles, emphatic with my wish. When I opened them, Neko soft look and wide smile made me believe.

There was a rush for the cake; Yu yanking out the candles and sucking off the frosting left on the wax, Echo shoved a knife into Neko's hand, which looked comparable to what a serial killer would use, and I moved to clear the dinner plates, raising my eyebrow when Hensley stood and stacked the dinnerware on her side of the table.

We deposited them next to the sink where I would rinse them off before loading and starting the dishwasher, before I wrapped an arm around Hensley's shoulder and gave her a quick embrace. "Thanks for checking on me."

"Graham?"

“Yeah?”

“I’m thrilled you found Neko and this family. Although you never thought so, you deserve to be happy and in love. I’m glad I got to see it.”

I glanced back to see Neko let out a frustrated growl before a smirk lifted his lips as the twins pointed where they would like him to cut, complaining the slices he wanted were microscopic. Reo and George sat back and watched as Neko slapped at their hands, never connecting, while Echo sighed, and waved her hand for Neko to hurry.

“I am, too. Thanks for seeing we weren’t right for each other. And for being the one to break it off.”

“That’s what friends are for.”

“I’m getting that.”

Grabbing the cake plates from the cupboard, I turned in time to see both the twins steal a piece of the chocolate cake and in no uncertain terms, shove the entire slice into their mouths. They both chewed while making sounds of approval.

Neko turned to me and smiled, “So, lemon-poppysseed, strawberry, or what’s left of the chocolate?”

I laughed and beamed at the twins, who smirked back with chocolate-covered teeth.

“I’ll take a slice of the lemon and the strawberry, because I’m feeling selfish.”

“Perfect.” With a dexterity that still amazed me whenever Neko moved, he cut several slices of each, plating huge portions for me and sliding it over, before he distributed the rest. Fresh strawberries along with the tart lemon and the sweetness of

the buttercream harmonized with the fluffy cake. Unable to stop myself, I demolished both slices and sat back as the once elegant cake disappeared, leaving two tempting slices among the ruins.

“That’s it, I’m moving in and having Neko feed me. You won’t even notice me until you cook something.”

He laughed. “Well, I’m pretty sure the neighbors noticed you the moment you parked on the street. Not to mention, oh, yeah, you’re a stunning woman. But...”

“What?”

Neko glanced at me and smiled. I had a notion of where his thoughts led him, but I sat back and shrugged, letting him know I was fine with whatever he decided.

“You can move in next door, take over the lease from Graham. When you’re around, Echo and I will help you with your setup and introduce you to other streamers. You’re close enough to the City for your job, but it’s up to you and Graham.”

“Um...” Hensley stuttered and looked back and forth between me and Neko, confused by the offer. I watched her face and noticed she was more than intrigued, but she didn’t want to cause trouble in my new relationship.

“I’m fine with it, if you are. And Chaos is right, I moved in here the day after we met.”

“How did that happen?”

My face hardened, and Neko cupped my cheek, giving me a quirk of his lips. In such a short time, we’ve learned each other’s expressions and moods based on an idiosyncrasy. A brush of his hand against my arm, making my heart beat faster in my

chest, a sign he stood by me no matter the situation. His sweet smile calming my heart. Or him settling against me whenever he was restless, craving my touch. Besides, our relationship wasn't based on Neko's past, but the knowledge of his situation happened to be a catalyst that shook me out of my mundane life.

"It... I watched the video. Protective instincts I didn't even realize I possessed flooded me and I ran out of the house, needing to know Neko was safe. Since then, I haven't been able to pull myself away from him. I'm protective of him and the instinct to keep him safe is always present, but I also love spending time together and crave to know everything about him."

"You know I feel the same way, love."

"Wait," I froze as Ri and Yu glanced at each other and then turned their attention back to me.

"We never cleared up the fact you were, well, fucked over by your employers this morning," Yu said, and Ri nodded.

“What happened?” Hensley asked, confused.

Neko explained, and Hensley laughed.

“It’s about time. You hated being a mediator, although you were successful. But if I know you, and I do, you never have to work another day in your life with the money you have.”

I shrugged when everyone’s wide eyes turned toward me.

“Explain,” Ri said.

“Now!” Yu demanded.

“When you mediate multimillion and billion dollar deals between corporations, they pay a lot for someone like me to save them money. I’ve brokered deals for tech and biomedical companies, which pay well, but the stipend for understanding and negotiating international law is higher. Also, I’ve never allowed a start-up business with a bankable idea suffer layoffs or downsizing, so I have a reputation of getting them a lot of money or securing employment, sometimes both, depending on their request.”

“So, how rich are we talking, G?” Ri asked.

“Um, well...”

“You were the anonymous one hundred and fifty-thousand dollar donor during

Neko's stream, weren't you?" Echo asked.

Neko blinked at me before his hand rose to cover his mouth.

"What?" The sound diffused, but still clear.

Instead of passing it off with another shrug, I nodded. "Your chat stepped up and raised a lot of money, but I noticed your endurance to the prolonged stream was waning. Since you passed your goal and it was a worthy cause, I wanted to contribute and maybe get you to end early."

Without a word, Neko stood, and my heart faltered in my chest. Was this where he demanded that I get out? Was he angry I hadn't told him about my wealth or the donation?

I wanted to reach out and grasp his wrist, keeping him close no matter his reaction. But I knew him, my man, and if he didn't blurt out his initial feelings, he needed time to process what he'd learned. I locked down my body and held my breath when he blinked at me. Ready for whatever his reaction, I gave him a modest smile, hoping to let him know I was fine with his decision. But there was no way I was giving him up without a fight.

A relieved breath escaped me when he parked himself on my lap, draped his arms over my shoulders, and kissed me. His tongue swept inside, tasting me and allowing me to swallow his drawn-out moan. I held on for dear life.

"You're not mad?" I asked when he leaned back, breaking our contact, blinking at me without focusing.

He shook his head before he answered, "No, I... should I be?"

“I don’t know how to answer that question. Either I say yes, because I donated to a charity you’re supporting before I explained my financial situation, or no, because my financial situation doesn’t matter to you.”

“Um, well, I’ve never been one to care that much about money.”

“Wow, understatement. You hit that mark on the head,” Reo said.

“Okay, okay, less judgement in your tone, mother.”

Reo let out an exasperated tone and said, “I hate it when you call me that.”

“Almost as much as I hate it when you call me by my entire name while thumping me on the forehead like I was eight and stole the candy bar.”

Incapable of holding back my chuckle, I asked, “What happened?” Because it was my spectacular boyfriend, the story would be hilarious.

“After I started down the block, staring at the repugnant thing in my hand, thoughts bombarded me. I realized I wasn’t only stealing from the man who worked the cash register in the shop, but the shop’s owners and their children, too. And then my mind wandered to the fact it might have happened so often from little shits like me they’d go broke and have to close their store and starve because it all started with me stealing a candy bar. I walked back, practically throwing the thing at the man, and started crying as I explained I stole it. Although, the guy was more freaked out because I had a complete breakdown in front of him, wailing, pounding my hands on the floor, and begging him to call the cops on me than the actual stolen candy. Instead of being hauled away to the clink for life, he called mom, who thumped me on the forehead, slid a twenty across the counter for all his trouble, and dragged me out of the shop. I haven’t been back since.”

I glanced at Reo, holding my chuckles inside. “Why did you thump him? His guilt was punishment enough.”

She shrugged. “I needed to stop him from crying and it was the one thing I could think of.”

The room erupted in laughter, Echo and Hensley leaning against each other as they tried to catch their breaths, the twins rolling their eyes before snagging more cake, and George smiled at his wife.

I kissed Neko on his forehead, which I hoped would erase the pain from that long ago thump.

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“I’m ridiculous. Are you sure you want to be part of this lunacy?”

Sucking in a sharp breath, I leaned forward and pressed my lips to his ear. “Every day for the entirety of our existence and whatever awaits us in the next. And besides, you, alone, made me realize this life is worth living. For the rest of our days, I will search every minute of forever to give you a gift such as the one you’ve shown me, and it still wouldn’t be enough.”

Neko’s face softened, and he cupped my cheeks. “Despite everything you tell me, you are the sweetest guy in the world. And when you say things like that, you make my insides melt into goo.”

“Later—”

“Presents! Okay, I may have had my fair share of sugar tonight, but I want to get out of here before any flat surface becomes—”

“Okay! Oh, I forgot, I have presents.”

The twins got me a coffee mug when I wasn’t looking, and written in a thick font offset by each letter in a different color, was ‘World’s Best Brother,’ and I almost teared up. Reo and George gifted me a bluetooth turntable and several records, which also led to a promise from me to teach the twins how to dance.

But it was Neko’s gifts given with a shrug and a, “It’s a freeing and creative side of childhood, even if it comes later than expected.”

Included with the elegant boxes were a gift card and an eReader, several three thousand-piece puzzles of famous paintings, a rainy night being my favorite. But when I opened the biggest box, the kid inside me stuttered and then jumped with happiness. I was looking at the Apollo 11 lunar module and rocket Lego kit. Stunned, Neko pushed the next box over to me and it revealed the car of my dreams, an Aston Martin DB5, also in a kit.

“Um...” Neko started.

I jerked my head up and blinked. “Oh, no, this is fabulous. They are the best gifts I’ve ever received. I’m stunned, that’s all. Thank you, sweetheart.”

And my awkward, stuttering answer and a press of our lips together was enough to bring back Neko’s smile.

Our gazes caught and held, and before long, everything fell away until it was the two of us. After the night before, although it seemed a lifetime ago since I’d touched him and loved him, the clawing urgency to claim Neko surged inside me.

“Well, now that we’ve eaten and opened presents, I think it’s about time to head home and get ready for school tomorrow,” Reo interrupted.

Echo groaned. “I need sleep, so no one call me before noon tomorrow.”

“I’ll take Hensley over to the house and get her settled.”

Neko leaned close to my ear and whispered, “I’ll clean up and meet you upstairs.”

I turned and was almost out the door after seeing Reo, George, the girls, and Echo off before I remembered Hensley. She trailed after me, holding her stomach, laughing, and I rolled my eyes. I held my hand out for her keys, knowing she’d have a suitcase

or two in the trunk. When she dropped them in my hand, I added her new house key and led the way.

The neighborhood was quiet and although it was the middle of September; I heard the crickets chirping. I snagged the suitcases and then handed her back the keys. She opened the door, and I shut off the alarm, closing the door behind us. I showed her around, making sure she memorized the code, before lugging her bags upstairs into the bedroom.

“Breakfast next door tomorrow morning whenever you wake and if you need anything, call me.”

She dragged me in for a hug, hesitant because of the reluctance I’d shown her in the past. But I laughed before I tugged her close.

“It’s good to see you happy, Graham.”

For a long minute, I studied her face. “Thank you, Hensley. I mean that. Have a good night and call if you need anything, okay?”

With a big smile, she sent me back to Neko, making a big production of locking the door and arming the system.

But on my way back across the yard, I noticed a strange dark sedan parked on the street where it wasn’t earlier, and halted in my tracks. When the driver noticed me staring, they revved the engine and squealed the tires as it took off before switching on the headlights halfway down the block. It was too far away for me to see the license plate.

Acting on instinct, I ran the rest of the way toward the house with my heart pounding in my chest.

Chapter 9

Neko-Ren

I paced backand forth at the foot of the bed, my body buzzed with what was to come. On the other end of that spectrum, nerves swamped me, making me restless and causing my thoughts to swirl around in my head.

Before Graham, I never thought about myself as a sexual being. When I was a teenager, I was all long limbs and a lanky frame, and with my interest in computers and games and, oh, yeah, being gay in a small suburb in Connecticut and knowing it from an early age, I didn't fit in.

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Later on, even though I found my professional niche, I wouldn't allow myself to believe the shallow words of superficial praise from my ex. When I thought back on what he declared he liked about me, it wasn't as though I had a choice on the shade of my skin, the length of my nose, or the plushness of my lips, which combined to make my face 'appealing.'

Yes, I was proud of the firm jaw inherited from dad and the high cheekbones from mom, but what comprised me as a whole; being a supportive son, brother, and friend, the happiness from taking care of those I love, and having a career where I connected with others, had fun, and once in a while, led by example was more important to me than my outer shell.

He never learned to understand me, and in the end it didn't matter. Donovan wanted to display me, show others he scored a younger man. My feelings on the subject didn't matter.

But Graham, a gorgeous specimen of a genuine man; intelligent, funny, caring, protective, had shown me in all ways that matter how much he cares for me. He learned to cook, which started out as a desire to spend time with me, but turned into another passion for him. I've learned that like me, he's a homebody, satisfied with watching TV or challenging the twins to another board game where he'd triumph as the winner. And I expected Graham will feature in my videos and streams in the future because despite his nervous protests, chat loved him and our interactions.

Last night, despite exhaustion weighing me down, my stumbling declarations of devotion, and the fact my stomach made itself known with loud and distracting grumbings, once Graham's eyes sparked with heat, my mind shut off and there was

only passion. From his sultry stares, to the way he growled my name; all of it dissolved the nervousness of Graham being my first, well, everything.

Alone and swamped with questions, I continued sliding my bare feet against the carpet in a shuffle-pace and wondered if I should await Graham on the bed. Should I be naked? Or only with my boxer briefs? But then, the idea of having him strip me, similar to those bodice rippers I used to read as a teenager, held appeal, which warmed my body.

My thoughts turned to the night before and the response he drew from me. As I stood there, the exquisite memories replayed, and I closed my eyes. The heat surged at the thought of Graham taking total control and me reveling in it. There was pleasure, more than I'd ever experienced, but the knowledge Graham was taking care of me, the one holding me close, thrilled me.

Until I allowed myself permission to delve into the past, I hadn't realize how much I doubted myself in the last few years. Decisions about what game to play or when to stream were easy. But showing my true self, along with giving trust to others, made me tentative.

Everything changed when Graham knocked on the door to check on me. That fact alone relaxed me enough to let my guard down. Then I invited him over for dinner for selfish reasons; he drew me to him, and I wanted to get to know him. Even as friends, I knew he'd be a good one to have.

But then he watched the video.

Even before I knew Graham the way I do now, I understood his anger. It was a disgusting display of abuse that for weeks, hell, months after, held onto me as the ghost of his hand around my throat, squeezing, brought nightmares and an unconscious fear. Unknown to me, after the incident, I flinched whenever someone

raised their hands or moved too fast. Dad pointed it out to me soon after the incident and I started going to a therapist for what she described to me as a trauma. Because I was open about the incident and so many people witnessed it, it became cathartic whenever I spoke about it.

Graham's reaction yanked me out of my commonplace sameness with his steady, laid-back, 'nothing gets to me' persona, but brought me to life with his feelings of fierce protectiveness toward me.

I shook my head. There was no reason to be nervous or doubt him.

I blew out a relieved breath as the front door opened, the alarm code entered to shut off the beeping. Instead of his voice drifting up to me, the code was reentered in quick succession, surprising me. The thumping up the stairs startled me, only because I'd never seen Graham rush. Before I blinked, he swept into the room, picked me up in his arms, and held me close.

"What's wrong?" I whispered.

My arms tightened around his shoulders when his body shuddered below me, similar to his reaction when he found out... oh, shit.

"Is he... did you..." I jerked back and checked him for injuries, but there weren't any visible.

He buried his face into my neck and said, "No, well, I'm not sure. There was a car outside. I didn't notice it before I got Hensley settled. When I turned toward the street, I sensed movement, and I tracked it to a car with someone sitting on the driver's side. The lights were off and it wasn't running, but when they noticed me scrutinizing them, they took off."

“Why do you think it’s him?”

“The fucker created fake social media accounts for me hours after the stream where you introduced me as your partner. It can’t be a coincidence.”

“What do you want to do? I’ll call the police in the morning, but until then?”

The tension seeped from him, but he kept me close.

“I think we should sick the twins on him. Ruin him in every way, and then maybe he’d get the hint to stay the fuck away from you,” Graham growled, but then took a deep breath. “But because we’re both sensible adults, we’ll document everything and report it to the police. But you’re not leaving the house without me and if he threatens you, I will beat him until he no longer has brain function.”

A gasp escaped my throat, and I said, “Oh, fuck, he knows who you are. What if he comes after you?”

My body ached at the thought of Graham hurt because of me, of poor decisions I’d made in my life.

There was no way I could give him up. I accepted my selfishness, although the thought of him getting hurt... no, he wouldn’t. I’d prevent it, somehow.

“What are you thinking about?”

“You’re my person.”

Graham captured my lips and kissed me breathless. Without breaking contact, he said, “There wasn’t a doubt, sweetheart, and you’re mine.”

With his words relayed to me as a promise, I relaxed my shoulders and sunk into him, pushing my scary thoughts away.

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“Tomorrow, I’ll order home security cameras. We’ll be smart about this and play by the rules, for now. The house is secure, and we have the rest of the evening alone. I’ll admit, I panicked, but I know you’re safe with me.”

I ran my hands through his hair and deepened the kiss, letting myself enjoy being in Graham’s arms. When he lifted my hoodie, giving him room to slide his hands underneath my sweats and boxer briefs to cup my ass, I pressed myself closer, loving his hard cock against my stomach. A thrill passed through me, knowing how much he wanted me.

Graham broke the kiss and before I blinked, he lifted the material off my torso before he threw it behind him. He slid a finger along the waistband of my tented sweats, causing me to suck in a sharp breath at the sensations of his warm, calloused fingers dancing close to the one place I needed him.

“Please,” I begged.

“What, sweetheart? How do you want me to take you apart tonight?”

“I...” My breath stuck in my chest, but I powered through it and said, “I want your shirt off, exposing your chest. Then your pants and boxer briefs around your thighs with your legs spread apart. And when you’re leaking precome, I want your hand gripping my hair, guiding your cock in my mouth and down my throat—”

His loud groan cut off the rest of my idea. Not wasting any time, he shrugged off his shirt and unbuckled the belt. I groaned as he shimmied the jeans past his taut ass and braced his legs apart.

I hadn't remembered sinking to the floor, but when I became eye level with his leaking shaft, I moaned. My eyes raised to search his gaze, which flared silver when he noted my position. Without breaking contact, I planted my hands on his thighs and leaned forward, brushing my cheek against his hardness.

The desire for Graham to take his pleasure from me spurred my movements to reach for his hand and place it atop my head. I groaned as he tightened his fingers in my long strands, but sighed when he didn't guide me to what I most wanted.

"Graham, please!"

"I'm not sure—"

Unable to wait another minute, one hand traveled up and gripped the base of his cock. I marveled at the sight of my skinny fingers wrapped around his girth. I stroked up once. Rewarded with a low moan rumbling through his body, I then encased the head of his cock with my mouth and sucked.

In my brief history on this planet, I've never sucked a dick before, although my filthy fantasies would lead you to believe otherwise. But feeling the weight on my tongue and the sensation it caused when it jerked in my mouth made me crave even more.

Not waiting for Graham's direction, I tipped forward as my tongue darted back and forth along the underside of his veiny penis, my need to know how deep I could take him spurring me on. I closed my eyes, savoring the man who I wanted to spend an eternity with. I allowed myself to drown in the quick gasps of breath and the rumbled moans coming from deep in his chest, immersing myself in everything Graham.

When the head tickled the back of my throat, I relaxed and swallowed around him, causing two glorious things to happen.

His muscles clenched, which included his hand, and the pinch on my scalp from his fingers drew out a long groan from deep in my chest. And then his hips darted forward, pushing himself deeper down my throat.

When I blinked my eyes open, staring at his thighs and belly, taut and quivering, I drew my hand up his leg, past the cut of his hips, which were insane, and over his stomach and toward his pectoral. I reached his nipple, pinching one between my thumb and forefinger, which drew a sound so dirty, my cock jumped, wetting the front of my pants.

“Fuck, fuck, Neko! Neko... fuck!”

Not wanting to startle Graham but unable to stop myself from swallowing, I pulled back a few inches and then my throat constricted around him, causing another groan of pleasure. I kept my eyes open as I slid him from my mouth, shocked at how much of Graham I could take. When I reached the tip, another bead of liquid dripped onto my tongue. Spurred on by his excitement, I dove back in, gulping him down, a sudden hunger for him to spill down my throat.

My hands moved up and down his thighs as I devoured him, noting his scent growing stronger with each swallow. I cupped the back of his legs on my next stroke. I then remembered what I asked him and pulled off, staring at his adonis form.

He was perfection with his head thrown back, his abdominal muscles bulging, and the defined muscles of his thighs as he held himself up. Graham’s hand moved from my hair and linked with the other one behind his back, drawing a gasp from me when I traced over the bunching muscles of his biceps and forearms, marveling at the strength he held.

“Graham, love...”

The raspy sound caught us both by surprise, and with an ease I marveled at, he reached down and lifted me onto my feet and then into his arms. He encouraged me to wrap my legs around his waist, and I complied, although not finished with my mouth on his cock.

Without realizing his half-dressed state, Graham took a step toward the bed and tripped. I gasped, thinking we were about to hit the floor, when he flipped his body around and landed on the bed. He grunted when our chests collided and I assessed our situation.

By pure luck, I hadn't kneed him in his beautiful dick. A tragedy avoided. My hands landed on the bed, so my pointy elbows weren't near his ribs, and I searched his face.

"Are you okay?"

He shook his head against the quilted comforter and said, "I'm a menace."

That shocked a laugh out of me. I leaned down to nuzzle his throat, savoring the spicy pepper scent centered under his Adam's apple, making me moan.

"It's more like I am. I asked you to partially undress, remember?"

His arms reached up and guided me onto his chest, burying his face in my hair, and chuckled.

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“My brains leaked out the moment you touched my dick. But to know you don’t have a gag reflex... for all that is good and pure in the world, how the fuck will I survive that?”

“Oh, that reminds me, I’m not done. If I’d known you felt like heaven shoved all the way down my throat, I would have unbuttoned your pants and sucked you off on the first night. But since you’re safe in bed, I’m going to end what I started.”

I backed up and braced my feet on the floor before reaching for the rest of his clothes. With jerky movements, I slipped them down his body before discarding them on the chaise in the corner. But before I dropped to my knees, Graham sat up and tugged me in for a kiss, and I groaned as his tongue dove inside.

“I won’t survive if you put your mouth back on me.”

The side of my lips quirked up as the filthiest thoughts washed over me. Unable to keep silent, I said, “I got a taste of you as I pulled off, which wasn’t even close to enough. I wanted you to fuck my throat until I swallowed your come, but you held back. This time, I’m not playing around. I’ll shove your cock down my throat, swallowing and moaning like the slut I am for you, until you lose control and fuck up into me, trying to drown me with your release.”

For a long minute, I grew silent as I let my words sink in, and then continued.

“After, I’ll be a good boy and drop face down on the bed with my hips up in the air, begging you to eat my ass before you fill me with your cock.”

When he dropped back down on the bed and covered his eyes with his forearm, letting out a choked sound, I pressed my lips to the corner of his mouth, moving down until I reached his nipples, sucking one into my mouth, flicking it with my tongue, before drawing a moan and moving to the other. My tongue traced over the flexed muscles of his stomach, down the cut of his hips, and without stopping, I engulfed his hard, leaking dick in one smooth movement.

“Fuck!”

With Graham, I experimented with all the ways to draw pleasure from him, savoring the pleasant gasp whenever my tongue swept the base of his cock or when I nuzzled my nose in his pubes and gulped. As his moans became louder and his hips punched forward, unable to control his need, I pinched the base of his cock and pulled off.

My voice, hoarse and ragged, shivered over him, “Next time, I want to lay back on the bed with my head dangling off and you can tell me if you can see your cock in my throat as you plunge deep inside, using me for your pleasure.”

I gave him no time to think about what I said. My lips pursed over the head and I swirled my tongue around it before sinking down and swallowing. I groaned aloud when he cupped the back of my head and pushed me down as his hips shot up in swift jerking motions, fucking my mouth and throat. With a deep, guttural curse and then my name shouted from his lips, he surrendered to his orgasm and gifted me with stream after stream of come.

I kneaded his ass with my hands as my eyes drifted closed, savoring Graham, until I sensed his dick was growing sensitive. Not jostling him, I inched back until I reached the head, my breath panting in and out of my chest as though I ran a marathon. My tongue flicked up, licking the last of his essence, before I collapsed back onto the floor.

“Neko?”

“Hmm?”

“Was that for my birthday?”

There I was, doing a glorious imitation of a starfish on the ground, the lower half of me clothed, yet damp with my dick perking up and salivating for whatever would come next. All the while working on catching my breath as pride surged through me as I recalled the way Graham let go and allowed me control of his pleasure. The buzz from watching Graham fall apart caused a sense of euphoria so overwhelming, his comment, which might have been interpreted as hurtful in any other context, made less of an impact.

“Yeah, no, that wasn’t because of your birthday. The presents and the cake and preventing my well-meaning family from singing to you because that would have been torture no one needs. That was all for your birthday. Trust me, love, when I touch you, or kiss you, it’s because I crave that connection with you and for no other reason.”

There was a huff from the bed and although I could’ve looked, my bones were jelly and opening one eye required more movement than I was capable of at the moment.

“I knew it was offensive when it started coming out of my mouth. But my ability to shut off my self-insulting thoughts while making it sound like an accusation toward you is a talent few men possess. Aren’t you lucky?”

A giggle burst from deep in my chest and with a sudden need to be close to him, I stood on shaky legs and launched myself next to him on the bed. Rather than landing on the mattress, the solid man caught me in his arms before capturing my lips in a searing kiss.

“Yes, I am. I’m thinking about playing the lottery and when I win, we’re going to Fiji,” I huffed out.

The smile he granted me was a shot of warmth and love, which settled around my heart.

“I love seeing you like this... all relaxed and giggly.”

Graham scoffed, albeit with a smile on his face. “I do not giggle.”

“Well, I say I’m right and you’re wrong and now we’ll move on.”

He turned toward me and his hand opened over my stomach, his fingers tickling my side, as he dragged his skin against mine, causing me to gasp and throw my head back. I savored the caress as the stroke continued up, the sensation warming, sending tingles through me as I arched into him.

“Do you like that?”

“All of it, love. Whenever I have your attention, I can’t get enough.”

I waited in anticipation as he drifted closer, and blinked in surprise when he pressed his lips to my cheek and said, “What I’m about to do is the most unorthodox way of committing myself to you. But then again, our development from the shortest friendship in history into a loving partnership where I can say, in all honesty, took me by surprise in the best way, is the greatest example of how perfect we are for each other.”

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I appreciated Graham's heartfelt speech, but neither my sex-starved body nor my sluggish brain were helpful in clarifying what sounded to be a declaration on his part.

"Love, what you're saying is important, and I get that, I do. But my primed, ready to explode..." I glanced down at my dripping cock on obvious display, "you know, and your hard body... makes my brain a bit, well, fuddled, so—"

He laughed as he leaned back and captured my gaze. Then he held up a finger, before he scrambled off the bed.

"Not... at all what I was hoping for."

Another rumble escaped his throat, but I was busy sucking too much air down my own when he bent at the waist. His muscled ass was on perfect display as he dug in his jean's pocket, which drew a whimper from me. When he straightened, I admired the magnificent way he held himself. His shapely calves, up to his strong thighs, defined hips and belly, up to his muscular pectorals and wide shoulders, all of it culminating with a symmetrical face, soft beard, and silky hair tied back away from his piercing gray eyes.

"Sweetheart?"

"Yes, love?"

"The jumble of words earlier was a roundabout way of asking you this..."

With an elegance that contradicted the relaxed and playful atmosphere, Graham

lowered himself onto one knee and gave me an incandescent smile. I loved the glint of playfulness in his eyes, the teasing yet serious expression on his face, and the tilt of his mouth that never failed to set my heart beating hard in my chest.

“What?”

His eyes lowered, and mine followed. In his hand, he held a blue-teal box decorated with a thin gold ribbon spanning the lid. Nothing became clearer when he opened it.

I noted a platinum band with a diamond in the center nestled into velvet black liner, making the ring shine because of the contrast of its background. Then I noticed the detail on the ring. The center where the diamond sat was a thinner band, but what caught my gaze was the inlaid triangle design which hinted at both sophistication and strength.

“You’ve never seen an engagement ring?”

My head shot up and I let out an embarrassing squeak. “I’m... I’ve seen them in movies, but I didn’t... don’t know, um. I’ve never seen a man propose to his boyfriend before, so I wasn’t sure. Not that I’m saying that that’s what you’re doing, but can you please kiss me or something to shut me up because—”

Graham put me out of my misery with a gentle brush of his lips against mine and by the time I relaxed enough to discern his words, excitement started rising in my chest and I shook with the adrenaline that flooded my system. I inhaled a deep breath and let it out before I opened my eyes.

The slight tilt of his lips and his glittering eyes as he searched my face for any leftover panic was another reason I knew he would always take care of me. Even if it meant patience while my brain kicked back online.

“I never asked, during all of our late-night talks, and the conversations in front of the TV, or in bed, other than the passing comment during your stream, but have you thought you might want to marry me?”

With shaky hands, I cupped his face and smiled against his mouth.

“If I added logic to the situation, I mean, what is the likelihood of that happening? I’d say marriage is a big step and we’ve known each other for such a short time. But with all the love I feel for you and knowing we’d make each other deliriously happy for the rest of our days, I’d marry you tomorrow if you wanted.”

He shook his head, pulling me up short, and then chuckled.

“Think about the twins and Echo finding out we married at the courthouse with your parents as witnesses?”

I winced. Their imaginations were limitless and their torture would be ingenious, and because I learned from years of experience, I avoided that part of their humanity as much as possible. Emotional pain was one thing, but being flicked in the head or punched in the balls at inopportune times was different.

“Oh, hell, no, we’re including them. But if we do, that means they’ll take over everything.”

“Your sisters have great taste and Echo will rein them in, but it also means it’ll be a few months before we can marry. Can you wait that long?”

“Will we still live together, have sex daily, and call each other fiancé’s?”

The tilt of his lips told me everything I needed to know.

“All that and you get to hear how much I love you as I worship your body,” Graham added.

“Then, yes, I will marry you, Graham Norris, and adore you all the days of our existence.”

Before we became lost in each other, and with reverence, he held up my left hand and slid on the band; the diamond shining from the low light of the lamps on the nightstands. The weight of the ring, albeit minuscule, felt connected to my heart, and I knew I’d never remove it.

I glanced up, eyes threatening to spill over, and whispered, “This ring is the most precious item I’ve ever received. Thank you, love.”

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He kissed away the one tear which escaped.

“Will you wear one, when we’re married?” I asked.

“Yes, sweetheart, we’ll pick one out for me soon. But now, I have to fulfill one of my promises.”

I vibrated. “To ravage me until I scream your name?”

“That, and so much more,” he promised.

Chapter 10

Graham

It’s apparent to me once I wake up, Neko isn’t in bed with me. There’s a minuscule part of me ready to panic. The protective side who would tear through the bedroom and down the stairs searching for him while screaming his name at the top of my lungs until he appeared. But it all receded when I heard the faucet in the bathroom turn off.

Heightened awareness and dread were constant whenever Neko wasn’t near. In the month and a half since our engagement on the night of my birthday, Chaos and Mayhem kept me updated on the ex, without Neko knowing. They’d tracked his phone outside our house for nine minutes the night I caught the suspicious car leaving without its lights on, confirming he’d started stalking Neko’s movements.

We added several cameras covering all angles inside and outside, motion sensors around the house, and three new deadbolts; at the garage, back door, and front door. I've caught the same car on security camera driving by several times. Each time I've documented it in a file, along with the videos I saved, before I reported his movements and sent over the evidence to the police.

But he must've received a warning because for the past two weeks, there hasn't been a trace of him. With anyone else, they would let their guard down, thinking it was a fluke. But I knew better. Three years after their breakup and his subsequent arrest, he tracked Neko's life through his channel, took note of the people he interacted with, and wasted time circling our neighborhood hoping to spot him, so I knew a visit from the cops wouldn't discourage him.

"Ahem."

I lifted my head from the pillow and choked on my tongue. I scrambled up for a better look and almost fell out of bed.

Neko, the most desirable man I'd ever laid my eyes on, stood there looking wide awake at seven in the morning, wearing a tee with 'Cute Gay Unicorn' on the front. The white material draped down his slender form as he leaned against the doorframe with a smile tilting the side of his mouth.

With slow movements, I lowered my gaze down his torso and said, "I can't help but notice you're missing your pants, sweetheart."

A dramatic gasp burst from his throat as he bunched up the material of his shirt in his fists and lifted it, revealing a candy pink jock with white straps. His marvelous cock trapped in the soft-looking cotton in the front. And when he turned to show off the back, I found myself jealous of the two bands plumping his globes, disappearing between his legs.

“Hm, it seems you’re right, love. It might have something to do with my plan for this morning.”

With my cock growing hard in my boxer briefs, I kicked off the comforter and moved from the bed. Or let’s be honest, I scrambled toward the other side, getting tangled in the sheets and comforter, before rolling off the bed.

I’m drawn to Neko on an elemental level. But knowing he’d chosen me to share his life with, to trust in a physical and emotional relationship, left me with the knowledge every day how much of a lucky bastard I was.

What intrigued me wasn’t his sexy-as-fuck underwear or the cocky way in which he knew the display would draw me close to him, but the desire sparking in his beautiful hazel eyes, for me alone.

Without stopping, I strode forward until I buried my face against his neck and breathed in his warm skin and the lemon scent from his body lotion. There were more times than I could count when I became mesmerized, watching him rubbing the silky cream all over his skin, an exotic dance that never failed to ignite my blood.

“And what does your plan include?” I choked out.

“Well, I set my alarm at six this morning, knowing Hensley and I have the stream at noon. Then I dragged my body, incapable of processing my wakefulness at such an indecent hour, mind you, into the shower where I scrubbed my skin clean. And then using these fingers...”

He paused, wiggling two digits on his left hand, before he leaned forward. The next words whispered in my ear.

“I’m clean. Maybe even brushing against my prostate once or twice, but I stopped

myself because I vowed to wait for you before I came. I forced myself to rinse and towel off, but I thought I heard you wake when I couldn't keep the moans from escaping my throat as the fluffy material kept brushing over my cock."

A loud growl escaped my throat, and I nipped at the sensitive skin on his neck, causing a loud gasp. My siren sound.

"And what's supposed to happen?"

My fingers traveled along the top band of his tempting jock, following it down the curve of his ass, until my finger brushed the outside of his crease. His hips tilted back, but I kept my fingers dancing along the straps and away from temptation. With my other hand, I cupped his hip and slid my splayed hand up his ribcage until my thumb drew close enough to another of his erogenous zones.

"Tell me, sweetheart."

As he opened his mouth, I flicked my thumb against his hardened nub and brushed the other against his hole, both whispers of touch against his heated skin. His hips jerked forward, and it was my turn to moan as his trapped cock brushed against my clothed one.

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“I wanted to seduce you until you lay on the bed, on your back... sweet fucking hotness, if you keep touching me like that, I’m going to make a mess in this pink cup.”

As I inched away from the places which drove him crazy, I placed a kiss on the side of his plump lips and focused on his words.

“You want me on my back? Are you going to ride my cock, sweetheart?”

His head shook back and forth as my hand traveled from his entrance, caressing his skin as I traveled up the strap, currently holding my concentration. I pulled on it, testing the elasticity, before it snapped against his skin, making both of us groan.

“Did you want to spank my ass? Leave your handprint on my skin?”

I shivered, as if he poured cold water on my head.

“Graham?”

“No, I’d never mark your pristine skin, even in pleasure. But there’s something about the way you wear these that do it for me.”

“That’s why I bought them. I want to ride you later, but for now... um, I want to feel your tongue...”

The sudden realization hit me and left me on the precipice of sanity, bordering on pushing me toward complete lunacy.

I reached for his hips and threw him over my shoulder as I strode toward the bed, smiling as the action sent Neko into a fit of giggles. Once at my destination, I set him onto the bed, cross-legged, and stayed him with my hand on his hip when he tensed and leaned forward, ready to scramble closer.

“Don’t move.”

Yes, it was gruff and demanding, but the way he shook, holding himself still, told me he understood. Stepping out of my briefs, my skin heating from his piercing gaze, I settled myself onto my back. My head moved away from the pillows as I placed myself in the middle of the bed. Without waiting one more minute to give Neko what he wanted, I reached for him and moved him until he straddled my head.

His hands gripped the hardwood headboard in front of him and he rounded his back until our gazes met. “Graham!”

I linked my arms around the outside of his thighs to keep him from climbing off me.

“Sweetheart, there is no reason to be self-conscious. You’re gorgeous, kind, funnier than anyone I know, and by biting your lip or giving me that flirty ‘You’re my entire world’ smile can drop me to my knees in a split second if you commanded it. All I see, all I know, is the man I love and will love for all eternity. And if you want me to rim you until you scream my name and come all over my face, then I’m going to give you what you want.”

Each word relaxed Neko until the smooth skin of his ass rested against my chest. He nodded his silent permission, and I reached for his hips and jerked him forward, mouthing at his hard cock for a few minutes, making him go even more lax.

When I kissed his balls, I dug my heels in to the bed and dragged myself down until I aligned myself with Neko’s pink hole. As I tilted my chin up and took an

experimental swipe at his pucker, I grunted when he quivered at the touch. His low, dirty moan surrounded me, propelling me to continue.

My hands spanned his hips as I encouraged him to give me his weight, licking a swath across his entrance, over and over. Each moan or gasp characterized what he needed, and when I stiffened my tongue and pressed against his hole, his body jolted before expletives shot out of his mouth.

I grew addicted to the uninhibited gasps, pants, curses, and moans escaping from his throat and memorized the effects from each of my actions. For instance, pursing my lips over his entrance before my tongue flicked out, caused a quiver to travel over his body, making my cock jump.

Is it possible to make him come with only my mouth and tongue? And as precome leaked from my cock, painting my stomach, I wondered if my release would join his if I continued?

“Graham, love, fucking hell, this is the dirtiest thing I’ve ever done.”

Unable to answer with the tip of my tongue pushing its way inside, I cupped his ass, groaning at the sensation of the material of his jock rubbing against my palms. I licked, and sucked, and growled as I lost control for the next few minutes, living off each amplified word, begging for more.

His hips, unable to keep still, rocked back and forth against my tongue and my lips, as he chanted my name above me.

My beard became wet with my saliva and as I tilted my head back to slurp at his balls, I rubbed my facial hair against his taint and his reaction was spectacular.

He scrambled backward, leaving me missing his taste. But as if he couldn’t wait

another second, he slammed his mouth down on mine, and devoured me as I lay there, body throbbing with the desire to take what I craved. Powerless to keep myself from touching him, my hands cupped his ass as I teased my finger near his hole. Even with the slick from my mouth, it wasn't enough to push inside Neko, not without hurting him.

“Lube.”

He bent his arm behind him and reached into my nightstand drawer, handing off what I needed to get inside him, before my mouth opened and his tongue swept inside, tasting himself.

“Fuck, that’s hot. Tonight, when we have more time, I’m going to lay you on your stomach and eat your ass until you come all over the bed. Then I’m going to finger you, stretching you wide, before teasing you with my dick. Your frustration will grow out of control, and you’ll shove me down on the bed and take my cock, riding me until your come bursts onto my chest.”

“Graham, please...”

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There was a slight catch in his breath when I bit his earlobe, and he sighed out my name as I soothed it with my tongue. A sound mixed between a whimper and a cry escaped his throat as I tipped my head back, moving my mouth from his skin. When I caught his gaze, there was a desperation that jerked my cock up in response.

“Hold on, sweetheart. I have an idea.”

I sat up with him, my left arm encircling his torso, hand splayed against his back. His legs tightened around my waist as I grabbed the four standard pillows and piled them against the headboard, enough to cushion his back. On reflection, I reached for another two decorative ones and placed them within arm’s reach.

“What?”

Neko’s hold stiffened as I moved to kneel on the bed, thinking I might put distance between us. But separating myself from him, even a hairsbreadth away, would’ve been impossible.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere. I’m positioning you on the pillows for protection.”

His giggling brought about a novel sensation between us. Even at the beginning, I concentrated on drawing out the pleasure from Neko, whether it was with my mouth or my cock. There was an intensity that brought a seriousness to our lovemaking, but with Neko’s silly side, it brought out another aspect I only shared with him.

I maneuvered both of us until Neko’s back lay against the cushions. As he snuggled

in deeper, slouching down a bit, he blinked up through his delicate eyelashes, waiting for me.

Before he questioned how the position would work, I spread my thighs and sat back on my feet. I draped Neko's legs over my outstretched knees, taking a minute to savor the pretty flush over his primed body. I shuffled forward until my balls brushed against his ass.

My plan flew out the window when Neko scurried forward, shuffling his ass further up my widespread thighs and drawing a loud curse from my throat. His arms banded around my shoulders and mine looped around his back, splaying my hands over his skin as I clasped him to my chest. He rubbed the head of my dick against his hole, sucking in a breath whenever the tip caught his rim.

"I'm... going to reach around with my right hand and guide you into me."

Not wanting to wait another second to be inside my man, I captured his lips in a searing kiss and loosened my right arm, reaching for my leaking, pulsing dick. With a tilt forward, his hole quivered around me before I lowered him down, savoring the catch in his throat and the low moan that followed.

When he bottomed out and squeezed me, blackness edged around my vision, making me feel faint.

"How, for a man who only fucked women before, do you know so much about gay sex?"

"Oh, sweetheart, it has nothing to do with gay or straight sex. I trust you wholly, which goes hand-in-hand with how much I love you. And because you've shown me you love me back, I'm free to indulge in every way I can find to take you apart. Trust me, I've done nothing but imagine different scenarios, positions, and fantasies

featuring you.”

In order to prove my point, I drove forward at the same time his ass rolled, making my cock drive deeper into him. My hand curved over his rounded bottom. The tip of a finger brushed around his stretched entrance, and I absorbed every noise escaping from his throat.

Not getting enough friction because of our limited movements, I cupped his butt with both hands.

“Drape your legs over my shoulders, sweetheart, and place your hands flat on the bed.”

I angled him as he scrambled to do as I asked, his calves on my shoulder. When he leaned back on his arms, I lifted his ass and thrust into him as I dropped him down, allowing me deeper inside him.

“Oh, oh, yeah, this is... can you feel me fluttering around you? You’re so fucking big, but I love the stretch and... fuck, each time you brush against my prostate, it makes me leak all over myself.”

Bracing one arm underneath his lower back, which brought me closer to his mouth, I whispered against his swollen lips, “There he is. The obscene words and dirty little moans telling me how to fuck your orgasm out of you. It’s a fucking thrill, sharing my body and my soul with you.”

“Do you...” he huffed as his hands fisted the sheets underneath him, “like it when I describe how your cock feels, plunging inside me. Or should I tell you I’ve dreamt about you straddling my hips while stroking your cock; the hard, curved, angry red cock pulsing in your hand as I beg you, like a good little come slut, for you to mark me.”

“Fuck!”

“Love, my fantasies go even further. I’ve wondered what would happen if you tease me for hours, not letting me come, while you paint my face with your own release, seeing it dripping down from my chin, as I beg you—”

Not able to keep control if he spoke one more word, I crashed my mouth down on his, cutting off whatever torment he’d inflict on me if he continued.

The desperate little whimpers, the stuttered way he moved his hips, and his hole clenching and relaxing around me, made my body throb and I shivered with my upcoming release.

Helpless to keep the words from escaping, I broke the kiss and murmured against his mouth, “Fuck, I’m close, sweetheart.”

My gaze took in the colorful flush along his neck and chest, the sweat dampening his thick, soft hair, and his fists tangled in the sheets as he pushed his hips against my thrusts, seeking his own pleasure. I glanced down and growled as the pink material covered what I desired.

Somehow balancing Neko with one arm, I reached down and tugged the waistband until it fit snug underneath his balls, exposing his leaking cock. But I didn’t touch it.

“Graham?”

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“Hold on, sweetheart. I’ll get you there.”

He clenched around me, triggering the orgasm I could no longer control, as I groaned his name. My arms gripped him, pressing his chest against mine. The shiver as I filled him vibrated through me and prolonged my release as my hands roamed along his scorched skin. Even touching Neko pacified the monster living underneath the surface, always craving his closeness and the need for near constant contact.

My vision dimmed, yet I shook it back. I needed Neko to find his gratification.

“Love? Please,” he begged.

With slow, deliberate movements, I withdrew from Neko’s pliant body and laid him down on the bed. The flush still prevalent on his chest, the way his fists clenched and unclenched, and the desperation on his face all drove me to settle between his outstretched legs before I swallowed his cock down my throat.

“Shit, fuck, damn, fuck... damn!”

Although I wasn’t as talented as my man at blowjobs, I pushed myself down onto him and when the tip of his cock almost brushed the back of my throat; I gulped.

Without warning, his legs tightened around my shoulders as his hands clutched my hair, trying to pull me away. But there was no way I wouldn’t taste him this time.

“Graham!”

The splash at the back of my throat surprised me, and I groaned. I held him in place with my grip on his thighs as his orgasm caused his body to twitch. Soon, my throat constricted around his still pulsing and swollen cock, drawing out every bit of Neko and gulping it down, forgetting all about his jerky movements.

The knowledge I propelled Neko to the edge left me savoring his essence, which tasted tangy and sweet and surprisingly delectable.

His body sagged, and he whimpered when his dick became too sensitive. I pulled off in increments, preventing myself from flicking my tongue out to stimulate him once again, until he slipped from my mouth.

“I’m dead... right? No one could have survived that because you sucked my brains out through my dick and I need brain activity to survive. Yeah, your argument could be that I’m speaking now, which leads you to believe I’m a functioning human being, but there is where you’d be wrong. My legs don’t work, I’m pretty sure there will be no way to lift my arms, much less form coherent sentences when I stream later, and now I’m thinking I should have woken up even earlier. But none of that matters because I’ve ceased to exist.”

Without a word and a smile on my face, I climbed up next to him before I captured his lips in a breathless kiss.

“Okay, not dead. Good to know. But look at you, Mr. I’m a Fucking Sex God, at the ripe old age of thirty-four, sucking my dick like a pro. Because, fucking hell, love, even without the ingenious positions you fuck me in, having your mouth on me rivals, well, anything.”

“I love you, sweetheart.”

And with those words, Neko’s expression softened, and he cupped my face in his

hands and kissed me. He moved to my forehead, my cheek, and then nipped my earlobe, before burying his face against my neck, breathing me in.

Being the responsible one, I glanced at the clock, surprised to find the time nearing ten. With reluctance, I lifted Neko into my arms and carried him to the shower.

“I’m thinking full breakfast with eggs, bacon, those whole wheat and nut pancakes, hash browns, mangoes, and a gigantic cup of coffee before your stream.”

With a twinkle in his eyes, he reached behind him when I set him on his feet and started the shower. “And I’m thinking tonight, when the candy supply has run empty and everyone has gone home, I put on my special Halloween costume I picked out for you and give you a lap dance?”

If I said I remembered getting through the shower and cooking, I’d be a liar. Neko settled into devouring his breakfast, moaning about how I somehow made better pancakes than he did; an absolute lie, which I appreciated all the same. My cognition sharpened the moment he stopped at my side to give me a thorough kiss, before he disappeared upstairs to his studio.

The stream, according to the number of viewers on Neko’s channel, was a success. He’d introduced Hensley, first to his chat and then to six other streamers, all his online friends. They were playing a horror investigation game at the moment.

“Hey, G-Man!”

“Why if it isn’t Chaos and Mayhem, followed by Grumpy. E, you realize it’s two in the afternoon. Shouldn’t you be more awake?”

“Shut it. My date last night was a disaster. It turned out to be a good thing, because I met a guy at the restaurant’s bar where my date ditched me. We got talking, and... I

like him.”

“Was that painful for you to admit?”

She slid into a seat and dropped her head on her arms on the island and groaned. “Yes, because he’s sweet and funny, sexy and well, his smile lights me up from the inside out, and now you see my problem?”

Neko and Echo, I’ve learned, are both huge believers in self-deprecation. I’d no clue where it’d come from, but in order to get through to them, I needed to apply a bit of tough love.

“No, because I don’t see you the same way you see yourself,” I said.

“What?”

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“E, honey, you think you’re a raging bitch who no one likes. You think people see you as abrasive, unfunny, and a plain harpy who drives others away. But reality is different. The twins worship you, Neko loves you like a sister, and mind you, the next words I speak are coming from an innocent place, I swear. I see you as a sexy, fierce woman who scares the living shit out of me, but who’s also beautiful, a dedicated friend who would go to any lengths to protect those you love, funny as hell, and anyone who’s smart enough to realize all that and more about you will be a lucky man.”

During my speech, I got up and poured coffee in her mug, and kissed her cheek when I finished, pressing it into her hand.

Before her brain absorbed the truth and she formed a reply, there was a tremendous crash from the living room and an ear-deafening siren, the alarm echoing throughout the house. I ran toward the living room, holding out an arm to prevent anyone from running past me, and peeked around the corner. For a moment, the situation stunned me stupid, as I blinked at the sight in front of me.

A wooden Adirondack chair that didn’t belong to Neko or anyone else in the neighborhood was broken on the floor in the entryway. Shattered glass on the ground sparkled in the bright sunlight coming through the gaping hole. As I grabbed a knife from the drawer and moved toward the exit of the kitchen to confront our intruder, three loud rapports, gunshots, reverberated through the house over the shrill blare of the alarm.

I searched the kitchen for my ear buds and slid them in before I glanced down at my phone. The chat was going crazy. Most already contacted the police, and Neko

grabbed his phone. With a quick succession of inputs, the alarm cut off before he placed a call to the emergency services.

Although my head pounded, remnants of the piercing sound, I concentrated on the yelling coming from the foyer.

“Engaged. Are you fucking kidding me? How many times have I told you you’re mine? What do I have to do for you to LEARN! Maybe now, when I empty thirty bullets into the disgusting piece of shit who thought he had the right to touch you, you’ll understand you’re MINE!”

“Are you hearing him? He’s deranged,” then Neko gasped as he glanced at the door, “Oh, fuck! Please, please come soon! My teenage twin sisters, my best friend, and my fiancé are downstairs, all in the line of fire. Hurry, please.”

I almost breathed a sigh of relief when I spotted Neko’s door locked. But he paused, snagged a chair from beside his desk and jammed it underneath the doorknob before he lifted the phone back to his ear.

“His name is Donovan Abernathy the Third. Three years ago, he choked me and punched me before my best friend stepped in and stopped him. Because of that incident, I have a permanent restraining order against him, issued by Judge O’Malley. One minute, please.”

He set the phone down and worked on dragging his desk to block the door. The metal and glass monstrosity wouldn’t budge. Thinking on his feet, he yanked several file cabinets and pushed them against the door before dragging the loveseat over, lifting it vertically, angling it in place.

Neko stumbled his way toward his monitors and with a few keystrokes, put his movements in the screen’s corner while displaying four others from the security

monitors; the entrance, the kitchen, the stairs, and the back of the house.

He picked up the phone and said, “If you logon to my stream, you’ll see the security camera feed. Please hurry.”

I messaged him, letting him know we’re safe. His eyes flicked over to the third feed and sagged in relief, giving me a nod. The next instant, his entire body stiffened, and he blinked into the camera. His fingers flew as he typed out his message to me.

He’s getting closer to you.

Chapter 11

Neko-Ren

Panic, which hadn’t been present the moment the fucking asshole threw a chair through my fucking window, setting off the alarm, before shooting up my ceiling, shuddered over me when Donovan turned toward the kitchen.

Graham stood ready near the corner at the entrance between the dining room and the kitchen, staring into the mirror on his left as he watched an irritated Donovan continue to shout. Huddled in the doorway leading to the basement were Echo and the twins, keeping their eyes darting back and forth from Graham and the mirror. They’d head downstairs and barricade themselves inside if Donovan moved closer, but I knew my man wouldn’t.

When his eyes flicked down to his phone, I noted the headphones in his ears and the images moving on the phone. I knew he watched the stream, but he was in danger of being shot the longer he stayed there.

Get the fuck downstairs! Yes, he’s pacing, but if he charges toward the kitchen, you

won't have time to hide!

Rage surged through me, although a healthy dose of fear kept me from rushing downstairs and confronting the coward. The combination left me light-headed and shaking, but what persevered was anger.

My phone vibrated in my hand.

Fuck! He's heading up.

I breathed a sigh of relief because he'd moved away from the people I loved.

He's on the stairs.

Antagonistic thoughts swelled inside my head as I searched the room for something to bash his brains in with.

At your door... now!

"Mr. Ellison?"

"Ah, fuck," I'd forgotten about the emergency operator and whispered, "Yes, yes, I'm here. I barricaded the door, but he's right outside. No one can reach the front door to unlock it, so please come through the back door. But don't harm my family. Please."

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Unlock the back door for the police, please, love.

The pounding sound startled me and I jumped, almost dropping my phone, although I'd known it was coming.

Again, fury pulsed inside of me.

The doorknob rattled, and I remembered I'd locked it before I angled the couch against the door. But before I worried about the handle somehow being worked open, something hard crashed into the door.

I squeaked and then covered my mouth with both hands as the windows rattled. I glanced over toward the monitors and noted the face of my tormenter, gnarled in rage. He'd rammed his shoulder against the door for a second time, before he flinched and his body sagged.

Then, the voice I'd dreaded for years, who managed to hold on to me even without his presence for months, even years after, floated through the door. It didn't match everything ugly about the image on screen.

"Neko, honey, what are you doing in there? I can't open the door. I want to get in and see you. It's been so long since the last time we were together and I've missed you."

I glared at the door with what probably was the most incredulous look on my face, thinking about the curse words, insults, and small dick jokes I had in my arsenal, but the voice of the operator cut in.

“Don’t reply. It’ll only enrage him.”

I angled my body away from the door and whispered into the phone, “I haven’t seen or spoken to this man in three years, even after a restraining order and jail time, and you think me saying something about his inbreeding is going to make him even more delusional than he is right now?”

“What was that, honey? Are you okay in there?”

Rather than spout every hurtful word that came to mind, I kept my mouth shut.

“The police are close. You’re doing great, Mr. Ellison.”

Then the fucking psychopath said the exact wrong thing.

“Neko-Ren, honey, if you don’t open this door in the next minute, I’m going to run downstairs, find those evil fucking monsters you call your sisters, and march them to the front yard. I’ll force them to kneel on the ground before I shoot each one in the back of the head. Then, I’m going to find that bitch of a friend who busted my knee and using the sharpest knife I find in our kitchen, I will flay the skin off her, relishing in her screams, before I stab that bitch in the heart.”

Every rational thought, even through my fear, flew out of my mind the moment he threatened... I choked when my unhelpful brain imagined his exact words.

A noise outside focused my anger and instead of dwelling on the possibility of him killing those I loved, I formed a plan.

I clicked on the security camera outside in the hallway, enlarging the picture. I searched for any other weapons or bulges where he might hide a knife, but I spotted nothing. Determination washed over me and using my one talent, I started speaking.

“If you throw the gun out into the front yard, I’ll come out. And I mean, you go downstairs, open the front door, and chuck the gun in the far corner of the yard in the bushes before coming back inside and up the stairs. Then, and only then, will I open the door.”

With Graham close by and the police closing in on the house, I needed to do something to help.

For a long moment, silence met my request. Not wanting to wait for his agreement, I grabbed the stainless steel office scissors and slipped them into my back pocket. I opened the heavy duty stapler, testing my ability to strike out with it without hurting myself, when I remembered the hammer in my desk drawer.

On second thought, the stapler might come in handy.

After pocketing the sturdy, yet cold object, the letter opener caught the sunlight, and I slipped it next to the scissors, in case I lost the hammer. I had two stabbing weapons on top of the crushing ones, all of which I would aim at his face and head.

What the fuck are you thinking?

Without a gun, or any other weapons on him, I know, I checked, he’s vulnerable. With all my makeshift weapons, it’ll be enough damage to hold him off.

“I accept your offer. I’ll be back.”

With a furrowed brow and indignation running through me, I stared at his image strolling down the stairs, unlocking and opening the door, before tossing the gun underhanded into the bush separating our yard from Hensley’s. He strode back through, not bothering to shut it behind him, and marched up the stairs.

Before he reached the room, I put the cell to my ear and said, “The front door is wide open, he’s unarmed, you’ll find his gun in the bushes.”

“Under no circumstances should you open that door.”

“I’m buying time. I’ll make it sound as though I’m moving the furniture out of the way.”

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After lying to the helpful operator, I watched Donovan, again making sure there wasn't anything he'd grabbed on the way back inside. The khakis he wore left little to the imagination, and the white button down wouldn't hide anything.

Just then, a horrible memory rose. He used to dress like that for our dates. My stomach rolled, and my breakfast threatened to reappear.

With my focus back on the issue at hand, I reached for the loveseat, pulled it down, and pushed it in the corner. Before I reached for the filing cabinets, a heavy thud landed on the door, and I growled. Believing he was trying to rush me, I opened my mouth to bark back, when I happened a glance at the monitor.

Graham, who'd come up the stairs in silence, pinned Donovan to the ground.

Rushing forward, I pushed one filing cabinet out of the way and opened the door halfway. Graham, who sat on top of Donovan, knees pressed to his biceps, punched him in the face.

There was a pause, and then, "He doesn't love you—"

Another punch straight to his mouth.

The sound elevated my pulse, but not in a bad way. It was time Donovan experienced the consequences of his actions.

When Donovan gritted his teeth and prepared himself to attack Graham, anger swelled inside me. I lunged and kicked out, landing a blow against his temple as he

reared up. It wasn't the exact spot I aimed for, but I blew out a breath, relieved I hadn't hit Graham.

His body went lax; well, his body flopped back and his head smacked against the floor, which, I won't lie, brought a smile to my face. It was then the cops swarmed through the house and up the stairs.

"Do either of you have any weapons?"

Graham didn't move as he said, "No, officer."

I said, "Yes, several. A letter opener, a hammer, an open metal stapler, and a pair of scissors all in my pocket, except for the hammer."

A policewoman nodded at me and asked, "Please empty your weapons onto a clean surface before you move any obstacles from our path and open your door."

I did as she asked, keeping every action in full view.

Donovan groaned and blinked open his eyes, albeit with a dazed look on his face. One cop tapped Graham's shoulder, who stood with his arms raised, before he cuffed Donovan and lifted him to his feet.

"I—"

There wasn't any chance I'd give him a way to weasel himself out of this one.

"Shut. Up! You stupid motherfucker, throwing a fucking chair through the fucking window. I recorded the entire thing. And like last time, the judge won't believe you when you say I attacked you. Yes, I kicked you in your stupid fucking head because you were going to hurt Graham, but you fired a fucking gun in our house, you...

grrrrr.”

Without thinking about it, I charged at him, but Graham stopped me by enclosing me in his arms at the same time the cop jerked the asshole toward the stairs and out of the house.

I gasped and turned around, my hands moving over his shoulders, his chest, his arms, checking for any blood or injuries.

“Are you okay?”

“Me! You stopped my heart when you started loading up on weapons.”

“So you decided sneaking up the stairs and tackling him was a good idea?” I screeched.

He cupped my face, his look fierce, and said, “I will do my best to protect you, even from yourself. I can’t lose you, sweetheart.”

And with those words, all the fight left me and I burst into tears as I clutched at him. We could’ve been standing there for hours or days, but constant chatter and the flow of people around our house reminded me we weren’t alone.

“The sooner we get the police what they need, they’ll leave us alone.”

Echo walked upstairs and rubbed my back until I glanced up, giving her a watery smile.

“I’ll get the recording for the police and tell chat you’re fine. Hensley went home with your mom and I’ll take the twins over and stay the night. Love you, Neko, and I’m glad you’re okay.”

“You too, E. I love you, too.”

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She disappeared into the room as the twins rushed upstairs, sandwiching both of us in their arms, as they started their lecture.

“We should be mad at you for not taking our advice.”

“But because of this stupid stunt, he’ll be in jail for the foreseeable future.”

“And if he ever comes back...” Yu whispered.

Ri finished, “We’ll destroy him.”

Dad was waiting outside for the twins and Echo, promising to come by the next day to check on us. I relaxed, knowing the danger to them had passed.

The minute Donovan left in handcuffs, the rest of the police started taking pictures of the damage and collecting witness statements.

And all of it a buzzing in my head as the adrenaline waned, leaving me a weeping, clingy mess. We gave our statements, including Donovan’s threats in horrific detail. The pitying looks they sent my way after the detectives watched the entire play through of the event made me want to hide. But for the moment, the security footage and recording turned out to be enough testimony for them.

Graham called for a window replacement and after paying a handsome fee for same day service, the window was as good as new.

Unable to be away from me... who’s kidding whom here, with me clinging to him

with no sign of letting go; we locked up the house, making sure we secured the new window and set the alarm. He carried me into our room and locked us in our sanctuary.

There were several scenarios I expected from Graham the moment we were alone. Yelling about how I'd armed myself, ready to put myself in danger, which was the stupidest idea I've ever had. Or silence as the most analytical man I knew contemplated every scenario that might have played out, which would include several where I met my demise. But my vote was our intense need to prove both of us were alive and unscathed, which played out in my head as a mad scramble to get naked before he claimed me in every way possible, while marking my skin with love bites and beard burn.

"Sweetheart, I know what you're thinking."

"Huh?"

"What?"

"You don't sound like you're mad at me."

"Why would I be mad at you?"

I'd no clue how to answer the question, so I gaped at him. My jaw dropped and I'm uncertain, but my eyes were wide and unblinking, so I must have looked like a lunatic.

Graham cupped my face and met my lips with a scorching kiss. I clutched at his shirt and savored the way his lips parted mine, the sweep of his tongue inside, which stirred my pure need for the man. When we kissed, reality fell away, and for me, my concentration centered on the ways he could splinter me apart before reconstructing

me.

We broke apart, both gasping for air, as he placed his forehead against mine.

“I’m so damn proud of you. You kept your focus, even when he stood mere feet from you, threatening everyone you love. Although fear seeped into me, making me weak the moment you grabbed the hammer, I knew you were a fighter. But you’ve experienced enough violence to last you a lifetime, and that’s why I intervened.”

“And it’s why I kicked him. I would protect the twins, and Echo, and Hensley, and my parents with all my limited power. But when I saw the hate reflected in his eyes as he stared at you, I recognized and accepted the dark part of myself in an instant.”

Graham beamed at me. “There’s the man I fell in love with.”

“What?”

A chuckle escaped his throat, and he brushed his lips against mine before he explained.

“You’re much stronger than you give yourself credit for. Instead of making excuses for what Donovan put you through, you learned it wasn’t your fault, exposed yourself to your audience, and channeled it into something positive by teaching them the signs of an abusive relationship.”

I blinked back tears and shook my head. “You... it’s because of you...”

“No, sweetheart, you are fierce, and brilliant. I was fortuitous enough to have met you that night and helpless to stay away. But I’m not the reason you fought back.”

All those times I wished for a partner, a man who loved me for who I was and what I

strove to become in the future, never could I have dreamed of Graham. Many times I've thought he was too everything; perfect, beautiful, kind, but through it all, he'd been mine and I, his.

Our connection and love was unconditional, and it took me until that moment to realize there was nothing I could do or say, and trust me, I've said some outlandish shit in Graham's presence, that could drive him away.

“Fuck!”

“What?” Graham sounded confused.

“I’m demented, my sisters are... well, you know. Echo’s crotchety on a good day, and my parents are interfering harpies. Yet, you want to be with me, anyway. You... gasp... like it here.”

The side of his lip tilted in a hint of a smirk. “Did you, instead of making a gasping noise, say it aloud?”

“I might have done.”

His arms wrapped around me and squeezed as his body shook with amusement. I sighed as he buried his nose underneath my ear, shivering as it traced along the sensitive skin of my neck.

“This right here, holding you, inhaling your scent as you melt into me. Or when we wake, you in my arms, all warm and cuddly, before you mutter all the way downstairs about the unfairness of mornings, despising the fact coffee doesn’t materialize on your nightstand. And the nights where you lay against me as we watch cooking shows, noting a new recipe to try, while we talk about anything that comes to mind. The million ways you touch me; a brush of your lips against my skin, the noise you make when you need me inside you, or the way you gravitate toward me whether we’re the only ones in the room or not. I could’ve never imagined you. One, I have no originality in my thought processes and two, there’s no one comparable to you, sweetheart.”

Tears welled in my eyes, and I clutched at him. “You know I will always choose you.

For the rest of our lives and even beyond.”

“I know that. I’m not going anywhere.”

Relief and something more sparked through me. We had forever; loving each other, building a life including marriage, kids, dogs, and a cat or two, and whatever roadblocks life threw our way. But he’d be my eternal Graham and I’d be his wacky, sex-obsessed partner. At that thought, I groaned, “Graham?”

His eyes sparked with excitement and desire. “You know I can’t resist you.”

Clothes flew as it became a contest not to break our kiss. We failed when our shirts bunched around our heads, but his laughter set my body alight. His hands opened along my back, sending a flutter of anticipation through me, but he paused as he reached the band of my new lace trunks.

I glanced up as he closed his eyes and watched the byplay on his face as his fingers skimmed the solid band. But when they roamed over the lace pattern on the front, cupping my hard cock barely contained in the fabric, his mouth pinched and he blew out a heavy breath while I whimpered.

“My heart can’t take much more of this. This morning it was the fucking sexiest pink jock and now... what color?”

“Black.”

“Are they panties?”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of those. These don’t show as much as the jock, and they aren’t as skimpy as panties. And there was one color available. But—”

I stopped talking when his hands tightened on my hips, and he put distance between us. Before I whimpered in complaint, his gaze lowered. Mine followed, and I gasped when I noticed my precome leaked through the fabric and the dark spot grew the more his gaze focused on my cock.

“It’s see through.”

“Yes.”

Without another word, he bent down and wrapped his arms around my thighs as my hands landed on his shoulders. When he lifted me, I let out an embarrassing squeak. Soon, it turned into a moan as he mouthed my dick through the thin material.

Mesmerized by the muscles of his shoulders and arms bunching as he held me several feet off the floor, along with the provocative growls escaping his throat, I breathed in and out several times, hoping to prevent my leaking dick from exploding at Graham’s reaction.

“I need access to you, sweetheart.”

My foggy thoughts weren’t able to process his request, but after a moment, I glanced down at his heated gaze and surmised his request.

“I won’t let you fall,” Graham promised.

I flushed from head to toe at the thought of our positions, but released his shoulder with a shaking hand and grasped the band of my underwear. With deliberate movements, I hooked the side strap and shimmied it down. My hand moved across my body, lowering the other side of the lace until my cock sprang free.

Without pause, Graham swallowed me down his throat, causing me to clutch at his

shoulders with both hands and shout his name.

“I’m going to come. Oh, fuck, I’m going to come.”

Instead of pulling off or throwing me onto the bed, his tongue flicked the tip of my dick, encouraging me. He glanced up as he swallowed me down once again, and with a wink, I lost the fight against my impending orgasm.

“Graham!”

His right forearm clamped against my ass as his other hand pressed against my lower back, savoring my release as I twitched and moaned in his embrace. The answering rumble as he swallowed me down, letting me know he craved me as much as I did him, made my cock twitch with one last spurt before I went limp.

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When he lowered me onto the bed and climbed over me, I slow-blinked at him.

Until I felt his hardness against my leg.

With a surge of adrenaline, I flipped him onto his back and crawled over him, stealing a kiss.

“My turn.”

I nibbled along his neck and his collarbone, drawing out the sounds setting my body alight. My tongue darted out and licked a swath from his neck to his ear, savoring the rumble from deep in his chest.

“Oh, love, I want you to come down my throat as I swallow around you. And when my voice is raspy tomorrow, it’ll be a reminder of your beautiful, thick cock abusing my throat.”

“Oh... fuck!”

Not waiting for him to brace himself for what was to come, I kissed down his chest, flicking his nipples with my tongue and then my thumb, before I freed his cock from his jeans. Not bothering to remove the offending clothing, I grasped the base and swallowed him down without hesitation.

“Neko, sweetheart, I’m...”

My lips tightened around his girth, and I bobbed up and down, moaning at his musky

scent invading my senses and making my member twitch. When my nose bumped flush against his skin, I swallowed once, savoring his sharp curse, before I did it again. I migrated back off him as my tongue darted and swirled, teasing him.

As I reached the head, leaking profusely, I flattened my tongue and moaned as his essence filled my senses. I pressed against his slit, savoring the taste filling my mouth, and happened a glance at his gorgeous form. His back arched as his fists clenched the sheet below him, keeping tight control over his body's actions.

I loved Graham on the edge. At each stroke, lick, and suck, I wondered if this was the action which would send him over. He would either surge up and tackle me to the bed, preparing me with quick thrusts of his fingers deep inside me, or if he'd surrender and come in my mouth.

With long swaths, I bathed his cock in my saliva from base to tip, pressing against the pulsing vein along the underside, reacquainting myself with every inch of his cock.

“Fuck, shit, fuck, fuck!”

I engulfed the head and teased him as I pursed my lips and sucked around the crown, groaning at the feel of his silky, taut skin. Done with teasing, I gulped him back down, not stopping until he reached the back of my throat.

My hands worshiped his thighs and hips before moving to his tensed stomach and up to pinch his nipples. A rumbled shout was all the warning I received before he shot into my mouth. I closed my eyes and savored every rope of come, tightening my throat to prolong his release.

“Fuck, sweetheart, I can't.”

I unlocked my mouth and without adding pressure, lifted myself off, all the while

staring at his heaving chest and wrecked expression.

Proud of what I achieved, I sat back on my haunches and looked my fill.

“There isn’t any way I can move.” Graham blinked up at me.

“Don’t worry, I got it.”

Not to jostle him, I knee-walked toward the edge of the bed, hopped down and headed toward the bathroom. A wipe down and sleep were all we needed. After cleaning myself in the bathroom, I warmed a cloth for Graham. My eyes traced his beautiful form on the bed as I wiped come off his chest and using a gentle touch, cleaned his dick standing at half mast.

After draping the cloth on the side of the hamper, I grabbed the extra blanket from the closet and shut off the lights.

Graham reached for me when I settled and pulled me on to his chest. I buried my face against his neck as I draped my leg over his and slung my arm around his waist. Safe and loved, I blew out a breath as my eyes drooped.

“I want every day to start and end with sex.”

“I’m in. But I have one tiny suggestion. You might not agree, because the analytical side of you will think it’s too soon, or you’re still hung up on the fact I’m a decade younger than you, and when you have time to think about how ape shit my family is, you’ll change your mind. But considering you proposed to me after knowing me for a brief time—”

“Neko, sweetheart?”

“Yes?”

“I texted everyone when the window was getting replaced. We’re getting married tomorrow at the courthouse.”

“Oh.” I paused for a minute as a glorious series of images flashed in my head. I fantasized about hyphenating our last names signifying to the world we belonged to each other, sharing a connection I never dreamed possible, and calling Graham my husband as our relationship thrived, all of it sending shafts of urgency for tomorrow to come as I squealed and jumped at him.

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I straddled Graham and rained down kisses on his face. His hands landed on my hips and he laughed as I continued showering him with affection.

“Tomorrow can’t come soon enough.”

Chapter 12

Graham

Two Years Later

Neko cocked his hip against the kitchen counter, a cup of coffee clutched in his right hand, a smirk on his face as he looked me up and down as I stumbled for the mug of steaming hot coffee he’d poured for me. His look, awake and delightfully rumped, worked for him. With his longer than normal hair sticking up in different directions, his hoodie, this one with the phrase, ‘I’m a fucking delightful unicorn,’ along with his wrinkled sweats, completed his sexy-as-sin look.

But then again, Neko was the epitome of beautiful.

“Do you, the love of my life, the man I want above all others, along with your wicked, muscular, sexy form and your sheer talent at making me scream out in ecstasy with a casual touch or an intense kiss, know what day today is?”

Without saying a word, I snagged his cup and set it aside before I slid my hands to his face. “Happy Anniversary, the love of my life, my husband, and my all,” I murmured as I tilted my head and kissed him.

As with every other time we touched with intent, the kiss grew out of control. I backed my husband against the counter, spanning his waist with my hands, and lifted him onto it. Our connection never broke, and for several minutes afterward, I devoured him.

Although we'd planned on committing ourselves to each other the day after our brush with death, we waited a month after the Halloween stream and subsequent home invasion for the civil ceremony. We'd slept in that Monday and by the time we'd drank enough caffeine to stay upright, Neko learned there weren't tuxes available the same day and he refused to marry in casual wear.

On the day of our wedding, Neko dressed me in a tailored black shawl collared tux jacket with dark orchid accents, matching black pants, and completed the outfit with black patent leather shoes. His outfit matched my own, except his jacket included a textured floral pattern in purple with black accents.

After adorning the rather comfortable formal wear, I gathered downstairs with his parents, the twins, Echo, and Hensley.

Although I started a tentative truce with my parents in the weeks leading up to the wedding, they weren't comfortable enough attending, even at Neko and Hensley's insistence. My mom, Holly, assured me it wasn't because of my bisexuality, and dad mentioned it was because we'd lost a lot of time and we're getting to know each other again.

In the convening years since my and Neko's relationship started, mom and dad visited several times and became close to George and Reo. While our trips to California were infrequent because of Neko's career, we spoke several times a month and for the most part, let past hurts go and worked on repairing our relationship.

The nerves mixed with the urgency to marry the love of my life before he changed his

mind, had me pacing the foyer, much to the amusement of the twins and Hensley.

“He won’t back out, you idiot. We’ve all seen the way he looks at you, and you him. There’s no way we won’t witness you two pledge your undying love for each other,” Echo said, emphasizing her point with a punch to my arm.

All thoughts, worries, and fears fled the moment Neko’s head popped out from the top of the stairs, the rest of his body hidden by the wall. His smile settled the riot in my chest and allowed me to breathe for the first time that morning. Neko, in all his fabulous and gorgeous glory, loved me and the last thing I would do was to dissuade him from that notion.

“Ready?”

With a stupid grin on my face and my head nodding up and down, he emerged from his hiding place and strolled down the stairs.

I stilled and sucked in a sharp breath. “Wow.”

It croaked out of my throat as my gaze roamed over him. The jacket and white shirt underneath were dazzling on his thin frame, tapering at his slim waist and displaying the broadness of his shoulders. The slacks emphasized his long legs, and when I spotted the flash of his engagement ring as he lifted his sleeve to adjust a cufflink, pride swelled in my chest. I reiterated a vow that Neko’s happiness was my lone priority.

I’d love to say each minute of our wedding day was crystal clear in my memory because I married the love of my life that day. But in all honesty, while it was momentous, I blubbered during the entire ceremony. And... okay, I won’t lie, I continued off and on the entire day. The magnitude of bonding myself to my perfect man struck me whenever I laid eyes on him.

Neko came prepared for the emotion of the day, pulling out a handkerchief. As he wiped my cheeks, the soft smile lived on his face, the one meant for me alone, as we said the words and the official pronounced us the Norris-Ellisons.

And after the ceremony, I clung to Neko.

Echo threw a party to celebrate, using our house since according to her, 'People get drunk, then they get clumsy, and if anyone is going to spill something on the furniture or throw up in my presence, then I'd rather it be at your place.' Neko shrugged, and I planned on locking all the upstairs doors, not wanting anyone in our bedroom or his studio.

But what surprised both of us, Echo brought a date. She introduced him as Hugo and explained he was the same guy she'd met at the bar the night before Neko and Hensley's Halloween stream. He matched Echo's height, but their personalities were... well, I would say Hugo was the antithesis of Echo. I found him thoughtful with manners seldom seen, shy, and his actions exhibited a devotion to Neko's best friend.

Hugo had asked Neko his advice about how he should go about proposing to her so she wouldn't give him an automatic no. My husband, knowing Echo had talked, incessantly, about taking the next steps with Hugo, gave him the advice of a romantic dinner at home, without an audience. They are planning their ceremony for next spring.

Although before we met, commitment seemed both distant and impossible, we settled into marriage with ease. Our day-to-day lives changed little, but our relationship strengthened with every conversation, touch, or expression of love. We didn't fight, but my husband had moments of stubborn resistance where he wouldn't take care of himself, and I stepped in. His happiness still mattered to me above all else.

Neko continued with his career, and I became his manager. All it meant in the long run was I invested our money and built our wealth while financing several charities for domestic violence awareness and supporting the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth. I also dropped in once a month for a Q&A on his stream. His chat loved to know about our rather mundane lives, and I enjoyed time with my husband.

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Hensley retired from modeling and purchased the house next door. Her popularity soared since she started streaming and she settled into a new chapter of her life, which made her happy. While I expected Hensley to be a part of our lives, I watched, fascinated, at the close friendship she developed with my husband and Echo, which was enviable in the neighborhood.

The twins, who stayed most weekends with us, were happy, well-adjusted... demons. But they were ours. At fifteen, they created a free app where victims of domestic violence and stalking could call for help without alerting their abusers. Also, the app gave tips on how to leave a toxic relationship and listed resources for building their new lives once they left. They've been debating several job offers after graduating last June, all while contemplating bringing awareness to social issues important to them.

"Stop trying to distract me," Neko whined.

My smile widened against his mouth and he reached up and tweaked my nipple. The answering moan from deep in my throat had an immediate reaction. Neko jumped into my arms and wrapped his legs around my waist as my hands cupped his ass.

"Love, please."

With a peek at the clock, I carried Neko toward the TV room, no patience for the long trek upstairs before our flight.

"What's going on?"

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You glanced at the clock. In the past two years since you’ve retired from your full-time job, you haven’t cared about the time once,” he narrowed his eyes and continued, “what’s going on?”

“Tonight, we’re flying to Ireland, which is a starting place for a month-long traveling honeymoon. I know what you’re thinking. ‘I can’t take that much time off,’ but I’ve talked to your chat, and they were encouraging. Also, Echo relayed you’re two weeks ahead of schedule for your video uploads, and she’ll space them out while we’re gone. Plus, they’ll be a group stream when you get back. I know it’s a lot, me presuming this is what you want, but you haven’t had a break since you started your channel and I wanted to surprise you for our—”

Neko peppered kisses on my face, whispering how much he loved me, as his eyes watered. Of course, his tears were my weakness, and I tightened my hold.

“Oh, sweetheart, please don’t cry.”

“Happy tears, I swear.” He wiped at his eyes and asked, “How long have you been planning this?”

“I wondered about it as I bought your ring, but started planning on our wedding day. We didn’t have time for a honeymoon after the ceremony, and I wanted time for us to settle in as a married couple in familiar surroundings. And I’m glad we did because spending all our time together, growing closer and being open about our nerves and our doubts and our plans for the future, cemented everything I’ve felt for you since we’d met.”

A laugh bubbled up in his chest, and the sound set my body alight. “I clung onto the amount of alone time we had together and savored each minute, and I still guard our time together because it’s precious. When we fell into our normal routines, the tight

ball of anxiety in my chest loosened because I needed you alone, to be in a familiar space. If we rushed off to a honeymoon and let everything fall by the wayside, we might not be on solid ground, and that scared me.”

Neko paused and then met my gaze. “When do we leave?”

“The flight to Donegal from JFK is at four. We have—”

Neko pulled away from my hold, but grabbed my hand before he led me up the stairs and into our bedroom. He rushed toward the closet, stopping at the dresser, pulling out our underwear drawer and turning back to me.

“Pack all the underwear. And the charming socks along with the dress socks. Oh, and my funny tees, and the suspenders you think are cute on me, and don’t forget the unopened package in there. No, you can’t open it and no, you can’t know what’s inside. All in due time.”

My mind wandered to the next possible provocative garment he’d ordered on a whim that would drive me insane and make me strip it off him as fast as possible. I about swallowed my tongue when Neko cleared his throat.

“Love, hurry, we have little time. We have to drop by that store we found and pick up our favorite lube in three ounces to pack in the carry on and the bigger one for the suitcase.”

I paused in searching for our suitcases and turned back to him. “You’re planning on riding me in the airplane bathroom, aren’t you?”

He waved away my arguments. “I’m bringing the disinfecting wipes and your travel cologne. We’ll be fine.”

When Neko paused and studied me for a moment, his face softened before he walked

back toward me, draping his arms around my shoulders.

“I love you.”

And with those words, I’d do the unlikely, the impractical, and if he wanted me to, the impossible. All for the love of Neko.