



Temptation at Randy's

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: New beginnings didn't usually come with a side of temptation.

Arlene

The last thing I would've expected when I dared to attend a local munch at my favorite diner was to run into one of my favorite YouTubers. Claude wasn't part of the munch, as far as I could tell, and they hadn't posted anything in forever, but they still approached me. Me.

It was a miracle I didn't lose it right then and there.

Claude

Despite what my friends from LA said, I didn't regret moving to Boston. It had started as an attempt to run away from a PR crisis I hadn't known how to handle, but I liked it here. I'd found a safe haven at Randy's, and people to surround myself with.

People to surround myself with shouldn't have included a financial advisor with a sweet tooth and gorgeous eyes, but... Here we were.

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ONE

Arlene

I couldn't believe I was doing this.

Damned cork board.

Damned Dylan, too. The moment I'd mentioned the ad for a trans munch at Randy's, he'd been all over me. He'd turned it into a bet, too, because having shared a townhouse for two years now meant he knew all the ways to get me. I could be competitive.

Of course, he just happened to have a gig today, of all days. If he wasn't such a bad liar, I would've pointed out how convenient it was that he couldn't go with me. He probably did have a gig, though.

The staff at the diner had shoved a few tables together toward one of the walls, probably to avoid interfering with the flow of regular customers. The munch was RSVP-only, but most of the seats were taken already. I sneaked in to get one by a corner. I imagined the center of the elongated table would be more overwhelming. I already felt overwhelmed enough, my skin buzzing with nerves.

Dylan—and my family—disagreed, but I didn't think I was any good at social situations. Dylan joked that I was a shy sunshine. I supposed it was true.

Shy was the keyword here.

At least I'd already written down my order when I RSVP'd so I didn't have to ask for a Mouthful of Cookie in front of the dozen people here. I would probably implode.

It was the only drawback of Randy's. They'd gone a little out there with the names of some of the items in their menu. Still, I'd fallen in love with the diner the second I'd seen the pink and blue lighting. Walking in for the first time had literally eased the knots in my upper back. It had felt like community in a way I'd only heard of online. A feeling I'd long ago given up on, accepted as a myth or an urban legend.

But... No. It existed at Randy's.

"Hey!"

Shit.

I brought a hand to my chest. One would think that after more than twenty years of people scaring me by simply occupying a space, I'd have a better handle of it.

I did not.

"Hi." There was no way my smile didn't reveal how nervous I was, but I tried.

"It's your first munch here, right? I'm Cin, they/them pronouns."

Cin extended a perfectly manicured hand in my direction. I shook it out of sheer reflex. They were dressed in all black, giving goth, but they were too bubbly and happy looking. Granted, I couldn't say I've been around many goths, so maybe bubbly, happy goths were the norm. It might've been kind of like that misconception about punks.

Sometimes I felt like I'd been too coddled growing up in comparison with most of the

people I met at queer spaces.

“Yeah, I’m Arlene. She/her.”

It could get isolating.

“Love it.” Their smile was sincere, too. “Love the dress, too, by the way.”

They did?

I looked down at said dress. I always tended to feel self-conscious about my style when I met new people. They really looked sincere, though.

“Thanks. It has pockets.”

It reminded me of the cute dresses in old Hollywood movies. I wasn’t a fan of the blatant misogyny during that time, but the aesthetic kind of stuck with flowy dresses right above the knee, soft fabrics, and that feminine vibe.

Finding them was hard, but this one? With the addition of pockets? I was this close to buying it in every available color.

I could admit I had a problem.

“Work.” Cin winked. “I’m gonna go say hi to everyone, but let me know if you need anything, are uncomfortable, or... whatever, okay? I’ve got you.”

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“Sure.” I wasn’t one to cause problems like that, but I didn’t say so.

Instead, I let Cin go be a social butterfly, or whatever it was they wanted to do, and I grabbed my phone from one of the pockets so I could scroll for a bit.

Having nothing to do was the absolute worst. I needed some kind of stimulation at all times. I didn’t have ADHD—my parents got me tested at one point—but... It was about feeling too aware of where I was and what my body was doing.

It was better if I didn’t leave room for that.

To be fair, the people at the munch were nice. As César, one of the servers I’d grown worryingly familiar with in the past weeks, served all the food and drink orders, others introduced themselves. They brought me into their conversations and asked about me. I snickered a few times, but full-on belly laughs were reserved for people I had built more trust with.

It was good, though. When Cin asked if they’d be seeing me at future munches, I didn’t give a definite answer, but I could see myself here. Maybe if Dylan came with me, I could loosen up more and give answers that involved more than five words at a time.

“Cin! You still here?”

Many people had approached Cin since I arrived. It made sense; they were one of the hosts. I’d been more attuned at first, raising my head to see who was who. The last half hour, I’d been too engrossed with the two kinksters next to me.

That voice, though.

It was familiar.

The second I turned, it made sense. The years had lowered it, made it raspier, but...

Shit.

My eyes widened. That was Claude of Spades. I'd watched too many of their vlogs during all-nighters in college not to recognize them.

What were the odds that they were in Boston? In Randy's, of all places?

And that they knew Cin, too.

All the anxiety I'd started to shake out came back full force while I tried to figure it out. Last time I'd heard, Claude had been living their best influencer life in LA.

They'd disappeared, though, after a vlog that went viral for all the wrong reasons.

Ben—a better known YouTuber and their best friend—had been tight-lipped about it. Back then, I checked out their social media profiles a couple of times a week, hoping for some kind of update.

I wasn't scared to say I'd had it bad. It was my coping mechanism while dealing with classes filled with finance bros and professors with outdated ideas on gender.

Cin must've noticed me looking because they gestured toward me and mouthed, "You know each other?"

Pulse in my throat, I shook my head. I knew Claude's internet persona. Just because I

got obsessed for a while there didn't mean I was blind or unaware of how YouTube worked. Many people in the comments section were another story, though. I guess that was why Claude's last video had blown up the way it did.

I never would've claimed to know anything about them. I'd just enjoyed the content. It had been the best safe space I could afford to enjoy.

Kind of what Randy's had quickly become.

Randy's was probably better for my mental health than rabbit holes down the lore of a dozen YouTubers. Worse for my finances, for sure, but... One couldn't have it all.

Besides, I'd already built it into my budget, so it was fine. All under control.

"Love the vintage look," Claude said. They were moving closer. The guy who'd been sitting to my right had already said his goodbyes and headed out. I... "I take it you're a fan?"

Fan.

No, that wasn't the right word, but... I supposed it was the easiest way to explain it.

"Used to be" felt like a good compromise, though I winced when I said it. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to make you feel awkward."

I cataloged the changes as they sat in the booth next to me, our legs almost touching. Their hair was dyed dark fuchsia, cut around their shoulders. I had never seen them wearing a natural color, so I supposed that had remained the same. The undercut, too.

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Had they stayed on T? There was something about the set of their jaw. More angular. I wasn't about to ask, obviously, but I wondered. I remembered they complained about access to gender affirming care.

"It's fine. Believe it or not, you're the first person to recognize me since I moved here."

That, I did not expect. "Because you moved in yesterday?"

I mean, even if they'd ridden off Ben's followers and had appeared in many of his videos, they'd never really reached his levels of fame. I was aware. But... Still. I wouldn't have assumed they were that niche.

Claude laughed. Their voice was definitely deeper than I remembered. Not too much—others may not have even noticed—but I did.

"A few months ago. A PR agency gave me a chance as an intern, and I needed the change."

I nodded. It made sense that they'd do something marketing-related. "I work as a financial advisor."

What didn't make sense was why I thought sharing that piece of information was called for.

Could I just bang my head against the table and end this conversation—which had barely started?

Thankfully—or not—Claude just smirked. “I used to have one of those.”

“Oh yeah?”

I wanted to say I didn’t squeak like a hormonal teenager caught doing something she shouldn’t have been doing. Chances were I didn’t sound like a functional adult, though.

“Well, he was Ben’s, but he let me borrow him.” Their nose wrinkled then. I zeroed in on the action. They looked so young and careless when they did that. It made sense, though. One of my favorite things about Claude’s videos was the dichotomy between their dry humor and the expressive facial expressions. “I hated it.”

“I’m sure I have clients who share that sentiment.”

Great line, Arlene. Good job.

Claude laughed again, so that was... good, though, wasn’t it? I really should’ve made more of an effort in all those bars when Dylan offered to be my wingman. First impressions, first conversations? Not my thing.

Never had been, and it only got worse with age.

“Did you wanna keep talking? I just ordered fries, and I asked for extra, but I probably won’t be able to finish them.”

“Uh, sure. Okay.”

Needless to say, I was in shock, but... Claude, my stupid Internet crush for more reasons than I could count, was asking me to share fries with them.

No, I was not hungry. I did not care.

Even if those hormone-inducing feelings weren't there, Claude was interesting. There were so many things I wanted to ask, to talk about. I'd always been fascinated by the world they used to live in.

"Great." As they stood up, they spared a glance in Cin's direction. "I'm also saving you from their spiel to join the local kink club. It's a whole thing."

"Huh?"

"Unless you were interested?" Claude tilted their head to the side, looking me up and down. Yeah, imploding was definitely on the menu for today. "I'm sorry. I people watch a lot, and you didn't look completely comfortable. I assumed?—"

"No, it's fine." I stopped them from talking for two reasons. One, it wasn't completely true. Two, I didn't want to risk Cin overhearing or getting the wrong idea. They'd been so nice, and my being overwhelmed was... well, a me problem. "They already wanted to know if I'll be coming back."

"Will you?"

They started leading the way to their table as they spoke.

"Probably," I admitted. "Maybe if I get my roommate to join me."

Claude seemed to regard me for a second. "You're one of those people who need a clutch, aren't you?"

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Uh... should I be offended?

“What do you mean?”

They just groaned.

“Sorry, sorry. Julian keeps saying it’s funny how I have no way with words.” They rolled their eyes at some memory I wasn’t privy to. I knew who Julian was, obviously—Ben’s boyfriend, and the other half of one of the longest-lasting queer couples online. But Julian wasn’t in many videos, and he definitely did not talk a lot when he was there. “I just mean... There are different kinds of introverts, right? There are the ones who... stay introverted, I guess. Then there are the ones who are introverted at first, but then you give them some time, and boom, they suddenly don’t shut up. And the ones who benefit from a third person to move from introvert to not shutting up.”

Huh.

I guess I was that, then. My cheeks still heated up, though. Was it a good thing, a bad thing... a neutral observation? I couldn’t tell.

TWO

Claude

Personally, I blamed Ben. Julian, too—but that was just because it annoyed him, and annoying him was fun. The thing was, we were FaceTiming yesterday, and Ben had

just come back from a meet with fans. He'd been charged up, going on about how he didn't understand how I didn't miss meets.

And... I did. Obviously, I didn't tell him, but I did. It had been our thing, too.

We'd meet up at a diner or an overpriced café with a few select fans. It was cool. They were chill for the most part. Sure, I didn't come across as the friendliest, and I had to set boundaries a time or two, but...

Maybe it was an ego thing, but it was nice to be around someone who was so invested in seeing you thrive. Someone who was so happy that you were living your best, out life in the open. I didn't get that anywhere else, so the meets had had a healing factor attached to them.

Meets were not the same as one-on-ones, though. Arlene wasn't the only one who functioned best when she had a clutch. Well, I knew how to turn on a persona and act approachable. It was exhausting, though, and I was out of practice.

Arlene was intriguing, though. I'd seen her at Randy's before. The PR agency I was working at wasn't too far from here, and I'd quickly become a regular. The food—I was biased to their cheesy fries—was amazing, they had a good, queer-friendly crowd, and they hosted community events, too. I'd made a promise to myself that if they hired me here and I relocated, I was going to make an effort to build a network.

Randy's was the best way to do that.

“So, what do you do when you're not telling people they can't have avocado toast for breakfast?”

Arlene spluttered for a second. It was cute.

“I don’t tell people that,” she protested. Cute. “But, uh, I like baking? I mean, I like it a lot. It’s my way to decompress, basically.”

“What’s your best dessert?”

“What do you mean?” Her head tilted to the side as she spoke.

“Like...” I licked my lips. Man, I was hungry, too. I couldn’t wait to get my fries. “If you were to bake something to impress a date, what would you do?”

“Oh.” Heat reddened her cheeks, spreading down her neck. “I mean, it depends. On what they like, I mean.”

“Right.” Should I take pity on her? I bet most people would say I should. I was curious, though. I’d once read a book where a character said they tested people by seeing how they reacted under pressure or when their anxiety ran high. I supposed I internalized some of that mentality. “I like cheese. All kinds. And chocolate. And berries. No coconut, though. Well, I like the flavor of coconut oil, but the texture is icky.”

I assumed she was going to say cheesecake with something. It was the unknown something that had me salivating. Man, back home, there was this small bakery that delivered to my place...

I missed it.

“I’d probably go for cheesecake bars.” Arlene swallowed, maybe self-conscious about the confidence in her tone. It was hot as fuck and definitely grabbed my attention. “I haven’t fucked those up in years.”

“What are those?”

“Basically a cheesecake, but the base is cereal, or Oreo cookies, and marshmallow fluff or honey. I go with one or the other depending on what I add to the cheese batter.”

Ohh.

Ohh, I wanted those.

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“And what does a person have to do to inspire you to... bake things for them?”

Maybe I batted my eyelashes. Whatever. I was very easily bought with food. I was aware of that fact. It had to count for something.

I was also acutely aware of the way Arlene flushed as if I'd just asked for the most salacious thing. It was endearing, in a way, but it had me curious, too.

“Just ask?” Her voice was an octave higher, a fact that just made the pink hue in her cheeks darken. “I mean, I bake all the time. It's a good thing I have a roommate, or it would all go to waste.” Before I could say anything, she scrunched up her nose. “Well, that's not true. I mean, I'm environmentally aware. I don't throw out food. If I think something's gonna go bad and there's no one I can give it to, I take it to a food bank next to my place. The kids love the surprise treats.”

Damn.

Who on Earth didn't have a soft spot for someone who baked desserts for kids dependent on food banks?

Yeah, I was one hundred percent going to blame Ben for any choice I made moving forward that involved Arlene.

“Should I feel bad I'd be taking food from kids?”

The half-genuine, half-teasing question made Arlene chuckle.

Good. I wanted to hear the sound more. She had a nice laugh. Soft. It matched her vibe with the frilly dresses. I saw her once in a suit. She'd added a pin with her pronouns to the lapel. She'd looked hot, but there was something about the vintage dresses I didn't see anyone else wearing.

She actually reminded me a bit of an English YouTuber. I'd met her once in a convention and could not believe it was not a costume.

Arlene wore the dresses better.

"Nah." It was good she brought me back to the conversation. I could get deep in my head and have a million conversations while the world revolved around me. "I mean, I should probably let you think that so you don't realize how serious my baking addiction is."

Why didn't I get roommates with a baking addiction? Whenever I'd shared, it was either online shoppers, vape smokers, or gym rats.

Someone who kept the house smelling like freshly baked goods was goals.

"That's fine."

Arlene just looked away. She was shyer than I'd already assumed. It was fine, though. César came in with my order of fries right then. They had loads of cheese and chives, and they were my guilty pleasure.

Her eyes darted up when the food arrived.

"Have at it."

César had added a second set of utensils, so we were good. My mouth was salivating

already.

“Thanks.”

I nodded and tried to smile, but if I was honest, I was too focused on getting all that greasy goodness in my mouth. I should probably try to get a financial advisor or something here, too. My salary wasn't the highest, and just because Boston was cheaper than LA didn't mean I shouldn't try to budget better. Right now, my budget was just... Vibes.

It did not exist.

“So are you a freelancer, or do you work for a company?”

One big lesson that I learned from the meets with Ben: conversations flowed much better when we shifted the focus to the fans. After talking about themselves for a while, they kind of... Well, they didn't forget who we were, but they didn't hyperventilate every time we looked their way.

“I work for my father,” she said. “He has an investment company downtown.”

“I wouldn't have pegged you for the investment type.”

“I know.” Arlene groaned, head hanging down. “I used to volunteer at a center when I was studying, helping people get out of debt and stuff. But they weren't looking to add any paid positions, and I wasn't getting through the selection processes, so...”

I nodded. I didn't want to assume too much, but there was something in her body language that said I'd probably be right about why they weren't hiring her. The job market was brutal for us trans folks. I didn't invite her to have fries with me to sour the mood, though.

“It’s nice that your father hired you, though.”

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“Yeah.” Arlene smiled then. Her smile lit up her whole face, even when she tried to dim it as if it was something to feel self-conscious about. “He’s pretty great. He’s even looking into expanding to do some pro-bono stuff.”

“Oh, that’s cool.”

It was. Bio families were a complicated subject for me. When someone—someone trans, especially—had a supportive family? I was sucked in, hard.

“Yeah,” Arlene agreed easily between bites of her food. She took tiny bites, I noticed. “I kind of feel guilty sometimes, that I’m basically a nepo baby, but...”

“We gotta do what we gotta do. I get it.”

I wasn’t a fan of all the content I’d put out online, either, or all the brand deals I’d signed. Thankfully, none of those had been the problematic kind, just the cringe kind, but it didn’t make it much better. Some people could look past it, but a part of me never managed. I supposed that was why I never made it big, either.

“Yeah.” Arlene chuckled. “Fuck capitalism, right?”

“I didn’t know financial advisors could say that, but... Fuck yeah.”

I would toast to it if I had anything other than lemonade. And if she had a drink.

Shit. I should ask if she wanted something to drink.

Maybe Julian had a point every time he said I was a terrible host. Well, not really—he just said it because I let the two of them fetch for themselves, in a house they'd been at a million times. But whatever.

“Is it bad that...” The woman was blushing before she'd even asked the question. Not that I needed her to. “I kind of want to ask about that video?”

Yeah, she didn't need to specify more than that. I winced. I'd had years to think about it now, to reflect, and have the perfect response at hand.

I still didn't like it. “It was a combination of a million different things and the worst possible timing.”

That was an understatement.

“I never got involved with the comments or any of that.” She definitely didn't look the type, so I hadn't even considered it. “But, yeah, it felt... messy.”

“That's one way of putting it.” I scoffed. “I just... I definitely went about it wrong, in more ways than one, but I do believe it would've always had a negative reaction no matter what, and... it sucks.”

It sucked because clickbait and strategies aside—I'd beat myself over that Am I still asexual? title for years—that video was still one of the most honest things I'd posted online.

“What do you mean?” Arlene frowned. She must've noticed the reticence in my face. “I mean, sorry, you don't have to answer.”

I didn't precisely love going into detail about it. I was still getting the hang of being vulnerable around people. Playing a persona where I was nice and approachable and

witty was easy enough. By now, it almost felt real. With some people, it really was. Being vulnerable was another matter altogether.

“No, I get it.” It was all people wanted to talk about. I... did not. Then again...
“Maybe ask me again when there are some of those cheesecake bars in front of me?”

I did have a sweet tooth.

“Really?” Her eyes glistened when she asked.

...Yeah, I’d just technically asked her on a date. Or something.

Was this what people meant about sapphic dating being messy?

I wasn’t usually the one who took charge. Then again, my experience in LA was all but nonexistent, and here... I’d tried a few apps, thinking I was safe, and I might as well experiment and explore those parts of myself I was coming to terms with.

The theory had sounded good.

The practice? Not that great.

No horror stories to tell—which, yeah, I knew I was lucky—but I wasn’t sure that was an achievement per se, if there weren’t any outstanding stories, either.

So far, it all had been very take it or leave it.

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Right until now, though, no one had sparked my curiosity the way Arlene did. Maybe that meant following my gut could be worth it.

Maybe.

It was a possibility.

“Yeah.” I forced myself to smile, but my heart was thrumming irrationally fast. “Tell me when and where.”

Uh, actually, this was going to be a disaster.

Well, I could always run back here after and eat my weight in cheese fries.

Yeah, nothing wrong with that plan.

THREE

Arlene

“Hey, babe, you sure you’re okay?”

Well, definitely not if he asked like that.

There was no reason for concern, though. It was all under control. I was just a messy baker, but Dylan knew this already. Still, I forced myself to take a break from pouring the cheesecake into the molds and turned to look at him.

He'd agreed to leave us the townhouse for the evening—me and Claude, who would be here in about an hour, and no, I wasn't freaking out about it. It was all fine, and perfectly under control. Sure, I was not doing well on time, because I should've popped these into the oven for the batter to bake twenty minutes ago.

It was fine.

I'd just let my perfectionism take charge.

Dylan—since he was the one who ended up suffering through my baking experiments the most—joked that I was great at flavors, but not presentation.

He was right.

"I'm fine." I just needed a towel.

I knew I was overthinking this too much. Claude would not care if something didn't look absolutely perfect. They never were that kind of YouTuber that was all about appearances.

But... Shit, call me shallow, but I wanted to impress them. First impressions, and all that.

Sure, this was technically the second impression—and I was still trying to figure out why they didn't run for the hills after the first one—but...

But. It would be the first time they saw my baking. It counted.

"You don't sound fine."

Was he not leaving?

I sighed.

No, I'd told myself eons ago that I did not lash out at people.

Breathe in, breathe out.

Dylan had his head tilted to the side as he watched me from one of the stools by the kitchen island. He always managed to look like a lost puppy.

“Just stressed. It's fi—it's whatever. It'll all work out.”

I wasn't completely happy with how the cake was going to set, but... At least I got the right proportion of honey for the base. I'd messed that up before.

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And I remembered to taste test, so I knew it would be good—unless the oven decided to play tricks on me.

It would be just my luck.

“You’ll be okay, love. And you can text or call me if shit goes wrong, or if I need to fake an emergency.”

Dylan was a terrible liar on the spot. I had a better chance getting my father to help with that, and he was the brooding type.

“Yeah.” I shrugged before I watched him more carefully. He’d said he was going to his boyfriend’s, but... “You’ll do the same, yeah? If you need to head back here, you tell me.”

Dylan, predictably, scoffed. “I’m not gonna ruin your date, excuse you.”

“You one hundred percent will if it comes to that.”

No, I wasn’t the biggest fan of his boyfriend. I didn’t think anyone who’d met him was, really. More and more recently, neither was Dylan, but I didn’t think he’d reached the point where he could say it yet.

I sighed.

“Whatever.” He rolled his eyes.

“Please?”

“Fine.” For a second, I thought he’d storm out, but he changed his mind last minute and came around the island. “And you won’t even need to reach out because they’re going to love whatever it is you’re baking, and you’re going to have the sapphic time of your life.”

“Oh my god, shut the fuck up!” I shrieked.

Sure, I wasn’t a nun. I’d thought about it. But I was also trying very hard not to go there. It was hard enough not to implode as it was.

Claude just liked sweets, and they wanted to try my cheesecake bars. They’d tell me about the video that ended their career if they were more in the mood today, and that was it. Just because my stomach got all fluttery didn’t mean anything was going to happen. I was just a messy, hormonal woman. That was it.

Nothing to see.

“Sure, babe.” Dylan all but pounced to manage a kiss on my cheek. There was no way he wasn’t a puppy, but he’d never confirmed it. Or denied it, for that matter. “Have fun!”

I’d have... something.

Claude

Just left work

Fucking finally

I'll be there in thirty?

Arlene

Sure!

My roommate is just leaving, so perfect timing

Claude

Great

fyi I'm starving

What was wrong with me? I might not have lots of dating experience, but I was pretty certain that someone saying they were starving was not a reason to get all fluttery.

I was not going to make it until the end of the day. That much was clear.

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And there was no way I'd have everything done in time, either.

I needed to take a minute, too. I knew what happened when I pressed myself too hard. I recognized the way my vision was starting to blur at the edges, too, and I'd rather not have to open the door to Claude while in the middle of an anxiety attack.

It was fine.

It was fine.

I just had to repeat it in my head until the words stuck.

I really, really hated the way my brain worked sometimes. When I wasn't frozen in time struggling with one thing, it was something else. No time for a breather, ever.

I'd just taken the bars out of the oven when the doorbell rang.

Shit.

Well, I'd counted on it. It wasn't as if there was a way to speed up the oven, and Claude had mentioned they worked not that far from Randy's when we were texting to set this up.

So I'd known it wouldn't take them long.

I still opened the door in a rush, words fumbling out of my mouth. "Hi. Hi! I'm really sorry, I'm so behind, and I still have to let the bars chill in the fridge, but I?—"

“Hey, it’s fine.”

I didn’t usually like when people cut me off—even if they were doing it because I was on the verge of a panic attack.

It turned out I didn’t hate it when it came from the most collected person to have ever put a foot inside this house.

“Is it?” I squeaked. “I mean, yeah, but I swear I’m better with... time management.”

“It’s fine,” Claude repeated. Their lips tilted upwards, a glint in their blue eyes making me stand straighter. “Cute apron.”

Oh.

Oh.

Oh, no.

I’d say I couldn’t look down, but it would be too late.

No, I hadn’t taken off the apron Dylan got for the two of us at one of the geeky conventions he used to go to.

Objectively, it could be worse. The apron just had an image of an infamous Marvel anti-hero in a compromising pose with flour and frosting all over.

My brain could not process objectivity right this minute, though.

“I’ll pop the tray in the fridge, and then I’ll change.” I was moving as I spoke, my brain whirring with all the words I needed to say and no time to put them in order. “I

know it's rude to leave you here, it's only one second. I really miscalculated today. I'm really sorry. I have brownies too if you want to eat something while we wait. Oh, and drinks, of course. Whatever you want."

Claude just... watched as I rambled.

It was eerie.

"Who are you and what have you done to the Arlene I met, what, two days ago?"

Damn.

"Sorry." How many times had I apologized today? I tried to laugh, but the sound was weak. "I'm... I don't usually host. I get anxious."

"Sounds like the understatement of the year." There was something about the contrast between their words and their soft smile that both drew me in and pushed me away. I didn't know which direction to go. "Pop the thing in the fridge, go change into whatever you're most comfortable with, and we'll start again, okay?"

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The relief I felt was palpable. I didn't care.

"Thanks." I swallowed, the knot in my throat becoming bigger now that I didn't have to fight my way through an apology I didn't have time to rehearse first. "And I'm really sorry."

"I'm sure I'll have forgotten all about this once I try your stuff."

I wasn't so sure, but I didn't say that out loud. I just smiled—tried to—and started moving.

Bars in the fridge? Check. Then I just had to take off the not-so-funny-now apron and scurry upstairs to my room. I'd been working from home today, and my idea had been to change after the food was cooling in the fridge to avoid any problems.

I could be clumsy. I was very aware of it. And I was not the best at thinking on my feet—as evidenced by the fact that while running out of time, I completely forgot to change.

At least I had thought far ahead, and the clothes I'd planned to wear were splayed out on my—perfectly made—bed.

I didn't stop to wonder if I should go with a different choice of outfit. It was too late, I was sweating, and the last thing I needed was to spend so long here that Claude left. Or maybe they wouldn't leave, but it would be ten times more awkward when I finally went back downstairs.

No way I was risking it.

Okay, clothes were taken care of. I didn't stop to check myself out in the mirror. I'd done enough of that last night, and I was on a time crunch here.

I'd felt cute in it last night, and that would have to do. It was just an oversized hoodie and a pair of loose-fitting shorts. Strangely enough, I liked my—admittedly—gnarly legs, and temperatures hadn't dropped too much yet. Plus, with all the baking, the kitchen and living room felt much warmer.

Claude was sitting on the same stool Dylan had been pestering me from. They were scrolling on their phone, but they didn't look bothered or tired of waiting, or like they were going to make an excuse and leave.

I'd take it.

They didn't notice my thudding down the stairs either, though.

"Hey." I cleared my throat. I always felt self-conscious doing that. "Sorry about... that, earlier."

"No problem." As they spoke, they locked the screen on their phone and dropped it on the table. I did my best to ignore the way they seemed to check me out. Surely, that was just the nerves. "I kind of feel bad that I put you through all this."

They glanced at the messy counters in the kitchen.

I blushed.

As clumsy as I could be, I was usually more organized.

“It looks worse than it is.”

Kind of.

“I can help.”

“You really don’t have to?—”

Claude cut me off, again. “I’m offering, aren’t I?”

Yeah, I supposed they were. I was not used to being around people who weren’t Dylan, or Dylan’s friends. Well, or clients, but I didn’t invite those home. I certainly didn’t bake for them—even though something told me my father would love that idea.

The amount of ass kissing and hand holding being a financial advisor required was something no professor had warned me about.

I shook those thoughts off, though. My job might not be ideal, but I had to look at the bright side of things. Working for my father meant I made enough to live in this house, and I had a budget where I could bake as much as my heart desired.

So, it was fine. I was doing much better than most, and I was painfully aware of that reality at times.

I just had to remain positive, and sit down, and breathe. The bars might not look perfect, but they were going to taste great, and Claude didn’t look upset because they had to wait.

“So did you want anything to drink?”

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Heat rose to my cheeks, but I couldn't remember if I'd asked them already—or if they'd answered. Maybe I should finally listen to the podcasts I played on my way to work and take up meditation or something like that.

Yoga?

That could work. I'd never been too flexible, but people said it was relaxing.

“Just water is good,” Claude distracted me.

It was a good thing they did. I could get lost inside my head and start making a million plans.

“Sure.”

I was going to grab just one bottle but realized two was the safer option. Having something to do with my hands would potentially help me not to look so awkward, right?

My heartbeat started to slow down once I was sat down. My mother used to joke that I only started to listen when I was resting my butt. It had made me uncomfortable back then, but maybe there was some truth behind the teasing.

Anyway.

“So...” Claude bit their lip while tilting their head to the side. “How long are we waiting?”

“Oh, about... twenty minutes?” I was ninety-nine percent sure twenty minutes would be enough, at least. “Full disclosure, I’m really not good at plating.”

“What do you mean?”

I chuckled nervously. Sure, I was calmer, and I could appreciate the fresh forest green dye in Claude’s hair, and the oversized button down and how their striped pants made their legs look longer. That didn’t mean I suddenly got all my shit together.

...There was no way on Earth they were coming back here, even if I managed to blow their mind with my baking skills.

“You know in those baking shows, how there’s someone that says they’re all about the flavors, but they hate the flashy, pretty stuff?” I ran a hand through my hair. I should’ve tied it up or something, but I always felt like my head looked too big when it was pulled back. It brought too much attention to my brow bone, I think. I could deal with it most of the time, but not when I was already feeling self-conscious. “I’m kind of like that. Well, I don’t hate it. I just don’t have an artistic bone in my body.”

“Got it.” Claude chuckled. “And that’s totally fine.”

How many times had they reassured me since they walked in, again?

This was an absolute mess.

“Yeah, well, didn’t want you to set your expectations too high.”

Fuck me.

“I’m just happy to have something baked that doesn’t come from a plastic wrapper,” Claude said. Their eyes were twinkling. The blue popped out more with the new hair

color. “You can relax, I swear.”

“You never bake?”

I was pretty certain that I’d seen videos of them and Ben attempting to bake stuff they’d seen on TV. Saying that would probably make me sound like more of a stalker than I was comfortable with, though.

I hadn’t even seen their videos in years, anyway. I just had a good memory.

“Nah.” Claude shook their head. “I tried a few times, but I’m a disaster in the kitchen. Most of my fridge is precooked meals.”

I shuddered.

Then again... “I could teach you. If you want.”

I didn’t know if I was salvaging today’s disaster or making it ten times worse. I supposed that would be a problem for future me.

“Sure. I personally think I’m a lost cause, but yeah. It could be fun.”

“Yeah.” I didn’t know what was going on anymore, but I might as well go with it.

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“So tell me something I don’t know about you.” Claude leaned forward. I was toast. “I mean, you follow YouTubers, you’re at least curious about kink, you work in finance, and you bake and donate food to food banks.”

I squealed. It seemed I wasn’t the only one with a good memory. “Do I need more things?”

Unless we started discussing our childhoods? I didn’t know that there was a lot more to talk about when it came to my life. I’d kept things fairly simple—until recently, maybe. That excursion into the munch might’ve been aiming too high.

“Those are all very generic.” Claude shrugged. “And I’m a curious person.”

“Are you?” Yeah, I squealed again. “I mean, yeah, I know that.” They’d had that in their bio, I was sure of it. “But uh, you know more about me than I do you.”

Was that smooth? Not remotely. Did it get me out of the spotlight? That’s what I was hoping for.

“What do you wanna know?”

Or not.

Claude took a swig of water while I tried to look like I wasn’t the mess that I was. I might’ve had a chance if the act wasn’t so distracting.

I really needed a grip. It was only getting worse lately.

Was I going to end up caving and letting Dylan drag me to a club sometime?

Ugh.

The mere thought of clubbing had me shuddering for a different reason altogether, but it would be nice to not be in horny mode twenty-four-seven.

“I...” Yeah, I should’ve thought this one better. The only things that came to mind were definitely too personal. Well, I guessed the deal was that I fed them desserts, and they told me about the viral video that had destroyed their career. The timing didn’t feel right to tackle that one, though. “What do you do, other than working extra hours at a PR firm, and dyeing your hair?”

Claude had begun tilting their head to the side before they were laughing.

“Well played.” They winked. “But I’m really not that interesting. I hang out at Randy’s with a bunch of the regulars there, and I FaceTime with Ben and Julian a lot.”

“There has to be something more than that.”

I wasn’t trying to play games when I said it.

“Sadly, not really. Living vicariously through others is more fun.”

It was safer, too. They didn’t say it, but there was no need. I’d been there, too.

“Sure. So is it true that Ben tried to adopt a fox?”

Claude groaned. “Don’t get me started.”

Their eyes twinkled with mischief, though.

I relaxed against the back of the stool. The tension had left their shoulders right away.

I'd managed that, so maybe I could manage to salvage this whole mess, too.

FOUR

Claude

“These are amazing. What the fuck?”

After we talked—for longer than the twenty minutes she'd first estimated—Arlene had been relaxed enough that she only made a casual comment about how I had to remember it might not look perfect, but it would taste good.

It tasted more than good.

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Maybe I was just easy—or biased, because when Arlene didn't look on the verge of combusting, she was nice to talk to. Sweet, in a cinnamon roll kind of way. I should've remembered that when someone was nervous around me, the safest thing always was to talk about Ben.

"Thanks." Arlene squirmed, heat rising to her cheeks. "You can take some home. I baked a lot."

"I mean, sure?"

It was my turn to be uncomfortable. Was I abusing her generosity? I didn't get the vibe that she was a starstruck fan, but... I still hesitated. Most of the people I used to hang out with in LA loved it when others went the extra mile for them on the basis that they recognized them, but...

Not me.

"You know," Arlene spoke, unaware of my inner turmoil. It was probably for the best. "I should probably rewatch some of the old vlogs now. They really were a lifesaver when I was in college."

"Is it bad I never quite understood that?"

I loved YouTube. I loved vlogging, and streaming, but I didn't love watching myself. I guess it was another reason why my content never made it big. I could never quite connect with my audience because I was never a part of it. I saw what others did, and I tried to mimic it. That was it.

“What do you mean?” Arlene cocked her head to the side as she asked.

I didn’t know if she realized how expressive she was or if it was something I could mention without her imploding again. I’d rather avoid more of that happening.

“I just... I loved making content and recording stuff, but when people commented about dopamine hits and healing from watching me talk about the most random stuff?” I shook my head. It wasn’t something I was super proud of, but for some reason, I wanted to tell her, to open up to her. “I didn’t get it.”

For a few seconds, Arlene remained silent. Her chocolate brown eyes darted around. I didn’t want to assume and read too much into what it meant.

“For me? It was about seeing queer people thriving without stress and dread and real-life complications.” She looked down, fidgeting with her hands. “When I was in college, especially as a freshman, most people who weren’t close to me kept reading me wrong. And then there was the whole anxiety about exams and papers and group projects. There was stress coming from every direction.”

“Right.”

I hated that for her. My stomach churned the way it did when people discussed anything transphobia-related. Who wanted daddy issues when you could have issues with your entire family instead? I just nodded, though. It was easy to tell that Arlene needed to talk, and I was used to it. Most trans people I was friends with ended up referencing something at some point.

“So, YouTubers were kind of... goals. I mean, obviously, even back then I knew there was a lot going on behind the scenes?—”

“Understatement of the year,” I snorted.

“Yeah,” Arlene continued, “I wasn’t clueless. I knew no one’s life could be that quote-unquote perfect, but... Watching you, and the others, made me forget. I could believe that lives like that were possible, and within reach, and life wasn’t just shitty for everyone.”

I nodded. It wasn’t anything I hadn’t heard before, but the words somehow sank in better when it was Arlene speaking them. Which was... disturbing. I didn’t have big reactions to people like that.

To distract myself, and figure out how to answer, I grabbed another of the cheesecake bars. To be honest, I hadn’t been fully convinced when I first saw it. She wasn’t kidding when she said presentation wasn’t her strongest suit. That, and I’d forgotten to mention that Rice Krispies weren’t my favorite thing in the whole wide world.

The things really tasted amazing, though. The cheesecake melted in my mouth, and the hints of raspberry she’d added?

Damn.

I could eat the entire batch right here and now. Even the base had... honey? Or something. But it made it so the Rice Krispies weren’t dry, and it all came together, and... Whatever. I never claimed to be a food reviewer. It tasted amazing, and I’d go to great lengths for more of it.

“Do you miss it?”

Uh oh.

This was why lingering silences were never a good idea. People got the need to fill them, and then there was no control of the narrative or running away from topics I wasn’t too comfortable with.

“There are things I miss,” I hedged. “Others, though? Not really. Especially toward the end, I just had all of the ugly and none of the good.”

I stuffed my face with the food. I was going to end up having to ask for a second bottle of water. Was that acceptable behavior? I didn’t usually break into someone’s house after they’d spent hours baking for me. If there was a protocol or a script to follow, I had no idea what it looked like.

My only saving grace was that Arlene didn’t seem to have a clue, either. It would be more jarring if she did and I was the one flailing. I would’ve probably found an excuse to leave by now.

Was that why some people thought I was too callous at times?

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“Wasn’t there anyone on your side?” Huh? Arlene was frowning when I looked up. “I mean, I don’t really remember much, and I don’t think I read many of the comments, but surely...”

“Please don’t. Read the comments, I mean.”

Ben had banned me from reading them after I got the gist with the first... hundred, or so. I’d been tempted to go through them again over the years, but... Nothing good came from reading hate comments. That was basic knowledge if one wanted to survive.

I didn’t think anyone actually followed it, but...

“No, no,” she backtracked quickly, “I wasn’t going to, definitely not now. I just meant?—”

“I got it.” My smile had to look as strained as it felt. “Can we change the subject, though? Please.”

“Sure. I mean, of course.” Arlene swallowed, her eyes widening in terror. I grimaced. I didn’t mean to send her into a panic. “What do you wanna talk about? Ugh, I’m terrible at this.”

“I don’t know.” I wouldn’t say I shared her sentiment, but I was clearly not the greatest either. Maybe I could hide under the fact that I was out of practice. It sounded cringe, but... it was kind of true. Back in LA, I mostly hung out with Ben and whoever he’d wanted to hang out with. Here, I’d been more social, but always in

groups. There was a different skill set to navigate groups and one-on-one interactions. “I’m at a disadvantage here.”

“Are you?”

It hit me as I spoke the words. Yes, yes, I was.

“I mean, yeah.” Arlene chewed on her lip when I leaned forward. I’d feel bad if I thought the intrusion was unwelcome, but... That wasn’t the vibe I was getting. Besides, there was no better way to know a person than to tease a bit. “What drew you to the munch, other than seeing the ad for it?”

“Oh, that.” She looked away for a second, her hands fidgeting with the hem of her sweatshirt. I had to say, it was an odd choice of clothes for a... date—or whatever this was—but I dug it. It made me want to squeeze her. It wasn’t a sensation I was super familiar with. “I guess I’ve always been curious, but it’s always seemed too intimidating. Or I didn’t have the time, or... You know.”

“What are you curious about?”

If someone told me they were curious about something, that was their downfall. Something switched in my brain, and I needed to understand everything.

“The... intimacy, maybe?” Arlene groaned. I wasn’t sure I understood why. “I sound so lame, don’t I?”

“I don’t know.” I really was not the person to answer that question. “Intimacy is so underrated, though.”

“Right?” She perked up there, her eyes glistening with the kind of relief that sucked me in. “But yeah, I think it’s a combination of the intimacy, and the consent, and

worship, and... Well, the sexual stuff too, obviously.”

I tilted my head to the side.

Arlene must’ve misinterpreted it because she rushed in with another of her explanations. “I mean, not obviously, obviously. Ugh. Why am I like this?”

“It’s fine.” I chuckled. “You’re sweet, but I swear I’m not offended.”

“You’re not?”

I shrugged. I had to tread carefully if I didn’t want to send us back to square one and questions about the video that should’ve never been uploaded, but...

Huh.

I actually wanted to talk to her, to explain. “Sometimes, I still don’t really know if I’m gray, or demi or what, but that label is only about my attraction to people.” It would’ve been my turn to fidget, but I reined it in. “And, yeah, I’m not a horn dog or anything, but if I want to get in the mood, kinky scenarios are gonna get me there more easily.”

Okay. I’d explained it, she didn’t look at me like I’d grown three heads, and I didn’t feel like clawing out of my skin.

That counted as progress, right?

“That makes sense, I think.” Arlene wrung her hands together. “You said you’ve been to munches before, right?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “A couple of times. I like Cin.”

“Yeah.” Arlene chuckled. “I mean, they were a bit intimidating for me? But everyone is, honestly.”

“Aw.”

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I was a sucker for the hurt puppies that needed to build their self-esteem.

Shit.

“But, uh, what I wanted to ask is, have you... done anything else? Other than going to munches, I mean.”

Oh, boy. She really was new to this. “I’ve been to a couple of local clubs a few times. They aren’t my favorite thing, to be honest, but they’re still cool, and I like the people.”

“I’m terrified it will be too overwhelming.”

“Nah.” If I said it wasn’t overwhelming, that had to mean something. “Just don’t go on a day when there’s a special theme, or an event or workshop you’re not super comfortable with. And check the club rules. Some will not allow any play outside of private or semi-private rooms.”

“Right.” Arlene swallowed, but she looked like she was taking note of it. I supposed it was better than what was becoming her usual panic. “I still don’t think I could ever go alone.”

I did, but it wasn’t relevant to this. I just did because I didn’t want someone bugging me about it—at least, not when it wasn’t on my terms, and when I hadn’t made my peace with what it meant and what I wanted it to mean.

I didn’t even attend a munch until I’d sorted through all of it. But we were facing

different issues. At least, that was the vibe I got, and I got a good eye for those.

Never steered me wrong, and all that.

“That’s fine. We could go together one day if you want? I could ask Cin if they know a day when it’ll be more quiet.”

No big deal, right? No reason to freak out, either, because I was offering to go to a dungeon with someone else. If today didn’t feel like a date already—gay panic aside—going together to a dungeon definitely counted as one.

Shit.

“I’d love that, actually.”

...Yeah, I was screwed.

FIVE

Arlene

Somehow—and to Dad’s amusement—I managed to unstick from my phone screen long enough to grab my things and leave the office. For a finance company, he was pretty strict about no one staying after hours if they could avoid it.

I was usually the first one out of the building, but I kept getting distracted all day with Claude’s texts. Apparently new age PR companies had a very lax policy on use of phones. My dad was a bit more traditional, although being strict had never been his thing. It depended on the day.

He’d lean on the strict side if he caught wind of my latest exchange with Claude.

We'd been texting on and off all day. I'd been thinking about asking them to meet up, but their boss was making them do overtime because of some new client.

It annoyed me to degrees that went beyond logic.

When Claude had eventually left, after I had to insist they take some of the cheesecake bars to their place, I'd thought that was it. Sure, I could look back and acknowledge that it hadn't all been a complete disaster. I'd genuinely believed there was not going to be a second anything, though.

But then they texted a link to a gossip site about a baking show with the messiest contestants. We'd been texting ever since—which had been two days ago. So, maybe I was getting a bit attached and jumping the gun too soon.

I mean, jokes about sapphics being oblivious aside, there was a chance of something, right? I'd take anything, too—friends, friends with benefits... Whatever. I wasn't picky.

There was no finding out if I was moving too fast or not, though, if Claude's boss kept them in an office where I could not test all my admittedly very hormonal inner ramblings and wishful thinking.

It wasn't just me, though. Sure, I was on the bus on my way home rereading the last texts we'd exchanged, and my stomach fluttered with nerves, but... Even if I'd always felt more comfortable over texts than I did in person, I'd never opened up so much with someone I hadn't been friends with for years.

Claude

Can I ask you something personal?

Arlene

Go ahead

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Claude

Okay, so I don't usually talk about anything sexual or kinky with anyone, but I was actually comfortable with you, and when I'm comfortable I start getting more curious, so...

When you said you're turned on by BDSM stuff, what does that look like for you?

Arlene

Huh?

What do you mean?

Claude

So for example, I can get aroused, but I don't like touching myself or being touched. Too much dysphoria.

But I know that's just me and other trans people experience things differently, and have different relationships to their bodies, and it's kind of fascinating to me?

Arlene

Oh

We're going there, then?

Claude

I mean, obviously not if it makes you uncomfortable

Sorry

Some people say I'm too forward

I don't always read the room

We can just ignore this conversation and you can explain something baking to me

Arlene

No, it's fine!

I actually don't have many trans friends, so I'm... rusty, is all

I'm non-op. I like bottoming, and muffing, and having my clit played with like one would a cis woman's clit

Does that make sense?

Claude

Yeah

I've heard of muffing, but I've never seen it

WHICH IS NOT A COME ON

Sorry

I just meant, I'm not completely clueless, but I kind of am, too

Arlene

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lmao

That's fine

I hadn't texted anything more, and Claude soon started to complain about their boss's email requesting them to stay longer.

To be fair, what was I supposed to say? Invite someone on the ace spectrum to watch me fuck myself? Offer to give them a tutorial?

I cringed just imagining those scenarios.

No, Claude could bring up the thing again if they really wanted to. In the meantime, I was going to do my best to pretend this conversation never took place—and figure out a way to either ask them out or get them to ask me out.

The latter felt like the safest option, to be honest.

I supposed I could bake something again. Enticing them with food seemed to do the trick. Then again, I'd just baked for them, and we'd just met, and being at my place had definitely not played in my favor last time.

I needed a neutral ground where my head wouldn't go straight to... any of the scenarios it really shouldn't go. Not yet, at least.

Arlene

Are you at least eating something?

Claude

Just so you know, I'm usually the caregiver in a group

Arlene

That's not an answer

Claude

Whatever

I'll grab something on the way home

I had a huge burrito for lunch, so I'm good

Arlene

Oh

Yum

I covered my mouth with one hand. I was brimming with nerves. A part of me wanted to just take the leap and ask Claude out for dinner, but... No. I wasn't the kind of girl who took the first step like that.

Was I?

Claude

Were you trying to imply something?

Arlene

What if I was?

Hypothetically

Claude

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I'd say yes to some fries from Randy's

Arlene

Deal

Text me when you're done stalking whoever it is you're stalking

Claude

You don't have to make it sound weird

But I will

Damn, I really want those fries now

All I could say was that I did not squeal or otherwise embarrass myself while in public. No, I behaved and waited until I was in my room and face-planting on my bed.

I'd just, somehow, scored a date.

That didn't happen—not really. My attempts at dating before today had consisted of creepy dating-slash-hook up apps. I hadn't been approached by someone in a diner, or any of the meet-cute stories from the rom-com movies I cried too much with.

Sure, comparing this with rom-com movies was probably one leap too many.

Still.

Step #1: Find clothes to wear. Check.

Step #2: Don't get sidetracked with things to do around the house and end up being late. Check—I actually got to Randy's twenty minutes before the time we agreed on.

Step #3: Ask server for a more isolated table. Check.

Step #4: Don't bite on nails or anything else that would ruin the look. Check—for now.

Zo, one of the full-time servers at Randy's, had just brought some coffee to the table when I saw Claude walk in.

Step #5: Deep breaths. I was on it.

Sure, my heart was racing faster than it was probably healthy, but it was fine. Understandable, too, after all the scenarios I'd conjured up in my head all evening.

"Hey, Zo!" Claude didn't wait to be sat down. No one seemed bothered by it. "I'm starving."

"Let me guess." Zo chuckled. She was in her 30s, but sometimes reminded me of those cute grandmas in TV shows that adopted everyone around them. "Fries?"

"And as much coffee as you can legally serve me."

Zo chuckled. "Coming right up."

I had a second of panic when she whirled around. Her leaving meant it was just

Claude and me. I really shouldn't have been left alone with my own imagination all day.

The air felt charged. Maybe it was just me. Should I stand up to greet them? It didn't feel like my style—or Claude's—and they'd already sat down, but...

"Hey." I pushed past the growing nerves and smiled. It was fine. We'd just been talking all day about stuff I didn't really talk about with anyone else, but it was fine. No need to read too much into any of it. "Did you finish the stuff for work?"

"Yeah." Claude groaned. Whereas I sometimes thought I worried too much about my posture, and everything else in how I presented myself, I'd noticed Claude didn't have the same problem. They just leaned back against the pink leather in the booth and rolled their eyes. Not that I should be having these thoughts, but it was oddly attractive. "The boss is happy, too."

"She saw it already?" I thought she'd said their boss had left before them.

"Yeah, she's always online." Claude shook their head. "Complete workaholic, but hey... Can't complain."

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I wrinkled my nose. “I mean, you can.”

Claude dismissed it with the wave of a hand. “You know what I mean.”

I got the feeling that I didn’t, not completely. I should steer away from heavy topics, though. “Well, I’m glad you could make it anyway.”

“Sure.” Claude tilted their head to the side. “By the way, there’s a club not too far away. They open during the week, but they don’t have anything set up till the weekend, so it should be pretty quiet.”

Here I was, trying to avoid heavy topics. I supposed it was still better?

My throat dried up. “Have you been before?”

“A couple times,” Claude confirmed. “It’s tiny. Chill. I can ask Cin too, but the club they go to is more involved.”

“No.” I shook my head right away. “Tiny’s good.”

I couldn’t help but look around as I spoke. No one was paying us any mind, but it was still wild to think that I was talking about going to a kink club with someone in public.

“I thought so.” Claude grinned. They looked pleased with themselves. “Wednesday?”

Wednesday meant almost a week of imagining every possible scenario. It was

probably better than the alternative of, say, going tomorrow, and the panic that came with having no time to prepare.

“Wednesday works. I mean, I’ll text you, but it should work.”

I foresaw a lot of baking this weekend. I was pretty sure that Dylan had said something about family visiting, so maybe I could offload it on him. His family had loved it last time when I’d set myself up to bake a three-tiered cake and miscalculated how much cake that would actually be.

Yeah.

It would be fine.

Zo arrived with the new carafe of coffee for Claude then, and a promise that the fries would come in shortly. I wasn’t too hungry, but maybe we could share a dessert or something, later. I didn’t always have the best appetite.

“Okay.” Claude smiled at Zo before turning that smile on me. The new hair color really highlighted their eyes. “Do you have any gear?”

Oh.

Um...

Goodbye, pretending to be moderately calm about this. “What were you planning to wear?”

“I usually just wear black clothes with a harness on top,” Claude said. It was their turn to squirm. I didn’t love that they were uncomfortable, but there was something about not being alone in that... feeling. “It’s pretty bad quality, but it does the work.”

“Right.” I swallowed. I was stupid. Who else wouldn’t think of the dress codes when thinking of going to a kink club? Ugh. “I think I can do that.”

If I remembered correctly, kink clubs were okay with goth clothes, right? I’d gone through a bit of a goth phase once. I was pretty sure I could reuse some of the clothes I hadn’t donated.

Worst case scenario, I could follow Claude’s lead and order some cheap harness online once I got home. It... It was fine.

“Cool.”

SIX

Claude

No, I had no idea what was going on anymore. I just knew I’d been munching on my fries, and Arlene had been talking about the baking shows she liked to watch. She got very passionate about it, and it was endearing. Apparently sometimes the advice the judges gave was plain wrong, and she got all red in the face and pouty when she tried to explain why it was irresponsible that they did that. She really got talking when it came to baking.

Anyway.

So, that was happening, then the fries were gone, and we mentioned dessert almost at the same time. For some reason, I’d suggested a crêperie right down by my apartment. But then all the tables were busy, so I had the brilliant idea that we grab them to go.

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Now Arlene was sitting down on my couch after I refused to let her help get stuff from the kitchen.

“Your place looks so cozy.”

“It’s just a place.” I shrugged. I hadn’t put a lot of thought into decorating it, either. It was cozy, but that was mostly due to the landlord’s furbishing and a few trinkets Ben had blackmailed me into putting up. “I mean, your place is cozy, too.”

Hers looked more intentional, too. Was that something I should’ve mentioned when I visited?

Ugh.

There definitely was something behind the taunts that I didn’t know how to socialize with others.

“Yeah. I like soft things.” She blushed as she said the words.

Admittedly, I was too busy noticing the way her hair still looked perfectly styled while I had to tie up mine in a bun before we left the diner.

“That suits you.”

It suited her a lot, actually. I kept my musings to myself, though, and just placed the two plates and forks on the coffee table.

My couch was big enough to where we could both sit down comfortably with plenty of personal space, so don't ask me why I sat right next to her, where our thighs touched. I noticed the way her breath hitched for a second. I was about to pull back, to pretend I always intended to sit three inches away. But then she looked at me, and her lips parted, and she smiled, and...

And apparently anxious, not very experienced women were my Kryptonite and gave me all kinds of clichéd butterflies.

"I..." Arlene started speaking, but she stopped. Her eyes darted downwards. "I don't know what's acceptable here. Which, might sound super inappropriate, and I'm sorry?—"

"Do you want to kiss me?" I had to ask.

"Do you?"

Why was she so surprised? Kissing was nice.

I ignored the fact that I didn't usually feel so attached to the idea of kissing someone. "I really do."

Arlene swallowed. I held my breath until she bobbed her head up and down. I didn't take the lead often, but I liked that it wasn't even up for debate that I would here.

I understood it was only a kiss, but power still surged through me. I sat straighter, leaned closer. My hands found her shoulder, then traced her jawline.

"Is this okay?"

The air grew charged around us. Arlene nodded again. I hovered over her for a few

seconds. I liked this kind of foreplay, teasing with anticipation and expectations. It didn't come from a cruel place, though.

My lips connected with hers. She was soft, immediately pliant beneath me. I guessed we didn't have to wonder where she fell in the D/s spectrum. The thought made me grin against her lips as I nudged her toward the back of the couch.

She complied after letting out a soft moan. Her cheeks reddened right away. It made me want to tease her further. I ran a hand through her hair, tucking it behind her ear. She looked at me through hooded eyes, her lips parted.

I studied every line on her face, memorizing it. It was a simple kiss, almost innocent, but Arlene was so open in her reactions that someone else might think I was doing much more than I really was.

It was mesmerizing.

“What's...?” Arlene swallowed. Her body tensed for a second. I pulled back right away, my head tilted to the side. “I don't know what to do with my... hands, or anything else.”

A self-deprecating laugh followed her words.

Shit.

“What do you need to know?”

It was hard, but I managed to focus on my breathing, to keep steady. I appreciated her questions—a lot. It wouldn't work if I shut down. I wanted her to ask.

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“Just...” Arlene cleared her throat. Her eyes met mine easily, though. “What are you comfortable with doing? And what’s... Where can I put my hands?”

If I wasn’t straddling her, I would squirm away—at least for a second. It was fine, though. It was just the general discomfort that came at the beginning of these talks—nothing to do with Arlene.

My gaze darted down. I hadn’t realized, but she’d kept her hands to herself. It was a small detail to focus on, but it lodged a knot up my throat.

“Just stay away from my chest and genitals,” I mumbled. I hated that I couldn’t use that surge of power I’d felt not that long ago to come across more confident.

“This okay then?”

I held my breath as her hands drifted upward. My eyes tracked each movement. One hand circled around my hip. Her other hand moved up my arm until it landed on my neck. My heartbeat sped up. This was all more intimate than anything I was used to.

A part of me screamed that I should recoil, that we weren’t comfortable with this, but... Oddly, I was. I wanted to be this intimate. I wanted to keep cataloging Arlene’s reactions, to keep teasing her and learning everything about her. And her body was a part of her.

“Yeah.” I bobbed my head up and down. “Um, did you want to eat the crepes first before we do anything else?”

“Oh.” Arlene’s pupils widened before she looked down. Her fingers pressed against my skin for a second, as if she wasn’t sure if they were still welcome there. It was probably a good thing. I didn’t know myself. “Yes, of course.”

There was something else there. Maybe I was out of my game with all the touch and closeness and vulnerability coursing through me. But my alarms pinged at her tone. I just didn’t know her well enough to tell what it was she wanted.

“What is it?”

If I wanted to say I was in control, and hovering over her, that also meant I needed to be able to take a step back and check in with her. Right? I might not be an expert in BDSM affairs, but that made sense to me.

“Can you...” Arlene licked her lips. I wondered if I should lean closer, if it would make things more challenging. Teasing her was fun. “Only if you’re comfortable, but I’ve kind of always had this fantasy of being fed?”

Oh.

Not exactly what I was expecting, though to be fair, I wasn’t expecting anything in particular.

“I can do that.”

It was cute. I couldn’t say I’d ever imagined myself feeding someone, or that it did anything for me, but how could I say no? She’d asked so adorably.

“Okay.” Her nostrils flared, her grip on me tightening for a second before she relaxed again against the back of the couch. “Good.”

“I thought praise was my job.”

It was a light tease. I was just curious to see how she’d react.

She frowned. “Your job?”

I leaned back and turned so I could grab the plate with her crepe and a fork. In hindsight, I should’ve said something about just getting one for the two of us. It was fine, though. I could reheat mine—I’d done it before.

“This feels like a Domm thing, doesn’t it?”

Arlene’s eyes widened for a second. She tried to sit up straighter while balancing me on top. I couldn’t say that I helped her much with that predicament. Turned out, making people squirm was fun.

“Is that—you’re okay with that?”

She swallowed as the words left her mouth. I felt bad that I found a certain kind of pleasure in it.

“Do I look like I’m not okay with it?”

“That’s not an answer.”

I supposed it wasn’t. Before I answered, though, I cut a piece of crepe with the fork and offered it to her. Arlene’s lips wrapped around the fork right away. It made me shiver. I didn’t hide it fast enough, either. This time, her hold on me tightened for a different reason.

“Claude...” She shivered, too, but for different reasons.

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I had more experience than her. I'd tested the waters—in the most surface level possible. It had never felt like this. Not exactly. I wanted to lean into the power, to test how far I could take it.

“Yeah?” I prepared another bite as I asked.

“I kind of need you to pinch me right now.”

I chuckled. That was funny. “You're lucky I'm not a Sadist.”

“Am I?” Arlene retorted.

She was probably not planning on it given the shade of red her face turned to the second the words were out.

I liked that. I wanted her to let go, to say whatever came to mind first. Fuck filters.

“You tell me.” I shrugged. Arlene wrapped her lips around the fork again. It made me want to kiss her again. There was a speck of chocolate above her lip line that called to me. It was just about the chocolate. “I'm happy to go with the flow, but I've got a feeling you need more specifics.”

“Yeah.” I tilted her head up before she could look down. I didn't want her to feel small or to be embarrassed.

I took the chance to kiss her, too. Her breath hitched when my tongue poked out to get that leftover chocolate.

“So, talk to me.”

Arlene licked her lips again. “I guess I don’t really understand what’s in this for you, and I don’t want to feel like I’m taking advantage, or we’re at different places?”

“Huh?”

She groaned, slouching forward. Her head fell against my torso. There was no thinking involved when my fingers tangled through her hair and kept her there.

“I’m sorry. This is embarrassing.”

“What is?”

Before, I’d just needed a second to process and figure out a way to put my response into words that would make sense. Now I was genuinely confused.

“I get too far ahead in my head, and... We just kissed, but I’m already building this up, and... Ugh.” A mix between a moan and a groan slipped past her lips. “I’m sorry—I can go if you want.”

“I don’t.” That much, I knew at least. “I think... It’s a lot to explain, and I don’t have all the answers.”

That was the understatement of the year.

Arlene snorted. “I bet you still have more answers than I do.”

“Do I?” I mused. Chances were I did, to be fair. I just didn’t know how to transform them into words. “I’m enjoying this. I... I can’t tell you that we get the same type of pleasure from it. I mean, we don’t, but I don’t think it’s a bad thing.”

Arlene frowned as I spoke. I liked how she focused on every single word and stopped herself from interjecting. It was clear in the way her eyes squinted at times.

“Is it a turn off that I’m stopping to ask about this?”

“The opposite, actually,” I said.

It was true.

“Oh.” I didn’t know it would be so surprising. “That’s good.”

“Yeah.” I’d analyze everything and what all my reactions to her meant later, but not now. For once, I was more interested in living in the moment. “We should eat the crepes first, though. And talk. And we can see where to go from there?”

If anyone asked, no, my voice didn’t go that high pitched toward the end there.

SEVEN

Arlene

Holy fuck.

“This is not uncomfortable for you, right?”

If someone asked me how I managed to stomach a full crepe, I wouldn’t be able to give an answer.

“No.” Claude chuckled. “I mean, it’s rare that it isn’t, but I’m chill. I swear.”

I nodded. That was good. I wished I could say the same. I just couldn’t stop thinking about the way their lips had felt on mine. The way they’d hovered over me, owning every molecule of oxygen in the room? I could not stop thinking about it.

I probably should, though. We had to talk. I couldn’t be thinking about the things that made me squirm and go back to that place I’d only discovered—a place where everything kind of quieted down and there was only Claude, and Claude’s touch.

“Okay.” Claude had finished their plate too. I wanted to stand up and offer to clean up since they didn’t let me help earlier, but I didn’t want to move and accidentally break whatever had set between us. “So, you were saying, you get something out of this even if it’s not the same?”

They shrugged before they sat down cross-legged on the couch. “It’s like... No, I don’t look at you and want to jump your bones in the way allosexuals do. Nothing personal.”

“No, I get that.”

I did. It just confused me.

Well, it didn't completely confuse me. I knew asexual people could have sex and enjoyed sex. I also knew a lot of this was just the result of being deep in my mind, and not just me being an ignorant ass.

I suddenly felt very ignorant, though, and small.

“But... I still get something out of it. I mean, again, no offense, but I wouldn't be doing shit if I didn't 100% want to.”

I chuckled. I couldn't help it. Their blunt ways had always appealed to me, and it was even better in person. “I'm not taking offense to that.”

“Good.” Claude nodded, lips pursed. “Because I really, really enjoyed Domming you right there.”

My throat dried. “You did?”

It was a novelty, hearing that someone had Dommed me, and that I'd subbed for them. It had happened, though. The words felt right because they were right. I wanted them to be right.

“Yeah.” Claude cleared their throat. “And no, before you ask, it doesn't mean I was suddenly overwhelmed with attraction. But I wanna explore those... layers of intimacy with you. And I really, really like teasing you, and getting reactions out of you. It's... Fuck. Satisfying sounds lame as fuck, but... Everything zeroes in on you, and...”

“Yeah.” I breathed out more easily. There were many words there that I knew would take me hours and days to fully process and analyze, but they were what I needed to hear. “It’s the same for me. That last part, I mean.”

“I’m glad.” Claude smirked. Of course they did. “What else do you need us to cover?”

“What do you mean?”

“As I said, I’m happy to go with the flow, but that’s not you.”

“I thought going with the flow was a no-go for kink,” I quipped.

Claude chuckled. “Yeah, Cin’s Domme would probably agree with you. It’s not like I’m planning on going all whips and chains on you anytime soon.”

“Or ever, right?” I swallowed. “That’s what you mean.”

Whips and chains were not the things I had in mind when I pictured getting into kink. I guessed I could see the appeal for other people, but... Oh, fuck, did Claude see the appeal? I hadn’t gotten that vibe when we were talking. I could be wrong, though. Our talk hadn’t been too exhaustive.

A few seconds later, Claude started laughing. I scowled. Well, I guessed they really meant it when they said that they liked teasing me.

“I have no interest in impact play, honestly.” They shrugged again. “I like the scenes that are about playing with the senses, and with power imbalances, and with overstimulating and controlling a sub’s body.”

Yeah, I was into those things as well. I needed a minute to make my voice work

again.

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“Okay, good.” I chewed on my bottom lip. “Sometimes I worry the stuff I like is very... soft, maybe? In comparison.”

“I think many people share that worry,” Claude mused. “From stuff I’ve heard in munches and read online.”

“Yeah.”

I lurked online from time to time, but I must not be in the right spaces. Maybe I should ask Claude for some links.

Information was power, or so they said. The one thing I got from my lurking was that being educated and doing your own research was essential. I didn’t want to end up being the clueless sub that clueless authors wrote books about. Misrepresentation was never good.

“You’re good, honest.” Claude must’ve taken my silence as needing more reassurance.

I couldn’t say I didn’t.

“Okay, but...” Maybe I should’ve drank more water. I kept having to lick my lips and clear my throat because everything felt so dry. There was too much I felt self-conscious about without the need to add more to the mix. “I think I just need some more clarity on what you want from me? I know we texted about it a bit, but...”

“No, I get it.” Claude swallowed. They dropped the empty plate they’d had balanced

on their lap on the table before sitting down again, knees close to their chest. “Other than what I told you, though, I don’t have like a list of yes or no areas. It depends a lot on the day, and just how I’m feeling at a specific time.”

They blushed. I hadn’t even known that was possible, but it was their turn to keep their eyes down and look self-conscious.

It didn’t take a lot of thinking to move closer. I didn’t want to crowd them, and Claude was the one who tended to get in my space, but I couldn’t not offer some kind of comfort.

“Hey.” I waited until they looked up at me. Their face was flushed, eyes brimming with unshed tears. “I just don’t want to... cause harm, that’s all. You can just tell me what’s okay and what’s not. Or just move me around like a puppet if that’s what you need.”

Actually, the idea of being Claude’s puppet held a lot of appeal, but...

Nope, not going there. Not the time.

“I’m sorry.” Claude sighed. Their gaze held mine while they tried to take a breath that wasn’t too shaky. “I’m more comfortable with my body than I used to be, but talking about it is still new.”

“It can get awkward, for sure.”

My answer made them chuckle. It was the goal. I liked how that felt, the warm glow in my chest. I’d done that; cheered them up. It was silly, but it wasn’t. It felt big, important.

“Yeah.” Claude looked up before their hand found mine. “I do want to kiss you

again.”

“Just kiss?” I felt the heat creep up my cheeks the second the words were out. “I’m fine with just kissing, I mean.”

“Good to know.” Claude smirked. “But... No, I wasn’t thinking just kissing.”

I bobbed my head up and down. It was the only move that made sense.

No, I wasn’t going to ask what exactly they were thinking about. Part of it was anxiety. Another part was... they were trusting me. It made sense that I did the same, right?

“Nice.” Wrong word. Wrong word, wrong word, wrong word. “I mean...”

“I get it,” Claude interrupted me.

I was about to apologize, to try and not come across as the complete mess that I was.

It was a blessing that they sat up more properly, shifting until they were on their knees. In this position, they stood taller than me. It was only a visual effect, but the imbalance made me breathe out in relief.

I always suspected if I got the courage to explore kink, it would be from the submissive side of things. I guessed I’d gotten that right—more right than I’d thought, even.

If I was home, I’d be dissecting everything about it. Here, though, it just made sense. The only thing I wanted to dissect were my reactions to them. Their lips met mine again. Claude’s kisses were soft. Teasing. Playful. Their tongue flicked out, but they didn’t try to shove it down my throat.

I always thought being tongue kissed was the end-goal. This felt more satisfying, though.

My entire body felt alive, and they were barely touching me. When they did, their hands teasing the collar of my shirt, a shiver ran down my spine.

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I'd feel embarrassed if it didn't make Claude groan.

“Wanna move to my room? Bed's more comfortable.”

“Yeah.” I couldn't say I had a preference for one surface or another. “Sure.”

Truthfully, I had no idea how I made it to Claude's room. I was too focused on how their fingers felt when they grabbed my hand. Their fingers were more slender than mine, but their hold was somehow firmer—definitely more confident than anything I could've come up with.

“I really want to play with you,” Claude groaned as they walked me into their room.

It wasn't what I'd expected exactly. With all the fantasy hair colors and more daring fashion choices, I would've thought their room would be more chaotic. It was almost zen—the kind of rooms that yoga instructors had in movies. Very neutral, woody colors. Very minimalist. Harmonious? Was that a thing?

A king-sized mattress took up the center of the room. There was a desk with a computer set up facing one of the walls, but that was the only thing disrupting the mood. It didn't completely, though—the computer was covered in a light wooden case. The screen saver was on, too, playing some waves on loop.

“Wow.”

Ideally, I would've kept my impressions to myself.

Too late now, I supposed.

Claude's eyes darted from my face to the room and then back to me. "I've been experimenting since I moved here."

They didn't elaborate more than that, and I was soon distracted when they grabbed me and twirled us around until my knees hit the mattress. I wish I could say I fell on the bed gracefully.

I did not.

Claude didn't comment on that, either, but their lips lifted up at the corners. They had one dimple that was more pronounced than the other. It was more visible when they leaned forward.

"I'm assuming I can kiss you again?"

I nodded right away, fast. There were no thoughts involved there. My whole body was vibrating with the need for more of whatever they wanted to give me.

Claude's words played in a loop in my head. I really want to play with you. I didn't bother to replicate the sentiment out loud. It would be redundant.

My breath hitched when their lips met mine again. Claude's hands rested on my body. One hand cupped my jaw while another rested on my waist.

"Let me know if you need me to move at any time," they whispered.

A shiver racked down my spine.

"Yeah." My hands found their thighs, where they'd said it was okay to touch earlier.

“You too.”

The nod in response was almost imperceptible, but it was there. It was all I needed, so I let myself be guided down until my back hit the duvet. Claude’s lips were there as their hands explored. I squeezed their thighs.

I wasn’t used to slow, to someone taking their time.

“Tell me what you need.”

“I...”

“It won’t make me uncomfortable,” Claude hummed. For once, I hadn’t even thought of it. “I want to give you what you want.”

“You want to torture me with it, is what you mean.”

Claude tsked. “Such big words.”

They were smirking, though. I wasn’t sure if anyone had ever told them—or if I wanted to be the one who did it—but they weren’t fooling anyone.

“Bring it on, then.”

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They chuckled. The sound had me frowning. That was until they spoke. “Sure thing. As soon as you answer the question.”

“Oh. Right.”

A hint of embarrassment came up to the surface, but I squished it down.

“You really are lucky I’m not a Sadist.”

Nope, not going to ask what that taunt meant.

“Just... Just more. I feel like I’m losing my mind already.”

“I’ve got you.” There was no reason for me to believe the words, except I did.
“Wanna take off your clothes for me?”

“Yeah.”

It wasn’t something I needed to think about. I just scooted backwards until I could grab the hem of my dress and get rid of the fabric. There was no awkwardness. I didn’t think I could muster enough brain cells for it.

I just needed them closer. It was all I could think about.

Claude was right there, too, before I could say a word. They leaned over me. Their hand teased the clasp of my bra, and my heart rate picked up. They weren’t taking it off, just teasing with the idea of it. I thought it would be something... innocuous.

It wasn't. My entire body was focused on their touch. I hadn't known I was capable of that, of existing solely for the whims of another person.

"Your skin is so fucking smooth." Claude trailed their fingers across my collarbone as they spoke.

I shivered. "You curse too much."

Claude chuckled. "It's a good thing I'm not a sub, then."

"Is it?" My breath caught.

Claude kept moving, their fingers now tracing the lace patterns adorning my bra. For the first time in my life, pride filled me for all the expensive sets of underwear I spent money on.

"It is for you," Claude retorted.

I chuckled—or I tried to. I knew people talked about laughing while having sex being the best thing. I wasn't sure I was wired that way. I didn't know what that said about me, either.

"How sensitive are you?"

I snorted. "You can't tell?"

Claude didn't respond—not verbally. No, what they did was grab one of the bra straps and let it snap against my skin. I couldn't tell what sound slipped past my lips—half surprise, half arousal. The bite of the bra spread around the skin surrounding it, igniting every nerve.

“If you don’t want to play nice, we don’t have to.”

My mouth parted. Claude nipped at my jawline before I could string a response together.

“N-no.” I swallowed. “I can play nice.”

“Good,” Claude hummed. “Is there anything that’s an absolute no?”

“No.” My spine arched off the mattress as I spoke. My body just begged for more of Claude’s touches. “You already know everything.”

“So... if I wanted to lick your clit while I fingered your ass, that would be okay?”

More than okay. I moaned, my eyelids shutting down as I imagined it. My hips bucked up.

“Please.”

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The more Claude hovered over me—touching, and kissing, and nipping—the more I forgot why this made me anxious in the first place. I just needed more of what they were doing and the things they were promising.

“Get your head on the pillows.”

I’d never complied with a command so easily. For once, Claude didn’t tease me about it. They just followed me there. It didn’t escape my notice that they hadn’t removed any clothes.

It was hot. In my head, when I watched videos or read pics, I imagined it would feel awkward.

It just made me feel more... submissive, I supposed was the best word to describe it. I was almost naked for them, for their enjoyment. I was exposed while they didn’t have to be.

I moaned. Claude quirked an eyebrow. I couldn’t form words, but I dragged them closer.

“So this is what Domms talk about when they goad about their subs being so responsive.” Claude grinned before lunging down and licking the shell of my ear. I shuddered. “I dig it.”

“Please, Claude.”

It wasn’t an honorific—even my overactive imagination knew it was too soon for

that—but it felt like one. It wasn't just me saying their name. There was a new weight to it.

I think Claude got it, too, their body tensing for a second before they straightened. There was newfound strength there. It made me want to touch myself, to put a stop to all the teasing and get the reward.

Maybe that newfound strength let them read minds. The next thing I knew, they were grabbing my wrists and locking them above my head.

“Don't move.”

I let out a soft pant. The bed didn't have a headboard, so I just intertwined my hands together. I could behave, even when my heart thumped loudly against my chest. It wasn't as if Claude would do anything I didn't want them to.

I trusted them.

They understood, too. They didn't walk around on eggshells, either. I probably had done that more than they did. I'd have to apologize.

Later—when they weren't intent on driving me completely mad.

This whole thing felt... sacred, the way first times felt in movies and overly romantic books. I kind of wished it was my first time.

“Claude.” Their name was the only one word I didn't struggle to utter.

“Yeah?” Their hands snuck under my back. I held my breath as the clasp of the bra clicked open. “You look so... hypnotic.”

Hypnotic.

I rolled the word on my tongue.

I didn't know about looking hypnotic—whatever that meant. I felt hypnotized, though, so maybe it made sense.

“Fuck me,” I breathed out. “Please.”

I needed to experience it, needed to fall into the fantasy that this was my first time, that I was giving it to Claude. I needed Claude to own my body, to show me how everything could feel as if I didn't have a clue.

Maybe I didn't. Every other experience I thought I'd had was shoved to the side. Irrelevant.

EIGHT

Claude

There really was some kind of hypnosis going on. I didn't know if it was Domspace or something else—it didn't matter; not right now—but nothing existed outside of Arlene.

She really was gorgeous. A part of me was jealous of the way she lay beneath me, her body on display. She was braver than she'd ever admit. I could not be put on display. It wasn't even about how I felt about my body. Vulnerability had never been my thing.

I wanted to dig into her mind, though, to understand every thought and choice that led her here. I needed to know what she was feeling, what it meant for her.

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“So impatient,” I teased.

It was a meaningless tease; I was just as impatient. It was something new, something I hadn’t thought I’d be comfortable with, but there was something about the way Arlene gave herself to me. I couldn’t move away.

“Shut up.”

I laughed. My hand cupped one of her breasts while the other teased her nipple. I could’ve asked how sensitive her breasts were, but it was more fun to discover it on my own.

“You really are lucky I’m not a Sadist.”

“You sure about that?” Arlene’s voice came out breathier the more I teased her.

I wanted to see how far I could take it, how it would sound when she was completely wrecked.

“Sure about what?”

Something told me she had to be thinking I had a Sadist in me. Maybe I was the one thinking it.

I was both intrigued and annoyed by the idea of adding yet another layer to dissect and rediscover about myself.

That would all be for later, though. Now it was about Arlene, and the way she writhed over the sheets and let out little moans. She was sensitive, all right. I was barely doing anything. I knew she was aware. It was a good thing she wasn't complaining.

I liked this, the kind of play that wasn't just focused on specific body parts and a script to follow. It was what drew me to kink, after all. For a fleeting second, I wondered if I'd explained it right to her when we talked about it.

I kept that in mind as I wrapped my lips around one of her nipples and pinched the other with my fingers. Arlene's hips bucked off the bed, lifting us both. A long, drawn-out moan slipped past her lips.

"I've heard some people can come just from nipple play," I hummed nonchalantly. "You think we could try that?"

"Don't you dare," Arlene half-moaned, half-groaned.

We were so going to try it. Not tonight, though. I could be nice.

"Got it."

The way she huffed was way more amusing than it had any right being. I should punish her for all that attitude. Instead, I shifted downwards and placed my lips on her stomach. Truth be told, I wasn't completely sure of what I was doing. I was mostly following her lead. I spent longer on the areas that had her breath hitching. I licked and nipped the skin above her hipbone, her belly button. She was easy to read, everything so close to the surface I didn't know how she kept it contained the rest of the time.

"Lift up your hips."

The other day, I'd been daydreaming about this—what I'd do with her, how I'd behave, if things turned sexual. In my head, I took my time. I didn't rush to get all her clothes out of the way. I didn't take off her matching panties as if I needed to get access to her.

I wasn't sure what was making me react this way. I just knew it was imperative that I gave her everything, that she left my place without a doubt that she'd be coming back for more.

Her clit was erect, reddened. I left it alone for now—mostly so that I could see the way her body stiffened when I drew near only to move away.

“You're evil.”

“Now I don't know about that.”

I let my lips ghost over her inner thighs. She shivered so beautifully, and I left goosebumps wherever I went. It was a heady feeling. I should've grabbed the bottle of lube earlier, though. I wanted to tease the skin around her hole, but I didn't want to move. I liked the intimacy we were building, the way the air was charged around us, buzzing with possibilities. It felt like a spell, like a strange, ancient magic humans had forgotten about.

“Arlene?”

Her name felt like more when it came from my lips. It was another thing I'd never felt before. It stole my breath for a second. What on Earth was happening here?

“Yeah?”

I kissed the skin above her hip bone in an almost reverent gesture. I wanted to keep

doing it. At this point, I was acting on instinct, but I went along with it.

“You feel it too?” Fuck. The question made me sound like a child, an insecure person starting to figure out what was what. I couldn’t take it back, though.

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For a second, Arlene stayed still. She wasn't even breathing. I knew because I couldn't take my eyes off her.

Then her eyes widened, and she swallowed audibly. "Yeah."

"Okay." I'd read into her tone later. For now, I scooted forward until I could reach the bottom drawer in the nightstand. I barely used it, but I kept a bottle of lube there—and a few single-use packets for when I was going out with someone who might need them but didn't have the foresight to grab them. "That's good."

I memorized the way Arlene's chest moved up and down as she watched.

Did she think I stored something dark in there? Or maybe this was affecting her even more than it was affecting me. Or she was worse at keeping those emotions to herself.

I showed her the bottle just in case. "This okay?"

"Yeah." Her eyes fluttered close after she nodded. "You're good. You're great."

I didn't really know what to do with praise half of the time. It wasn't a big problem here, solely because I could bury my face against the curvature of her thigh.

Arlene shivered. Oddly enough, it was exactly the reaction I needed—to remember I was the one in control. This was about getting Arlene to do more of that, to lose herself in her own pleasure.

With a subtle nod to myself, I uncapped the bottle of lube and poured a generous

amount of my fingers. I wasn't a fan of cold lube.

"Can you hold your legs for me?"

"Huh?"

I smirked. Getting her to stop functioning really was easy. I dropped the bottle of lube and used my free hand to nudge her leg until she got what I meant. It didn't take her long.

A part of me wanted to check in with her that the position was okay. It was more exposed, but I was selfish. First, I wanted her exposed. Second, it didn't take a genius to realize that she was the most turned on when she was exposed. Driving her wild brought me a strange sense of pleasure.

My body responded to being in charge of hers.

With her body folded in half, I had the perfect access to keep taunting her. I stuck to what I'd promised, though, which was sucking her clit while fingering her. It wasn't a hardship when Arlene was so open about the way it affected her.

Obviously, I didn't rush into it. There was no fun in that. No. Instead, I teased the wrinkled skin of her rim with a lubed finger while I caressed her taint. Arlene moaned, writhed slightly. A soft press of my pads against the sensitive skin made her stay still.

I'd remember that.

It was always good to be prepared.

"Good girl."

It was also good to give praise, or so people said. It was definitely good with Arlene. The words seemed to wash through her body with the way it relaxed and sunk into the mattress.

I could make more of an effort to praise her.

“Claude,” she whispered.

No one said my name the way she did.

“I’ve got you,” I hummed. I could be cruel, but not too cruel. “You’re so ready for me, aren’t you?”

Arlene nodded. I didn’t give her much time after that before I was sinking one finger inside her ass. Well, the tip of it. I could behave.

Her muscles clenched around me for a few seconds regardless.

“Breathe,” I murmured. “In and out.”

She obeyed easily, soon letting me go deeper. “Move. Please.”

“On it.”

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First, though, I leaned forward until I could lick a strip up the underside of her clit. Arlene shivered from head to toe. I grinned before doing it again.

I crooked my finger at the same time as I started lapping at the enlarged head. Arlene was vocal as fuck. I saw the pads of her fingers whiten from gripping her thighs.

It was all the motivation I needed. Soon, I was surrounded by hazy lust, musky scents, and loud moans, whimpers, and pleas for more fingers.

I complied to every single one. I replicated some of the moans, too. My body vibrated with need, but I shoved it aside for now. It was all about Arlene. Arlene's pleasure.

Arlene's everything.

"Please." Her words echoing the need starting to build within me.

I wrapped my lips around the head and applied more pressure. Arlene keened. Fuck, it was mesmerizing. Her whole body sparked alive under my touch. I'd never been so aware of the power I held over someone. I didn't want to stop and look into it.

Instead, I hollowed out my cheeks, added a second finger, and fucked her faster. I was lost in the physicality of it. I drowned in the sounds she was making, in the softness of her skin. She was so fucking pliant.

At one point, she let go of her legs, her fingers clenching around the sheets instead. It didn't matter. Her whole body was tense. I knew she was close before she tried to give me a warning. Her head lolled back, teeth gnawing at her bottom lip, hips lifting

off the bed.

“That’s it,” I murmured.

“Please don’t stop, please don’t?—”

She didn’t finish the sentence. I didn’t have time to tell her I had no plans of stopping, either. Her spine arched off the bed, her muscles clenching tight before letting go. A small string of fluid pooled on her stomach. I wondered for a second if I should lick it up. I’d never quite understood the appeal, but I felt compelled to taste it. More than that, I felt compelled to draw even more reactions out of Arlene.

More shudders. More pleas. More pretty moans.

I got what I wanted.

“Claude...” Her voice was wrecked, raspier than it had been. I moved up in the bed until my face was over hers. She lunged forward to kiss me. It was my turn to shudder. “How do I?—?”

I didn’t ask her to elaborate. Even if she hadn’t asked, I already had thought of it. Scrambling, I reached for the nightstand again. I had a Hitachi wand there.

After dropping it unceremoniously on the bed next to Arlene, I sat up on my knees, long enough to get rid of my pants. There was no hesitation about losing the piece of fabric in front of her. Just more of that urgency.

“You know how that works?” My words came out breathy, my eyebrows quirked in the direction of the wand.

Arlene swallowed, then nodded.

“Good.” I nodded. “Don’t be gentle.”

She had questions—it was clear as day. I didn’t give her time to ask them. Instead, I lay over her, resting my weight on my elbows. I placed the wand on her hand and shifted us around until the head of the toy connected with my most sensitive skin.

“Anytime you want,” I teased.

Arlene snorted, but she didn’t take long. She took my words seriously, though. One second, there was quiet between us, our intermingled breaths the only thing disrupting the silence. The next second, buzzing took over the entire room. The vibrating head of the toy pressed against my glistening skin. I screamed, squirmed, debated if I wanted it, or if I wanted to run away from it.

Arlene’s free arm curled around my waist, keeping me still. She was stronger than I would’ve thought, too. More confident in the way she handled me than I would’ve assumed. I thrashed. I’d never been good at being silent.

“Need to—” I rasped.

“Take it.”

I didn’t know if she could tell what I needed. Everything was building up too fast, though. It was overwhelming. My teeth met the fleshy skin by her shoulder. I bit hard.

Arlene hissed before she let out a long, drawn moan. She didn’t tell me to stop so, as vibrations coursed through my body, I kept doing that.

My climax was the most intense I’d ever felt. I didn’t pass out, but I was close. At least, it felt that way. My skin felt over sensitized as I scooted to the side. It was too

hot. The air, her skin, my skin. I needed to take a breath, to shiver in the aftermath without hands pulling me closer.

“Fuck,” I whispered.

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“Yeah,” Arlene breathed out the word.

She didn’t begrudge me for the distance. She just shifted to her side, leaving the overheated wand on the nightstand closest to her first.

I appreciated that kind of thoughtfulness, but sleep was clinging to me too fast to actually say it out loud.

NINE

Arlene

“You need to buy more flour.”

Claude stumbled into the kitchen. My heart sped up for a second. I thought I’d be quirky and cute, but maybe it came out as too much. Maybe I was overstepping, too, and I should have just stayed in bed.

Maybe I should have left when I noticed they were fast asleep? Technically, we hadn’t talked about sleeping over.

Leaving would’ve felt wrong, though.

Claude plastered on a smile before I could overthink anything more. I melted a bit. It was a combination of last night, and the way they looked today—hair sticking out in every direction, an oversized T-shirt that went past their mid-thigh, and squinted eyes they couldn’t quite open yet.

“I didn’t even know I had flour.” They flopped onto the stool by the kitchen island as they mumbled the words.

I gasped. “How could you not?—?”

I didn’t finish the question, but I’d ask my follow-up questions later. Flour was one of the most basic ingredients. I’d understand not knowing that you’d run out of... I didn’t know, apple juice, maybe. But flour?

How did one make it without flour?

“What are you making?”

“Pancakes.” My improved version of pancakes, if I said so myself. “I thought people started out by saying oh, you didn’t have to cook.”

“Shut up,” Claude groaned. I laughed. “I’m still half-asleep, and you’re better in the kitchen than I am. It’s called survival skills.”

“Sure,” I joked, “I’m sure that’s what it’s called.”

Claude grumbled something under their breath. They didn’t tell me to stay away from their pans, though, so I gave a final whisk to the batter and started pouring it into the pan.

I’d debated on adding chocolate chips, but I couldn’t find any. Maybe next time I came over, I’d bring some with me.

Huh.

It was weird, thinking about next times. It was even weirder that I didn’t question it.

“Are you one of those people that needs coffee first thing in the morning to function?”

It would and wouldn't fit them.

“I mean, it helps, but not really.” Claude stretched on the stool. “I ran out of the one I like, anyway. I'm getting it delivered this evening.”

“Good.” I was in overdrive as I said it, though. Should I get in charge of their groceries? Yesterday, there was talk about me being a sub, and it fit, but... I liked making sure that people were taken care of, too. “Are you also getting flour?”

“Probably not.” They chuckled. “Are you really offended by my lack of baking items?”

“Not offended.” I wrinkled my nose. “Weirded out, though? For sure.”

I heard Claude move off the stool. I wanted to turn around and see what they were doing, but I needed to keep an eye on the batter. I was just flipping the first pancake when their arms wrapped around my waist. I'd haphazardly put on the dress from yesterday when I decided on my plan to cook us breakfast.

Safety first, and all that.

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“I’ll buy all the baking things you want, if you agree to give me private classes,” they hummed. “I’ll need many.”

Shit.

The innuendo in their voice was impossible to ignore. My stomach fluttered, skin heating up.

“Yeah. Okay.” It wasn’t my smoothest delivery, but words clung and stuck to the back of my throat. “I can do that.”

“You don’t sound too convinced.”

I swallowed. One quick look showed Claude was just teasing, their lips tilted up in a grin.

“Maybe I’m just processing the lack of flour in your kitchen.”

“Hey, you had enough to make pancakes.”

“Barely,” I grumbled.

Claude just chuckled.

It was fine. It was all under control.

“So, are you going to stay? Or do you have to work?”

“Why would I work on a Saturday?”

“I don’t know.” They shrugged. “Aren’t finance types the ones that work 80 hours a week on a good day?”

I frowned. That had been my father’s mentality before my mother forced him to slow down.

“I don’t.”

I felt guilty about it sometimes, though. I believed my father when he said he was happy now, and when he said he wanted to look into doing more pro-bono, charity type of stuff. But there was a voice at the back of my head that sometimes wondered if it had taken him so long to slow down because of me.

I was just terrible at hustle culture.

“Good to know,” Claude hummed. “I mean, not that I want to assume anything...”

“I’d love to stay.”

“You would?” There was wonder in Claude’s voice before they realized and shut it down. “I mean, cool.”

“Yeah.”

I should tease them about it—if anything, it would be payback for yesterday and show them that I could tease, too. Well, I was probably gentler about it, but...

But I got the feeling that this was, in a way, newer for Claude than it was for me. I could let them work through it while I finished getting the stack of pancakes ready.

“No chocolate chips?”

So, Claude didn't do well with silence when they were unsettled.

Got it.

“There would be chocolate chips if you had any.”

“Oh.” Claude cleared their throat. “Sorry. I'll go update my grocery order.”

“Okay.” It was hard not to laugh.

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It was also a good thing that they couldn't see the grin splitting my cheeks wide. To be honest, it was actually a relief—that they weren't acting quite themselves. I would've been way more anxious if they were their cooler, more collected self. If they were anxious, they kind of forced me to keep my cool. Well, to keep my cool slightly better.

Whatever.

I shook my head as I finished up plating the pancakes. At least Claude did have plenty of sugar so I could whip up a quick caramel sauce.

Dylan was not going to let me hear the end of it when I told him about this.

First, though, I should have a clearer idea of what this was, and that meant talking to Claude about it. Hopefully, they'd had time to calm down some.

“Where should I put these?”

“Lemme.”

They'd been sitting in front of their laptop when I popped my face in the living room. The moment I spoke, though, they straightened up right away. Yeah, they might need another minute or two before I could trust them to lead a conversation.

“Sure.”

I could've just put everything on a tray, but I couldn't find any. Well, I was sure there

were a couple behind a bunch of saucepans, but it felt too invasive to snoop around.

“Did you update your grocery order yet?”

“Yep.” Claude spoke as they grabbed plates and forks. “Not sorry for all the things I probably ordered wrong.”

“How can you order flour wrong?”

Claude quirked an eyebrow as they passed by me.

“Watch me,” they said. I snorted but followed them to the table in the living room where they’d been placing everything. “These smell amazing, by the way.”

They did. There weren’t many things I was actively proud of in my life, but my pancakes were one of them. “Thanks.”

Claude was more than happy to pile up their plate with three pancakes before even trying one. Not going to lie, it made me blush. I blushed a lot around them. It was a thing.

“We should talk about last night after breakfast, right?”

I nodded. Nerves threatened to make an appearance, but I kept them under the surface. “We should.”

Last night had been... I had no words, but I had lots of questions. In many ways, it had been revealing. As naive as it sounded, I’d learned things about my body I didn’t think I would’ve learned otherwise—not even if I’d dared to go to a kink club or anywhere else on my own. That said, discovering things about my body also brought up new insecurities.

The most pressing one was probably what it all meant going forward. It wasn't like I could just ask Claude. It wasn't even about what Claude thought or wanted, anyway.

I'd suspected I'd be more submissive if I ever got into a kink-based dynamic, but there was a world of difference between suspecting, having an inkling, and definitely knowing.

I had no interest in reversing the roles—with Claude, or any other prospective Dominant. Even if I tried to imagine it... I simply couldn't.

"How do you feel about it?" Claude asked after stuffing their face with half a pancake.

I was glad they weren't the kind of person to moan loudly around their food. I got that people wanted to show their love for food, but I never got the appeal.

"I..." My head blanked for a second. I had to blink twice before I could actually answer. "I liked it. A lot. Obviously."

Claude hummed around the food. "These are so fucking good, by the way."

The blunt compliment made me blush. It didn't matter that I knew they were good. "Thanks."

"Sorry." They cleared their throat. "The people I've been with, if you can call it that, were usually more experienced and happy to lead these talks."

"It's okay."

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“But... how do you feel now? I know this stuff can mess with your head.”

“Yeah.” I chewed on my lip. That was one way of putting it. “I’m not sure what to think, or feel, truthfully. I never thought this would happen.”

Whatever it was that I’d said, it made Claude frown. It made them forget the half-eaten pancake too. Being under their full attention was nerve-wracking. Claude was intense when they wanted to be.

“Why not?”

Oh.

That’s what got them all frowning.

It was kind of sweet.

“I mean, you know, I’m not... the best at meeting people. Or making a move.”

“You’re fine.”

“That’s what you say,” I mumbled.

There was no heat in the words, though. Claude didn’t take the bait, either. I was happy they didn’t. Happier than I had any business being, probably.

“It messed with my head, too.”

I hadn't realized silence had fallen between us. I snapped my head up when Claude broke it.

"It did?" I gulped.

"Yeah." They looked away for a second, a hand running through their hair. "I'd never been so invested, I guess. It's weird."

"Oh?"

I frowned. I didn't know if it was supposed to be a compliment or the exact opposite. I did not breathe until Claude started speaking again.

"When I woke up, before I came downstairs, I was thinking back to, y'know, The Video TM." They swallowed. "How, I discovered something about myself, and it led to... the worst months of my life, basically."

"Right." I nodded.

I'd love to say more, but Claude hadn't opened up about it. There was no way I could utter a word without somehow fucking up. Everything was too fresh and too new to take that risk.

The issue with not saying more than one word was that I had more time to go over what they'd said and what it meant. Claude had come to me less than an hour ago, and they'd seemed fine. Surely, they weren't dreading whatever was happening.

Part of me screamed that Claude wouldn't be so cruel to ask me to spend the day if that was the case. Another more insecure part reminded me that I didn't actually know them beyond the persona they used to play in front of a camera.

“You’re freaking out,” Claude said.

And they were avoiding the topic.

“Well, yeah.”

How could I not?

Claude licked their bottom lip before they cut another piece of pancake. I didn’t know if I should be frustrated or relieved. Surely, if they were still eating, it couldn’t be so bad.

Surely.

“Sorry, I’m kind of questioning everything I knew about myself, again. I do wanna keep hanging out, though.”

Keep hanging out.

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Okay. I could work with that. Not everyone jumped into things as fast as I did—I knew that was a beige-leaning-toward-orange flag of mine.

“How can I help?”

Claude didn’t need to know that I had no chill. Or that stopping so that I could think rationally was a struggle. Truth was, I was turning into a bit of a simp around them. I just wanted to keep doing more of what we’d been doing.

So, while Claude discovered whatever it was they’d discovered about themselves, I’d discovered I was kind of a horn dog.

Fun.

TEN

Claude

I should’ve waited until I had some caffeine or something in my body. The pancakes had enough sugar to wake me up, but it didn’t feel the same.

Ugh.

“I meant what I said when I told you I got things out of fucking someone,” I started. Maybe a bit crass, but it was the best I could do at this hour. “I like teasing and learning people’s reactions and using them against the person. It’s fun.”

I caught Arlene squirming. I smirked, quirking an eyebrow in a silent dare for her to say something.

She didn't.

I didn't know if I should praise her and tell her she was a good girl, or if I should chastise her for it.

Decisions.

In the end, I guessed it was better for both of our sanities if I just kept talking and made my point. I wasn't sure what that point was, but that had never stopped me before.

"I don't look at someone and say, I wanna jump their bones," I said. "I still don't. Sex is just something else I can do with someone to learn more about them and feel closer to them."

"Yeah. That makes sense."

"Does it?" I raised an eyebrow.

I didn't want to sound like an asshole, but I was used to more skepticism or questioning glances.

For whatever reason, it made Arlene blush. "I'm not entirely clueless, when I have my wits around me."

Gosh, that was so endearing.

It made me laugh.

“Good to know.”

“Is it?” She squealed.

It was sweet. More than that, it helped deflate the pressure building in my chest. “I’ve just never been so invested in something sexual before. Sure, it’s not like I have a plethora of experiences, but it’s still...”

I made myself take another bite of the fluffy pancake—not that it was a hardship—while I pondered how to continue.

“It just... I can obsess over labels quite a bit, if you didn’t notice with that last video.”

Arlene nodded, slowly. “Don’t we all, at some point?”

“Yeah.” I snorted. “You’d think I would’ve learned my lesson by now, though.”

“I don’t, actually.” Arlene’s eyes widened, as if she was surprised by her bluntness. In a way, I was too. I appreciated blunt, though. “It’s hard to say ‘fuck labels’ when everyone is holding those labels over our heads.”

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I ran a hand through my hair. I should've grabbed something to tie it with, but I was not a morning person on a good day.

“Yeah.” I swallowed. “It’s like, when I posted that video... I mean, I get that I went about it wrong. I was just thinking about monetizing and going viral, and I shouldn’t have used clickbait or any of those things. But... Suddenly, my entire experience as a human being was reduced to whether or not I was a true asexual. Whatever that meant.”

“The comment section got ugly for sure.” Arlene winced. “I did not participate, by the way. I never really commented or engaged at all.”

“It’s fine.” It was a relief, but today was not the day to stop and let that feeling sink in. “I guess a part of me is still bitter that I didn’t get any of the support I’d wanted. Deep down, I mean.”

“I get that.” Arlene nodded. “If you wanna talk about it... I swear I’m not saying it as a fan or anything like that.”

I grimaced. It wasn’t that she offered, or that I saw her as a fan who was after some fresh gossip. Hell, it wasn’t as if it mattered. I’d quit the world of YouTube years ago. There was no reputation to damage—or salvage, for that matter. That ship had sailed a long time ago.

Then again, I should probably talk about it at some point. If anything else, it was an elephant in the room hovering every time I let someone in for real. And I was the one bringing it up time and time again. That had to mean something.

“I know.” I sighed. “It’s just, as cliché as it is, I didn’t have an... easy time, coming out. With my family or anyone else at the time, really. And I don’t know how to talk about that video without relating it to all that shit.”

“I’m sorry.” Arlene reached out her hand.

I grabbed it on instinct, intertwining our fingers. It was strange. I didn’t want people going around thinking I was super affectionate, but I didn’t mind it with her.

Man, I really had it bad.

Was this what they’d talked about once at a munch? Sub-frenzy? Dom-frenzy had to be a thing, too. I might not be an expert on everything kink, but it made sense that there were equivalents.

“Uh, thanks?” I never quite knew what to answer when talk involved my past. Most days, it was easy to be focused on the present and the life I’d built for myself. A few days a year, though, it hit a bit harder. I wasn’t too ashamed to admit I turned into a bit of a recluse then. “But yeah. I guess it’s just one of those days I’m in my head more than usual.”

I didn’t know there was a day when I wasn’t in my head. Perhaps what I meant was that I wasn’t as good as hiding it today.

“That’s fine. We can just chill on the couch.”

There was no way I could tell her, but Arlene looked like an overexcited puppy trying to hold that excitement in right now. It was a good thing that I was coming to the realization that I really liked physical touch with her.

“Sure. After pancakes.”

“Right. Of course.”

I chuckled. I’d been the one talking, but I’d also eaten at least double what she had. Too bad I wouldn’t feel self-conscious about it. I’d never been the kind of person who lost their appetite, especially not when it came to desserts or anything sweet.

Arlene could really do desserts. I was doomed once she learned how easy it would be to blackmail me into everything and anything with them.

I digressed, though.

“Couch?” Arlene asked.

I would’ve nodded if she hadn’t started to gather everything.

Look, I was more than okay with having Ben or Julian mend for themselves. Ben and Julian didn’t cook for me, though. They were even more useless than I was—Ben more so.

Arlene didn’t fall into that category—of useless. I was even afraid to ask how long she’d been awake before I came down.

Even my limited cooking knowledge said pancakes didn’t take very long to make, but she must’ve had to figure out where everything else was first. My kitchen wasn’t the tidiest space in the house. Besides, she’d looked way too awake.

Either she was a morning person, or she’d had time to actually wake up.

“Lemme,” I protested before she made her way all over to the kitchen.

“It really is fine.”

“I don’t care.” I jutted my chin up. “Besides, I have a system.”

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“A... system.” Arlene blinked.

“With my dishwasher,” I clarified.

It was actually true. I stood by the fact that my kitchen could be ten times better, but one thing it wasn't was dirty.

“Oh. Okay, then.”

Thankfully, my system wasn't super elaborate or took a lot of time. I hadn't realized how much my skin would prickle with awareness just because someone was watching me put plates in an electrical appliance.

Once that was done, it meant going back to the couch. I sat down first, and Arlene followed. For a second, I watched, wondering. Was she going to sit right next to me now that we'd had sex? Or was she going to feel more self-conscious and keep her distance?

After one second where she stood still, probably debating the options in her head, Arlene chose a middle ground of sorts. Our knees brushed together, but she was still theoretically on her side of the couch.

I could so easily pull her closer if I wanted, though.

I wasn't planning on doing it yet, but it was always good to know what my options were.

“Did you want to watch something specific?”

“I’m good with whatever,” Arlene rushed to answer.

It made me suspicious right away. Then again, it could just be her nerves. I should remind myself to slow my roll—we’d only just met, pretty much. I might not be processing last night yet, but we had to be responsible here, right?

“Okay. Netflix has baking shows, right?”

That got her talking again about the last season of a show she hadn’t watched yet.

Good. One thing I didn’t have to decide from scratch. I really was not a TV person. The main reason I had one was that it came with the house when I signed the lease. I’m not sure I would’ve bought one otherwise. My laptop worked just fine on the rare occasion I wanted to watch something.

“You’re going to have to explain everything like I’m five.”

Arlene squeaked. “Uh, sure. I mean, might be hard, but I’ll try.”

I nodded. Maybe after watching a couple of episodes, talking about The Video TM would feel less asphyxiating. Or it would come up naturally in conversation, and I wouldn’t clam up completely.

For now, I was happy to hear her theories about the different judges and why it didn’t make any sense that one of the women was there to begin with.

She was probably right. I was once invited to judge a local dancing competition. I knew nothing about dancing.

I also knew that, unlike me, many people accepted those invites for the hype of it.

Ugh. I didn't want to spend today thinking about how much the influencer world sucked. It wasn't as if I could disconnect from it during the week—who would've thought influencers were the main employers of the PR company that took a chance on me? But still.

I'd never been a huge fan—the shine had faded pretty damn fast—and that wasn't going to change now.

“Okay, what's wrong with those cookies now?” I teased in my driest tone possible.

Arlene had been nitpicking absolutely everything since they started baking. It looked fine to me, but I wasn't the expert here.

And the way she huffed and got all indignant was adorable as fuck.

“I mean, nothing per se.” She was chewing on her lip, though. Poker would not be her thing. Then again, it could be fun to talk her into playing strip poker sometime. I had never played, but I imagined it would be fun to see just how flushed she could get. “I would've just added a mix of dark and milk chocolate chips to elevate the overall flavor.”

“Is that a thing?” I frowned.

“It's totally a thing. Lots of fancy bakeries do it,” she said. My arm found the back of her head. Her hair was stupidly soft. “My grandma learned it from a baker that lived down the street.”

It did not surprise me that her family came from a place with fancy bakers down the street. It wasn't a bad thing—just an observation about the way she held herself

sometimes. I wasn't one to talk, anyway. As little contact as I now had with them, I grew up privileged.

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Too privileged, some might argue. It had taken a lot of deconstructing myself to get to where I was today. It hadn't started when I left, of course. There was a reason I always was considered the black sheep of the family, way before I'd come out as anything.

"Is your grandma still alive?"

"Yeah." Arlene shifted on the couch so she was looking right at me. "Just turned eighty a couple months ago. My parents keep offering for her to move to a townhouse right next to theirs that's up for sale, but she's stubborn."

"That's nice."

I ignored the twinge of disappointment and bitterness. I'd love to share stories about my family, too. They'd taken that away from me.

Arlene leaned into my hand. I swear she'd be purring if she was a cat. I liked running my fingers through her hair.

"Yeah."

I was glad she didn't ask me about my family. Then again, she followed me. It was another reason why I liked hanging out with people who knew of me. They'd watched all the vlogs where I talked about them, so they knew not to go there.

She was probably remembering those right now. It would usually make me squirm in discomfort, but... As anxious as she could be, something about her presence was

soothing for me.

“Are we still going to that kink club on Wednesday?” she asked.

“Sure. If you still want to?”

Today was not the day to assume what she was or wasn’t thinking. I’d rather play it safe—and hope she didn’t misinterpret it as something else.

“Yeah.” Arlene bobbed her head up and down. “I really do. And you wanna keep hanging out, right?”

I did, but this was getting ridiculous. There was no way we didn’t look like two fumbling teenagers.

Back to getting things moving. “I wanna keep kissing you, too.”

“I’m not stopping you,” Arlene breathed.

I tracked the way her throat bobbed up and down. One hand over her chest showed her heart was picking up speed.

“Good.”

I forgot all about the baking contest, then. Some of the voices were slightly irritating, but they were soon little more than background noise. Nothing existed but the heat in her mouth as she opened up to me and the way she breathed, almost shallow. The way she leaned back against the couch, too. Her hips lifted up slightly, a moan trapped between her lips before I caught it.

“I want to keep doing more of this with you,” I said.

One part of me just wanted to tease and see how far I could drown her in pleasure. I owed her more honest talk, though, and I wasn't sure she felt confident enough to ask for it, yet. It would be an issue if it didn't get better down the line, but...

Huh.

Now I was the one going ten steps ahead.

"Me too," Arlene whispered against my mouth.

Words eluded me more than they usually did. It was a good thing that I had the excuse of kissing her now. Her lips were soft and pliant, and she smelled of those pancakes she hadn't eaten many of.

It was still addicting.

"I don't know how to describe what I'm doing, or feeling, or... any of that," I admitted after moving so I was straddling her hips. There were no thoughts about exposing my body. It just felt comfortable. "Which, shit, it makes me sound like an asshole, but?—"

"I get it," Arlene cut me off. "It's fine."

Huh.

I was the one interrupting her all the time.

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This had to be the first time she took charge of the conversation.

I liked it.

ELEVEN

Arlene

“You sure about this, babe?”

I huffed. “For the millionth time, yes, Dylan, I’m sure.”

I hated sounding exasperated with him or upset in any way. Truthfully, I knew what he was doing and why he was saying it. But, damn, I was excited about this. I was also the most anxious I’d been in years while checking out my reflection in the mirror, but that was irrelevant.

Was it so hard to get some encouragement around here?

“And you don’t want me to come with?”

I chewed on my lip. “Maybe another day?”

If I didn’t completely implode and embarrass myself so much that they banned me for life. Was that a thing? I frowned. I didn’t know.

There were so many things I didn’t know. One thing I did know, though, was that I

wanted to have this first experience with Claude.

It wasn't because they were Claude—of Spades—for most queer people who grew up chronically online. They were just... I didn't know it was possible to feel the way I felt around them. Sure, I knew a big part of it was hormones, and the thing to expect from a new relationship—one that didn't even have an official start date, to boot, if it had even started.

Even then, though, I wanted to cherish the feeling, and explore it, then treasure it.

I'd have more than enough time to hang out with Dylan wherever he wanted.

Hell, I'd mention it to Claude, and I could introduce the two of them. I wasn't completely sure how they'd work together, though. Then again... Claude had been—still was, from the sound of it—best friends with Ben.

Dylan was a walk in the park in comparison.

“Fine,” he groaned. It was good that we had a system—in which I gave him a look and he behaved nicer. I could not deal with his usual sass on a twenty-four-seven basis. “At least text me if anything good happens.”

“Define anything good.” I raised my hand before he could take me up on it. “Actually, please don't.”

There was a reason why he and I didn't discuss kinky matters at length. I felt like a baby taking her first steps when we did.

It was different with Claude. Yes, I was still anxious, and jittery, and not really processing the fact that they were interested in me. But I didn't really have time to think. Or, rather, I had many thoughts, but I didn't have the room for thoughts about

how inexperienced I was.

I liked it that way. Claude hadn't complained, either. After we spent most of Saturday making out and watching people baking atrocities on TV, we'd been texting every day. Nothing too scandalous, but those texts were more than enough to calm me down.

They really wanted to see where this led. It hadn't been some fluke or a vivid hallucination because I'd put more hours than usual in the office.

I wanted to see where it led, too. The other night... I still had no words to describe exactly what had happened. It made me feel like an absolute newbie who'd just discovered how mind-blowing sex could be, but... That didn't change the facts.

"Need help with that?"

Oh. Yeah, I did. I'd forgotten that the reason Dylan was in my room—not that he needed much incentive on any given day—was because of the corset I'd found at the back of my wardrobe.

I'd bought it years ago—everyone went through phases—but it had been relegated to the back of my wardrobe when I realized I did not have the dexterity to actually put it on.

It really fit the vibe of a kink club, though. My plan was to pair it with a soft dress that reminded me of a babydoll set and that I didn't remember buying, either. I really had gone through a few phases while trying to figure out my own style.

Claude said the club we were going to was more relaxed around dress codes, but I didn't want to draw too much attention to myself by wearing something too basic. Besides, I kind of wanted to impress them, too. They had this idea that I was sweet

and shy, and...

Well, yeah, I was that, but I had layers, too. Or rather, I could have layers. Claude didn't have to be holding my hand forever and ever—even though the idea of holding hands made me giddy enough that I would not discourage them.

For now.

The handholding I was talking about here was not the physical one, anyway.

“Uh, right, yeah.” I blinked when I realized Dylan had been standing there, waiting for an answer. Well, he hadn’t been waiting for long, or I would’ve heard something about it. It still made me shift on my feet. “I keep getting in my head.”

“Oh, really.” Dylan snorted. Thankfully, he stopped teasing and got to work on the corset laces. I’d tried to watch tutorials, but I really could not comprehend how some people did it on their own. “You’re fine, babe. I mean, you’re probably gonna crash so badly after all the sub-frenzy is done, but I’ve got you.”

“That’s...” I grimaced, his words leaving a sour aftertaste in my mouth. “Not as encouraging as you seem to think it is.”

“I think I’m plenty encouraging.”

In other words, he had to be fighting with his boyfriend again. He always got way more cynical and snappier when that happened.

It left me conflicted. On the one hand, I wanted to dig in there. On the other hand... There was no way I could focus on that drama today. It was selfish—I hated that it was—but it wouldn’t be fair to him if I tried to fake it, either.

“Text me if you need anything, yeah?”

“Sure I will.” He rolled his eyes.

Rolling his eyes in response to literally every little thing he was told was another sign that trouble was brewing. Maybe I could talk him into going out this weekend.

The tavern he liked had a promo going on. I’d gotten an ad for it yesterday, but I’d forgotten to mention it to him.

It was for the best. If I had, he’d probably be planning going there with the boyfriend, and that... never ended well.

“I mean it, though.” It was important that I said it—for my own sanity if anything else. “Claude will understand, too. They’re a good friend.”

“And you know that because?”

“Because...” I blanked. “Because.”

I fixated on those things. It was in the way Claude talked about Ben without a camera on their face, in the way they bantered with the staff at Randy’s, and how they always stopped to say hi when they recognized someone.

I noticed that stuff. Claude would groan out loud and force a change in subject if I shared the observations with them, but that was beside the point. They thought they gave off this aloof vibe or something, but they didn’t.

It was the opposite, really. They were a total mama bear. I saw how indignant they got when we were hanging out and Ben sent them a text to a new article about him and Julian that wasn’t entirely flattering. They cared a lot.

I might not know every single thing about them, and this was all so new that I hadn’t

wrapped my head around it yet, but I knew some things.

I knew Claude was the kind of person people should want to have around. It was more than enough for me.

“So...” I sighed. “How do I look?”

I supposed I liked how I looked in the mirror, but... This would still be my first time in a kink club. What if I thought my outfit matched the vibe, but it actually didn't?

“I didn't even know you had biker boots.”

“Of course I do.” I pouted. “Just because I'm in my cottagecore era lately doesn't mean I?—”

“Okay, okay, I got it.” Dylan raised his hands in the air.

We were definitely going to talk about his boyfriend after I survived tonight.

Dylan sighed, his face eventually falling before he ran a hand through his hair. I was pretty sure he'd just woken up when I asked if he could help me.

His schedules were something else.

“You do look good,” he admitted, “and your Claude is gonna love it. I'm just messed up.”

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“Yeah.” I was just thinking it, so there was no point in trying to play nice and deny the obvious. “Let’s do something this weekend?”

Some of his usual humor returned to his eyes. “You won’t have plans?”

“I mean, probably?” Considering all the memes about sapphic dates, and the fact that this was our third in less than two weeks, yeah, it was a safe assumption. “But I can make time.”

“All right. If you say so, I mean. Text me or whatever.”

I was the one rolling her eyes as he walked out of my room. It was a good thing I could not afford to live alone, and that he was a pretty great roommate. I’d definitely lucked out there.

It didn’t mean that he didn’t have his moments, and I was now worrying about him instead of the night ahead.

I grabbed my phone from where I’d dropped it on the bed.

Arlene

Did you have any plans this weekend?

Claude

Hello to you too

Here I was, thinking you'd be anxious about tonight

Arlene

Very funny

I am anxious, but it's a whole thing with my roommate

I wanna hang out with him, but I wanna see you too

Claude

You can always introduce us

Or, you know, we behave and spend one day without seeing each other

I'm sure some people call that healthy

Arlene

I'm not some people

Claude

Neither I am, but that's beside the point

Anyway, how are you feeling about the club tonight? I managed to leave work earlier today so I should be there on time

Arlene

That's good! Yeah, I'm ready

I don't know how I'm feeling, but I wanna go, and I wanna see you?

Does that count?

Claude

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It does

We're still meeting there, right?

Arlene

Yeah

We'd discussed taking the subway together, but it hadn't made any sense logistically. Did it make me more nervous to show up to a kink club alone, even if I wasn't going to walk inside?

Yes, but... I was going to be an adult about it. Besides, it would be good for me, like a little test. It was how I'd started thinking about it.

It was all good.

I should've baked something, though. That would've given me something to do with my hands—while waiting, too—and it would've distracted Claude from my ramped-up anxiety.

Then again, it probably wouldn't have changed a lot. Claude seemed like the kind of person who saw through that. Well, they'd be really happy about the sweets—they reminded me of a gremlin when there was food in front of them—but they'd call me out for it.

I didn't want to be called out for my dysfunctional coping mechanisms just yet.

They weren't even that dysfunctional.

I could be taking drugs, or I could be some unhinged adrenaline junkie. Instead, I just baked an inordinate amount of sugary food.

“Hi!”

I should've definitely baked something. It really would've gotten rid of some excess nervous energy.

“Hi.” Was it me, or was Claude's voice sultrier than usual? “Ready?”

I gulped down. No, no I was not ready. Claude looked...

I thought they'd said they'd only wear a harness over some basic clothes. There had been nothing there about leather pants, or the dark makeup that was framing their eyes so well, or...

I should've put on some makeup. I just was not the best at it, and I ended up smudging it all over the place, so I thought it would be safer if I only put on some chapstick.

I was now questioning that choice.

Really questioning it.

“What is it?” Claude tilted their head to the side. “You should see your face right now.”

I took in a deep breath. I tried to, at least. I knew they didn't mean anything negative by it, but... Yeah, I was definitely overwhelmed.

“Sorry.” I winced. I didn’t mean to apologize exactly, but the word just slipped out. “I swear I was keeping it together.”

Claude watched me for a minute. At least, it felt like a minute—a long, agonizing one. “I believe you. And if you want to grab an Uber back to my place, we can do that.”

“No,” I nearly stammered the word. Damn. “I can do it.”

I wanted to do it, and there was no way I’d survive the mortification of leaving without even stepping a foot inside.

“Okay.” Their fingers wrapped around my wrist. The innocent touch gave me goosebumps. Claude noticed, but it didn’t stop them. “Squeeze my hand twice, and we’re out, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Maybe it was silly, but having that? Without me being the one who’d asked for a signal? It felt like I was taking my first real breath since I’d started pacing around the nondescript industrial building.

“Let’s go, then?”

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Claude didn't let go of my wrist. I didn't tell them to, either. I just closed my eyes for a second and tried grounding myself. This was fine. It was just another new experience. Even if I hated it, it wouldn't have any major consequences.

Tonight was just about going to a new place. A little adventure of a spicier nature, but an adventure nonetheless.

"Yeah. I'm ready."

"Good." Claude walked just one step ahead of me, but they kept an eye on me. "You look great, by the way."

"I do?"

Claude nodded, licking their lips. "Very. I wanna tease you so much, but you're probably not okay with public exposure yet."

I paused. "Yet?"

They just winked at me.

I squirmed.

I shouldn't find that hot, should I? And yet... I was not going to be able to think of anything else all night now.

Great.

Damn.

That was probably Claude's intention all along. I guessed what they said about Domms knowing better was true.

Well. I wrinkled my nose. Maybe only partially true. Some-of-the-time true. I wasn't comfortable with the idea of someone thinking they knew better just because. No one—Domm or otherwise—should have that kind of ego.

Right?

Anyway, I digressed, and Claude had opened the heavy doors to the club while I was questioning all those things.

I thought there would be more fanfare. In my head, someone greeted us at the door, asked for our referral, and tested us or something. There was someone behind a desk of sorts, but they just greeted Claude after recognizing them, complimented my corset, and asked if we wanted to use the coat rack.

Very underwhelming, to be honest.

The club itself came next. There was metal music playing in the background, soft enough to not be overwhelming, but loud enough to feel the beat of the drums.

Claude had explained the club had two floors, but the second floor was mostly private rooms. I'd agreed to stick to the first floor.

As my eyes zeroed in on the narrow stairs to the side, though, I wondered if it was too late to change my mind.

Or if Claude would be in the mood for it. They didn't make me think they were when

they were describing the club, and I didn't want to assume. It was too soon, I kept repeating to myself as a mantra. It was better if Claude set the pace. Safer, at least.

I liked safer things.

Curiosity picked at me, regardless.

“Did you want something to drink?” Claude's lips brushed against my ear.

The wicked grin on their face told me they'd done it on purpose. I wanted to scowl—I tried—but I knew it was a lost battle. I'd never been great at pretending to be irritated, or at dry humor, or any of the things most people around me were.

Maybe that was why they were drawn to me. It was a weird thing to contemplate, though, so I brushed it off.

“Yeah, sure.” I hadn't had time yet to spot the bar tucked in the corner. A few people were milling around, but it wasn't crowded. “I didn't know there would be a bar.”

“And have people dehydrated?” Claude teased. “No Daddy would allow that.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

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It really did, and I had no idea why I'd thought the opposite. I'd feel silly if Claude wasn't walking there already as if there was nothing strange about my words.

“There's no alcohol, but they make great mocktails if you're into that.”

I didn't have to ask to know Claude would be into that. They really had a serious sugar addiction, not that I was going to complain. Their sugar addiction was the reason we'd started this—and why I was here tonight with them.

“Good to know.”

Claude ended up ordering for me when they flagged the server behind the bar.

He was a bald man wearing what I could only describe as stripper heels and a shiny corset. Rubber, perhaps? I didn't know there were rubber corsets. It looked good on him, regardless of the material. I just always thought that rubber suits had to be incredibly uncomfortable. It was probably a me thing, though. Plenty of people were into rubber—I'd done a lot of research in preparation for tonight. Sure, I supposed some people could be into it because it was uncomfortable, but that couldn't account for everyone.

Right?

“You're deep in your head,” Claude observed.

I blushed. “Sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?” They made a tscking sound with their tongue. “I just want to make sure that you’re having a good time.”

“Yeah, no, of course.”

My eyes wandered around the room once more. I’d had this idea that, when we arrived, we’d be welcomed by screams of pain, with floggers and whips cutting through the air. Of course, there was nothing like that. Apart from a couple of subs on their knees while their Doms talked, nothing else was really happening. The room had a four-poster bed with a cage underneath that made me shiver for reasons I’d dissect once I was back in the safety of my own room. The other toys I was more indifferent toward. There were a couple Saint Andrew Crosses, a spanking bench, and a pillory.

I supposed I could be into that one, too, if it wasn’t used for pain. It could be used for sensation stuff, too, right?

Clearly, I hadn’t researched enough.

“You were right about this place being more chill,” I hummed.

“That’s why I like it.” Claude took a sip of their syrupy drink before continuing. “I can take you to the club Cin and their partner go to sometime if you want, but I like the no pressure vibe here.”

“No, I like it too.” I swallowed.

It was different than what I was expecting, yeah, but different was not bad. If I’d walked in to a different thing, I probably would’ve shut down right away.

“So what do you wanna do?” Claude tilted their head to the side. “I recognize a

couple faces here. I wanted to say hi, but after that, I'm all yours."

I took a deep, fortifying breath before I let the ambiance swallow me in. "Isn't it the other way around?"

Claude's gaze sharpened immediately. They moved quickly, standing between my legs, their hand above my knee. I shivered as they nudged my inner thigh.

"It goes both ways."

I shivered once more—or maybe I hadn't stopped shivering. "Right."

"Good." Claude smiled as if they were satisfied with the answer, but there was something about the glint in their eyes. That something said I should not lower my guard so quickly. "Now come with me. I'll introduce you."

"Anything I should know?"

Claude had said over and over that this club was more chill than others, and that people came here to mill around more than anything else. Still, my research said that lots of these clubs were big on protocol things. Even if this wasn't a high protocol establishment, I wasn't sure I knew how to handle myself in a middle protocol space, either—if that was even a thing.

It probably wasn't, and I was just overreacting.

Good luck telling my overactive imagination that.

"Follow my lead." Claude shrugged. "Sometimes subs are on speech restrictions, but their Domm will let you know. Besides, they know you're new here."

Just as they were starting to soothe my worries...

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I squealed. “What do you mean, they know?”

They just chuckled in response. “Nothing sinister. Everyone just knows everyone around here.”

Huh.

I supposed that made sense, but it still didn’t make the heat from my cheeks dissipate as Claude took my hand again and led me toward one of the circular couches a few people were sitting around.

Sitting was a generous way of putting it, though. It looked more like a bunch of bisexuals had claimed the couch, and none of them had any interest in breaking away from the stereotype that we didn’t know how to sit down.

I dug it, not going to lie.

Claude didn’t let go of my hand even after we reached the eclectic group—not even when they were met with a bunch of quirked eyebrows and sly smiles.

“Don’t be assholes,” they grumbled. There were a few chuckles. “Is this really how you all greet someone after they haven’t visited in a month?”

“So dramatic,” one of the people drawled. They had a green mohawk and wore a leather ensemble that made them look like they’d come out of a documentary on punks in the 90s. “It’s your own fault if you don’t make time for us.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Claude rolled their eyes, but their lips were tilted into a smile. “Arlene, this is Clay. He uses he/they pronouns and is a pain in the ass.”

“I’m not.” Clay mock-gasped before they winked at me. “I can dole it out, though.”

“Uh...” I was going to combust.

“This is why I don’t make time for you.” Claude sighed in complete exasperation. “And you’re not doing anything to her, we clear?”

Clay pouted. “But she’s cute.”

“Too bad.”

I swallowed. My hand squeezed Claude’s tighter. They seemed to be okay bantering with Clay, but I wasn’t good at that, and the other three people around the couch didn’t look like they were much better behaved.

I needed a minute to breathe.

Maybe I should’ve listened to Dylan. If he were here, he’d be drawing all attention to himself, which would give me the chance to do just that.

TWELVE

Claude

“What’s going on?”

Something was going on with her. I’d been trying to figure it out for the past ten minutes, but no luck. No, I wasn’t proud of it. Asking and drawing attention to it, was

the last thing I'd wanted, but... Desperate measures, and all that.

After introductions were out of the way, and Clay proved how desperate he was for any and all kinds of attention—and, let's face it, how loud he was begging for a punishment I had no interest in giving him—we'd moved to a different couch.

It didn't take a genius to know Arlene didn't do great in crowds. I thought she'd relax when it was just the two of us, but so far, she was as strung tight as she'd been before.

"Sorry." Arlene licked her lips. "I just got more overwhelmed than I thought I would."

I absorbed the words. What did she want me to do? We'd just sat down with our drinks. Our legs brushed against each other, which I was very aware of. Should I be touching her more? Maybe I should've discussed if she wanted me to be in more of a Domm role. I could ask her to go on her knees or something. Well, I could have. I wasn't doing it now; it was too late, and I wasn't negotiating anything when she was this tense.

"Did you want to leave?" I tried.

We'd barely been here, and I'd hate it if she left with a bad taste in her mouth, but she shouldn't push herself too much if it wasn't working.

"What?" She frowned, her finger frozen where she'd been tracing the rim of the glass. "No. N-no. It's not that."

"What is it, then?"

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I kept an eye on her as well as the rest of the room. So far, no one was playing outside of mild role-play with some subs on their knees. I didn't want to risk a heavier scene starting, though. There was no way she'd deal well with that.

Arlene took another sip of her drink. I'd gotten her a mocktail different from mine so that we could switch in case she didn't like it. I was questioning that choice right about now. She'd mentioned she liked it, and she looked like she enjoyed the watermelon syrup, but...

I hesitated. I wasn't one to doubt myself or second-guess like this. It was strange. Untethering, quite frankly. I wasn't sure how I felt about it.

"I don't know." She sighed. "I swear it's not... It's really cool to be here, and watch people just being themselves, I guess. I just..."

"You just...?" I prompted when she didn't finish the sentence.

"I..." Arlene looked up, her bottom lip trapped between her teeth. "I didn't think today would be the day I realized I don't know what being myself means yet."

"Huh?" That was a leap I wasn't expecting to hear. I sat up straighter. I pulled her closer, too, grabbing her drink from her hand and placing it alongside mine on the chrome table. I needed her full attention. "What makes you think that?"

From the moment I first saw her, I'd clocked that she wasn't quite comfortable in her own skin. As I got to talk with her, though, I got the impression that it was more about the people around her than who she was or wasn't.

“It’s stupid,” she protested.

“It doesn’t sound stupid.”

Sure, I could be projecting here, but I knew a thing or two about identity struggles. I knew about the ants crawling up my skin on a daily basis whenever I wasn’t true to myself, my style, my gender, and everything else.

If I could help someone not go through that, I would. My relationship to them didn’t matter. They could be the most annoying person in the entire world, and I’d still run to help.

“Doesn’t it?” She grimaced. Her fingers twiddled with the gauze in her dress. She really looked cute tonight. “It’s just... I’m here as a sub, I guess, but I don’t know that I know what that means, or... What it means for me, I mean. I know I don’t want pain, or rubber suits, or big paraphernalia, but... that’s all I’ve got.”

I nodded. “And it’s important for you to have... more.”

I didn’t want to influence her, or to put words in her mouth that weren’t there.

“Yeah.” She darted her gaze down. “It’s silly, I know, but...”

“I’m still processing, too, if it helps.” I knew it didn’t, but I didn’t know how else to begin what I wanted to say. “I don’t know what I want to turn this into. I mean, I know I like playing with you, but I don’t know what kind of Domm I am, either. You’re gonna have to suffer through me figuring it out.”

Something about what I’d said made her laugh. It hadn’t been the goal, but I supposed I’d take it. That was what people did, wasn’t it?

“You’re just so... cool with everything.”

“I can assure you, I am 100% not cool with everything.”

I wasn’t cool with most things, in fact. I got what she meant, though. Whereas Arlene was an open book, with her anxiety the first thing people noticed about her, I wasn’t. I kept my cards close to my chest, and I put on a smile, or a resting bitch face—depending on the occasion—without thinking twice about it.

It was the best way I’d found to protect myself over the years. I didn’t want Arlene to think I was goals, though. I really wasn’t, and she... I didn’t want her to think she had to dim her light, or whatever it was that had first drawn me to her. It just didn’t feel right.

Not everyone had to be a mess behind closed doors like I was.

“I just mean...” Arlene ran a hand through her hair. “I don’t know. I don’t cope well with uncertainty.”

“I can see that.” They weren’t just words, either. “How can we remove some of that uncertainty so you can enjoy your time here?”

Gosh.

I shivered. What was wrong with me, and why did I have to sound like my therapist? I bet she’d love that if I remembered to tell her.

“I...” Arlene opened and closed her mouth a few times before she seemed to find her words. I kept my face still, not giving anything away. I might be impatient most of the time, but I could wait people out when it was about conversations that mattered. “Can we go upstairs? Just you and me?”

There was no thinking involved when I nodded. No time lapse, either, or going through all possible responses and scenarios in my head. “Let me talk to the owner.”

“Oh?”

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My heart started picking up speed then—as those things I hadn’t taken the time to consider built up. “I know there are signs or something you can put outside the doors that mean people can’t walk in to watch, but I don’t know where they are, or how that works exactly.”

“Oh.” Arlene swallowed a big mouthful of air. “Yeah, that’s smart.”

It was the best I could do, even if I knew it wouldn’t suddenly soothe all her anxieties. If there was something that would, I would’ve done it already. Alas, it was out of my reach.

“Wanna wait here or come with me?” The second I phrased the question, and I processed the panic in her face, I knew I’d fucked up. “Don’t answer that. Just wait a sec.”

It wasn’t as if the club was huge, or there were many people trying to get the owner’s attention. I always forgot his name, but I knew he was always behind the bar, he made great mocktails, and he always responded when people asked for help and took them seriously. It was more than enough for me to have a high opinion of the man.

He killed it in those heels, too.

“And no one’s going to come in, right?”

I snorted. “Not unless they want to be banned for life.”

“Okay.” Arlene nodded.

I gave her a second, but when she didn't say anything else, I took charge and started inspecting the shelves and wardrobes. There was an entire shelf full of condoms, dams, and disposable gloves. Another one was full of the kind of first aid kits masochists would need for aftercare. I was not going to need any of it, but it was good to know they had it. Who knew who could get in trouble, or which one of my messier friends ended up here and I had to guide them to it.

Yeah, I needed to surround myself with less messy people.

It wasn't as if I collected them on purpose. They all came to me, and I was bad at turning people away. Really bad at it.

“Anything specific you had in mind?”

There were two main reasons I asked—or that's what I told myself. First, I'd caught her staring at the stairs the second we walked in. She'd tried to cover her interest in the upstairs rooms, but I wasn't born yesterday. I'd just figured it was better if I didn't overwhelm her right from the start.

Second, when I'd told her I didn't know what kind of Domm I was—or wanted to be, for that matter? Yeah, I couldn't have been more real than that. The idea of not knowing might not be sending me in the same downward spiral it was sending Arlene, but it didn't detract from the fact that I really didn't know what I was doing.

I knew I wasn't particularly interested in any of the standard toys. I was curious about others—like wax, but even though one of the drawers revealed a selection of paraffin waxes, I was not an irresponsible person. Which meant I should find a Domm out there who actually knew about wax play before I could even talk with Arlene about it.

I supposed I could talk with her before that, but that would only add more pressure. It wasn't as if I worried she would say no to trying it. She'd talked plenty about

sensation play. Even if it had been a hard no from her, though, I was a naturally curious person. It was how I'd ended up hanging out with kinky people in the first place even before I knew I wasn't quite the sex-repulsed asexual person I'd thought I was.

Those thoughts had no place here, though. I'd just brought Arlene out of an identity crisis. Rehashing mine would not help matters.

"Not really," Arlene murmured, "I just wanted..."

"You can just tell me, you know," I teased, "I swear I'm not gonna break."

One day, I'd figure out how to cram it into her head that I wasn't going to run in the opposite direction because she wanted sex. I knew that was what she was gathering the courage to say.

The thing was, I understood why she hesitated, and I even knew how to fix it. It was the execution that was stumping me—actually talking about everything I said and did in the video that had ended my career.

Yeah, no big deal.

"I know." Her voice pulled me back. Yeah, I usually had better control of my face muscles, but I couldn't help but frown. "Really."

There was laughter in her voice, a hint of mischief that drew me in.

Forgetting the open drawer I'd been inspecting, I stalked toward her. "Wanna say that again?"

Arlene giggled. It was stupidly sweet, and I hated the way it made me want to bottle

it all for myself. That was weird, and not a thing that happened. Ugh.

“I do admit sometimes I worry I’ll drive you away because I’m too horny all the time, or something, but that wasn’t why I wasn’t talking just now.”

I guessed that was as honest as I was going to get. Well, it was honest, period. There was a lot to unpack there—the whole thing about driving me away didn’t sit well with me—but I could be patient. Kind of.

“Fair enough,” I hummed. “You still haven’t answered my question though.”

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Arlene huffed. “You’re so impatient.”

I was aware of it. At least she picked something that was actually true—unlike Clay, who just called everyone dramatic for sport.

“Your point?” I teased either way.

It really was fun to get her all bothered, whether it was a sexual thing or not. Actually, I might enjoy it more when it wasn’t in the middle of sex and orgasms. I thought faster, and that meant I registered things more sharply, too.

Like the way heat spread across her cheeks, and how she tried to pout, but it didn’t really work out.

“Whatever,” she mumbled before meeting my gaze with hers. “But, to answer your question, I just wanted to feel close to you. It’s embarrassing to say, but I think it settles me, and... Yeah.”

Fuck.

Note to self, do not ask things when you’re not sure you’re ready to hear the answer.

“Come here.”

I expected confusion, but her face just glazed over as she obeyed.

Yeah, I could see how power could get to people’s heads.

“Good girl.”

THIRTEEN

Arlene

Truthfully, I didn't know how I managed to go to Claude. My knees felt as weak as they'd ever felt. What was walking, anyway? We might've just been less than two inches apart, but it seemed like more. Or maybe it was just the symbolism I hadn't been ready for. This was just... something new we were trying out. I might not be a relationship guru, but no one had told me it would feel this way.

And when they praised me? I suddenly understood all the videos, and all the Xena fanfics I'd shamefully read underneath the covers while I was growing up. Back then, I hadn't realized what a foundational experience that would be.

I didn't have a lot of time to wander in my head, though. Claude's hands were on me, gripping my waist over the corset—the one that had felt fine when Dylan tightened it, but all of a sudden now felt suffocating.

I needed out.

This time, the urgency settling in my belly was not a result of anxiety. I didn't feel out of air because I was on the verge of a panic attack.

I did need to feel closer to Claude, though. I just hadn't realized it was going to turn me into a live wire.

“Please,” I breathed out the word. The next thing I knew, their lips were on mine. I faltered backwards. They were guiding me to the bed in the middle of the room with so many details in red velvet that it made me regret I couldn't do a transatlantic

accent because it would totally fit the vibe. “Claude.”

“And I’m the impatient one.” They tutted playfully. “I think you should show me how you fuck yourself.”

“I should?” My lips parted, and my head tilted back.

I didn’t even know what they meant, or where the request had come from. I only knew there was little I’d say no to—and for most of those things, I felt safe in the knowledge that Claude wouldn’t ask them of me.

“You should.” Claude’s hands traced a line from my knees to my inner thighs, their fingers nimble and teasing, barely grazing the skin at times, and digging more purposefully at others. “You brought this upon yourself, really.”

I had?

“I did?”

Claude just hummed. There seemed to be a perpetual smirk etched on their face when it came to me. I liked it, in a strange turn of events. Or maybe it wasn’t so strange. I wouldn’t know, would I?

I didn’t even know what I was saying. Following trails of thoughts was hard when a fog seemed to cloud over everything.

“You’re the one who told me you enjoyed it, and I told you I was curious about it.”

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For a few seconds, I just stood still. To be fair, I'd told them many things. It was a result of my general awkwardness and the fact that I completely lost my marbles around them. I supposed it was good to know they didn't see the problem with it.

Oh.

Ooooh.

That could've clicked faster, sure.

My ass clenched. "You want me to...?"

"Yep." Claude tilted their head to the side—as they did. The movement was becoming so intrinsically associated with them in my head, it spoke to how often I'd seen them do it in the last week alone. "Unless you aren't comfortable?"

I swallowed. "I'm comfortable."

I'd only played with my cunts in front of one other person before, but I was comfortable. It was just... nerve-wracking, as everything seemed to be lately.

"Where do you want me?"

"You can be there." I cleared my throat. I had no idea how I was managing to push the words out—while sounding relatively sane, too. "Between my legs, I mean. Just, uh, if you can help me with the corset?"

A part of me was curious, felt hot all over, imagining fucking myself for Claude in the outfit. Another part wasn't sure I could do it with the pressure in my abdomen. Maybe another day, when I was more... confident.

"Sure." Claude shrugged. "Full disclaimer, though, I don't know how these go."

"It's fine." I snorted. "I don't, either."

"So... we're fucked," they said in their driest tone. "Fun."

It was all teasing, though. Claude scooted so that I could stand on my knees on the bed and turn around. They might not be as quick with it as Dylan had been, but they didn't flounder, either. I wasn't sure I would've managed if the roles were reversed. Well, I would've done it, but it would've taken longer.

My chest expanded the second the pressure of the corset was out of the way. I liked the way the corset shaped my body, but I didn't know how people managed to wear them on the regular. I'd rather stick to my dresses.

Claude was almost reverent as their fingers grabbed on the hem of it. They were only teasing, but my breath still caught. My body caught up before my brain did, too, lifting my hips up in the air for them.

Again, I was soon naked—well, almost, underwear notwithstanding—while Claude was fully clothed. Exposed, while they were a shielded fortress.

It was ridiculous, and made me a total simp, but it made me hot.

My cheeks heated as I let out a soft moan before I'd even touched myself—or Claude had.

“You really are horny all the time,” they said.

They were using my words from before. It was mean, I supposed, but it just had me writhing on the bed.

“You make me horny,” I protested.

I didn’t care if I wasn’t fully coherent, or if the tone of my words contradicted the urgency in my body.

“Get to work, then.” They winked, settling back until their ass met their ankles.

I nodded. I just needed a second, to close my eyes and breathe. This was fine. I wanted this—wanted much more than this. Claude wanted it, too. I knew they did, even though I couldn’t always tell how their want would manifest.

I trusted them to tell me, too, if I was getting it wrong somehow. If anyone was going to get something wrong, it would be me. That was just being realistic.

I unclasped my bra first. It was silly, but I always felt awkward playing with myself when I wasn’t completely naked. It felt more intimate, more meaningful, when there was nothing shielding me. I liked having my body looked at by a partner, too. There was something about it that elevated the experience for me.

Claude didn’t say anything, but there was a certain glint in their eyes. Approval. Or maybe I was projecting. I couldn’t say I quite cared. Whatever it was, it was still there when I pulled my matching undies out of the way.

I gently pressed a hand against my lower belly as I did so. I’d tucked before getting dressed, and there was a certain comfort in feeling the result of it.

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“You said you’ve never seen someone muff themselves, right?” I remembered to ask.

It wasn’t relevant, and it didn’t change anything, but a part of me demanded to know, to confirm. That part rejoiced in the knowledge that I could be their first one, to give them one experience they hadn’t gotten from anyone else.

In a way, it felt like balancing the scales.

Claude shook their head. “I’ve just read about it.”

I nodded. “I know it’s different for other women, but for me, it’s mostly about comfort, and... gender euphoria, I guess. I think of my inguinal canals as my cunts, so it’s like... I’m fucking my cunt, because I have one.”

“That makes sense.” Claude nodded. Something crossed through their face, but it was too quick for me to catch it, and I was too stimulated by everything else going on to stop and analyze it. “Can you come just from it?”

“Yeah.” My hips lifted off the sheets in response. I’d try to act more rational and less like I was a touch starved nymph, but Claude would’ve said something already if they cared about such things. It would take too much effort, anyway. “Well, I come my way. Same as I get hard my way.”

“That’s hot,” Claude offered before doubt could seep in. “It’s just using your fingers, right?”

“I think some people train themselves for more, but... yeah.” I swallowed. I could

hear my heart thumping against my ribcage. “I can’t do both at the same time, either. Well, I can, but it feels better to just focus on one.”

Claude wasn’t the first person I’d talked through something during sex. It felt like it, though. They were the first person who listened raptly, as if they had to absorb every piece of information. They weren’t missing a thing.

“You look so hot,” I breathed out the words, losing some of the self-awareness that sometimes kept me from saying them out loud.

Claude chuckled. “I do, huh?”

“Yeah.” I swallowed down the knot building in my throat. “I wanna fuck myself for you so bad. I want you so bad, too, and....”

I groaned.

My hand found the head of my clit, my fingers wrapping around it. I didn’t want to make myself come this fast, but the pressure kept building, and I didn’t know what else to do when every cell in my body was screaming for touch, and pleasure, and.... More.

I needed more.

“You can have me.” Claude’s words came out slow, calculated.

It made me frown, but it was hazy enough that I didn’t do or say anything. One second and some rustling later, their body was covering mine, not touching but almost. It sent a shiver down my spine. I struggled to meet their gaze, but I did regardless.

Their tongue teased my lips when I didn't lean forward to meet them right away. I moaned. I didn't have the words to call them off for being too impatient. Non-verbal sounds would have to do.

Claude just chuckled. But then they were kissing me, so it was okay.

The hand that wasn't playing with my clit moved to their hip. I didn't use pressure, but I still held them there. Claude sighed into the kiss, their lips ghosting over my mouth before darting down my jaw.

My neck.

My bare shoulders.

"I think there's a bit of a pleasure Domm in me," they murmured.

The term sounded mildly familiar. I didn't care enough to ask at this very moment. Pleasure anything sounded good to me.

"Good," I breathed.

"You'd think so, huh."

I didn't care that they were clearly teasing. I cared about the way they were quick to drive me wild with their mouth. That was about it.

"Didn't you want me to...?"

"Right, because I'm the one who begged to get off track." Claude smacked their lips together. "How do you feel about nipple clamps?"

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I squirmed. “What’s that have to do with anything?”

Claude leaned back before they spoke. They were playing with me, I knew, but I’d never been good at squashing my reactions.

“I saw a few pairs in the drawers, and it just came to mind because I was face to face with your tits,” they said easily.

I blinked. Sure, that was the most natural thing to tell someone.

“I could try, I guess.” I imagined there was pain involved, which made me shrink back, but I did like some roughness when I played with my nipples. “It’s a maybe.”

“I can work with that.”

Silence settled between us after that, only the sound of my hands against my skin and our breaths filling the room. There was eroticism in the talking, but there was another kind of erotic charge in the air when there were no words.

There were no distractions. Just skin, and sweat, and the musky scent of sex.

My finger trailed down easily to find the spot my skin opened up after tucking. It wasn’t visible, mostly a feeling. I remembered the first time I’d tried it after reading a fanzine about it. I’d never felt clumsier in my life. Now, fucking myself this way came as natural as breathing.

My body stiffened for a second when the tip of my finger breached in. I paused,

rejoicing in it, before I let out a deep breath. My eyelids partly shut, I felt as my body sank into the sheets before I kept going. I liked it more when I was slow, when I could savor every nerve sensation as I rubbed the inner walls gently.

“Fuck.” Claude broke the silence. It didn’t matter. “You’re getting so wet.”

I grunted. I liked that they adapted to my language so easily, without the need for big discussions about it.

“Yeah.” I bit on my lip until the pressure helped me think clearer. “Feels so good.”

It felt better when Claude was there, too, their fingers teasing my nipples. I stiffened, only for a second.

“Need more,” I breathed.

I tried to make eye contact, but I wasn’t sure I succeeded. Sometimes, fucking myself provided comfort, and warmth. Other times, it amped up everything and made me ten times needier for everything.

“What do you need?”

When they asked like that, it wasn’t just a question. It was a command. I knew it, deep in my gut. My toes curled.

“I don’t care, just... something. Nipple clamps, your mouth, a dildo, whatever. I’ll take it.”

I’d be so good at taking it, too—anything they needed or wanted from me.

I got that desperate. It wouldn’t be long until I was blubbering all of that out loud,

either. For now, though, I was too focused on the way the mattress dipped with their weight. “Hang on a second,” they said.

The irrational part of me wanted to complain. The most rational part of me knew it made sense that they needed to move to grab at least one—or two, I wouldn’t complain—of the two toys I’d mentioned.

“The dildos here are all larger than I like,” they admitted, “but there’s a smaller set of clamps I’d like you to try.”

“Okay.”

I’d just been thinking about how intimidating those sounded. Not anymore. I trusted Claude, as wild and irrational as it could be. Besides, they’d just said it was a smaller set, and they knew I had no experience with it.

“I actually enjoy nipple clamps,” they spoke as they rummaged through another drawer. What they were doing only clicked when I spotted them covering the silicone clamps with smaller, finger-sized condoms. “They make me burn all over in the best way.”

I’d remember that for another time.

Probably.

The bed dipped again under Claude’s weight. They settled next to me, close but not as close as I shamefully wanted them.

“Just let me know if you want them gone, no safe word needed.”

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“Did we have a safe word?”

The other day, we didn’t talk about safe words. After my research, I’d worried about it, and I texted them. They hadn’t answered for hours because they’d been shadowing another coworker or something for a meeting that never ended, which had been incredibly nerve-wracking. But then they’d said that we could talk safe words if we ever started playing heavier, but just asking to stop would be enough.

I agreed with them.

Yet...

Something about the way my brain was drowning in everything Claude felt like we’d hit that heavier play. I didn’t dare to say whether or not it was subspace, but it was definitely new and unexplored, and overwhelming in a titivating way.

“Red, yellow, green?” Claude suggested.

Maybe they also felt the turn I’d taken.

“Yeah.”

That was easy. I’d read about it, too.

“Good girl,” Claude drawled out the words. Their fingers teased my tits, circling and squeezing my nipples as they trailed there. I dug my heels into the mattress as my neck arched. “Breathe for me.”

It was hard, even before they'd done anything. I still pulled air in, though, still focused on their words even when there was too much to focus on as it was.

The silicone ends wrapped around my nipples soon after.

"I'm not going to tighten them too much this time." Claude hovered over me, lips ghosting over my skin. "But just keep in mind, taking them off is gonna feel at least ten times more intense than what I do to you now."

My mouth dried up. Claude's words should have instilled fear, but they just made me hornier. Needier.

I watched, transfixed, as they tinkered with the tiny wheel on each side. The pressure was there, but it was not what I was expecting. It felt like having my nipples squeezed by my fingers. It was nice.

Then again, their words were playing on loop in my head. At least ten times more intense. Trepidation filled me as I found myself unable to look away. The tiny nubs pounded against the tight hold.

"How does it feel?"

I grunted. "Good."

I couldn't give them more than a one-word answer. It was a good thing they didn't seem to be looking for more than that.

"I'm glad," they teased. "Can you take your finger out of that needy hole of yours?"

"Why?" Did I whine? Maybe.

I didn't know what to focus on, or why I should do it.

"Because you wanted me to suck you, and I'm not sure you can handle three things at once, gorgeous."

I panted.

I wanted to protest, but Claude was probably right. "I want to."

"I know," they said. Their tone was soothing. It had the same effect as the back of their fingers trailing down my side. "We can talk about training you for it another day."

Shit.

"Don't say that," I pleaded.

I wanted to last. Picturing those scenarios did not help stave off the building pleasure.

Their laughter didn't help, either.

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“So you don’t want to be the perfect slut for me?” Claude taunted as I pulled my finger out.

As with every hole, it always felt strange when it was suddenly empty. Some days, the emptiness pulled me into a mourning mood of sorts. Today, there was no time to mourn. Claude didn’t take any prisoners, didn’t tease around it. They just lapped at my clit until I had to focus hard on not thrusting my hips up into the air.

I didn’t notice right away, but I did when a sharpness like I hadn’t felt before pulled my focus back. Almost out of breath, I looked to see that they’d wrapped a finger around the chain connecting the two clamps together. Their eyes screamed wickedness when they stared up at me, giving a smaller, teasing tug.

“Again,” I breathed out the word—for reasons unbeknownst to me.

I thought pain would greet me, but it wasn’t quite pain. It was... fire, coursing up my veins and spreading throughout my entire body.

“Claude,” I warned. I didn’t know that I was going to last a lot more.

“You can let go with me,” they hummed, barely stopping the ministrations to my clit.

Their lips wrapped around the head, though, their cheeks hollowed out.

I felt that orgasm run through my entire body. I didn’t know what made me pass out—the orgasm itself, or Claude choosing that time to take off the clamps from my nipples.

Nothing had ever hurt so sharply, so physically. Yet, no pain had ever left such a feeling afterwards—a need to rejoice in it, to chase more of it.

FOURTEEN

Claude

“Do you really have to drop me off?”

“We both work tomorrow,” I reminded her, my voice softer than I’d ever admit as I tucked a few strands of dark hair behind her ear.

Truthfully, I didn’t want to leave her, either, let alone when she was still so dazed after whatever trip she’d gone on back at the club. I had so many questions about it, too, but after she’d come back to the land of the living, she’d just wanted to curl up by my side.

I hadn’t had the heart to do anything else but snuggle and praise her in an even softer voice than the one I was using now.

“I wanna see you more.”

“Good.” I didn’t know if it was Arlene talking or the needy sub she’d turned into back at the club. It should’ve been irrelevant, but something told me the distinction mattered. I wanted to honor it even when that meant not digging into what she really meant with that request. “I’ll walk inside with you, and I’ll text you first thing in the morning, okay? And you can call. Or text. Anytime.”

It was important that I told her that, and that she knew I meant it.

I did.

I'd read up on sub-drop enough to last me a lifetime over the last few days. I wanted to know about it if she struggled. Arlene was new to all of this, and while I assumed she'd done some research of her own, it still felt like my responsibility to make sure that she'd be okay.

I wanted it to be my responsibility.

Huh.

So I had a bit of Zaddy Domm in me, too? I guessed I was collecting types of Domms as if they were Pokémon. It would fit with the way I went about a million other things in life, so the revelation wasn't too shocking. It was just funny.

I'd have to text Arlene about it—tomorrow, after checking in that she wasn't feeling any worse for wear.

In hindsight, I shouldn't have suggested we go to a kink club during the week—for her first time, no less. In my defense, though, the weekdays were when the clubs were emptier. My main issue back then had been to plan for a day when she wouldn't be easily overwhelmed.

“Do you promise?”

Fuck, she sounded almost drunk. I'd given her plenty of water too, before we'd left the club with a promise to Clay that we didn't hate him and we'd be back sometime. They'd mostly been just words, but I would not say no to going back. I'd say Arlene needed to do it, too. If nothing else, she needed to explore that fully fledged sub in her more, and being in the club seemed to unleash something she usually clung on to tighter.

Or maybe it had just been muffing?

I had no problem making her finger herself every day if that was the case. Or fingering her too, after I felt more confident about it. Watching was hotter, anyway. It was really underrated, but that didn't change much for me.

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Claude

Please tell me you didn't snooze your alarm or something

Arlene

No, but I've been pretty groggy all morning

Sorry

Why is work a thing?? :(

Claude

You're supposed to be the one about hustling and corporate BS

Don't ask me

Arlene

PR is all about that BS too

Just saying

Claude

Fair enough

I just don't take it seriously enough

Ugh, I have a meeting as soon as I walk through the doors

But seriously, are you feeling all right?

Arlene

Just exhausted because I'm a baby and I'm not used to going to bed so late during the week

But yeah, I'm fine

Well, horny thinking about it, tbh

Claude

Did you still want to meet this weekend?

We can also do dinner at Randy's

Arlene

Yes, dinner, please

And weekend plans

But dinner first

Claude

A girl after my own heart

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That was all the texting we did for the rest of the day. I supposed she was busy at work. She'd mentioned that her father was putting more responsibility on her, so it would make sense.

I still didn't like it. I was... restless. There was a certain sense of security, and comfort, in the knowledge that I could give her what she wanted from my role as a Domm. There was also more insecurity, a need to have more defined lines around whatever it was that we were doing or building or...

Ugh.

I was so gone, it was ridiculous.

My head hurt now too, because I'd come to Randy's early after I'd run out of things to do around the house, and I'd run into Ray. I liked him, and he was great, but ever since he'd learned my family was from Québec, he just switched to French when I was around. It wasn't as if I'd suddenly forgotten my native language, but I hadn't really spoken it since I graduated from high school.

Arlene walked into the diner about five minutes later. I was going to flag her down, but she spotted me quickly. It was stupid, but a part of me wanted to say it was because she was tuned in to me already.

See the part about being too far gone? I needed to clear my head, stat. No one wanted a clingy person, Domm or not. I wasn't a clingy person.

Arlene looked good as she sat down in the booth. She was wearing a cute vintage

dress and a matching headband with sneakers. I guessed she had changed clothes after coming back from the office. She might tease me all she wanted about my biases against finance people, but sneakers were not business attire. She was the kind of person to dress up for work, too.

“Sorry I ordered already.” I realized belatedly the way her eyes tracked the half-finished plate of fries. “I ended up arriving here about... two hours ago, I think?”

“Oh.” Arlene’s eyes widened before her face settled on a relaxed smile. It suited her, even though it wasn’t as common as I would’ve liked. I liked to think I was bringing it out of her, and I liked how the thought made me feel. “How come?”

“Honestly?” I grimaced. Other people being vulnerable around me? That was fine. Me, being vulnerable around other people? Not so fine. “I was anxious as fuck.”

Arlene hadn’t expected me to say that. It was as clear as day in the way she froze. One of the servers walked by to get her order before she could say a word, though. I didn’t know if I was saved by the bell, or if it was the complete opposite. I couldn’t look away from her until the server left again and she had to figure out how to get back on topic.

“I’m anxious, too,” Arlene said before she licked her lips. “At the same time, I’ve never been as relaxed as I am today. I guess I’m still riding the aftermath of last night?”

“That’s good.”

“My... you know... are sore as fuck, though.”

I chuckled. It was cute that she didn’t want to say nipples out loud. The diner was getting crowded, I guessed, but although none of the patrons here would be

scandalized by overhearing something of a more sexual nature, I didn't tease her about it.

"And they will be for a few more days."

At least, that was my experience with clamps. It might be different for her. I got a feeling it wasn't going to be a problem either way. There was no way she wasn't the type of sub that got off on having physical reminders.

I was the type who got off on it, and I was no sub.

Arlene didn't answer right away, but she nibbled on her bottom lip as if she was debating the benefits of my words.

"Good to know."

"I bet," I teased.

I was sure there was some kind of script I was supposed to follow. A part of me was stressed that I didn't know for sure and already going through a list of people I could reach out to for advice. Another part of me was... settling. Arlene was fine. She was more relaxed than I'd ever seen her, soon sipping on a cherry flavored milkshake.

She looked gorgeous, too.

The world hadn't imploded because I'd given her a mind-blowing orgasm and pulled her into subspace hard. She hadn't said those words, and I wasn't sure if she was aware or if she'd had time to research and look into it, but that was what it had been. She'd been delirious with pleasure, and want, and all the things I cared more about than I'd first assumed.

I'd been delirious with it, just in a different way. All my focus had been on her in a way that allowed me to just feel. I hadn't had to worry about my body, to feel any type of way about it. It was just there to give her what she was begging for—I was there to give her that, to give her everything.

It should be scary, but it wasn't.

“I still want you to teach me how to bake,” I blurted out. “You’re not getting out of that.”

“Oh gosh.” Arlene groaned, heat creeping up her cheeks. “I’m probably the worst person to teach you. But yeah, okay.”

“Why would you be?”

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I'd eaten stuff she'd baked, and I'd listened to her go off for what felt like hours about everything baking when she stayed at my place. She knew her stuff.

"Because I turn into a mess around you?" Arlene's voice went a few octaves too high. "I mean, into an even bigger mess."

"Which makes it fun," I drawled. "I don't see the problem."

"Of course you don't."

I really didn't, but it was not worth debating over. No, I just winked at her instead. Then I flagged Zo so that she got me one of the new veggie burgers. I'd been snacking, but I'd promised dinner, and I was still starving. Ben had once joked I ate like a growing teenage boy.

I didn't care that I did.

"Seriously, though, I know we're probably going heavier on the D/s aspect of it than we'd first talked about? And I know we have to talk more about thatpart, but I don't want to lose everything else, or make this thing just about kink."

I hadn't realized it was a huge part of what had been plaguing me all day until the words were out of my mouth. There was no hiding away from that truth once it was in the open, though.

"Oh, no, I get that." Arlene nodded vigorously, her lips turned into a frown. "I know I can be... a lot, but I like all the... fluttery, messy sapphic feels when I'm baking for

you or when we're just talking about a show."

"Okay." I let go of the air I'd been holding until it stopped feeling like my chest was constricted by an invisible weight. "Good."

"It's not weird that we're talking about all these things, right?" Arlene wondered. "My roommate said it's a bit weird, but I don't think so. And, anyway, he's in a lowkey shitty relationship, so it's not like he's one to give out advice on anything, but..."

"I've been told kink dynamics tend to move faster when it comes to discussing this stuff," I said. "But if you want to slow down, it's cool."

I'd figure out a way to cope that didn't make me look too pathetic. Somehow. It couldn't be too hard. Right? People got into relationships—or situationships, or whatever they were called now—all the time, and they tended to get messy.

The fact that I couldn't see why our very new D/s dynamic could get messy was irrelevant. Sure, it could be wishful thinking, but...

Sue me, I liked wishful thinking.

"No, no." Arlene shook her head for extra emphasis. "Sorry, I guess Dylan got in my head."

"That's fine." It really was. "I haven't told Ben about last night, but I bet he's going to say the same."

Well, he wouldn't worry about whether or not I was moving too fast—that concept wouldn't even cross his mind. But he'd annoy me to no end. It was probably the reason I hadn't kept him as updated as I usually did. He tended to get over invested,

and he was loud about it.

I couldn't always handle his brand of loud, even if it made me a terrible friend. Then again, almost a decade of knowing him later, he still claimed I was his best friend outside of Julian. So, I guessed I wasn't so terrible?

Who knew.

"I've just realized that the Ben knows of my existence, sorry." So that was why she'd looked a bit frozen this time. "But anyway, yesterday was..."

"A lot." I nodded. I didn't want to derail the conversation to talk about Ben, or why she shouldn't idolize him that much. Well, she didn't, from what she'd told me. And I could understand the idea of him feeling intimidating. "Not in a bad way, obviously."

"No, not at all." Arlene swallowed, which told me I'd done well by clarifying. "It's super cliché, but I didn't really think things could feel so intense. Still wrapping my head around it."

"Yeah. Same." My intense and her intense were wildly different, but they were still real. I was still going through that mental list of people I could reach out to. "I want to keep exploring it. If it's okay with you."

"It's more than okay with me." Arlene sounded like she was out of breath, but she didn't take a second to blurt the words out.

I had to take it as a good sign. She was as much into this as I was. In her head, Arlene probably thought she was much more into it than I was, but that would be a problem for another day.

"I kind of feel like a teenager going through everything all over again," I admitted.

It didn't escape me that I was supposed to be the calm one here. Even forgetting that I was now taking on the role of a Domm, Arlene was the anxious sunshine that didn't know what to do with herself half of the time. I was supposed to be the soothing presence.

I was failing at it today.

"Yeah." Arlene giggled, seemingly unaware of my inner turmoil over my state of being. "It's like going through puberty for the third time."

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That was one way of putting it.

Actually, it was a way I really liked.

“When I started transitioning, they just talked about a second puberty,” I joked.

“Right?” Arlene laughed.

I really liked her laugh, dammit. It would be nice if she wasn’t laughing because I was an anxious mess, but I still wanted to make her laugh more.

“I’m definitely a pleasure Domm,” I groaned.

“Uh?” Arlene licked her lips.

I’d bet anything her mind had gone to last night, when I’d uttered those words for the first time.

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “I was just thinking mushy shit about wanting to make you laugh more.”

At least now she was blushing, and I could pretend to have everything under control.

My burger and Arlene’s sandwich arrived at the same time—before Arlene got that blush under wraps, too. The server, César, didn’t say anything, but he looked like he wanted to ask. He was a sweet kid—with a massive crush on one of the most senior servers, too. I didn’t blame him, to be fair. But that server was working today, too,

which meant César behaved more... demurely. It was that or putting his foot on his mouth. I'd witnessed some of his floundering a couple of times.

Some might find it cute, and I did feel bad for him, but... Yeah. It was probably for the best that he'd left it alone.

"You do this on purpose," Arlene grumbled as I was getting a better hold of the burger.

I hated when the avocado slices fell off the bun.

"I do what on purpose?"

"Getting me all flustered," she mumbled.

"I thought you liked being flustered."

If there was innuendo there, I would never admit to it.

FIFTEEN

Arlene

I whimpered. "Please stop that."

"I'm whisking the egg like you told me!"

"No, you're not." I huffed. "You're trying to beat it into submission, and that's just not..."

"Beat it into submission, huh?" Claude teased.

This was why I'd said I'd be a terrible teacher. They made me all jittery and flustered with just a pointed look. "Angles, Claude."

"So disrespectful," they had the nerve to say.

The audacity. I was trying here, dammit.

"You're infuriating."

"I am not." They even stuck their tongue out.

It was a new side of them I was only starting to see. Baking with me seemed to bring it forward extra hard, but Claude could be playful, and silly, and not think twice of it. In the meantime, I felt just as messy as I always did, but weirdly enough, not out of balance.

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I fit in their place, with their very lacking-in-everything kitchen and the TV they barely used.

It had been less than a month, and Dylan kept giving me weird looks whenever I brought up Claude's name—or whenever I looked a certain way because he caught me thinking about them, honestly. It didn't matter. For once, it really didn't. Being here, doing whatever I was doing with them, made sense.

“Just whisk properly, please.”

This was only our second “baking” date. The first one had ended up consisting of me doing everything while Claude watched. Maybe we should get back to that format. It felt safer, for everyone and everything involved.

“I wanna use my strap-on on you tonight,” Claude announced.

I squeaked, almost dropping the cup of water I'd just filled up. “And this is the best moment to let me know?”

“Obviously.” Claude shrugged. “I have a ribbed dildo I think you'll really like.”

I needed air. I seriously needed air.

I also needed them to stop teasing me, or...

Before I could string words together, Claude was there. They took the bowl from me and placed it on the counter, then they were walking me backwards until my ass

pressed against the sink.

“Breathe,” they reminded me.

I nodded. Right after, their lips were on me. I was getting more used to their brand of physical touch, more familiar with the way their relationship with touch worked. Claude had explained it better the other day, too. As they’d said the first night, they didn’t look at me and want to jump my bones, but they craved being close to me, and they craved pleasing me.

I knew there was more there—more that had to do with the video they weren’t ready to talk about yet. I could ignore it, though. It turned out that it was much easier to focus on the way I felt—and the way Claude made me feel—rather than what should or shouldn’t be when I settled into a... role.

To be honest, D/s was still strange to think about. I really hadn’t accounted for any of this when I dared to attend the munch at Randy’s. It had just been an experiment, something to do so that I could feel proud of myself for it later. I never thought I’d find myself with a Domm—or that I’d find one in a YouTuber I used to follow back in college.

A sigh escaped my lips as Claude’s hands gripped my waist tighter.

“I just wanna point out, you’re the one who said our relationship had to be more than sex.”

Claude nipped my jaw. “You’re very distracting.”

“Thank you?” My voice went higher, breathier.

It didn’t take much for Claude to take me there.

Subspace.

It was the one thing in kink I seemed to have grown excessively familiar with over the past few weeks. Claude teased that I was a natural. They once mentioned it took some subs a lot of training to go as deep as I did. I just ignored them. Even if it was the result of over-the-top hormones that didn't know how to chill, subspace just made sense to me.

It was safe, and quiet, but it was also one of the most exhilarating states of mind.

“We should finish up these muffins.”

“We’ve barely started,” I had enough presence of mind to point out.

Claude just shrugged, that smirk making a comeback to their face. “What I said.”

“Uh huh.”

Unlike Claude, their back already turned as they strode back to the kitchen island so they could keep whisking that egg—properly, this time—I needed a second to regroup.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

I rolled my eyes. Claude had just taken the muffins out of the oven. They seemed to be doing just fine, whereas I couldn’t stop thinking about what they’d said. The strapon, and the ribbed dildo, and the way their body felt when they pressed against me.

“Are we going to your room now?”

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Maybe I was exploring a side of me that took after them on the impatient front. I couldn't say I was sorry.

Claude laughed. "I suppose I shouldn't keep you waiting."

"No, you shouldn't."

Orgasm control was definitely not something I was good at—or anything that had to do with delayed gratification, really. It had never been my thing, and it wasn't going to start being my thing now.

"Who's the Domm here?"

I didn't bother answering, but I did follow their lead from earlier and just headed upstairs. For all they complained, Claude didn't hesitate to follow right after me. Being inside the room was not enough, though. They'd turned teasing me into a fine art, and not rushing through things was the best way to do it. They'd learned that one fast, too.

So, before I could turn around and try to decipher the expression in Claude's face, or drown in the want reflected in their blue eyes, I started disrobing.

I tried to, at least, Claude's hands on mine the second they realized what I was doing.

"I want you to try something new."

I panted. "What do you want?"

The truth was, I'd try pretty much anything they'd set their mind on.

"Take off your underwear and get on the bed. Dress stays on."

"Claude," I warned.

"I know you said you prefer being naked when you're touching yourself," they said. I breathed. I hadn't gone straight to assuming they hadn't been listening, but there was validation in hearing my words repeated back. "But this isn't masturbating. This is me fucking you, and I think you're going to be into how dirty it can feel when you're being fucked while fully clothed. Mostly."

Shit.

Well, when they put it like that.

I squirmed, my bottom lip trapped between my teeth. It was all Claude needed to see to know I was in whatever new plan of theirs this was.

I didn't want to do anything about it, but I shouldn't be this easy to read.

Probably.

Oh, well.

Claude made quick work of everything once I was how they wanted me on the bed. I tracked them as they grabbed lube, and a condom, and the ribbed dildo they'd taunted me with. They took off their pants then, quickly slipping on the strap. I was transfixed by the simple act. Something about it had every nerve ending in my body screaming with newfound need.

I thought that after they'd adjusted the strap in the right place, they'd be on me. Apparently, Claude had something else to grab from their nightstand.

My mouth dried up when I saw what it was—their wand. I'd used it on them more times since that first night I'd spent here. I was still intimidated by it.

“I should let you know what I'm planning, huh?”

“Uh... Yes?” I cleared my throat.

I hadn't meant it as a question, but my voice had tilted up of its own volition. Claude would have to deal because there wasn't a lot more I could do. It was either that or not saying anything at all while the knot in my throat grew.

“Gonna fuck you like I said, but I read somewhere your taint is super sensitive, so I wanna use my wand on it.”

“It is,” I moaned, my mouth parted.

It really was. I loved pressing the pads of my finger against that canal of smooth skin when I was on my own.

“Good.” Claude looked worryingly pleased with the confirmation. “So we're doing that.”

“Yeah.”

I’d love to say the opposite, but I really wanted to do it, too—even if Hitachi wands still looked intimidating. It couldn’t be more intense than nipple clamps, right? I just had to center myself. Preferably, I wouldn’t get distracted by Claude dripping half a bottle of lube down my crack, but... No such luck.

It was cold, too. I hissed. They’d done it on purpose, and I both hated and loved them for it. Realizing I was a slut for sensation play had both pros and cons, as it turned out. With a tease like Claude for a Domm, I saw more of the cons than the pros, but I just happened to be a slut for those too.

The thought had me squirming. I grabbed on to a fistful of sheets, letting my head rest to the side against the pillow.

“There’s something else,” Claude spoke at the same time as my body stiffened with the feel of the dildo against my entrance.

I breathed through it. Knowing Claude—or starting to—they could be talking about anything and everything.

“What is it?” I whined.

Another development was in learning that I could be whiny as fuck. I was still figuring out how I felt about it, or how far I could push it before it became too much—either for Claude, or, let’s face it, for me.

Claude leaned down against me, until their teeth grazed over my shoulder. It was a tease, but it was a silent command for my body to relax, too, to sink into that space where not much mattered.

“After I’m done with you, I want you to grab the wand, and I want you to keep me coming until I pass out from it.”

I gasped—well, I tried to; there wasn’t enough air in the room for me to fully manage it. “Okay.”

Okay might not be the most proper, but it was all I could come up with. It was a good thing Claude wasn’t one for protocol.

I wouldn’t make it long if I had to be all “Yes, Ser,” “No, Ser.” It was nothing personal, but I just couldn’t see myself doing it. I had to be formal enough with certain clients, all “Ma’am” this, and “Sir” that. It was hard enough to remember during my work hours.

I didn’t want to add that struggle outside of work, too.

“Where did you go to?”

Shit.

Claude chuckled, but embarrassment filled me. I didn’t know why I drifted in the middle of things sometimes. I didn’t like it, either.

“Sorry.”

I shifted my hips from side to side. Maybe I could entice them into... something. Forgetting that I was an absolute mess? That sounded about right. I knew Claude

didn't think of me that way, but being a mess was not something I could change.

I was lucky that some people found it charming—Claude amongst them, all complaints aside.

“Hmm,” Claude teased. Their finger circled my rim before going lower, brushing against my taint. I let out a low moan. I was also lucky that Claude was in even more of a given mood than usual. “You’re going to open up so well for me, aren’t you?”

I didn't need to answer, but I still grunted out a yes. It felt wrong to just stay there and take it. I wanted to get better at it—talking while all my senses were overloaded with Claude.

I'd read the forums about the dangers of subspace when it became a place that kept you from being able to check in with your Domm. I didn't want to make anything about us dangerous—as sappy as it could sound.

“I will,” I emphasized, “I will, Claude.”

“I know you will,” they teased. The tip of the dildo was back against my hole. Claude didn't breach me with it right away, but they tested the give in my skin. They added more pressure, more and more, until the head popped in. “That's right. Fuck, the sounds you make, gorgeous.”

I half-groaned, half-whined. Claude loved giving praise while they played with my body. It was hot, but it also left me not knowing what to say, and unable to hide. They were always extra crass, too—something else I was sure they did on purpose because their cursing left me more unsettled, made me more flustered.

“Please, please, please.” I chanted.

I needed to feel full, to be stretched wide for them. Claude seemed to be moving at a snail's pace. It was torturous. I moaned, whimpered, begged even if I was sure the words were unintelligible. I was beginning to understand that anticipation could feel heavier than any kind of play there was.

Claude's hand petted my side, softly. It was barely there, but I was acutely aware of it. I was always aware of everything with them. I couldn't not be. I wouldn't know where to start, if we were being perfectly honest.

"Patience," they drawled.

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I didn't bother answering. Just because we didn't have a dynamic where punishments and discipline were a thing didn't mean I wanted to try my luck.

They still held all the power.

I just whimpered and cried for more. Not even half of the ribbed dildo was inside of me, but the little bumps sent zings of electricity up my body every time they rubbed against my walls. It was not enough, though.

"I just have to get this going before I fuck you for real."

I panted. I had no idea what they were talking about, but I didn't have time to ponder. Two seconds later, a buzz I was increasingly familiar with filled the air. I inhaled, holding my breath, my body still.

Claude tutted.

It didn't change anything until it was clear that they weren't moving until I got my shit together.

A shiver ran down my spine as I let go of the tension. As intimidated as I was by their favorite toy, my need for them won out. I had to please them, to let them use my body however they wanted. I just had to. It had soon become my drug, the one thing that sent me into an ecstasy like no other.

Those thoughts didn't prepare me for the way a Hitachi wand would feel, though. I would've probably jumped, if Claude wasn't pinning me down—as if they'd known,

and they'd somehow predicted the way I'd react. It wouldn't surprise me. Claude had taken on the mission to play my body like an instrument they were a virtuoso of. They were succeeding, too.

"Claude, please," I groaned.

It was too much, all the nerve bundles that met there screaming and begging and crying, spreading the overwhelming sensation as far as they could reach until I wasn't sure I could hold myself up.

As it happened, it didn't matter. Claude had plans that didn't involve me on my knees. No, just as they found the perfect spot where the head of the wand reached all my sensitive spots, they impaled me on their dildo.

I screamed, falling forward. Claude followed easily, not slowing, or letting the wand slip. I bit on the pillow, and they bit on my shoulder.

My clit was squashed against the mattress, hard, in desperate need of friction, but unable to do anything about it—and I loved it, the heady feeling inundating everything that surrounded me.

"That's right," Claude whispered. "Ride it all for me, Arlene. Just ride it."

I cried out. The soothing tone as they spoke contradicted the way they were abusing my hole, all of me. I didn't want them to stop. They couldn't stop, not without breaking a part of me I wasn't aware of until recently.

Claude knew.

They knew everything. How else could they eclipse everything, to push every single button there was until I was dragged to that space where everything slowed down?

Everything lost meaning, but had more meaning at the same time, somehow. Perhaps the dichotomy of it was what drew me to it, what had me begging to stay there for as long as Claude would have me.

My vision stayed hazy, almost completely black, and I let out contented sighs in between the moans and whimpers and groans that slipped past my lips on their own.

That was, until Claude yanked me back. Their arm wrapped around my shoulders as they pulled me to my knees. My chest heaved up and down as I blinked back the haze.

“Remember what you have to do, gorgeous?”

As if I might’ve forgotten, Claude drew the wand higher. They must’ve upped the settings, too, the vibrations stronger and faster and more punishing.

I cried out. The new angle was too much, everywhere. Claude didn’t stop, though. They’d checked in on me more often at the beginning, but not since they realized what a slut for punishment I was, in their words. When they’d first said it out loud, I’d shrunk, feeling embarrassed. I wasn’t sure the words had fit, either, but as they explained punishment could have a unique meaning just for us...

It had made sense. Everything about what they did to my body made sense. I’d soon learned that it was better not to question it.

“Yes,” I rasped out the word.

I remembered. I just couldn’t hold on like this, even if I wanted to. Every fiber of my being screamed with the need to do as they wanted to, to please them the way they wanted to.

It turned out, I was only human. My body was not trained enough to sustain everything. Claude saw it before I could collapse on my own, pushing me with them until I could hold on to the sheets again.

“Good girl.” Their voice was ragged as they spoke against my skin. Shivers spread from where their lips ghosted it. I cried out. “That’s it. Just a little longer.”

That little longer felt like the longest time. It was torture, and a blessing, all rolled into one. Infernal hell mixed in with heavenly bliss. It rolled through every cell of my body until I couldn’t tell which way was up and which way was down.

I didn’t suppose it mattered much. It didn’t change anything.

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Claude was still in control of every inch of my body.

They knew what to do with it, too—not that I’d doubted it.

“Do you want to come?”

That was something new, too, something that had started when I admitted that I didn’t always come, or want to, that sometimes sex was about comfort and validating my body, and little else. It was about the mental aspects more than the physical ones. The physical aspect could detract from an experience, sometimes. Something about it had resonated with Claude that day.

They didn’t question it, either, when I shook my head. I just wanted to bask in the way my skin tingled with need, to vibrate with the need to be theirs.

And I wanted to go to them in an hour, or a few hours, completely desperate and at their mercy because I couldn’t hold everything inside anymore.

“Good girl,” Claude purred the words. “You’re so good for me. So fucking pliant and obedient and desperate to please.”

I really was. I’d stopped wondering what it meant for me, too. Well, I still did sometimes, when I was on my own, and I didn’t have anyone or anything to center me, to ground me.

It didn’t matter, though.

The vibrations stopped first.

My body jerked in response, in shock at the way the sudden absence felt. It almost felt like something had misfired, like an intrinsic part of me was missing. It didn't matter that I'd tried to run away from its intensity at one point.

The dildo pulled out next. I whimpered, biting on my lip. Its absence was more familiar, less shocking. I still mourned it, still shifted my hips around as if I could entice it back.

"That's it. It's okay."

I didn't know that it was. I didn't know that it mattered, but then Claude was pulling my sweaty hair off my face, and they were kissing down my neck. And then it really didn't matter. Only they did, only they managed to matter.

"I need..."

Air.

A second.

Them.

Too many things to put into words, to make sense of.

"I know," Claude breathed.

I chose to believe that they really did.

SIXTEEN

Claude

“These muffins are so fucking good.”

I hadn't even known mint chocolate muffins were a thing, but they apparently were. Arlene had looked at me so funny that first day she'd mentioned one of her flavor combinations, I didn't dare to question them again. At the end of the day, it didn't really matter.

My stomach was happy, so I was happy to let Arlene run around the kitchen talking about things that were supposedly obvious but really were anything but.

“The mint tea makes all the difference.”

“Wait, what?”

I frowned. I thought it would just be chocolate and mint extract and food coloring. Not the healthiest, but I wasn't one to complain about that stuff. Since when could muffins have tea in them?

Oops.

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Arlene was doing that face again, but I bet if I texted Ben, he'd be shocked, too. No sane person expected tea in their muffins. I would not be convinced otherwise.

"I do an extra strong mint tea, with about 30 bags, reduce it, and I add it to the batter of the muffins," Arlene explained. At least she wasn't teasing about it. She tried to every now and then, and it just didn't work. We had a system here. I teased, and she blushed. The system worked. "I actually discovered it because I'd run out of mint extract one day, but there was plenty of mint tea in one of the cabinets for some reason? I think Dylan was trying to do some kind of cleansing diet or something. He went through a phase. Anyway, I experimented, and it turns out that they taste much better this way."

I could not compare, but these muffins tasted amazing, so I accepted it as truth and kept enjoying the treat.

Arlene's roommate came back down from his room as I was wiping the breadcrumbs into one of the napkins she'd procured earlier. It reminded me I needed napkins for my place. Maybe I could get some reusable ones. I'd have to look into it.

"Hey, Dylan." I nodded in greeting. "I'm not sharing."

"Yes, you are." Arlene shook her head.

I winked.

I wasn't sure I'd won him over completely after just hanging out with him a couple of times on his way out of the place they shared. He smiled at me and stopped to give

me what I guessed he thought of as a playful shove, though. It was progress.

Rome wasn't built in one day, and all that.

“Whatever.”

Dylan rolled his eyes, but he sat down to eat one of the muffins. I guessed he wasn't in a hurry to leave this time.

He moaned around the first bite he took, too. It reminded me of Ben. Gosh, both of them could be so over the top—Dylan when he was in the right mood; Ben, all of the fucking time.

“Did you see the new Zelda game that's coming out tomorrow?” Dylan asked.

For a second, I thought he was asking Arlene, which piqued my interest—we'd talked hobbies, and she'd said nothing about gaming.

Oh, but I had. I guessed Arlene had told him.

“Yeah, I preordered it ages ago.” I nodded. I'd been watching every early review I could find, too. The ones that weren't made by incels, at least. So many incels in gaming spaces. “Are you getting it, too?”

“Duh. I've been playing the last one non-stop this week to prepare.”

So that launched us into a talk I wasn't really expecting to have with the most ambivalent person toward me I'd ever encountered.

I wasn't complaining, but it was something I noticed. How could I not?

Arlene seemed way too pleased with herself from the counter. She was pretending to clean up the area of the kitchen where she'd dropped a bunch of flour—and unfairly blamed me for it—but I saw through her. She'd orchestrated this.

I mean, I couldn't be upset by it. We didn't talk much about him, but it was getting annoying—knowing that there was someone close to Arlene who had decided I was not good enough, or whatever it was. I didn't think delving into figuring out why it was exactly that they'd decided to make me the enemy would help.

It was much better for everyone to just go with the flow and accept this Zelda-shaped olive branch—Master Sword?

I never had anyone to talk about it, anyway, so it would be cool if I befriended Dylan.

Arlene had mentioned something about a shitty boyfriend, too. I had a few things to say about it, and I couldn't until we were close enough to not make it weird.

I breathed out when Dylan eventually left, though. I really had nothing against him—not even when he was fully stuck into the “we don't like Claude” club—but I'd come here on a mission.

Arlene had wanted to meet yesterday and spend the entire weekend together, but I'd had plans. By plans, I meant I spent all afternoon drinking way too many lemonades with Gay while she helped me through... stuff. I'd postponed it long enough, but I'd needed someone who actually knew what it was like to set my head on straight.

She was more than happy to do it. Probably way happier than she should've been, too.

It was a good thing that it wasn't our first time talking, or I wasn't sure I would've been too thrilled for a repeat.

The point was, she'd helped me come up with a plan of action, but that plan of action involved Arlene and I having the place for ourselves.

“Hey, let me go to the bathroom real quick, and I'll meet you in your room.”

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Arlene watched me for a second, her pupils dilated. She tried to hide the way my words affected her, but it was no use. We both knew it, but it didn't stop her from leaning back against the counter as if she could play the unaffected role easily.

“Romance really is dead these days.”

I snorted. It was a good thing she hadn't timed that delivery while I was drinking. “You really like to make things harder for yourself.”

I had no plans to make anything harder for her—not today, at least—but she didn't need to know it. And hearing those words had her gasping and spluttering, which was always fun to accomplish.

“That is so unfair! I've done nothing.”

“Sure you haven't.” I blew her a kiss before I pushed my ass off the stool. “Just meet me in your room, okay? I swear I won't be mean.”

I really wouldn't be. Today was more about me—in a convoluted way—than it was about her, but I needed a second to myself before I could set everything in motion. I didn't think I could be faulted too much for it.

“You always say that,” I heard her grumble.

I still heard her footsteps up the stairs, though, so I didn't worry too much. Maybe we could talk about her newfound inner brat some other day. Or later today, if I didn't end up as emotionally exhausted as I feared I would. Preparing for all scenarios was

important. Gay had drilled that into me.

Well, I already knew as much, but she had a way with words. It had to be the civil rights lawyer in her. I was low-key scared for her subs, not that Cin looked like someone who would struggle to push back.

I found Arlene in the room as I'd asked her. She was wearing the same big sweatshirt she'd had on when she greeted me by the door and was just lounging against the headboard of her bed. That worked with me, so I just sat cross legged beside her. As uncomfortable as it usually made me, it was important that they saw me this one time.

"Is everything okay?" Arlene sat up, a frown settling between her brows. "You look like you're about to be sick."

Fuck.

Okay, so I didn't have my best game face on. I shook my head, trying to shake the nerves out as well.

"No, I'm fine." My fingers found hers. She'd gotten a manicure a couple of days ago after going in circles about it for way too long. It had reached the point where I was about to send her the money for it. Who knew financial advisors could be so stingy and anxious about their finances? "I've just been thinking about things, and since I can't post them online anymore, I figured you were the next best thing."

Arlene rolled her eyes. The thing was, when she rolled her eyes, she did it in a way that read as... fond. It made me warm inside. She followed it up with a soft chuckle.

"You can be such an idiot."

"Hey!" I gasped. "You're supposed to be the nice one here."

“And you’re avoiding the subject you brought up to begin with,” Arlene pointed out.

Sometimes I hated that she could be as observant as I was. It was an awful trait to share with someone. Did not recommend.

“Okay, okay.” I pretended to huff, but there was no heat to it. “In short, I want you to see me.”

The phrasing made Arlene frown. I hadn’t expected anything less. “I… don’t see you?”

“I mean, you do.” She saw more than most people who hadn’t been in my life for years now, and more than she would say out loud.

I knew that much. It didn’t deter me the way it should have.

Actions spoke louder than words, though, so instead of talking myself in circles like I knew I could do when I didn’t feel in complete control, I sprang into action.

Arlene stood still as I grabbed my oversized button-up and pulled it over my head. It draped over the floor—I might’ve yanked it with more force than necessary—but I didn’t care. I could ask Arlene to let me run a quick load of laundry later, or I could borrow some of her clothes. It worked either way.

Anyway.

I supposed she was waiting for me to say something, but I wanted to get the clothes out of the way first—before I lost all courage to do it. I’d hate myself so hard if that happened.

My heart sped up as I kneeled there, in front of her, completely exposed. It wasn’t

like it usually was, though. I didn't feel sick, or the urge to hide and cover up and keep my body away from anyone's eyes.

It helped that Arlene kept her gaze on me for the most part. She wasn't making it weird or going into that headspace where lust was the only thing that existed.

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“You haven’t seen this part of me.”

Arlene’s throat bobbed. “You know I don’t care about that.”

“I know.” I nodded. We wouldn’t be here if I didn’t believe it with every fiber of my heart. “But I think it’s really important for me to do this.”

“Okay,” she agreed, “I understand.”

They were words that meant nothing, but they meant everything at the same time. I pulled up some much-needed air before I continued.

“This goes back to the cursed video we don’t talk about.”

“Please tell me you’re not going to start singing the Encanto song.” Arlene blurted out before she caught herself, heat pooling up her cheeks. “I mean, you can if it’s part of your process or something, but...”

I scoffed. “Do you have anything to say about my singing voice, gorgeous?”

I’d never claimed to be a singer. I’d never attempted to be one, either. I was the first one to admit taking me to a karaoke bar was the worst thing you could do. It didn’t mean I wouldn’t enjoy teasing her about it, though.

All was fair in love and war or whatever.

“No.” She gulped. “Please continue.”

I grinned. The short-lived banter had given me what I'd needed—the breathing room to forget what I was doing, or what state I was in.

It was easy to continue when I wasn't hyper-aware of the air brushing against my skin.

“There are many things I did wrong when I posted that video,” I started. I'd already said that, but it bore repeating. “I was getting to a point where I felt stuck, and... stagnant. I wasn't growing. Everyone just saw me as Ben's sidekick, I was getting less and less offers from companies to place their products...”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair.

“I'm not trying to excuse it, because I should've one hundred percent known better, but back then, I was just burned out, and hyper-focused on numbers, and going viral, and... Yeah.”

“That makes sense.”

I supposed it did. My therapist had insisted for the longest time on me having more grace for myself or something along those lines. Needless to say, I was still working on it.

“I shouldn't have used a clickbait title. I shouldn't have kept up the clickbait shit for the first five minutes of that video.” I'd counted it, back then. “I grabbed the community that had supported me from the start, and I threw their support under the bus, regardless of what my intention had been. There's no excuse for it.

“The content, though... After those five minutes, it was all true. It was the most honest thing I'd ever posted online. Hell, not even Ben knew a thing about it. He learned about it when he watched the video live along with everyone else.”

Arlene grimaced. “You did sound sincere, once you sat down.”

I nodded. I remembered walking all over the house when I was recording it, trying to find the perfect angle, the perfect rhythm to keep people engaged.

“I’m still asexual. Maybe gray-sexual, if we’re super technical about it, but I stopped worrying about that exact distinction a while ago.”

“Right.”

“But, figuring out I was not sex-repulsed? That was... the biggest mindfuck I’d gone through in... forever.” I snorted, aware the irony was lost on anyone but me. “No, seriously, figuring out I was non-binary was easier than that shit. I’d proudly bought a million ace flags and screamed it in everyone’s face from the second I hit puberty. No hesitation. In a way, I was asexual first and non-binary second.”

I didn’t want to have to digress into the way gender and sexual orientation would always be linked in my head. I’d had to do it with way more people than I dared to count. Thankfully, though, Arlene seemed to be aware of that line of thought, or she just didn’t care, or she somehow understood what I was saying. Whatever it was, I’d take it.

“I ignored it for so long. I mean, I was an educator on all things non-binary and ace. It felt embarrassing to admit, even to myself, that I’d missed the fact that I had so much gender dysphoria it was blocking everything else.” I snorted. “Still working through that with my therapist.”

“Sounds really tough.” Of course, Arlene ignored my attempt to make a joke.

Classic.

So unfair, too.

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“Anyway.” I cleared my throat. “So you clocked how I was on T?”

It was low-dose, but she’d mentioned something one day after she’d watched me inject myself. She’d noticed my voice was lower, and my jaw a bit more angular, that first day we met.

“Yeah?”

“I started taking it back in LA,” I said. “And the longer I was on it, the more I realized... Shit, sex might not be so bad after all. I caught myself looking at people, and yeah, I know T can affect your libido especially when you start, but...”

Arlene brought her knees up to her chest, resting her face there. “It felt like more than good ol’ libido?”

“Yeah.” I chuckled. “I mean, for all I know, it’s all a result of being on T, truthfully, but the fact is... The easier I found it to look at myself in the mirror, the easier I found it to look at other people. But more than that, I started being actually interested in sex.”

Arlene hummed. It was for the best that she was choosing to not let me just talk with no input whatsoever. I could do it, but I could feel the discomfort creeping in the longer I went without any kind of interruption.

“I think I relate to that,” she said. “Well, maybe not in the same way, but before I came to terms with being a woman, the idea of being in a relationship just icked me out.”

Huh. No, I supposed it wasn't quite the same, but it still took more of that weight off my shoulders.

“Yeah, so... It was kind of a dark era.” I sighed. “And, again, it doesn't mean that I'm the most interested or sex-driven person out there, even when it seems like I'm fucking you all the time, but... It's a part of me I had to discover and figure out and kind of accept, too.”

Arlene nodded. She leaned forward—not to touch me, but to be closer. I didn't mind it. Gay's words resonated in my head: it was important that Domms were vulnerable too, and it was important that Arlene understood every part of me. Moreover, it was important that I didn't walk around with all this weight on my shoulders or all the unanswered questions and imagined scenarios that were only hindering what we were building.

“It's what you meant when we talked about labels, isn't it?”

My eyes widened. Yes, I'd noted she could be as observant as I was, but I still hadn't expected her to remember or make the connection.

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat. “I'd built my entire identity around being ace, and yucking at people when they talked about anything sex, and it was hard to... let go of it. Well, some of it. I still call out Ben when he tries to tell me stuff.”

He just didn't understand the concept of TMI. Besides, he was like my annoying little brother. I was glad that he was enjoying his life with Julian, but I didn't need to picture it so vividly, thank you very much.

“That makes sense.” Arlene chuckled. “I struggle when Dylan goes TMI, too.”

I groaned. “We can never let them meet.”

There was no way in hell that Ben would leave LA unless he was invited to some sort of fancy event somewhere. Still, I was not risking it.

“Agreed.” Arlene grinned, shifting from one ass cheek to another. “Can I ask a question, though? It might be very obvious.”

“Sure.” I ignored the way my heart started picking up speed, or the way my mouth dried up.

This was Arlene. I trusted her.

“So, I understand everything about the viral video, and I appreciate so much that you’re opening up about it and let me... see, I guess? Like, it means a lot to me, and I get how hard talking about it must be.” She took a deep breath. I had to pretend it didn’t skyrocket my already frazzled nerves. It was fine. It would be fine. “But why today? And why... the lack of clothes?”

Right. I hadn’t tackled that part yet.

“Yeah, that’s mostly for my benefit, too. I mean, to be fair, telling you about the whole thing is, to be honest.”

Arlene tilted her head to the side. It wasn’t a gesture she did often, but it was cute when she did. Sue me.

“I was talking with Cin’s Domme the other day.”

Now that I thought about it, I wasn’t sure that Arlene had met Gay, or knew about Cin’s dynamics. We’d gone to one more munch, but Arlene was happier to stay at home baking, or indulging in my addiction to cheese fries, so I didn’t push her too much.

Should I?

I guessed I had something else to pester Gay with when I ran into her next. It was a good thing she didn't mind me doing it.

“Okay?”

Right. I'd gotten distracted.

Ugh.

I had to shake it off, somehow. Why was I back to being nervous? I was all over the place, and I didn't like it. At all. I didn't know how other people did it, but I couldn't deal.

"We were talking about how..." I licked my lips. That was not a good way to start. Well, I supposed it could be, but I was struggling here, dammit. "So, I've never had the best relationship with my body. I mean, getting top surgery helped, and being on T helps as well. It makes me more comfortable to present as fem and to experiment with clothes and makeup and everything else."

"Right."

"And, right now, I'm mostly neutral?" I pursed my lips. Neutral wasn't quite the right word, but I was at an okay place with it. Yeah, neutral might be accurate. "I'm still not comfortable with touching myself in certain ways, but I mostly see it as a vessel, like... It's there to keep me together."

"Yeah."

"But I guess I realized that... Well, it's two things, really." I really hated looking this vulnerable. I'd have to come up with something to do to her later to get us back on track. "One, I think a part of me needed to see that you... respected it? Which, fuck, it sounds awful, but?—"

“Relax.” Arlene smiled as she offered her hand. Goosebumps rose up my arms, but I pushed through the sensation, intertwining my fingers with hers. I’d started to keep track of all the tiny scars around her fingers from cutting herself while in the kitchen. If she ever got tired of dealing with the finance world, she could try working at a bakery or a restaurant or something. Her hands were proof enough of all her experience. “I get it. I’d never touch you without you telling me so, and you don’t have to be comfortable with absolutely every aspect of yourself to be okay or happy.”

I nodded. It wasn’t the first time I noticed, but at times, I felt like Arlene knew more about gender than I did, like I could learn from her.

It didn’t bother me.

If anything, it was another reason I liked her.

“Yeah.” It was true, anyway. “The second reason was, even if I don’t want to be naked during sex a lot, or... during anything else, really... I don’t want to feel like I’m keeping something from you, even if it’s silly, because it was building up in my head to this huge thing, and... Basically, I think that if I let it fester, it would kind of take me back to that place where I wasn’t as neutral or okay with my body, so... Yeah.”

I sat a bit straighter then, my face determined. This was about reclaiming strength, too, about my right to be in my body. Arlene’s face softened, her eyes brimming with adoration.

“Gosh, is it too soon to say I love you?” she blurted out, a hint of pink rising to her cheeks. “Because I kind of do.”

Somehow, I managed to smirk and keep my posture. At the same time, my knees wobbled, all air out of my lungs. “I mean, we’ve been seeing each other for three

months now. I'm shocked we've lasted this long, if anything."

Everything else had moved so fast, but the words... It hadn't felt as important, as urgent, as everything else.

Arlene chuckled, then stopped. "We?"

I grinned. The poor woman stared at me with doe eyes. "I love you, gorgeous."

I thought she'd go on overdrive, but she just breathed out, that relaxed smile etched on her face. "Can you kiss me, then?"

"On it." One day, Arlene would realize kissing her was not a hardship at all.

Until then, I was happy to tease her about it.

Epilogue

ARLENE

"You know, you say you love me, but this is the meanest thing you could possibly do."

Claude laughed. They laughed. I was struggling, dammit. It was not funny.

"You said you were in when I told you what the plan was."

"Well, yeah." I pouted. "But I hadn't thought..."

Claude nipped my jaw. It got me to stop talking, which was what they wanted, I supposed. "We can leave it for another day. Just say the word."

“No, I...” I licked my lips. I was overstimulated and had too much energy coursing through my body I didn’t know what to do with. I knew I didn’t want to leave anything for another day. I just needed some kind of outlet. “I want it.”

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“Why all the complaining, then?” Claude rolled their eyes playfully.

“You can be mean and still make me want something.” I huffed.

I thought it was obvious, but maybe not.

Claude just laughed again, but they grabbed my hand, and we kept walking toward their place. I’d told them we should’ve just gone there in the first place, but Claude had wanted to drop by Randy’s. They hadn’t seen Avery and Myles in a while and had grudgingly admitted to missing them. I found it sweet, even if the reason they gave the outside world was just that they needed to feed their cheese fries addiction.

I so wanted to get the recipe for those from one of the cooks, but I’d soon come to realize that Randy’s was Claude’s space more than it was mine. They knew everyone, and they recharged there. It was their hub. Their new platform, in a way, now that YouTube wasn’t an option they could or even wanted to grow.

“I cannot believe I just FaceTimed with a famous YouTuber while at a local diner,” I said.

I was just teasing. Ben was nice—a bit more tame than he was in front of the camera from what I remembered, but not by much. He had a lot of dirt on Claude, which had quickly turned into the most interesting part about him.

“You two can’t conspire against me,” they protested.

They’d said the same thing while we were talking.

I giggled. “Or what?”

The playfulness was a relatively new development I was only starting to grow more comfortable with. It was our thing—Claude’s and mine. That made it better.

“Oh, I’ll think of something.”

I shivered. The playfulness was not gone, but it was shoved to the background in favor of... lust. Claude would think of something, something that would most likely have me writhing beneath them while I didn’t know which way was up.

It was my favorite thing, but that wasn’t enough for me to admit as much out loud.

Claude questioned it at times, but I really couldn’t have picked a better partner to explore D/s with, or whatever we were doing. All the protocol and formalisms felt wrong whenever we tried to incorporate something. The way power shifted between us like a current keeping us together was real, though. I couldn’t ignore it if I wanted—and I didn’t want to.

“Besides, I’ll remind you it was your idea not to grab an Uber.”

“Well, you don’t live that far from Randy’s,” I grumbled, “and you’re the one who said I should help you set up a budget for yourself.”

I’d been way too excited about it when Claude texted me the other week. Probably way more excited than they’d thought I’d be.

I liked budgets—not as much as I liked baking, or submitting, apparently, but they were the... third best thing. Well, fourth. Claude had soon claimed a spot among the top three best things going on for me.

“Yeah, yeah.” Claude pouted. “Whatever.”

I laughed.

These past few months were giving me lots of these moments. I liked them way too much; it was difficult to put into words. I liked the security I found in Claude, and I liked how easy it was for me to breathe around them.

It was still scary—but it was ours, even when Claude grumbled about how they’d never gone to Randy’s with the intention of flirting with anyone.

To be fair, they hadn’t quite flirted, but... I hadn’t always had the highest standards, and I was easily taken by people.

I was aware of it. In this case, though, it had worked in my favor.

“Give me your hands.”

I squirmed. Instead of just telling me where and how they wanted me, Claude had taken care of all of it. They’d gotten rid of my clothes, and they’d positioned me, spread eagled, on the bed.

The fact that they were now including me had me hitching my breath. “You’re not going to just grab them?”

“I can’t do everything, gorgeous,” Claude drawled. I couldn’t see their face from this angle, but I could picture their smirk. “What kind of precedent would that set?”

“You tell me.” I shrugged.

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Personally, I was fine with letting them lead, but I knew what they meant. I supposed it was another reason why high protocols were not a thing that worked for us. As much as I was happy with letting them lead, I couldn't just give up every ounce of control. I supposed it was the same Claude went through—they thrived with that control, but all of it would become too much fast.

I got it.

What we had worked, and that was what I focused on as I lifted my arm off the bed. Claude grabbed a pair of handcuffs covered in black fuzz.

“I know leather ones are better, but I couldn't find any on short notice that weren't super bulky, so you just tell me if it bothers you at any point.”

I held my breath only to let it out slowly. “Yeah. That's fine.”

I still grew tense as the click of metal gave proof that I was secured to the head of the bed. My right hand came next. Claude was moving around, nudging my legs apart to shackle my ankles to the feet of the bed.

“Are all these really necessary?” I wasn't scared to be tied up, per se, but it was something new. I needed a second to get used to the helplessness that came when I tried to give a tug to my restraints and they barely budged.

“Keeping in mind how much you love to wiggle around?” Claude raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, they are.”

If it was something else, they would've checked in, but we'd talked about it last night, about what I needed if I started freaking out or posed questions.

I let my eyes drift closed. Knowing that there was a script, and that Claude was following the script as we'd established, took some of the tension off my body.

It was okay.

And I did want this.

"I don't wiggle around that much."

I totally did. I just hadn't quite let go of feeling somewhat self-conscious about it yet. Claude just said it was cute—or amusing—when I brought it up. It was no use. They were the most biased person out there for anything that had to do with me.

They also hated it when I mentioned it because a part of them would always pretend to be a grump even though they totally weren't. Whatever. It made me feel warm inside. It was a reminder that Claude really loved me when stress got to me because of work or anything else.

My chest heaved up and down. I knew why they were doing it, but Claude was taking way too long preparing the candles. I liked that they cared, and that they put care into what they were doing, but at this point, there was no way a part of it wasn't Claude building up my anticipation and being the tease they were.

"Claude..." I bit on my lip before I let out more words than absolutely needed.

Begging this early would only encourage Claude more. I'd learned as much.

"What is it?" They grinned as they looked over at me.

I squirmed. Claude quirked an eyebrow. I knew what they were thinking. I'd just told them I didn't wiggle a lot.

Whatever. What was a girl supposed to do when she was splayed naked on a bed, shackled to it, and their Domm was leisurely playing around with a few paraffin waxes?

Given the circumstances, I'd say I was behaving better than anyone could expect.

"Maybe hurry up?"

"So impatient." Claude pretended to look up in exasperation. Their poker face wasn't as good as they liked to think it was. "You know I tried it on the inside of my wrist the other day, but did you want me to do it on yours before I start?"

I debated over it. In the end, no more than two seconds later, I shook my head. I appreciated the question—it helped me slip into the passenger seat and let Claude take over. At the end of the day, though, a big part of what drew me to this was the trepidation, the buildup while imagining how something would feel versus how it actually felt.

"Okay." Claude got on the bed, standing on their haunches between my legs. "And you remember your safe word, yes?"

"We just use red and yellow, of course I remember."

Well, I mostly used yellow, sometimes when I was too overwhelmed and needed a second because too many things were happening at once. Or when I couldn't take the teasing pace Claude set any longer.

I really wasn't good at delayed gratification. It was a problem I should probably look

more into, but the truth was, for once, I didn't care that much.

I could be selfish about my pleasure if I wanted.

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“Don’t give me sass,” Claude warned.

The hand that wasn’t holding the candle rested on my inner thigh. It should’ve put me on edge, but it felt like a balm instead, like coming home.

“Sorry.”

I wasn’t sorry. I knew it, and Claude knew it. They didn’t tease me about it this time, though.

Turned out, I couldn’t always be on my best behavior.

“Talk me through it, okay? Tell me how it feels.”

“Okay.”

I hated and loved when Claude gave that command. I hadn’t been sure the first time they brought it up. In my head, talking about it meant not being able to fall into subspace, where I could let go of everything that kept me in knots and anchored to the ground. Talking, though? Forcing the words out actually elevated every single sensation to a level I hadn’t thought possible.

The first drop of wax fell right above my hip bone. I gasped, my hips lifting up the bed. It took me a second or two before I could start processing the way it felt. It hadn’t hurt, exactly. I wouldn’t even call it a sting, but it burned, the sensation so localized and short lived I didn’t know if I should be disappointed or relieved.

“I’m not hearing any words.”

If I’d been able to, I would’ve glared. As it turned out, I didn’t have it in my repertoire. Instead, I bit my lip before I started moaning again. Claude said I was loud, and I agreed with them.

“It’s...” I breathed, my eyes darting around the room as if the words were going to be written on the wall. “Warm. More than warm. It’s intense and comforting all at once.”

Claude hummed. That seemed to be enough for them. This time, when they turned the candle to a 45-degree angle again, they let more than a drop drip, creating a pattern next to the first one. Still over my hipbone, but getting closer to the center. It felt warmer the closer it got to there, more intense. This time, I didn’t have to worry about it.

I glanced down. “Is that supposed to be a heart?”

“Shut up.” Claude huffed. “I’m trying here.”

I giggled. They brought it out of me. “I mean, if you wanna switch places...”

“Keep talking, and I won’t be so nice.”

They were stupidly nice every single time, but I smacked my lips together and looked away. “Yes, Claude.”

“Cute,” they snorted.

I managed to stay still while they decorated my other hipbone—no attempts at drawing hearts this time. It was when they let a drop drip over the underside of my

clit that I hissed.

“Words, gorgeous,” they teased and reminded all at once.

“It...” I writhed against the shackles for a moment, the heat making me sink back into the bed and get away from it at the same time. Tears sprang to my eyes for some reason. I didn’t know why. “It feels so intense, so... hot. Literally.”

Claude chuckled.

“I bet.” They shifted on the bed, too, but I couldn’t look to see what they were doing. I needed a second before losing it for reasons that went far beyond my comprehension. “Do you want more?”

My breath hitched.

I didn’t know.

“Yes.”

One development I wasn’t a big fan of was this thing I did lately where I didn’t have a filter—around Claude, at least. I supposed I’d never had much of one around them, but this was different. This was self-sabotage of the highest order.

Claude leaned down. I didn’t have to focus my gaze on them to know. I’d recognize their weight hovering over me any time.

It sent a shiver up my spine.

“Look at me.”

I did. There was no question that I would. “Yeah?”

“You look amazing like this,” they breathed the words against my cheeks, their lips ghosting against the skin. “I love it when you’re helpless and reliant on me. But I love it even more when you’re working on instinct, asking and taking what your body needs.”

I snorted. “I don’t know what my body needs.”

“It needs me, of course.” Claude winked. Their teeth nipped the shell of my ear. They always moved too fast, as if there was a race to cover as many parts of my body as they possibly could. “What’s so intense about what we’re doing?”

“Other than liquid wax literally falling over my clit?” I squirmed some more.

The wax was already hardening. I wasn’t sure I was looking forward to ripping it off.

That would be a lie, of course. The thought sent blood down my clit right then and there. My whole body vibrated with the need for more.

“Other than that,” Claude said the words slowly.

They were probably aware that I was in my head, not quite fully here.

For a few seconds, I couldn’t speak. Only our mingled breaths broke the utter silence

in the room. Words failed me. I didn't know how to answer because I didn't know what was going on. I didn't understand why this felt like too much. Nipple clamps were more intense than this.

It couldn't be the physical act.

I just...

"It's about us."

"Huh?" Claude leaned back slightly.

I bet it was so they could study my every reaction. I was an open book for them, always. I had the impression that they hadn't expected me to say anything along those lines. In a way, neither had I. Sometimes my mouth ran ahead of my inner monologue.

"Yeah." I swallowed. "You've researched this for, like, weeks. It makes it... intense. Ours. It's us."

Claude stood still at first. I wasn't sure what to make out of the response, my heart starting to beat wildly against my ribs. Had I just fucked up something, said the wrong thing?

"Of course it's us."

"Huh?" It was my turn to be confused.

"You deserve everything, Arlene. Fuck," Claude cursed as they ran a hand through their hair. "I'll always want to give you fucking everything, and I'm always going to do everything in my power to get it right."

“That’s...” There was no way I was breathing now, and it had nothing to do with the hardening wax.

“Fuck, I’m sorry.” Claude looked at me regretfully for one second. “Yellow.”

Uh?

My heart lodged all the way up my throat. Claude was getting rid of the shackles holding me to the bed one second later.

“Sorry, I just, I need to hold you, okay, but you have to promise not to make a big deal out of it?”

“I’m not going to promise that.”

Still, as soon as all my limbs were free, and Claude had placed the candle back on the nightstand, I wrapped my arms around them. And I squeezed, tight. My heart began returning to its rightful spot as I breathed them in.

Claude returned the hold right away. They were squirming two seconds later, though, until their hand cupped my jaw, and we were face to face.

“You are so infuriatingly irresistible.”

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I grinned. It was that, or full on laughing, and I didn't think Claude would appreciate the latter. I was a considerate person, first and foremost. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means my life would be less of a roller coaster of feelings and stupid hormones if I hadn't stopped to quote-unquote greet a fan." They huffed. I snorted. They glared up at me, but it didn't last long, blue eyes brimming with affection two seconds later. The fiery red hair dye they'd gone for this month just made every glance look more alluring. "But that wouldn't be a good thing."

"I love you."

The words were there before I could fully process what they were saying. It didn't matter.

"I love you through actions more than I do through words," Claude said. The gravity of their words hit me right away, making me both want to melt into their arms and jump to the moon. "I don't want you to be overwhelmed just because you realize what that means for me."

"That's not..." I stopped. Claude didn't need to interrupt me this time. It was kind of what had happened, wasn't it? They quirked an eyebrow, waiting as if they could tell the conclusions I was reaching. "I love you."

Those were the only words that made sense in response.

"I love you." Claude kissed me quick before pulling away. "Now get your ass in the

bath if you don't wanna know mean."

I laughed. I couldn't hold it in this time, the kind of laughter that had me almost doubling over.

"Yes, Claude."

Whatever they said.