



Finding Home at Randy's (Diner Days)

Author: *Abrianna Denae*

Category: LGBT+

Description: The quiet one, the outgoing one, the observant one...they shouldn't work, but against all odds, they learn the meaning of home, together.

Luka

Boston is a fresh start, a chance to live my life on my terms, rather than doing what my family expects of me. Though, to my disappointment, my anxiety and insecurities made the cross-country move with me.

When a co-worker introduces me to Randy's Diner, at first, I'm not sure what to expect, but the warm and welcoming people who treat the diner like a second home show me a world of inclusion that I've only ever dreamed about. And then I meet not one but two people, who somehow manage to see through every wall I've ever tried to hide behind.

Graeme

Since my divorce, my life has been...stagnant. Other than my son, my ex-husband turned best friend, and my career as an author, Randy's Diner has been the only way to break up the monotony.

Luka catches my attention from the first glimpse. His shy smile and perpetual blush draw me in, making the caretaker instincts I buried long ago rise to the surface. But when he befriends the one person I can't have, I'm convinced I've lost my shot before I can even ask for a chance.

Denver

I can flirt and make friends with anyone, so it's no hardship to take the new face I meet at Randy's under my wing. Luka is adorably shy, and I make it my mission to help him feel comfortable in his own skin.

The closer we get, the more our feelings for one another grow, but it's not just Luka I'm interested in. Where my confidence and open nature helps me bring Luka out of his shell, I feel like a fumbling teenager around Graeme. So when it becomes apparent the other

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

When my new co-worker invited me for a “welcome to the team” lunch, I didn’t question it. I was just happy to get free food after a long and exhausting few months of starting over on the other side of the country. Walking into Randy’s Diner, I realize I should have asked a lot more questions.

But the words “ I’ll buy you lunch, I know a great place ” were really all the motivators I needed to say yes. I’m an easy mark, I’ll admit that.

I can’t say I’ve ever been to a true, authentic diner before; I don’t think Denny’s or IHOP count in either instance. So when we walk up to the hostess stand and the person behind it waves us off to seat ourselves, I take in as much as I can.

The white-and-light-blue checkerboard floor is different and unique, as is the glow of pink neon lighting around the upper perimeter of the space, but I have to admit, they all tie in together with the fifties vibe of the place and vinyl seating.

It is definitely not someplace I’d ever be brave enough to visit had I stayed in California.

Ivy chooses a booth near the back, and as we settle in, I turn to her. “This is nice. I like the vibe.”

She smiles. “I thought you might. Looks like we missed the lunch rush as well, which is good. I don’t wanna scare you off by throwing you into the full force of Randy’s clientele on your first day.”

I eye her warily. “Why does that give me a bad feeling?”

Ivy laughs. “It’s a good thing, promise. I just, well... I want to ease you in.”

A server comes sauntering up to us. “Ivy! Good to know you didn’t just up and abandon us.”

“Hey, Henry. You know I would never do that, things have been a little crazy at work lately. I’ve barely even seen Maisy and I live with her.”

“Hmm, that better be all it is.” Henry turns his attention to me. “At least you brought new eye-candy.”

I blush at his words, unsure what to say or do in the face of someone so...brazen. Henry must see my distress because he chuckles a little. “It’s okay, cutie, we’re all friends here. I’m Henry.” He brandishes his hand and I awkwardly take it in mine.

“Luka... it’s uhh, nice to meet you.” I look down at the hand I’m more holding than shaking and say, “I like your nails?”

God, please don’t tell me that came out as a question.

Henry giggles and pulls his hand back. “Thanks, sweetie. Now, what can I get ya to drink?”

“Water, please, with lemon.”

“You sure that’s all?” I nod and he looks to Ivy. “Coffee for you, I’m guessing.”

“You know me well. We’ll need a few minutes with the menu.”

“Sure thing. I’ll go get your drinks and poke at the writer’s table, make sure they’re all still breathing over there, then I’ll come back.” Henry saunters away, hips

swaying.

“See,” Ivy says, forcing my attention back to her. “That wasn’t painful, was it?”

I laugh a little and relax back in the booth. “It was... something.”

“Here.” She pushes a menu at me. “Find something you like, you can’t go wrong. The food is really good. Just be careful of the specials.” Some incredulous look must show on my face because she laughs. “Nothing bad, just one of the cooks is really into fad diets and Randy lets her put one item on the menu whenever she’s in a mood. So if you’re not into that then stick to the basics.”

“Good to know. I’m guessing you’re a regular?”

“You could say that. I actually used to work here, and my sister still does.”

“Oh, okay, that’s cool. So you know everyone then.”

“Yep.” She smiles brightly. “It’s like a second home to me, if I’m being honest.”

The smile I give her is a genuine one, something that’s been a rarity with me for a long while, but I’m slowly finding the joy in things again.

Henry returns with our drinks. “Still need more time?”

I shake my head before saying to Ivy, “Unless you do?”

“Nope. I’ll have my usual, but sunny-side up eggs this time.”

“And I’ll have pancakes, but can I get jam on the side, no syrup?”

“Sure thing, sweetie. I’ll get those right out. Let me know if you need anything.”

Ivy makes a face at me when Henry sashays away. “No syrup but jam? You’re a heathen. I don’t know if we can be friends anymore.”

I laugh and reach for my water. “What can I say? I have...unique tastes. I’m here with you, aren’t I?” I tease.

“Ooh, so that’s how it’s going to be. Okay, I see how it is.” There’s a twinkle in her blue eyes and we share a laugh at her words.

It’s been a long time since I’ve met someone who I feel comfortable with this quickly. It feels good. If I wasn’t terrified of jinxing myself, I’d say this entire cross-country move was the right decision, but it’s only been a handful of weeks, and I’m not an optimist by any stretch of the word.

So, I’ll hold onto this feeling for a while, and hope like hell it’s not a one-time thing.

We’re finishing our food when something catches my attention. As I’ve been people-watching, trying to soak up as much of the diner as I can, I’ve noticed the people coming and going from the hall where the restrooms are. One person in particular catches my attention.

Don’t ask me why, there’s nothing special about the man. He’s wearing jeans and a long-sleeved shirt with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows. His medium-brown hair mostly lays flat against his head, but the top is sticking up a little, like he’s run his hands through it a few times.

I watch as he moves across the diner and takes a seat at a table. There’s a few other people sitting with him, all of them with their heads buried in their laptops.

“Whatcha lookin’ at?” Ivy asks. She cranes her neck, trying to follow my line of sight. “Writer’s corner,” she finally says. “Don’t pay them any mind, they’re mostly here for the free coffee refills.”

I laugh a little. “Do you know who any of them are? Never mind, that sounds weird.”

“Someone catch your attention? I know Myles and Graeme. Don’t know who the other person is, but those two are regulars.”

As she’s speaking, the one who’s caught my attention looks up and I blush, quickly looking away. I’m sure he wasn’t actually looking at me, maybe just glancing up while lost in thought, but the last thing I need is to be caught staring like a weirdo.

“Ah,” Ivy says. “Graeme. Good choice, Myles is taken, but as far as I’ve heard, Graeme is as single as we are.”

I try to pretend that information doesn’t curl a little bit of interest in me. After all, I haven’t even had a clear view of his face yet. Plus, being single doesn’t mean I’m available for dating, or that he is.

“I could introduce you...” Ivy says in a sing-song voice.

“Absolutely not!” I hiss, leaning in and trying to ignore how hot my face feels. Damn redheaded genes, making it so my skin flushes easily.

She laughs. “You’re so easy, Luka. Seriously though, Grae’s cool. If you don’t want to eat alone, but don’t want to be bothered, he’s good for that.”

“Can we drop this, please? I was just taking in the atmosphere, not really paying attention to the people.”

“Uh-huh, whatever you say,” she teases. Thankfully, she drops the subject, and I ease back in my seat, pretending I don’t want to look over and maybe catch Graeme’s eyes again.

It’s ridiculous. I don’t pay attention to people, let alone random guys in diners. Not even if I swear I can feel their eyes on me throughout the rest of my meal.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

The Child

Can I order DoorDash?

Graeme

No. I went shopping yesterday, there's plenty of food.

The Child

There's nothing I want. Please? I'll mow the front AND back yards this weekend

Graeme

I bought you like 500 snacks. Go eat something we have

The Child

Cat sitting next to a half-empty food bowl Gif

Graeme

You're not starving

The Child

Wasting away

Graeme

Drama llama Gif

The Child

It was nice knowing you. Imma go die of starvation now...

Graeme

You do that

When no other text comes through, I assume he's either gone to clear out the snack cabinet or expired from hunger. Deciding it's best to send a warning along to Rory anyway, I switch text threads.

Graeme

Your son is not allowed to order food

Partner in Crime

Got it. Did he pull the starving card?

Graeme

You know it

Partner in Crime

Who thought it was a good idea to have a teenager?

Graeme

You're the one who knocked me up, so I'm blaming you.

Partner in Crime

Course you are

Gotta go, headed into a meeting. See you later

Graeme

Salute Gif

Putting my phone down, I look back at my screen and groan. Myles chuckles from across the table.

"Working hard over there, I see," he teases.

"Why couldn't I decide to write alien smut?" I grouse. "That sounds so much better than having to remember all the world-building I did for the previous book; past me was a dick."

Myles snorts. "You didn't write anything down?"

"That's the thing; I did, but the way my brain works, I can't keep too detailed notes, otherwise I get bored. That's not the problem. No, my dumbass decided a continuous series would be a good idea. Which means I need to mesh all of the plots together, and somehow have it still make sense."

"You're right," Myles deadpans, "Past you is a dick."

“Thanks.” Reaching for my mug, I whine in sadness when I realize it’s empty. “Remind me again why we’re not allowed to keep a carafe at the table?”

“Something about Zo not knowing CPR and being unwilling to let us have heart attacks.”

Sighing, I look around for one of the waiters to signal for a refill, when someone across the room catches my eye. My search for caffeine is forgotten for a moment as I watch the person quickly turn and drop their head down, as if embarrassed at being caught.

I noticed them when I got up to use the restroom a few minutes ago—I had to pass their table on my way through—and in that split-second glimpse, I could see how adorable they are.

Red hair, pale skin that probably flushes easily, and a build that appears similar to mine: slim but not too thin, though I’m guessing I have about twenty pounds on them—thanks pregnancy and c-section. They’re sitting with Ivy, one of the former waitresses, so if I really wanted to, I could get up and go introduce myself under the guise of catching up with her, but that may be a little bit too overwhelming.

The more I watch them, the more I see how they fidget in their seat. They don’t look my way again, but their gaze constantly roams around the room before turning back to Ivy. I can’t tell from the angle and distance, but they don’t seem like someone who’s uncomfortable with their surroundings, more just unsure. I’d like to think I’ve people-watched enough over the years to pick up cues like that, at least.

“You know,” Myles drawls, “You could go introduce yourself.”

I glare at him over our computer screens. “Oh, you mean like you did to Avery?”

He makes a face. “Th–that’s different! Avery is all... Avery!”

I laugh because that...both does and does not make sense, but then, that sums up Myles perfectly.

Before I can respond, Henry sashays his way over. “You’re looking a bit lost, hun,” he says before filling my mug.

I whimper. “You’re my favorite.”

“Uh-huh,” he hums. “Need anything else?” We both decline, and he refills Myles’s mug as well before walking off with a swing of his hips, humming some song I can’t name.

Taking a sip of my coffee, I look at my screen and grimace, quickly highlighting the last thing I wrote and deleting it in one fell-swoop. All signs are pointing to me doing the one thing I’ve been trying to avoid: I have to re-read my own book, so I can better get a handle on what the fuck I’m doing.

Calling the day a wash, I save what I have and shut my laptop.

“You leaving?” Myles asks.

“Yeah, I’m not getting anywhere right now. I should go and make sure my kid hasn’t perished from starvation.”

Myles snorts. “You should have brought him with you; everyone likes it when Callum’s around.”

“Yeah, but my wallet doesn’t,” I say. “Having a teenager is expensive. It’s like he woke up with a blackhole instead of his stomach one day. We should probably have

him checked for a tapeworm.”

Myles cackles. “Don’t kids like pets?”

“Fuck off.” I roll my eyes, but can’t stop the laugh that escapes. That’s one I’m going to have to tell Rory later.

Packing up my stuff, I make my way to the counter and pay for my coffee and the toast I don’t remember actually eating—writing brain is fun .

Sneaking one last look at the redhead, I’m pleased to find them looking at me. It’s a nice boost to the ego when I spend most of my days locked either in my house or here, wearing nothing but what’s cleanest on a good day.

On my way out the door, I come face to face with another good-looking person, only this one is more familiar to me.

“Hey.” Denver smiles, their hazel eyes brightening as our eyes lock.

“Hi, it’s been a while since I last saw you.”

They shrug. “Got switched to nights for a while. You leaving already? It’s early in the day for you, isn’t it?”

“Not getting any work done. I’ve gotta go make sure Cal hasn’t eaten his two-week snack stash in an hour, and I’ll probably convince Rory to buy us dinner. Anyway, I’m sure you’re exhausted and hungry.”

Denver laughs. “I look that good, huh?”

My face heats, and I hope my cheeks aren’t red. “You uhhh, you don’t look that bad

.” I wince. “Sorry.”

They have the good grace not to laugh at me. “You’re fine. I won’t hold you up anymore, though.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you have better things to do, like eating food and not just smelling it from the doorway.”

Denver grins at me. “But I like talking to you.”

Butterflies flutter in my stomach, and the feelings are almost like I’m a teenager again: chaotic and new, and making my insides quiver. The last time I felt like this, I married the guy that invoked the feelings and had a kid with him.

“Then we’ll have to catch up sometime, because I like talking to you, too.”

“Great, I’ll see you later?”

“You will.” I smile at them and hold the door open wider, letting them pass me to get into the diner, while forcing myself not to look over my shoulder at them.

Taking a breath, I let the door go and step away before it hits me in the ass. Shrugging my bag higher on my shoulder, I head down to my car, thinking that while I may have struck out with the words today, at least I got to admire not one, but two cute faces.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

Watching Graeme walk away makes me sigh, but the sight of his ass in those worn jeans is worth it. I'm disappointed that we couldn't catch up more, but he's right, I am freaking exhausted.

I ended up working more shifts at the hospital than I was originally scheduled for this week, and while I'd like nothing more than to be facedown in bed right now, the soreness in my muscles from when I woke up earlier told me I had already slept too much.

I could have ordered food to be delivered, but getting out of my apartment sounded good at the time. Sidling up to the counter, I grab a menu to peruse—as if I don't have it memorized already.

“What can I do for you, sweetcheeks?” Henry asks as he twirls behind the counter.

I smile and roll my eyes at his antics. “I'm thinking the usual, but to go, please. And a chef's salad on the side.”

“Aww, you don't wanna stay and play with us?” He bats his eyelashes at me.

“Not today. I'm exhausted. I've worked...way too many hours over the last few days.”

“Poor baby. I'll tell them to put their back into it and get your food out in a jiffy.”

“Thanks, Henry.” I pay for my meal and then sit on one of the barstools.

This time of day, there's not much happening. Myles is happily squirreled away in the writer's corner, and while I normally don't mind sitting there for the relative quiet, without Graeme to bug, it's not half as fun, though Myles is good company, when I'm not tired off my ass.

As I peruse the diner, I see Ivy sitting with someone I don't know. Being me—far more extroverted for my own good sometimes—I slide off my stool and make my way over to them.

“Hey, stranger!” I say as I sidle up to their table.

Ivy slides out of the booth to hug me. “I haven't seen you in forever!”

“You're the one who up and left us, sweetie. I've always been here.”

She laughs and shrugs. “What can I say, I wanted to work twelve plus hours from a chair rather than on my feet.”

“Don't blame you, because I do work on my feet all day, and lemme tell you, it's not for the faint of heart.”

“Speaking of my job, let me introduce you to my co-worker, Luka.” She gestures to the person who's been trying to pretend like they're not listening in on our conversation. “He just started at the dispatch center.”

“So you forced him to be your friend?” I tease.

Ivy smacks me and laughs. “Pretty much.”

Reaching my hand out, I shake Luka's, noting how soft and smooth his skin is, and how warm his hand feels in mine. “I'm Denver, it's nice to meet you.”

“You, too.”

“I hope Ivy here isn’t driving you too crazy.”

She gasps, mock offended. “I am an angel!”

“Sure you are,” I deadpan.

Luka gives a slight chuckle and shakes his head. “Ivy’s great. I’m new in town, and don’t really know many people aside from my roommate, so I appreciated when Ivy offered to bring me here.”

“Denver knows everyone,” Ivy says. “I think they know more of the regulars and semi-regulars than even I do. So, if you have any questions, they should be your go-to person.”

“Geez, thanks for putting me on the spot like that,” I tease.

Ivy rolls her eyes, but Luka flushes. He looks away and starts fidgeting with a napkin.

“Hey.” I wait until I have his attention again before smiling gently. “It’s okay. I was only teasing. I do know a lot of people. You’ll see a lot of different groups or ‘scenes’ here, like the club goers, or the writers over there.” I nod my head in the direction of the writer’s corner. “But I don’t really fit in any one place. So, if you want to get an in, like if you’re into D&D or something like that, I know people and can help make introductions, that sort of thing. Don’t hesitate to ask, okay? Or just show up one day. People post a list of where they’ll be and when over on the corkboard. And everyone is really nice, they don’t mind newbies.”

Luka's smile is a small, gentle thing, though his cheeks are still a little pink with what I assume is embarrassment. “Thanks for the tips.”

I wink at him. “Anytime. Ivy has my number, if you ever want someone to show you around town, not just the diner. Or just come up to me if you see me around. I like people.”

“Maybe I will,” he says softly, hesitantly. There's a pink hue to his face still that tells me he probably won't. No matter, I don't have a problem making friends, if he's too adorably shy to put himself out there. Unless he tells me no, of course. I won't push, but something tells me that Luka could use a friend, and if he's going to start hanging around Randy's, I'd like to think I'm one of the best people he could put his trust in.

Most people would call that conceited, I just call it facts. Peopling is my happy place.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

It's suspiciously quiet when I walk into the house. For being an only child, Callum likes to make his presence known. That he's not blaring the TV, or ruining Rory's perfectly clean kitchen, has my parenting instincts on high alert.

Putting my bag on the table in the entryway, I head upstairs. Knocking on Callum's door, I push it open after a moment and find my son laying starfished on the floor.

Leaning against the doorframe, I stare at the dramatic teen. "You dead?"

"No," he groans. "I ate waffles, and now I'll be fine until dinner."

Snorting, I think about asking why he's on the floor, but decide against it. When it comes to Callum, less questions is usually better. "Got all your work done?"

"Nope. I need Da to help me with some math work."

"Okay. Do you need me to check the rest? How's the English and History going?"

"Pfft." He lifts a hand and waves me off.

Chuckling and taking that as reassurance he doesn't need any help, I push away from the doorframe. "I'm making your da buy us dinner tonight; he doesn't know yet, so don't go texting him crazy requests. When you're done being angsty, go switch the laundry, and whatever else you didn't do while I was gone."

"Slave driver!"

“You know it.”

Closing his door, I head back downstairs, grab my bag, and then carry on down to the basement, where my bedroom is. When we bought the house, the plan was to always use the downstairs bedroom as ours, since it was the biggest, and the finished basement space, along with the office, made for a nice little sanctuary for us.

Neither of us ever planned on getting divorced, or that we'd carry on living together after said divorce, but we're four years on and it still works well for us. We each have our own space, and Callum was already weird before we split up, so it didn't impact him much. What might be odd to other people, is actually what keeps us all sane and helps us thrive, and none of us are keen on changing that.

Besides, Rory and I might not be in love with each other anymore, but us splitting up was never about not wanting to be around one another. Sometimes, things just don't work out, no matter how much you want them to.

In my room, I change clothes and pull out my laptop. I've pretty much given up on the writing front today, but there's still things I need to do for the backend of the business. Writing the book never stops there. Somedays, that's the easy part, it's the rest of the authoring stuff that can drive you crazy in other ways.

Bringing my laptop back upstairs, I set up shop in the sunroom.

I spend a few hours clearing out my emails, scheduling what I hope are interesting posts on social media, and going over my schedule with my PA, while trying not to throw my computer out the window.

When my phone goes off with a text, I'm thankful for the small reprieve it brings.

Partner in Crime

Leaving in 30. What do you want to do for dinner?

Graeme

Thai? Let me know when you leave and I'll order it.

Partner in Crime

I can cook. I'll just have to stop by the store as I don't think we have anything defrosted.

Graeme

Partner in Crime

sigh I'll let you know when I'm heading out

Graeme

Thank you. Want the usual?

Partner in Crime

Please

That done, I pull up the number to our favorite Thai restaurant, so I have it ready when I need it, and then I write out what to order so I don't forget something. I don't bother asking Cal what he wants, the human garbage disposal will eat whatever is put in front of him.

An hour later, Rory comes through the door. "Anyone around to help me?"

Setting my laptop aside, I stand and stretch, feeling my back crack and my muscles relax in relief after sitting in one spot for so long.

Walking out of the sunroom, I meet Rory in the entryway. “Hey, let me take some of those.”

I reach for the bags and carry them into the kitchen.

“Thanks. Where’s Cal?”

“Probably in his room. I’ve been trying to get some work done, and he was supposed to be doing his chores.”

“Ah, I see. I’ll go get him, you set the table?”

“Yeah, I’ve got it.”

Leaving the food on the counter for a moment, I grab everything we’ll need for dinner and put it on the dining table first, before moving the bags of food over.

One thing I wish is that there was more space in the kitchen for a longer island, instead of the square block counter that is in the middle of the room. I miss being able to just eat right in the kitchen, without fussing around with the table. Even after sixteen years in this house, that’s one thing I’d probably change if I could.

“What do you guys want to drink?” I ask when Rory shepherds our son downstairs.

“Just water, Cher, thanks,” Rory replies in French.

“Can you make my water fancy ?” Callum asks, stressing the word fancy. His response is in English, since I’m the parent using that language.

Both of us switching off with English and French was Rory's idea once Callum was born, and I have to admit it was one of his best ideas. Not only did it teach Callum a second language, but it kept Rory and I sharp—even if we had to take some refresher courses to make sure we didn't lose too much of the language.

Snorting, I grab three bottles from the fridge, but pull a glass down for Callum's. Thankfully, there are still a few lemons already sliced in the fridge, so I don't have to bother with that.

"Three waters, one of them fancy ," I say, setting them on the table, smirking when I put Callum's in front of him.

"You guys are ridiculous," Rory tells us.

"You're the one who told him it was fancy water when he was like, three," I reply.

"I didn't think it would stick!" he protests with a laugh.

We settle in to dish out the food, and it's a comforting few moments of silence.

"Did you get all your chores done?" I ask Cal.

He nods around the spring roll in his mouth before chewing and swallowing a bite. "Yeah. I still think we need a laundry room up here instead of in the basement. Going up and down two flights of stairs is brutal."

Rolling my eyes, I shake my head at him. "You're young. It's good exercise for you."

"Where would we even put it?" Rory asks. "There's no room up here."

"The spare room?" Callum asks hopefully. "We don't really need that room, no one

ever comes to stay here. We can totally just turn that into a laundry room.”

I laugh. “No. One: that’s a lot of work and money, considering there’s no plumbing already up there. And two: that just gives you an excuse to put off getting stuff out of the dryer even more, because how convenient that it’d be right across from your room. You’re not living out of the dryer, you have a closet and dresser for a reason.”

Callum sighs dramatically. “Fine, take away all my joy.”

“You’ll live,” I reply with an eye roll.

“Did you get all of your schoolwork done?” Rory asks.

“Mostly. I have stupid math that I need help with. Granna said she’d help me with the science work tomorrow.”

“Okay, we’ll look it over after dinner.”

“Oh.” Callum perks up, sticking to French even though he’s addressing both of us. “Some of the other kids were talking on our Discord earlier, saying that they were going to get together for a study session. Can I go?”

“When and where?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Unsure yet. Someone mentioned a library, but maybe a coffee shop or cafe, there were a few options being thrown around.”

“Find out the details and then we’ll talk about it, okay? I’m sure it shouldn’t be a problem for me or Granna to take you, though.”

“Cool, thanks. Can I be excused?”

Rory nods. “Sure. Dishes in the dishwasher, and then get your homework out so we can go over it in a bit.”

Callum pushes away from the table, and even goes so far as to take the empty food containers with him into the kitchen.

“He must really want to go to that study session. Only time he ever does extra work without being asked,” I muse.

Rory snorts. “Teenagers. It’s been a while since he’s hung out with that group, though.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “Ever since Brianna moved, he’s pulled away from everyone else. I’m glad he’s willing to go out and make more friends.”

Raising a kid is hard enough, and we knew it would be a bit tricky getting him to socialize since he’s homeschooled, but Callum’s thrived ever since we made the decision when he was young.

It wasn’t our plan at first, but he had a hard time acclimatizing in school, and we weren’t willing to put our kid through something that could traumatize him at a young age. Thankfully, Rory’s mother offered to take early retirement and keep him for us during the day when he was younger. The fact she taught both elementary and high school helped, as she was able to support him with his work.

We asked if he wanted to attend high school last year, because he’s been excelling at all his courses, but he shot us down. Since his education hasn’t faltered once in all the years he’s been homeschooled, we decided to let him lead, and haven’t brought it up again.

“Me, too. I was worried he’d be too much like you,” Rory teases.

“Oh, fuck you,” I shoot back without any heat. “I am a delight .”

“Delightfully a pain in my ass.”

Leaning forward, I lower my voice. “Now, it’s been a long time since I had that pleasure, Ror. Interested?”

Rory rolls his eyes and pushes away from the table. “No thanks. Been there, done that, burned the T-shirt.”

“Asshole.”

“Your turn to do the dishes,” he says in response, carrying his plate into the kitchen.

With a small chuckle, I clear the rest of the table and go about putting everything away, before turning the dishwasher on. Rory disappears upstairs to help Cal with his homework, and I enjoy the quiet that settles over the rest of the house. It’s a comforting routine that I didn’t expect to get when I was Callum’s age.

Maybe it didn’t work out the way I thought. After all, I didn’t expect to not be with Rory after everything we went through, but this odd, unconventional life is perfect for us all the same.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

“Hey, I’m going to have some friends over, do you mind?”

I look up at Valery and shake my head. “Of course not. It’s your apartment, you can do whatever you want.”

“You live here now too,” they remind me. “I want you to be comfortable.”

“I am. Or, I’m getting there. Did you want me to make myself scarce or something? Is this a sex thing?”

Valery tosses their head back as they laugh, hard. “Oh, my God, no !” They wipe tears from their eyes as they cackle a little more. “I’m going to have to tell them this, they’re going to die . But, no, we’re all just friends. I definitely want you to meet them. I think you’ll like them.”

“Okay, if you’re sure...”

“I’m sure. You need to live a little. Have you explored any of the city since moving here? I know I’ve been busy, and I’m sorry about that, but we can go do stuff next weekend? If you want? I mean, if you have the time off. I don’t even know your schedule. God, I’m a bad friend.”

“You are not, stop that. You’re just a busy friend. And I get it, you have a life. My being here disrupts that. I’m sorry if you’ve felt like you couldn’t do what you normally do with me here, but I promise, I’m fine.” I give them a smile and hope they believe me.

Have I felt a little lonely? Sure, but that's normal for me. It's not like I had hordes of friends back home, either. So, even though Valery and I haven't seen much of each other, it hasn't made much of a difference in my life.

"Still, I feel horrible. I told Jordan I'd help you, and all I've done is dump you in my spare bedroom. I don't need your cousin coming out here, kicking my ass because I abandoned you."

I roll my eyes. "You've done more than enough. You've put a roof over my head for way too cheap, and now are going to introduce me to your friends."

They perk up a little. "Yes, you're right. They're going to love you. I didn't expect to ever blend my two lives together, you know? But it feels good introducing you, and letting them get a glimpse of the before."

My cheeks heat with my blush and I try to laugh through the embarrassment. "I forgot how dramatic you are."

Valery rolls their eyes. "I'm being serious."

"I know, which is why it's funny. Maybe if I were Jordan, it'd be like that, but I'm not. I'm just me."

"And just you is perfect, Luka."

My cheeks heat but I tuck the little bit of praise away, letting the good feeling fill me up. Outside of my cousin, not many people in my life think that. To have Valery, who I hadn't seen in years before I showed up on their doorstep a few weeks ago, reaffirm that who I am is good enough, it is...more needed than I realized. It doesn't matter how much time passes, or how long I live as myself, there are still lingering doubts and trauma.

Taking a breath, refusing to let those thoughts in any further, I smile at Valery. “Thanks. And don’t worry about it. I know you’ve worked hard to get where you are. I’m proud of you, Val.”

“Thank you. You’re right, I’ve worked damned hard, but it’s nice to hear all the same. So come on.” They tap my knee. “I’m going to throw some dinner together for us all, want to help?”

“Sure, but I hope you warn them I’m not a good cook, so eat with caution.”

Valery laughs. “You say I’m the dramatic one. Come, I won’t let you poison our guests.” They head into the kitchen, amongst a flurry of ruffled skirts and jingling bracelets, and I am helpless to do anything except follow in their wake.

By the time Val’s friends arrive, most of my anxiety over meeting new people has dissipated. That’s one thing I’ve always loved about Valery, they’re usually good at getting me out of my head.

Valery answers the door to their friends, while I put the finishing touches on the charcuterie board they’ve had me put together. When I can’t stall any longer, I take a deep, calming breath, pick up the tray, and carry it out into the living room.

My grip on the tray tightens when I recognize one of the guests as the person who came up to me and Ivy at the diner the other day.

“Hey.” They smile when our eyes meet.

“H—hi,” I stammer.

Valery looks from me to their friend...whose name I cannot remember. “You two know each other?”

Setting the tray down on the coffee table, I reply, “One of my co-workers took me to Randy’s Diner the other day, we met there.”

“Ah, I see. I’m kind of jealous someone else introduced you to Randy’s. I haven’t been for a while, but I love that place; we’ll have to go sometime. Anyway, so you’ve met Denver.” They gesture to their other friend. “And this is Tori.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” Tori reaches their hand out. “Val’s told us so much about you.”

Taking their hand in mine, I look over at Valery. “Really? Don’t believe a word out of their mouth.”

Tori squeezes my hand in comfort before letting go. “All good things, I promise. Right, Den?”

Tori and I turn our attention to Denver, and I try not to focus on the way my cheeks heat as I realize their attention is on me. Damn curse of the redheads means I flush far too easily, and I’ve always been a nervous wreck around attractive people. Meaning there’s no way I can hide my reaction to being the focus of Denver’s attention.

Their hazel eyes seem to bore into me, and the way their caramel brown hair sweeps into said eyes makes me want to push it away from their forehead and see if it’s as soft as it looks.

“I promise,” they say, their full lips quirking up into a smile. “It’s only been good things. Mostly about how you were supposed to be their cousin-in-law, but don’t worry, they didn’t tell us any embarrassing stories about you or anything.”

I groan and turn to Valery. “Seriously? You’re still telling people that?”

Val shrugs and sits in their papasan chair, curling their legs under them. “I mean, I would have married Jordan in a heartbeat, had he given any indication he was into that.”

Snorting, I follow their cue and take a seat on the sofa, trying to ignore the fact that Denver sits on my other side, despite there being other seating available. “My aunt would have just loved that,” I mutter.

Val huffs. “She would have convinced herself that Jor is ‘normal’, since, ya know, I have tits and all that.”

We all laugh.

“Speaking of tits,” Tori says, leaning forward from where they’re sitting and grabbing a piece of cheese and salami. “Only three more weeks and I’ll finally be a ‘real girl’, and my tits won’t come off.”

Denver snorts. “I’d rather have a detachable dick than detachable tits.”

Tori throws a napkin at him. “I mean, me too, and I have a detachable dick, thank you very much. But now I’ll be able to take my bra off and not worry about being judged, because all I got from the hormones were little bee stings.”

My face feels like it’s on fire because I’m not used to such...openness. Valery is the only other trans person I know well, and being around them has helped me gain a lot of confidence in what was a very confusing time for me. Sitting here and listening to someone else talk about gender confirmation surgeries and HRT effects...it does things to my insides, making me feel jittery and out of place. Sort of like I used to feel before coming out, but in a good way this time.

I meet Valery’s eyes, and the look they give me says this was...purposeful. I’m sure

they did want to spend time with their friends, but this is also their subtle way of saying I'm accepted here. I can be myself openly without worry or judgment.

I can't stop the prick of tears, or the lump in my throat from forming at the realization.

"You okay?" Denver asks quietly, leaning in closely so as to not disturb Valery and Tori, who've moved onto a different subject.

Giving them a watery smile, I nod. "Yeah, I...I'm fine."

They hold my gaze, their brown and green eyes filled with concern, but they return my smile, and I allow myself to enjoy the way their mouth stretches widely. Hope and freedom curl deep in my gut.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

“So, how are you liking Boston?”

Luka shrugs and shifts on the sofa, acting relaxed, but I can still see the tension running through him.

He’s let his guard down some since Tori talked about her upcoming top surgery. I don’t know if he was even conscious of it, but I saw the way he wrapped an arm around his chest. It’s something I’d seen other friends do in the past, both post and pre-op, a protective and self-conscious movement all in one.

The longer Tori and I are here, the clearer the picture becomes. Valery is always careful not to out anyone, but I know them well enough to know this little get-together was specifically organized for Luka—more than just introducing him to new people in a new city.

“It’s been good so far. Like Valery, I lived in a big city back in California, so while it’s vastly different in a lot of ways, it’s not like a total culture shock. Getting used to the feel of the city will probably take a while, but I’m sure I’ll get the hang of it soon enough. I haven’t done a lot of exploring, if I’m being honest. I’ve mostly been working, and the other day at Randy’s was the only time I’ve really gone out.”

“I’m low-key mad that you’ve already been to one of my favorite places,” Valery says. “But I swear, I’ll be a better friend and former almost cousin-in-law.”

Luka rolls his eyes. “We’ve already had this discussion. I understand you’ve been busy. I needed time to settle in as well. It’s fine. Promise.”

Valery makes a disbelieving noise, but they don't say anything else.

"We can all go out," Tori says. "Show you all the best places to get a drink, and see what type of trouble we can find."

Luka gives her a small smile. "Sure. I'm not a big drinker, but I don't mind going out and having fun."

His body language doesn't quite reflect his words, but seeing him at ease and willing to try makes me want to take him everywhere and anywhere he wants to go.

"We'll have to do it before my surgery, because they said it'll be like four to six weeks of healing time, and that's the only part I'm not looking forward to. Like, after my bottom surgery a few years ago, it freaking sucked . It's hard to enjoy no longer having a dick when your new vag aches."

"Admit it," Valery tells her, "You were just mad that you had to wait a while for sex."

Tori sticks her tongue out at them. "Maybe, maybe not. I'm just saying. I'm not looking forward to the healing time, though I am freaking excited to have something to shake besides my ass on the dance floor."

Val and I laugh, but I notice that Luka tries to disappear into the corner of the sofa. His cheeks are almost as bright red as his hair, and it's kinda adorable.

"I can show you around. Not to bars or clubs, or any of that, if you're not into it. But there's plenty of galleries and stuff. Or there are lots of markets we can check out."

"That sounds good," he says. "I wouldn't want to take up your time, but if you maybe gave me a list of your favorites, I could check them out when I have time?"

“I can do that, but it wouldn’t be a hardship spending time with you, Luka,” I assure him.

Tori snickers but I ignore her, content to pretend that did not come out as flirty as it sounded. I’m not hitting on Luka, not really. I can admit he’s adorable, with his red hair, easily flushed skin, hazel brown eyes, and pretty lips that would look good kiss-swollen. Not that any of that matters, though. I’m not looking for anything, not when I don’t even have the balls to admit I might have a crush on someone else.

I know what people think when they look at me: outgoing, everyone’s friend, Denver. They would be the last person to ever get nervous around a good-looking, kind, and thoughtful man. People would be wrong, though.

Confidence and extrovertism only go so far when it comes to something or someone that matters.

I can make friends with just about anyone, but a meaningful relationship? That’s so much harder.

“Only if you’re sure.”

I grin at him. “Positive. I’m always up for making new friends and finding something to get into.”

Luka’s smile is hesitant, but there’s a lightness to his eyes that wasn’t there earlier. It fills me with a fuzzy feeling knowing I can affect him like that.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

Denver and I wander around the open-air market, browsing the stalls and people-watching. When they offered to show me around, I wanted to believe they were being nothing more than polite, but that doesn't mean I wasn't still pleasantly surprised when they asked last night if I was free to come with them.

"Are you hungry?" they ask as we near a stall with various baked goods.

"I wouldn't say no to a danish," I reply.

They grin and head to the stall. Trailing behind them, I reach for my wallet, but Denver sets a hand on my arm.

"No, I've got it."

"You don't have to."

They grab some money and hand it over to the woman manning the stall. "Please, I invited you, let me do this."

Biting my lip, I pretend all the walking we've been doing is the reason for the flush I feel heating my cheeks. "Thank you."

Denver rolls their eyes after taking their change and the bag of pastries from the woman. "It's the least I would do for any other friend," they tell me.

"Still, we're not really friends yet. I mean, we just met."

Denver leads me away from the busy bakery stall. “That’s the point of hanging out. So we can get to know one another.” In a break between stalls, we step out of the way of people, and Denver hands me a napkin and my danish. “I want to get to know you, Luka,” they implore. “This isn’t charity, or because I feel bad for you or whatever. It’s because I liked meeting you, and want to be your friend.”

Hazel green eyes meet mine, and the intensity in them makes me want to take a step back, but I hold my ground, even if my breath catches in my throat for a moment. “Okay,” I say, just loud enough for them to hear.

“Okay?”

I nod in response. “Yeah. I want to get to know you better, too.”

Denver’s smile is as bright as the late summer sun. “Good. Now, eat up, you’re going to need energy to keep up with me for the rest of the day.”

I laugh but do as I’m told.

“I don’t know about you,” Denver says, hours later, as we sit in a little cafe we found after the market, “But I am exhausted.”

“I didn’t expect so much walking,” I bemoan. “I work a desk job, I’m not used to this exercise BS.”

They snort. “What is it that you do, anyway? I know you work with Ivy, but I wasn’t sure if you did the same job as her or not.”

“Same thing as Ivy. I’m a 911 dispatcher.”

“That’s a tough job.”

I shrug. “It can be sometimes. I don’t want to say I enjoy it, because when you’re on the other end of a life and death situation, there’s nothing enjoyable about that. But...I do like knowing I play a part in getting people the help they need.”

“I know what you mean. I’m an ER nurse over at the children’s hospital. It’s... It can be very emotional at times, but rewarding as well, when you know you’re helping someone who needs it.”

“Yeah.”

“How’d you get into that, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Shaking my head, I say, “It’s fine. I...don’t know how to respond, actually.” Taking a moment to gather my thoughts, I tell them, “I sort of fell into it back in California. I mean, it was never my dream job—I don’t think it’s anyone’s. I needed a job, and someone I knew suggested I apply. I didn’t think I’d get it, but I passed all of the prerequisites, and so when I moved, it was a no-brainer to do it all over again here.”

“So what is your dream job?” Denver asks quietly.

Looking away from their inquisitive gaze, I fiddle with my silverware, unsure how to respond yet again. “I don’t know,” I finally say. “And I truly don’t.”

Meeting their eyes once again, I try to put into words the things I never dared to speak of. “I don’t know how much you know about Valery’s past, but they were dating my cousin for a while, and spending time with them sort of...gave me the confidence to be who I am.”

Denver gives me a small, encouraging smile. “They’re good at that.”

“Yeah.” Clearing my throat, I try to push back the old, overwhelming feelings of pain

and longing that are building up in me. “They’re older than I am, and at the time, I didn’t know anyone who wasn’t cisgendered or, at least anyone who was open about it. My parents...they kept me and my siblings really close and sheltered. So, when Jordan started dating Valery, and they were so unapologetically them, it...it was like something clicked in my young brain.”

Denver sighs and leans in a little over the small table. “Let me guess, your parents weren’t too supportive when you came out?”

I shook my head. “Nope. Remember how Valery said my aunt would have been happy if they did end up married to Jordan?”

They nod. “Yeah, something about Val’s tits.”

I laugh. “Pretty much. My aunt is much like my parents—not very accepting. She isn’t as bad as my parents, but we all know that she’s still hoping Jordan’s queerness is just a phase. She was always surprisingly good about Valery’s pronouns, but we all knew it was because Val is feminine-presenting. She could pretend Jor was what she wanted him to be, because to everyone else, it looked like his relationship was.”

Denver rolls their eyes. “Once again, I am reminded that I got very lucky when so many don’t.”

“Your parents are cool then?”

“That’s an understatement. They named me Denver, for fuck’s sake. I have a brother named Paris, and a sister named Venice. My parents being ‘cool’ is both a blessing and the bane of my existence.”

I can’t feel jealous over that fact. Though I wished for family that was more understanding when I was younger and realizing that who they wanted me to be was

far from the person I actually am, I don't begrudge the things they taught me. Standing up for myself, and figuring out who I am without their overbearingness is intimidating, but in the few short months I've been here, I've already learned so much about myself.

Meeting Valery's friends has helped with that, though sitting here with Denver gives me hope they won't just be Valery's friend, but mine as well.

"We got way off track," Denver says. "Sorry about that."

I shake my head. "It's fine. I started it. You asked what I always wanted to do, and I don't know because I was never given the chance to find out. I spent so much of my teen years fighting for the right to exist as who I am, it left little room to figure out everything else, such as a dream job. So, for now, I'm content where I am."

Denver reaches across the table and grabs my hand, squeezing it gently in theirs. "That's kind of sad, and I'm not saying that to make you feel bad about yourself. I just think everyone should be able to have a dream, whether it's attainable or not is irrelevant."

Even my throat grows warm when I blush, their words sinking deep inside and hitting the soft, vulnerable parts of my heart that I try to pretend aren't there, because, what's the point? My job pays the bills, and it may be more heartbreaking than glamorous most days, but I feel accomplished when a call ends on a happyish note. What more could I ask for? Yet, sitting here with Denver, their hand on mine, hazel eyes soft but not pitying, it makes me long for something... I just don't know what that is exactly.

"Well, I guess if I figure something out, I'll let you know. Deal?"

They give my hand another squeeze. "Deal."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

“ Fancy seeing you here.”

Looking up from my screen, I smile when I meet Denver’s gaze. “Hey, want to join me?” I gesture to the empty seats across from me.

Denver looks to their companion, who happens to be the cute redhead I saw across the diner the other day. “That okay with you? Grae’s cool.”

“My kid would argue otherwise,” I say. “But I think I’m cool, too.”

The redhead laughs a little. “Are you sure you don’t mind?”

I shake my head. “I wouldn’t have offered if I did. I’m Graeme, by the way, or Grae.”

“Luka.”

Denver slides into a chair opposite me, and Luka follows their lead. “We were just out and about, window shopping, that sort of thing, and thought we’d stop in. Luka’s fairly new in town, so I’ve been showing him around.”

“Nice, where are you from?”

“Los Angeles.”

“Wow, big move then.”

He nods. “Yeah, but I needed a big change. It was getting...stifling.” He huffs a little.

“I know, I know, it's kinda ironic to say that about such a huge city, but...” He trails off and shrugs.

“Nah, I get it. Sometimes you just gotta get out, find someplace new.” I give him a smile. “So, you liking Boston?”

He nods. “Yeah, it’s been great so far. My job is more or less the same, and I made a friend there already. Plus, my roommate is someone I knew from back home, so they’ve helped a lot with the transition. That’s how I met Denver, actually. They’re friends with one another.”

“Denver’s a good person to know, they’re fun.”

“I didn’t know you thought so highly of me, Grae,” Denver says.

I roll my eyes, but before I can respond, Maisy comes over. “How’s everyone doing here? You want a menu, Denver?” she asks as she sets one in front of Luka.

“Nah, I’m good. Just the usual.”

“You got it. And what would you like to drink, sweetie?” Luka blushes at the endearment, and stammers a little as he orders a water. Maisy grins at him. “I’ll be right back with that, and I’ll bring you more coffee, Grae.”

“Thanks, Mais.” When she walks off, I look at Luka. “Maisy’s cool; everyone here is. You don’t have to be nervous.”

He laughs a little and shakes his head. “It’s my natural state of being.”

I nod. “I saw you with Ivy a few weeks ago, Maisy is her sister.”

“I remember Ivy mentioning she worked here.”

“I swear, I’m not a creep or anything, but I noticed you guys when I went to the restroom, I thought about introducing myself then, but didn’t want to come off as weird.”

Luka smiles. “No, don’t worry. I don’t think that. I uhh...noticed you too that day.”

Neither of us admits that we caught each other sneaking glances at one another, but that’s fine. It’s not like I’m that smooth, it’s been...far too long since I’ve dated. Awkward glances from across the diner are as good as it gets for me.

“Please, tell me you’re working on your fantasy series,” Denver says, nodding to my laptop.

“Sorry to disappoint, but I’m just fooling around with an idea I’ve had for a while. My brain is still working on the storyline for book two, but I promise, it’s coming.” Maybe, possibly, if I don’t burn it first.

Denver tries to glare at me, and it’s an adorable effort, they’re about as fearsome as the kittens Callum keeps trying to get us to adopt.

Speaking of my child, I look over to the other side of the diner to find him laughing at something one of his study partners has said. I’m not sure what’s so funny about schoolwork, but there’s sure been a lot more chatter and laughter from that end of the diner than anything else.

Maisy stops by the table to drop off our drinks and takes Luka’s order before whisking off again, only to return with the carafe to refill my coffee. “Need anything else?”

I shake my head. “I’m good. But would you mind telling me how much damage Cal has done?”

She laughs. “He only ordered one entree, but two different types of pie, so it could be worse.”

I sigh but agree. “Great, thanks.”

“No problem, let me know if you need anything, and I’ll be back with your guys’ food shortly.”

Denver asks, “Cal’s here?”

I nod over to where the study group is sitting. “Yeah, he’s supposed to be working with his homeschool friends, but as you can see, it’s more of a social hour.” Luka looks confused, so I explain. “My son, Callum, is fifteen and homeschooled. I don’t mind letting him hangout with some of the people he knows from his homeschool group, it’s good to know he has people his own age he can spend time with. It’s not a hardship for me to sit around and try to get some work done while he’s doing his thing.”

“Ah, okay. I always wanted to be homeschooled, but my parents lamented about how there wasn’t anyone around who knew how to teach me.” He rolls his eyes.

“I don’t know what we would have done before online schooling. My ex-mother-in-law is actually the one who organizes his schoolwork—she did all the research into the different kinds of programs there are and stuff. She was a teacher and offered to help with Callum when we decided to homeschool him.”

“That’s sweet,” Luka says.

“Yeah, I’ve always liked her. She’s amazing. I still claim her as my mother-in-law because I may have divorced her son, but not her. Anyway, she does the school stuff mostly. We all try to encourage him to make friends with other kids in similar situations. Being lonely was one of the things we struggled with when trying to figure out what to do.”

I don’t explain further because the rest of Callum’s story, why we chose to homeschool in the first place, isn’t really something you tell a stranger. Plus, it’s always been important for us to let Cal know that he has a choice in telling people his business or not. As his parents, of course we need to know so we can help him, but no one else needs to, unless it’s what he wants.

“Sounds like you’re doing the best you can for him.” Luka’s voice is soft and sweet, almost wistful.

I smile a little. “Thanks, we try. Sometimes it’s hard to know if we’re doing the right things, or are screwing him up, but he’s a good kid and makes it pretty easy.”

Denver speaks up. “I think most parents have those thoughts, so ya know, it’s normal.”

I shrug. “True, I guess.”

Maisy drops off their food and I go back to my work in progress, so they can eat without me awkwardly staring at them. I poke at the keys a few times, trying to pretend I’m not watching as they talk amongst themselves.

My heart gives a soft lurch as I realize they look good together. They obviously have spent some time together because they’re at ease with one another; you can tell by the way Denver leans into Luka, their face close to Luka’s as they say something too low for me to hear.

Denver has always been friendly and willing to talk to everyone, but they only really get that close with their core group of friends. I watch as they reach up and brush a stray lock of red hair off of Luka's forehead, enjoying the man's blushes, even as an envious pit settles in my stomach. Though whether I'm jealous of Luka or Denver remains to be seen.

I might only admit it to myself, but I've been attracted to Denver for a while. They've always been open about who they are, and their personality has always shone brightly, drawing me in. They're very different from Rory, and maybe that's what attracted me to them in the first place, because while my ex is slightly introverted like me—even if he's more outgoing and willing to talk to new people—Denver isn't, and it's almost a breath of fresh air. Of course, that's not the only reason I find myself wanting to spend more time in their orbit, but it was the first thing that drew me in a few years ago when we initially met.

Luka, however, has a different type of magnetic energy. We've only just met, but I like the way he blushes, and his shy, more reserved nature. He seemed a little out of his depth the first time I saw him, and something about that made me want to take him under my wing. I'm not as brave as Denver, though, so I'm not surprised they swooped in and took charge. That Luka seems to easily and eagerly go along with Denver intrigues me, and makes another, long-forgotten part of me perk up as well.

"Hey, Grae." Denver's words bring me out of my head and I meet their amused hazel eyes. "You still with us?"

"Yeah, sorry, were you talking to me?"

"I was asking if you were ever going to join Pancakes and Pronouns again? We've missed seeing you around."

Tension has my shoulders tightening, and I try not to squirm in my seat. "I don't

know... I've been out of the scene for a while, and while I know I'd be welcome, it feels...weird being there and not being actively looking for anything."

Denver rolls their eyes. "You know neither Gay or Cin will kick you out if you were to show up. It's not just for people actively in the lifestyle. The whole point is to meet people and familiarize yourself with the scene in a low-stakes environment."

"Doesn't make it easier, especially when most of the people know my situation, and I'm sure not everyone believes Rory and I are just friends."

"Those people don't matter. It's also why I think it's important for you to go to this particular munch, because...I don't want to say Rory's not allowed, that feels too much like we're excluding him, but what makes it good is there are people who understand a little bit better, since we're all kinky and trans."

"What are you talking about? If you don't mind my asking?" Luka cuts in before I can respond, and I'm relieved to get the attention off me.

"You know what a munch is?" Denver asks.

Luka shakes his head and Denver smiles indulgently. "Oh, you sweet, summer child."

I snort and Denver rolls their eyes at me before turning back to Luka. "Okay, so you know BDSM? Kink?"

Luka nods slowly. "Yeaahh, I haven't done anything like that, but I have a basic understanding."

"Okay, well, a munch is just like...an informal gathering of kinksters. Nothing kinky happens, but it's a nice low-key social gathering where we can catch up and spend time with people who get what it's like. This one is hosted here at Randy's every

second Wednesday, and the host is non-binary. It's specifically for non-cis kinksters. Though, if you're interested, you can join us." Luka immediately shakes his head, and it causes both Denver and I to smile. "Like I was reminding Graeme, it's not just for people who are already active participants in the BDSM scene. It's a good place to meet like-minded people in a chill, casual setting.

"Everyone is great, so if you want to see what it's like, you can. Even if you decide the whole BDSM thing isn't for you, it's another avenue to meet other people."

Luka is silent, he pulls his bottom lip between his teeth and seems to be thinking about how to respond. Though there's something in his eyes I can't quite decipher. It seems like interest, but I don't know Luka, so I can't say for sure, yet he doesn't seem put off or against the idea.

"I'm not good with people," he says slowly. "And I appreciate you trying to spin it into meeting new people, but well...I'm sure you know I'm awkward as all hell. I don't want to make anyone else uncomfortable when they're just there for a good time."

Denver rolls their eyes. "We all start somewhere. There's no censure for being new, or curious. So long as you're not there to gawk and pass judgment on things you might not understand, no one will care if you don't have experience."

Luka squirms in his seat, and if this were any other situation, if we were in a place where making him squirm was the goal... Once more, the dormant parts of me stir, making me want to see Luka squirm underneath me... Shaking my head, I brush those thoughts to the side, because that's not what's important right now.

I am...cautiously interested in the man sitting across from me, but then, I've also been interested in Denver for a while, too. Neither of those things mean I am actually going to do something about it.

“I’ll think about it,” Luka finally says.

“Good.” Denver smiles and then looks back at me. “And you? I mean, how can you say no to both of us?”

Before I can respond, someone sidles up to our table and I let out a quiet sigh of relief when I see it’s Callum.

“Hey.” I smile up at him. “What’s up?”

He shrugs. “Everyone is getting ready to leave.”

“Okay, did you have a good time?”

“It was fine.”

Concern fills me because after consuming as much sugar as I know he’s had, and spending a few hours with his friends, he should be bouncing off the walls, but I can’t ask about it in front of Denver and Luka.

Callum slides into the booth next to me and sighs. “Continue with your conversation,” he says.

“But then how can we talk about you?” Denver teases.

“Pretend I’m not here,” he shoots back. “Nice to see you, Denver, it’s been a while.”

“It has. You need to start coming in with your dad again. It’s so boring when you’re not around.”

Callum knocks his shoulder into mine. “I know, I’m the interesting one, but I think

Dad's alright, sometimes."

"You little shit." I push against him, making him laugh.

"I'm going to tell Da you're calling me names again."

"He'll agree with me," I shoot back.

Callum groans and turns to Luka and Denver. "You see what I have to deal with?"

"Yes, you poor baby," Denver coos.

"Don't encourage him," I say with an exaggerated sigh. Side-eyeing my son, I gesture to Luka. "Don't give him the wrong idea and make it seem like you've not been raised right."

Callum snorts. "Between you and Da, I don't think I ever stood a chance."

Denver laughs. "He's not wrong, Grae."

Groaning, I look at Luka. "I promise, I did my best with him. It's not my fault he's..." I gesture to Callum. "All that."

Luka laughs a little. "I think it's nice. I can't say I had such a...relaxed relationship with my parents."

That makes me sad for him. It was very much the same with me and my father, which was one of my biggest fears when it came to raising Callum. I didn't want to make the same mistakes my parents did.

"I'm Callum, by the way," Cal says to Luka. "In case Dad tried to pretend he didn't

know me.”

Luka and Denver laugh while I groan in exasperation.

“Luka.” He reaches across the table to shake Callum’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You, too. I haven’t seen you around before, but then, I haven’t been here recently.” Callum side-eyes me. “Have you been hiding me from your friends?”

“Can you blame me?”

Luka shakes his head. “I’m fairly new in town, this is only my second visit to Randy’s. And I just met Graeme today.”

Callum huffs but ends up smiling at Luka. “I guess that’s fine then.”

“You’re such a brat,” I tell him.

“I know you are, but what am I?” Callum counters.

Rolling my eyes, I sigh, knowing I won’t win this one.

“We better go,” I say, packing up my stuff. “It was nice meeting you, Luka.”

“You, too.” He smiles at both me and Callum as I nudge Callum to slide out of the booth. “Maybe we’ll see each other around?”

“Keep coming here and we will, for sure. I’m here often enough to work.”

“Think about what I said, Grae,” Denver says. “I’d love to see you again. Don’t think I won’t call Rory and make him drag you kicking and screaming.”

“You’re cruel, Den.”

“All’s fair in playtime, Graeme.” They wink.

I shake my head. “We’ll see.”

Setting a hand on Callum’s shoulder, I steer him to the counter so I can pay.

“What was that about?” he asks in quiet French.

“Nothing, just Denver being Denver.” When Maisy rings us up, I give Callum a mock glare. “Next time, I’m making you pay for yourself,” I tell him as I swipe my card.

“It was only a little bit of food!” he defends himself.

Shaking my head, I decide not to argue because he’s not entirely wrong, it could have been way worse. I’ve seen how the kid eats when he’s “starving.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

I 'm making coffee when Rory slinks into the kitchen, dressed in a polo shirt and pajama bottoms, his hair is still damp from his shower. His eyes are open, but it doesn't look like he's alert quite yet.

I gesture to him. "This is why we don't stay out past our curfew," I tease.

He glares at me, and in retaliation, swipes the mug I just set on the counter.

"Hey!"

"People who are mean don't get the first cup," he grumbles before taking a long drink, only to make a face at the straight black brew.

Snickering, I turn back to the Keurig and change out the pods, setting a new mug under it. "Someone woke up on the cranky side of the bed this morning." Turning to face him again, I offer the small container of sugar as a peace offering.

"It was just a late night."

"So I can see." I flick my gaze down to his arms, where there are shadows of bruises around his wrists. "I hope you're planning on changing shirts before going into the office."

"Working from home today," he replies, setting the coffee down and doctoring it to his preferences before turning one of his arms over and showing me the distinct, if somewhat light, marks of ropework up and down his forearms. "Bertie wasn't planning on tying me up, but one thing led to another and I stayed longer than I

should have.”

I watch his face carefully. “You let her take care of you?”

“Of course, it’s why I didn’t get home until stupid o’clock. Neither of us are novices, Grae.”

“I know, sorry. It might have been years since we’ve done anything, but it’s still ingrained in me to take care of you.”

That softens him. “I know. I appreciate it, you know I do. You’ve always taken such good care of me.”

I drink my coffee because there’s no way I can respond to that without getting sappy, and it’s far too early in the morning for that. Besides, whatever was I supposed to do? We met when we were fifteen, became best friends right away, and then started sleeping together a year later, after confessing we liked each other as more than friends. We also discovered all the queer and kinkiness together at a young age.

Even when I came out and we tried to navigate what that meant for me as a man, and for our relationship, we’ve always stood side by side. Through my family’s outright transphobia and despair, to accidentally getting pregnant with our son.

Our romantic and sexual relationship may have fizzled out as we discovered that while we love each other, we’re not in love with one another, but that doesn’t diminish what we’ve built over the last twenty years together.

Rory is my best friend, my son’s father, and the person I’m probably going to grow old and die with. Of course I’m going to worry about him and his...extracurricular activities.

“You should try it, Cher,” he says into the lapsed silence.

“What? Rope play with Bertie? No thanks, I’m pretty sure we’re not each other’s types.”

“You know what I mean, you asshole. How long has it been since you’ve been on a date? Let alone a playdate.”

I grimace and hide behind my mug.

“Uh-huh. You know the Pancakes and Pronouns munch is coming up next week. I’m sure they’d love to see you.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because, unlike you, I pay attention. Plus, Cin told me, they thought you might be interested. Since they haven’t seen you there in a while, they told me to tell you that nothing’s changed, you can show up if you just want some company.”

I shrug and shake my head at the same time, unsure how to respond. “I don’t know. You know it’s awkward going to those things by yourself.”

He sighs but nods in agreement. “Well, I’d offer but I’m too cisgendered for them.”

I snort, but he’s not wrong. It’s not a bad thing, but Cin specifically hosts the munch they’ve dubbed Pancakes and Pronouns for non-cis people because nobody else is going to, and having a space that’s just ours is very much appreciated.

“Doesn’t Denver usually go?” Rory asks with a wry grin.

“Ugh,” I groan. “I always seem to forget how spunky you are after a scene.”

He laughs. “You know, asking them out won’t make the world end, Cher.”

My face heats, but I’d like to pretend it’s from the still-hot coffee I’m holding close to my mouth. “I think our interests are too similar for that, and if I was looking, I’m not sure that’s what I’d want, at least not right now.”

Rory makes a noise and mutters, “I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

I choose to ignore him because it’s far too early and I haven’t had enough coffee to try to parse what that means.

It’s not that I’m opposed to dating or playing with another Dom, but the only time I’ve tried was when I was still with Rory, the slutty submissive absolutely eats that shit up. On my own, though? I wouldn’t rule anything out in the future, but...it’s been a long time since I’ve been on the scene—dating or kink-wise. I’m not saying two Dominants couldn’t make it work...but if Rory is right—and the dick usually is—then for my first foray back into having a love life, I’m not sure that’s the direction I want to go.

Which, of course, is the whole reason I’ve kept my stupid fucking crush on Denver on lockdown for...a long time now.

Luka’s quiet curiosity of the munch, and all it entailed, when Denver brought it up, flashes through my mind, but I shove the thought down. I don’t know him, and while the insidious little voice in my head—that sounds suspiciously like Rory—says a munch is the perfect place to start getting to know him better, I don’t jump at it.

I saw the way Luka and Denver watched, touched, and reacted to one another yesterday. They may have only known each other a short time, but I could see the attraction and want simmering under the surface. And I respect Denver too much as a person to try to step on any toes there.

Rory sighs, bringing my thoughts back to him and the matter at hand. “At least think about it?”

I nod and give him what I’m sure is an unconvincing smile. “I will.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” he says sternly. “I need to go log in. I should at least pretend to work today.”

I snort at that. “Hey, you know what we should do with the spare bedroom?”

“No,” he says, already turning to leave the kitchen. “We’re not turning it into an office when there’s a perfectly good functioning one downstairs that was built for that purpose.”

I make a face at his retreating back. “Whatever! See if I take the kid with me today so you can have some peace and quiet!”

Rory continues to ignore me, disappearing into his bedroom, where I’m presuming he’s gathering his stuff to take downstairs.

Alone in the kitchen, I lean against the counter to finish my coffee, my thoughts spinning a million miles an hour as I admit, reluctantly, that Rory may be right. Getting out, even for just a few hours of good conversation, might be beneficial for me.

I just wish everything that came with making and keeping relationships—romantic and otherwise—wasn’t so fucking complicated.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

Jordan

Ready to come home yet?

Luka

Ask me when the snow hits

Jordan

LOL, yeah, that's a no for me. Everything's good? Job, settling in, all that?

Luka

Yeah, it's fine. Job's the job, ya know, not much difference there. Val's been great, and I'm really appreciative of them. I made a new friend, who's been showing me around, so it's going well enough.

Jordan

You made a friend? What is this world coming to?

Luka

Asshole

Jordan

Seriously, I'm happy for you. I'm glad it seems to be what you needed.

Luka

Yeah... It really has been.

Jordan

Tell me more about this friend... grinning emoji

Luka

Ugh, it's not like that, we really are just friends

Jordan

What's their name? How'd you meet?

Luka

Denver. They're a friend of Valery's. Val, the shit, invited them and someone else over a few weeks ago and we hit it off.

Jordan

Good. I'm glad, you deserve to have a friend

Luka

I'm serious... We're FRIENDS.

Jordan

I believe you...

Luka

Liar.

Jordan

GTG, have to meet a client. We should Skype or something soon, maybe do a watch party. I miss your face.

Luka

Gross, but sure.

I maybe miss you too.

Jordan

Talk to ya later

Tossing my phone onto my bed, I lay back with a sigh. Without my cousin to distract me, my thoughts go back to the other day when Denver and Graeme were discussing the munch. I can't deny my interest was piqued, but with it, the overwhelming fear that the people who frequent it will take one look at me and see all the ways in which I don't fit.

I've seen kink stuff online and whatnot, who hasn't? And I'll admit, some of it is intriguing, but I wouldn't know where to start. Despite Denver's reassurances that a

munch is the perfect place to meet other people who may be into the same thing, it's terrifying because what if someone asks a question I can't answer? They'll probably want to know where I fit, and how can I possibly answer that without experiencing it?

It'd be like fumbling my way through my first sexual experience all over again, and that was a fucking disaster. The thought makes my throat tighten and I have to close my eyes and take slow, measured breaths, trying to calm the sudden anxiousness running through me.

A knock on my bedroom door makes me jump and I place a hand on my chest, feeling my racing heartbeat.

"Yeah?" I call out in a shaky voice.

Valery pushes the door open a little. "Hey, you okay?" Their brow furrows and they look at me in concern.

"I'm fine. Just...working through something. What's up?"

"Oh-kay," they say slowly. "I was wondering if you wanted to have dinner with me? I can order food and we can just hang out? I feel like we haven't gotten to do a lot of that recently."

"Yeah, sure, that sounds good. I'll be right out."

"Take your time. I'll get the food, pizza okay?"

"Perfect, you know what I like."

"Just come out when you're done having a crisis."

“I’m fine!” I say as they close the door behind them, but honestly, I don’t even believe my words.

Taking a few more minutes to center myself, I leave my bedroom and head into the living room. Valery smiles at me when they look up from their phone.

“Food should be here in about forty minutes.”

“Great, let me know how much I owe you.”

“Pfft, my treat. I asked you, plus, as I said, I feel bad for pretty much neglecting you.”

I roll my eyes and sit against the arm of the sofa. “I don’t know how many times I have to reassure you, but I promise, it’s fine. I’m a big boy, I can take care of myself. Besides, Denver’s been great, I like spending time with them.”

Val smiles. “I knew you two would get along.” I look at them dubiously and they laugh. “Seriously, maybe not on paper because you’re very different, but Den’s cool. They’ve always had that friendly, at ease aura about them. Not much can faze them, so I knew they were someone I wanted you to meet, to help put you at ease a little.”

“You’re a little shit, but you’re not wrong. I like them.”

“Good.” They give me a look and I scoff, because I can see where they’re going to go next.

“No.” I shake my head. “I like Denver as a person and a friend, but in no way, shape, or form am I looking for a relationship right now.”

“Oh, come on, I think you’ll be cute together!”

“I promise, I’m fine. The last thing I need is a partner. I barely feel like I can make a life here, and that life is currently a mess. I don’t want to put that on anyone else.”

Valery makes a noise of disagreement but they don’t argue, except to say, “That family of yours did you a disservice. But, no matter. You’re here with me and we’ll get you straightened out.” They laugh a little at their own turn of words.

“What about you?” I venture. “You’re so worried about my love life, or lack thereof, when are you going to put yourself out there and meet someone?”

They groan and curl their legs under themselves. “I’ve gone on dates, thank you very much.”

“Sure, but you haven’t actually been with anyone. It’s been what...seven years since you and Jor broke up? And you are trying to tell me you haven’t found anyone in all that time?”

Valery shrugs. “What can I say? Your cousin is kind of hard to get over. But seriously, there hasn’t been anyone I’ve vibed with. I won’t lie and say I don’t still have feelings for Jordan, but we’re friends now, and I’m okay with that. At the same time, I already know what it’s like to have that type of all-encompassing and fulfilling love. I won’t settle for less. I meant what I said a few weeks ago—I would have married Jordan, given the chance. I want to feel that again. I’ve been here seven years and it hasn’t happened yet, so ya know, I’m just going to take my time, and if someone falls into my lap...well, I’ll consider not pushing them off.”

Chuckling, I shake my head.

“So what have you and Denver been up to?”

Before I can reply, there’s a knock on the door and I let out a breath of relief when

Valery jumps up to answer it. I don't mind talking about my friendship with Denver, especially since all we've been doing is hanging out, but the munch is still on my mind, as are my mixed feelings about it. Valery might be easy to talk to, but I'm not sure this is something I want to spill. Not when I can't even think about kink or BDSM without getting weird, fluttery feelings inside.

Then again, who else am I going to talk to? My cousin? Denver? Neither option is really appealing, for different reasons. As much as I don't want to admit it—because it makes me seem kind of pathetic—Jordan, Valery, and Denver are my only friends.

Valery comes into the room with the pizza box, paper plates and napkins piled on top. They drop their burden on the coffee table before heading back into the kitchen, calling over their shoulder, “What do you want to drink?”

“Water, please!”

“You're boring!”

I laugh and take a breath, not letting my nerves get ahead of me. “Hey, what do you know about the munch held at Randy's?”

The silence is almost deafening, but Val comes back into the room with drinks, handing me my water before setting theirs on the floor by their chair.

“Well...” they reply, moving the plates and napkins before flipping open the pizza box. “I know the organizers are good people. Cin is sassy and fun, a bit of a handful. I'm not into kink, but I've been around when they've congregated at Randy's. It's nothing scary, promise.” Valery puts food on their plate then looks at me. “Did Denver say something about it to you? I know they're into all that.”

I shrug and pick at the label on my water. “They mentioned it to someone when we

were at the diner the other day, trying to convince him to go. Denver offered to bring me with them, but... I don't know. I don't want to feel out of place, or for someone to think I don't belong."

"If that whole thing might be your scene, then why don't you go and see? The way I look at it, you can get a feel for the people, maybe get some questions answered, and if it's not for you, that's fine. But meeting new people is never a bad thing."

"Says you."

"Worse comes to worse, you answer a few questions about yourself. I don't see the problem with that."

Sighing, I set my water aside and lean forward, grabbing a plate and a slice of pizza. "I don't know. I'm not good at pretending to be a functioning person, you know that."

Valery laughs and I glare at them. "Sorry, sorry." They try to hide their smile behind a hand. "I love you just as you are, Luka. But the way you said it was... Well, can you blame me? I know peopling isn't your strong suit, but it's not like you'll be alone. Denver will be there, they'll take care of you. Even if it's not this month, you can go the next, or the one after. Hell, it's not my thing, but I'll go with you too, if you want."

I shake my head. "I couldn't ask that of you."

"You're not, I'm offering. Because we're friends, and maybe I'll find some hot Dom who won't mind sticking to boring ol' spanking with me before they fuck my brains out."

I choke on the bite of food I just took. Valery jumps up and tries to pat my back but I wave them off, grabbing a napkin and spitting into it. After coughing a few times, I'm

able to get myself under control. “Jesus,” I rasp. “Are you trying to kill me?”

“Sorry! Don’t tell Jordan, I am far too pretty for prison.”

I snort and cough again, my eyes watering from the near-death experience. “I’m fine.” Balancing my plate on my knee, I snatch up my water and take a few slow sips. “I don’t think you can call spanking boring, but that’s exactly why, if I do go, you’re not allowed to come with me.”

Valery laughs. “You’re so dramatic. Fine, I’ll behave and stay home, but that just means you should go.”

“I’ll think about it, okay?”

“Sure. So long as you actually do think.”

“I will, promise.”

“Good. Now, wanna watch something?”

“Seems safer than talking to you while eating. I would rather not almost die again tonight.”

Valery scoffs. “You’re fine, don’t be such a baby.”

Rolling my eyes, I grab another piece of pizza and Val snatches up the remote to turn the TV on.

“Thanks, Val,” I say quietly as they browse a streaming app. “Almost killing me aside, I’m glad you’re here to listen.”

“Anytime.”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

C allum's door is ajar, so I knock once and push it open enough to stick my head in. I find him lying on his stomach on the bed, feet kicked up behind him. "What are you doing?"

He blinks at me. "Talking to Nat." He brandishes his phone for emphasis. "What are you doing? I thought you were going to Randy's?"

"I am, wanted to see if you needed anything first."

He shakes his head and goes back to texting. "I'm fine. Go, have fun. Get some words done, 'cause I wanna read the next book."

I laugh. "I'm not going for work, but you'll be happy to know, I'm at least a fourth of the way into the book now."

That catches his attention. "Wait, you're actually going to hang out with people? I thought you just said that so Da would leave you alone."

I shake my head. "I have friends, Cal. It's not that much of a surprise."

"Eh, kind of is."

Sighing, I say, "Anyway, I'll be gone for a few hours. Don't get into anything you're not supposed to, and get your schoolwork done."

"How do you know it's not all finished?"

“Is it?”

“No,” he admits with a grumble.

“Thought so. Get it done, Callum, or no more talking to Nathan unsupervised.”

“That’s unfair!”

I stare at him and he seems to weigh his options, because he sighs but sits up, tossing his phone onto the bed. “I’m getting my priorities straight.”

“Good, you do that. I’ll see you later, behave, and if you eat something, clean up after yourself. Da said you didn’t last time.”

That earns me an exasperated sigh, but I ignore the dramatics and leave him to it.

I should probably be offended that my kid is so surprised I’m leaving the house for something more than work, but...he’s not wrong. Even before the divorce, I only went out every once in a while. I like being around people when I’m working because it helps keep me on track and makes me focus, but going out with friends hasn’t ever been a priority.

Though getting married at nineteen and having a kid two years later had something to do with that.

Of course, I was more introverted before that. Rory has always been outgoing enough for the two of us. It’s part of the reason we’ve always worked so well; we’re able to balance one another.

Going to the munch today, while it’s not my first time, it has been a while. Last time, it was at Rory’s insistence as well. I should probably work on that and start doing

things that I want to do but am too awkward about, without needing my best friend to talk me into them. It'll be less pathetic at least. Maybe.

Making sure I have everything, I realize I can't stall any longer, if I actually plan on going to the munch today.

As if he can read my thoughts from his office in the city, my phone vibrates with a text from Rory.

Partner in Crime

Don't stall. You'll regret it if you don't go. *And* if you don't, I'll make you go to the club with me next time.

Graeme

I hate you

Partner in Crime

I know. Now go, or else you'll be late

Graeme

I'm going

Walking out the side door, I flip off the security camera, knowing he'll check the notification to make sure I'm actually doing what I said.

Nerves try to overtake me once I'm in my car, but I push them to the side. Maybe Rory is right, in more ways than one. Because while I've never been the most

outgoing person, this sudden anxiety is surprising, and it's messing with my head even more. It might be my first time doing something like this in a long while, but it is not my first time ever. That doesn't seem to matter though as the anxiety churning through my body threatens to crush me. Holding the steering wheel tightly, I breathe deeply a few times.

After a few minutes, my heartbeat steadies and my breathing levels out, enough that I don't feel like passing out, or as if I'm going to shake apart. It's kind of disconcerting, as I've felt anxiety on and off over the years—publishing my first book was fucking terrifying—but this, though, is something different.

Before I can think too hard, I start the car and then put a call through to Rory.

“Change your mind?” he asks in lieu of hello.

“Almost,” I admit, backing my car out of the drive. “I...I think I had an anxiety attack?”

“Are you okay?” Concern threads through his tone, and whatever lingering feelings I had finally ease. “You don't have to do this if it's going to cause so much stress, Cher. I didn't push you too hard, did I?”

I take a moment to think it over. Realizing that, no, he didn't make me do anything I didn't already want to, he just pushed me to action.

“I promise,” I tell him firmly. “It wasn't you. I wouldn't have agreed had I not also thought it was something I needed. I guess I'm just worried I've been away from the scene for too long, and they won't want me there. Or maybe I'm too rusty for anyone to take me seriously, even though we're not there for anything more than conversation. Or...maybe it's not for me after all.”

Rory is quiet for a moment, but just his sheer presence helps soothe me further, so I'm not worried. "It's okay if you realize you no longer want to be part of the scene, Grae. It's even okay if you come to realize your limits and needs have changed, more than you originally thought."

"I know," I reply. And I do know that. Part of the reason Rory and I never worked as a couple, despite the love and sexual chemistry between us, is our kinks have never lined up enough. And while it's never been the be-all end-all for us, when you need that little something more, being able to have those needs met is important.

Rory and I made do for a long time, because we loved each other and the life we built, but love isn't always enough. Luckily for us, we'd known each other too long at that point to not realize something had to change if we were going to stay together and continue being a family, for our sake, as much as it was for Callum's.

"No, I don't think it's that. Do I think I've gotten too rusty and maybe too soft over the years? Sure, but the need to take care of someone is still there."

"You've always been a soft Dom, Cher."

"Thanks for the reminder," I say, knowing my smile is bleeding through my tone.

"You're welcome. Now, go and relax, enjoy catching up with people, and if you need me, I'm just a phone call away."

"I don't want to bother you."

"It's not a bother, Graeme. I'll be home soon, so you won't be interrupting anything."

"I thought you had a date?" I ask.

“Eh,” he says. “I called it off. I wasn’t really feeling it to begin with, then I said something about having a kid and he got...weird.”

I scoff. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s whatever. I can’t go back in time and change having Cal, and I wouldn’t, even if sometimes I wonder what I did in a previous life to deserve him.”

I laugh, knowing the feeling well. I love my son, but sometimes... He got the best and worst parts of both of us. Poor kid.

“I understand some people don’t want children,” Rory continues, “But to look down on those of us who do have them...”

“Yeah.” I sigh. “I’m sorry you had to experience that.”

“It is what it is. So anyway, I’ll just be hanging out with Callum, you can call or text, or even send a smoke signal if you need to. I promise, you won’t be interrupting anything; let’s be honest, you’ll probably be saving me.”

“Such a drama queen.”

“Did you hear what I said?” he asks, tone serious. “I’m hanging out with Callum tonight. You know, our loveable but one hundred percent strange child.”

Thankfully, I’m stopped when he says this because I can’t hold back my laughter.

“Hmm,” I say, when I can finally catch my breath. “I wonder where he gets his ridiculousness from.”

Rory sniffs. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Uh-huh, sure you don’t.” Taking a deep breath, I say, “Thanks, Ror. I appreciate you talking me down. And...for being my friend, after all this time.”

“Anytime, Cher. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

When Rory hangs up, I almost want to call him back, but swallowing down the urge, I find a parking spot and muster up the courage and good feelings that talking to my best friend ignited in me.

Trying to stall that one little extra bit, I pull down the visor mirror and mess with my hair, pretending I’m the type of person who actually cares about how neat my appearance is.

Taking one last deep breath, I flip the mirror back up and get out of the car on mostly steady legs.

Walking into the diner, it’s slightly easier to breathe when I’m surrounded by the familiarity of the place. Before I allow myself to second guess anything, I stride over to where familiar people are already congregating around a set of tables.

Cin comes bounding up, a set of cat ears perched precariously on their head, though I wouldn’t need the playgear to guess what they’re into. Cin is...very open, forward, and their sassy nature is a draw. I’m not into kittens, or their style of play, but I do admire how neither Cin nor their partner care about fitting into neat little boxes of what they “should” be. It’s one of the reasons I love this group they’ve managed to pull together; our hosts being themselves makes it easier on us, which means the risk of being judged is low.

“Hey, Cin.” I smile at the adorable kitten, who’s currently dressed in a tight black

crop top and skintight pants that show off way more of...everything than I'd ever be comfortable with.

"I'm surprised you're here," they say, moving in for a quick hug. "I mean, I got your RSVP, but I still didn't think you'd show up."

I look at them in confusion. "I didn't RSVP..." I know they prefer that we do, just so they can have a headcount, but nobody cares if someone wants to join us at the last minute, so long as they're respectful.

They grin up at me. "Well, the text was from Rory, but it was on your behalf, so same difference."

Rolling my eyes, I reply, "I don't think that's how it works."

"Sure it is!" They bounce on their toes a little, even as they give a cheeky smile that lights up their hazel eyes.

I shake my head. "The two of you need to stop conspiring against me."

"But where's the fun in that?"

Shaking my head, I sigh and look around at the people already here, not seeing either of the two I was hoping for. A hint of disappointment runs through me, but I shove it to the side, knowing I can't hinge this little outing on either Denver or Luka. I need to do this for me, more than anyone else.

It's incredibly annoying that the reminder comes to me in the form of Rory's voice.

"It's good to see you, Cin," I tell them. "You can't tell him this, but Rory is right; I think today's going to be good for me."

Cin beams. “Your secret is safe with me.” They look past me and bounce in excitement once more. “Ooh, Denver brought someone with them, they said they might.”

Turning slightly, I look to where Cin’s gaze is directed, to find Denver did bring Luka with them.

The two walk hand in hand, and seeing them together makes both my stomach and heart flip over itself. They look good together, even though it looks as if Luka is clinging to Denver a bit.

When Denver sees me standing with Cin, they smile, and it lights up their entire way-too-fucking-pretty face. Some small part of me is hopeful that they look like that because of me, but I know better than to think that.

“Hi.” Denver sidles up to us with Luka in tow. “I wasn’t sure if you’d be here.”

“Neither was I,” I admit. I give Luka a small smile. “Nice to see you again.”

“You, too.” He has the usual deer-in-headlights look that all newbies get, and it’s fucking adorable.

Denver introduces Luka to Cin, and I allow myself to fade away, still too full of my own anxiety to handle being so close to Denver, knowing they’re here with someone else.

I’m not a jealous person, so it’s not that. At least, I don’t want to equate the weird, jittery feelings now running through me as jealousy. Especially when there’s nothing to be jealous of. Not when Denver and I are nothing but...acquaintances? We’re friendly, sure, but not enough to call us friends. Denver knows about my work and my kid because they like talking to people, and they make whoever they’re with feel

seen. They may or may not know some of my history as a Dom because of the munches, and the fact my ex-husband is still very active in the scene.

Other than that? We don't know each other, and this crush I've harbored for them over the last few years is as one sided as it's always been.

So, I find someone I'm familiar with, and pretend I don't studiously watch as Denver introduces Luka to everyone, all the while keeping a hand on him.

The weird ache building in my stomach moves up to my throat, and I force myself to look away, determined to enjoy this part of myself that I've lost, rather than craving something I've never had.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

Plopping down into the empty seat next to Graeme, I ask, “Why are you being weird?”

He looks up at me with blue eyes, full of confusion, and a little...sadness? Maybe? I’m not sure what put that particular look in his eyes, but I want nothing more than to fix whatever it is.

“I’m not,” he denies.

“Bullshit.” Leaning in, I keep my gaze on his. “You know, you can talk to me, right? I’d like to think, after all this time, we’re friends.”

That earns me a strained smile. “Thank you. But I promise, I’m fine. Maybe a little overwhelmed, but it’s okay.”

Setting a hand on his arm, I study him. “Are you sure? Did you feel pressured into coming? I hope I didn’t make you feel like this the other day.”

Grae shakes his head. “No, no. You didn’t do anything to make me feel pressured, I swear. I just had a bit of a realization earlier that this is the first real social event I’ve been to in a long time. I guess it’s made me feel some type of way, as while I’ve never been the most social person around—that was all Rory—I like to think I’m friendly enough.”

“You are,” I assure.

He gives me another strained smile. “Yeah, maybe. But... I don’t know. I guess I’ve

come to see just how much I've shut myself away for so long. Reentering the social life I had not too long ago is difficult, and I don't know how to change that."

Giving his arm a squeeze, I move in closer, heedless of the people around us. "Well, I'm here to be your friend, and anytime you wanna hang out, I'm down. I'm still on nights right now, but my off days are usually free."

"You don't have to worry about me, but I appreciate it."

"Pfft. I'd love to see you more. I'm still showing Luka around, introducing him to the city and people, so you could join us."

Graeme sort of grimaces and another sad look crosses his features. "I don't want to crash your party. Especially not when it looks like you two are...moving along in your relationship."

It takes a moment for his words and meaning to make sense, and I laugh. "Oh, no. Luka and I are just friends. Are we close? Sure. We've spent a lot of time together the last few weeks, since Valery introduced us, and maybe I'm more touchy-feely than I need to be, but he likes it. From the little hints I've gotten of his past, I suspect he didn't have much love or affection growing up. I'm not saying I'm trying to compensate for that, but... I like the way he looks when I do nice things for him, even something as simple as holding his hand."

There's a look in Graeme's eyes I can't decipher, but the smile he gives is soft. "You're a good person and friend, Denver. Luka's lucky to have you in his corner."

"He's wonderful." I squeeze his arm again. "Seriously, Grae, consider coming out with us one day. We'd both like that."

"I'll think about it."

Hours after the munch, Luka and I are at my apartment. It's late and we're both exhausted, but working nights means my sleep schedule is whacky at the moment, so I'm good to be up for a few more hours, though I know Luka has to work tomorrow.

"Do you want me to take you home?"

He curls into the corner of the sofa and shakes his head. "No, I'm fine. Tired, but I don't work until the afternoon, so I'm okay." He bites his bottom lip and fidgets a little before saying, "You and Graeme looked cozy earlier."

"Not as cozy as I'd like to be, but then I'm not as touchy with most people like I am with you. I mean, touch is part of my love language, and I grew up with lots of hugs and stuff, but I didn't want to overwhelm him while he was clearly already struggling."

"He wouldn't have minded," Luka says softly. "He likes you, ya know. As more than a friend."

I swear my heart stops beating for a moment as my breath catches in my throat. I hope my voice sounds normal when I ask, "What makes you say that?"

Luka rolls his eyes. "He looks at you like I imagine I do."

"Luka..."

I get a sad, small smile. "It's okay," he says softly. "I saw how you were looking at him, too. I'm okay. It'll pass."

Sliding over so I'm sitting directly next to him, I set a hand on the back of the sofa and lean over his curled up legs, hovering close. "You're adorable," I whisper.

My words earn me a blush and shy smile, and it makes me grin. “Yeah,” I say quietly. “So adorable, and it draws me in. I don’t want to scare you off; I like being your friend. But if you’re going to say shit like that...it’s hard not to react.”

Luka gasps and his blush deepens. He sits up, his legs pressing against my chest as I lean over him, but all that matters is how close his mouth gets to mine.

“I like being your friend, too.”

Closing the scant few inches between us, I tell him in a breathless whisper, “I’m going to kiss you.”

“Do it.”

The first touch of our lips is soft, sweet. The second is much the same. The third time I press my lips to Luka’s, he groans, pushing harder against me and making me moan in return. The position we’re in is awkward, but neither of us seems to care. Sweeping my tongue along his bottom lip, I taste him.

A breath rushes out of Luka’s mouth as he opens for me, his soft whimper spurring me on, though I keep our kiss gentle, not wanting to rush this.

When we finally pull back, both of us breathless, I’m met by the softest hazel brown eyes, and the sweetest smile on kiss-swollen lips.

Whether what Luka said about Graeme “liking me” is true or not, it doesn’t matter right now. All that does is the sweet, shy, and absolutely adorable man in front of me.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

I hate night shifts. I don't know how Denver can stay so upbeat while working overnight, but it is definitely not for me.

“Hey.” Someone sidles up to me as I'm washing the mug I used while on shift.

Turning, I smile at the person I've only seen a few times in passing, I'm pretty sure they work nights, mostly. “Sorry, am I in your way?”

“No, no. I just wanted to introduce myself. I'm Axel, a friend of Ivy's. She keeps talking about how sweet you are, so I thought I'd come over and officially meet you. Maybe then it'll seem less creepy when she gossips. Or more... I'm not entirely sure.”

I chuckle a little and set the mug in the dish drainer. “I hope it's good gossip, at least.”

Axel smiles. “It is, believe me. She thinks you're adorable. And like I said, sweet.”

My face heats at Axel's words, but a warmth settles in me at the same time. Outside of Val and Denver, I don't have friends here, so to know that I've made such an impression on Ivy, even though we haven't been able to hang out recently, means a lot.

“Hey, you can say no, and I'd understand as you don't know me, but I'm starving, and was going to get something on the way home, so do you want to have breakfast with me?”

Axel backs up a few steps, giving me more space. “Totally cool if you say no, though. I just don’t like eating alone. I’ll call my partner and make them meet me, then they’ll bitch because they are not an early riser, but it’s fine.”

Axel must be able to interpret my deer-in-headlights look because they smile. “I promise, it’s okay. I’m sorry I came on a little too strong. Lauri, my partner, bitches about me being...excitable.”

An awkward chuckle escapes me and I shift on my feet. “I mean...I need food too, but I’m also exhausted, so raincheck?”

Axel’s grin doesn’t dim, despite me turning them down. “No problem. I know I came on too strong. Lauri says that a lot, too. But I feel like I know you because of Ivy, and I am always here for new friends.”

My smile softens and becomes more genuine. “I could always use more friends, but not after working overnight. Sorry, I am not a...fun person to be around without sleep.”

Axel laughs. “No worries. We can exchange numbers and meet up another time? I’ll bring Lauri too, so you don’t feel awkward about being alone with me. You can bring someone as well. I promise not to make it weird.”

“Awkward is my usual state of being, so it’s fine.”

“Oh good, then we’ll get along great.” Axel pulls out their phone. “Mind putting your number in? I promise to only use it for nudes of Lauri.”

Laughing, I take the phone and give them my number. Normally, doing this would send me into a state of overthinking, but there’s something...calming about Axel that draws me in, even with the...excessive energy they seem to have after a twelve-hour

overnight shift.

Handing the phone back to Axel, I watch as they type for a few seconds. “There,” they say. “Now you have my number, too. Don’t hesitate to tell me if I overstep, yeah? I tend to do that sometimes, especially when I’m excited about something.”

“And that’s me?”

Axel shrugs. “Well, yeah. I’ll admit that I saw you way before I ever talked to Ivy, but I don’t want to come off as some creep. I promise, I’m really nice!”

I smile a little. “I believe you. I’m not good with...social interaction though.”

They roll their eyes. “Don’t worry, I’ve got you covered.” Sighing, they say, “I suppose I should go home. Maybe if I annoy Lauri enough they’ll take pity on me and cook.”

I laugh because I almost feel bad for Axel’s partner now. I don’t know them at all, but I can already tell Axel is...a lot. In a good way, though.

“I’ll walk out with you.”

Axel grins and it’s infectious, making me smile in a way I haven’t since Valery was my almost-cousin.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

The Child

Picture attachment

Partner in Crime

No

Graeme

Absolutely not

The Child

But he's so cute! Look at that face!

Picture attachment

Graeme

You're not getting a cat, Cal

The Child

You're sure mean parents

Partner in Crime

Yes. We live to make your life miserable.

The Child

SIGH. Rude

What if, and hear me out, I keep it at Granna's?

Graeme

Still no

Partner in Crime

Nice try though.

The Child

Worst divorced parents ever. Aren't you supposed to like, disagree on how to raise me?

Partner in Crime

If we did that, we wouldn't have had you at all.

Graeme

What he said. Go back to your volunteering, I'll pick you up in a few hours. Don't give your granna a hard time.

The Child

SIGH

Rolling my eyes at my teenager's dramatics, I set my phone down and try to focus back on my computer, only to have my phone go off again.

I consider ignoring it, but curiosity gets the best of me, and distraction sounds better than whatever's happening on my screen.

Partner in Crime

Maybe we should talk about it?

Graeme

We agreed, no pets

Partner in Crime

When he was little. He's responsible now.

Responsible-ish. Think about it?

Graeme

I will. Gonna go dark for a few hours. Need to get some work done. I'll pick Cal up from your mom's when I go get dinner.

Partner in Crime

Okay. We'll talk later though

Graeme

Yeah. See you tonight

Setting my phone back down, I scowl at my screen, the half-finished sentence taunting me. With a groan, I close out the program and shut the laptop, deciding a change of scenery is what I need. I thought working from home would give me a distraction free place to get some serious words done, but being trapped in my own head hasn't done anything except frustrate me more.

I'm about ready to put this book in timeout and work on something else for a bit, see if that knocks anything loose. The problem with being creative is that it's not an on/off switch. My life would be so much easier if it were that simple.

Packing up my things, I decide to head to Randy's on the off chance that maybe a change of scenery and some people-watching will help get me into the right headspace. It's either that or tossing this book into the proverbial fire.

As soon as I step foot into the diner, some tension eases from me. The familiar sights and sounds are comforting, moreso than my empty house ever could be. The writer's corner is currently empty and I breathe a sigh of relief. As much as I need to be around people, I'm not sure I can actually deal with talking to them right now.

Zo drops by the table with a coffee, but I wave them off when they offer to get me food. Opening my document, I reread the current chapter, trying to see if it's as bad as I think, or if I'm just being my usual neurotic self. Sadly, Rory has a meeting right about now, otherwise I'd make him read it over and tell me what's wrong, or give me a good kick in the pants—whichever is needed.

I don't have many people I can trust to read this raw of a version and be honest with me. At least, none that I can trust to actually be brutally honest. I don't doubt that my

beta readers and editors tell me the truth, but when my head gets like this, it's hard to take their words at face value.

These are the things they don't tell you about writing; how your overactive imagination can be your worst enemy.

Deleting the last few paragraphs, I decide to start the scene over, trying not to think too hard as I get a few words down on the page.

It's not until I'm taking a sip of coffee that has gone cold, I realize I've been sitting here for far longer than I thought. But, the chapter is done, and that's all I care about.

Catching Zo's eye from across the room, I raise my cold coffee in the air. They give me a nod in acknowledgement, so I turn back to my computer, contemplating starting another chapter. I probably won't be able to finish it before I have to go get Callum, but a start would be good.

"Hey." Denver's voice has me looking over the screen of my laptop and I smile at them.

"Hi, it's nice to see you. Wanna sit?" I motion to the empty chair across from me.

They take a seat and I close the lid on my computer, not wanting to seem rude. Zo comes over with a fresh coffee. "You sitting here now?" they ask Denver.

"If it's okay with Grae."

"It's perfectly fine." I give them a bigger smile.

"Okay, I'll bring your food when it's ready." Zo whisks off with my cold coffee and I wrap my hands around the new one.

“So, what’s up?”

Denver shrugs. “Not much. Was just going to grab some food before going home. I’ve been out running errands all day, and Luka is working, so here I am.”

The mention of Luka has butterflies erupting in my stomach, but I don’t know if it’s good or bad yet. “How’s he doing?”

Denver’s smile is soft, and there’s something in their hazel eyes that I can’t read. “Good. He’s come out of his shell a lot since we first met, but he’s still painfully awkward about some things. It’s hard at times, watching him doubt himself.”

“I know that feeling well. He has you though, so he’ll blossom soon enough.”

Denver’s cheeks pink a little, and I like that I’ve caused such a reaction in them, they normally seem so untouchable. “You give me far more credit than you should, but thanks. I just wish everyone had it as easy as I did, you know?”

I nod, because I might not know Luka’s story, but I can read between the lines. My own coming out journey wasn’t easy, especially after I got pregnant and my family found out. But I wouldn’t trade any of it for the world. I love my life now. Even if I’m willing to admit I let it get a bit...stagnant.

“I want to clear something up,” Denver says, but before they can continue, Zo comes over and drops their food off. “Thanks, doll.” Denver smiles up at the server.

“No problem. Let me know if you need anything. I’ll go grab you another drink.”

Denver chuckles. “Ah, yeah, I left mine over there.” They gesture to the other side of the diner, where they must have been sitting.

“Are you here with someone? I don’t want to take up your time.”

“Nah.” Denver shakes their head. “Just Tori and her girlfriend, but it’s fine. They both understand. I...may have told them a little about the other day, at the munch.”

I feel my face heat and clear my throat, embarrassment rushing through me. “I’m sorry about that, for making assumptions.”

“It’s fine. I...maybe wasn’t one hundred percent honest with you.”

“You don’t owe me anything, Den,” I try to protest, not wanting to hear whatever might come next.

I’ve already accepted that I can’t have Denver, for so many reasons. I don’t need to hear any more.

“No, it matters to me.” They push their food around their plate for a moment. “I like Luka. We’ve been spending a lot of time together recently, and when he forgets to be nervous, he’s good company.” Their hazel green eyes are filled with something I can’t decipher, and I’m not sure I want to. “But...he’s not the only one who has my interest. And maybe I should feel bad for that, but I don’t.” They shrug, hands splaying out to the side for a moment in a ‘what can you do’ gesture.

A lump forms in my throat and my entire body goes from hot to cold within seconds. I don’t want to believe what they’re saying. After all, they could be talking about literally anyone, but that stupid, wistful part of me hopes they’re not.

I take a long drink of coffee. The caffeine isn’t really needed, but it gives me something to do so I don’t focus on the utterly disarming person across from me.

“Why are you telling me this?” I ask when I can’t stall any longer.

Denver stares at me with hazel green eyes that shine under the fluorescent diner lighting. Their lips that are usually in some perpetual half-smirk, are turned down in a frown.

“Because Luka said some things the other night after the munch that got me thinking. And I can’t go down that path with him without being honest, with myself...or with you.”

“Me?” I can’t hide my surprise.

They smile, their eyes softening further. “Yes, you. Didn’t you know? I’ve had a crush on you forever. It’s kinda pathetic really.”

I’m pretty sure my heart stops beating, and I have to set the mug back on the table so I don’t spill it in my surprise.

“I... You just come right out and say it, huh?”

Denver looks away, their long, elegant fingers squeezing around the fork in their hand. “It’s about time. If I want to continue down the road Luka and I started the other night, I think it’s time to lay all of my cards out there. He saw through me pretty damn easily. No sense in hiding it anymore.”

I swallow, trying to regain my thoughts. “So...what? You and Luka talked about dating, or something to that effect, but you want to keep your options open, or...?”

Denver scowls. “No! It’s not like that. You know it doesn’t work that way. It’s... Maybe crush is too small of a word, but I don’t know how else to say it. I want Luka, but I want you, too. And he knows. He saw it and made me face the truth. I...I’m not good at relationships. I know it seems weird coming from me, but flirting and making friends with people is different than trying to date them.

“We’ve known each other a long time, Grae. But always on the periphery. Maybe now, with the truth out there, I can get over it and move on, but I think it needed to be said, finally.”

“Oh,” I breathe. Denver looks back at me but doesn’t say anything, their expression is guarded, and who can blame them. Taking a deep breath, I decide to be as brave as Denver. “I like you, too. I have for a while.”

They smile a little. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Teeth bite into their bottom lip, they shift on their chair. “So uh, Luka was right about that, too.”

“Oh?”

Denver nods. “Yeah, apparently we haven’t hidden how we feel very well.”

It’s my turn to squirm in my seat. “I see. So...you and Luka?”

“Maybe, it’s... We haven’t talked about it much, but I’d like to try.”

I cradle my mug, letting the lingering warmth soothe my nerves. “And you and me?”

“I... Now that the truth is out there, I’d like to see what happens—friend-wise or other. You?”

Nodding, I keep my gaze locked onto their’s, unable to look away. “I might need time to process that this isn’t a dream, but...I’d like to spend more time with you, if nothing else.”

Denver's smile lights up my insides, and the anxiety currently twisting my stomach into knots eases a little at the sight.

I...have no clue what I'm doing. But...for Denver, and Luka, since he's the one who got this ball rolling, and even myself, I'd like to see where it goes.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

How I managed to pick up dinner and my kid, and then make it back home, is a mystery.

Telling Denver we'll see where things go between us is one thing, coming face to face with my words when I'm alone is a whole other. The problem I'm having is, why? Why me? Why now...? Just...so many questions I didn't voice earlier because everything seemed too good to be true. Distance has forced everything to the surface, and it's fucking terrifying .

"Okay, Cher?" Rory asks as I poke at the food on my plate.

I try to smile and pretend everything is normal. The last thing I need is for either of them to worry.

"Lying is a sin, Dad. You've been weird since you picked me up from Granna's. You should talk about it if it's bothering you."

"I'd much rather talk about what's going on with you," I reply.

Callum rolls his eyes. "Not much. We went to the shelter, and Granna helped me with my social studies work. I have some math stuff I need Da to look at after dinner, but other than that, I'm fine."

"I'm glad you had a good day. You talk to any of your friends today?"

He shrugs. "Just Nat. Did you know they're getting a kitten? Their uncle's cat had kittens, and said they could have one."

Ah, now I know why the cat conversation has reared its head again. For the last few years, every few months it seems to be the same thing, Callum asks for a pet, and Rory and I have to gently tell him no. Maybe Rory is right and now's the time to allow it. Hard maybe. It depends on how serious he is about caring for it. I've done my time taking care of small creatures, and mine can talk back now, I'd rather not have to deal with another. Though maybe a fluffy one would be better behaved.

"Well, my day was boring as all hell," Rory says. "Half the meetings I had today could have been an email, or at least a phone call where I didn't have to see the person face to face. I'm working from home the rest of the week because if I have to see another person, I might scream."

Reaching over, I squeeze his hand. "Sorry it's rough. I'll be mostly sequestered away, trying to put some more progress down on that damn book. Callum is home the rest of the week, except Friday."

"There's a homeschool group outing to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum then," Cal explains. "It'll fulfill some art credits that a few people need, and we'll probably hang out afterwards."

"Want me to take him?" Rory asks.

Normally, I'd say no, but... Denver said earlier their next day off was Friday, and we agreed to meet up after Callum's outing, as I was going to drop him off with Rory since we would already be in the city, but maybe seeing them sooner than planned would be good for us.

"If you can, please."

"Sure, no problem."

“Can I be excused?” Callum asks. “It’s Da’s turn to clear the table.”

“Yeah, sure. Go prep your homework questions and I’ll be up in a bit,” Rory says. He waits until Callum’s bedroom door slams shut upstairs before looking at me with a familiar ‘you better not think about lying to me’ expression. “So, what’s going on with you, Cher?”

For half a second, I consider not telling him, but...I can’t do that to either of us, that’s not the type of relationship we have.

“I...talked to Denver today. About their relationship with Luka and what they’re trying...and about my relationship with them, or the promise of one.”

Rory smiles. “That’s great, Grae.”

I shake my head. “It’s not. You know why I’ve kept my distance.”

He rolls his eyes. “Because you think your needs and kinks don’t line up. And maybe you’re right, maybe you aren’t a match in that way, but Cher, you won’t know unless you try.” I go to speak but he holds up a hand. “You fought this way when we separated, remember? You got so lost in your head, and what you thought was right, that I almost lost you as a friend. We almost lost this.” He gestures around to the house as a whole and encompasses our life in general. “Your needs changed, and that’s okay. Maybe the type of Doms you and Denver are aren’t compatible, but there are other ways to be together.

“We fell out of love, Cher. Long before we fell out of kink together. If that didn’t happen, I don’t think we would have broken up, do you?”

I shake my head immediately. No. Kink was never the be-all end-all to our relationship. We could have found our way together had we not fallen out of love, but

that's not what happened. Instead, we did what we've always done: we used our long-standing friendship to help move us and our family forward into something that makes sense to us .

I love him, wholly and truly, but I'm not in love with him.

And I hate that he knows me so well.

"You think Denver and I could still work," I say softly. It's not a question so he doesn't bother answering. "You think our friendship is more than what it appears to be, and that if we try to see what happens, we might find something for us that has nothing to do with bedroom activities."

Rory gives me a soft, gentle smile and he reaches for my hand. "I do. I think you closed yourself off so much after we separated, because you're afraid of things changing again. But Cher...change isn't a bad thing. I don't want or need another serious relationship, but you do. Even if it's not with Denver, you should at least try. Figure out what you do and don't want."

I give him a watery smile as a lump forms in my throat and tears burn the back of my eyes. "Je t'aime," I say quietly. "Thank you for being here for me. I'm not sure what I would do without you."

He squeezes my hand. "I love you, too. You and Callum wouldn't survive without me, so it's good thing you never have to find out what that's like. Now, does that help?"

Taking a deep breath, I nod. "Yeah, it does actually. We loved each other before the kink, and though that love is different now, it still counts."

"It does." He squeezes my hand again.

“What about Luka, though?”

Rory shrugs. “You’re not opposed to poly. We might not be the best example since we did the whole open kink relationship before calling it quits for good, but you know somewhat how it works. It’s something you’ll have to talk to both of them about, but whatever happens will be because all of you want it.”

“I know, it’s just nerve-wracking. Denver says he’s shy, and I saw a little of that. I haven’t gotten to know him well, but I would like to.”

“There you go then. You won’t know unless you try, Grae.”

I hold onto his hand just a bit tighter and give him what I hope is a believable smile. “You’re right.”

I have no idea what I’m doing, but as always, Rory knows what to say and do. I know he mostly said it in jest, but I really would have been lost had we not stayed close after our divorce. Needy and codependent? Maybe, but it works for us.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

“Am I overthinking this?” I ask Val, not bothering to turn from the mirror as I speak.

They sigh, long and loud and dramatic. “Yes. Yes, you are. It’s just Denver. Y’all have been glued together since you met, what’s the big deal?”

The big deal is I haven’t told Valery that we kissed, and I want more. Or that Denver changed our plans at the last minute to include Graeme, and I am scared shitless that I’m going to be a third wheel to something I instigated.

But it’s also the only off day Denver and I have together for ten days or so. On a weekend to boot, so I don’t want to waste it with my silly insecurities. I know they would have kept their plans the same if I said no...but I wanted Graeme with us, too.

Nothing makes sense. Graeme is nice, and I’ve enjoyed talking to him, but I don’t know him. Not like I’ve gotten to know Denver the past few weeks. Though, I also can’t deny I’m drawn to Graeme’s quiet presence.

At the munch, Denver was busy having fun and talking to everyone. They didn’t neglect me, but...they’re way more extroverted than I am, and I was content to just sit and watch them charm the pants off everyone there.

But Graeme was there, and while he talked to anyone who came up to him, he didn’t make the first move. He talked to me though. Quiet he may be, but the longer we sat together, the more open he became, and some of his walls came down.

His dry sarcasm was a surprise, but then, I remember meeting his son a few weeks

ago, and saw how they treated one another. It was fun and relaxed in a way I never would have been with my own parents. If I even dared to try to joke around with them the way Callum did with Graeme that day, I would have gotten a lecture about how they're my parents, not my friends.

Having some of that teasing wit aimed at me from Graeme was... It was exactly what I needed when I was surrounded by people I didn't know.

Tension eases from my shoulders as those memories of the other day help lessen the worry that's been churning inside me since I woke up this morning.

"Luka? Do I need to call 911? Or an exorcist? Your mother?"

Val's worried tone has me spinning around to face them. "What? Are you okay?"

They stare at me incredulously before rolling their eyes. "Are you okay? Did you have a stroke or something?"

"No, I was just thinking. And even if I did, please don't ever call my mother. Just send her the death notice."

Val laughs. "I'll leave that up to Jordan."

"Oooh, you're evil." I chuckle. "Sorry if I spaced out on you. I was just thinking about today, and I'm a bit nervous. You're right, Denver and I are friends, and have been hanging out every spare moment we can. I just...I like them, Val. More than I've liked anyone in a long while."

Valery's dark eyes go wide and their mouth drops open a little. "Really? I mean, I hoped you two would get along, but I didn't expect this turn of events."

It's my turn to roll my eyes. "Don't be so dramatic. It's still very, very new, if anything at all. I don't know... I just don't want to mess things up."

"Just be yourself. I know your sense of self is rather...discouraging, but you're a great person, Luka. Kind and sweet, and maybe a little shy, but it's endearing. If Den can see all that, then they deserve a chance."

I give Valery what I hope is a genuine smile, their words filling the hurt parts of me. "Thanks. Now, you sure I look okay?"

Val sighs and tosses themselves backwards onto the bed. "You look fucking adorable. I'd do you, if, you know, it weren't for the whole almost-cousin thing."

I laugh, my chest lightening at their words. "You're a dork, but okay, I guess I'm ready."

"Good. Have fun, and don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Is there anything you wouldn't do?" I ask, tilting my head as I stare at them.

Valery sits up and grins. "Nope. Which means, have all the fun. Do you need condoms?"

My face flames and I have to look away from Val's wide-eyed, too-knowing gaze. "Uh, no, I'm covered. I mean..." Covering my face with my hands, I take a few deep breaths. "Thanks for the offer, but I'm an adult who knows how to navigate all of...that," I mutter into my palms.

Val giggles. "Just making sure. I know you don't date often, and sometimes people don't think about it. Even though I'm sure Denver is prepared, it's always better for all parties involved to be as well."

“Jesus fuck,” I utter, completely embarrassed now. Uncovering my face, I stare at Valery. “I appreciate you for being helpful, but please, stop talking.”

“Fine, fine. Are you ready? What time are you meeting them?”

Giving myself one last once over, I decide I’ll have to trust Valery’s assessment of me. Denver hasn’t told me anything except when to be at their apartment, and to wear comfortable clothes for the outdoors. So, I’ve opted for jeans, a T-shirt, and an overshirt with the sleeves rolled up—at Valery’s insistence.

My hair’s doing weird things, but I’m pretty sure I’ve managed to make it look “artfully messy”, versus the “I have a mind of my own” look I was sporting. I also lathered on the sunscreen, because it may be fall now, but the sun’s still out, and that means I run the risk of burning. Even after all these years, I still get annoyed at how none of my siblings have the stereotypical redheaded curse. I just happen to be the unlucky one.

Making sure to stuff a travel sized bottle of sunscreen into my pocket is a habit I don’t think I’ll ever break. Unless I move to Antarctica or something, and even then, the sun will find a way.

“I’ll see you later,” I say, double checking I have everything I need.

“Have fun! Only put out if they take you somewhere nice! You’re not a cheap date!” Valery calls out as I leave them laying on my bed.

The deCordova Sculpture Park is a fascinating place. Art isn’t really my thing, but this is different. All the sculptures are unique and interesting to look at. That they’re spread out around the park means we also get to view the gorgeous grounds, and take our time moving from sculpture to sculpture. There’s a museum on the grounds as well, that Denver explained houses more contemporary exhibits that we can visit

another time, but for today, the three of us are just wandering around outside.

Denver packed a picnic, and we've spread out a blanket between a few trees to enjoy the scenery.

"This is nice," Graeme says, stretching his long legs out as he leans back on his hands. "I haven't been here since Callum was little. I'll have to suggest it for his art assignment."

"I love it. There's always something interesting to look at," Denver replies. "I'm glad you came with us."

"Me too."

Graeme looks at me. "You sure I'm not crashing your date? I feel bad, but Denver assured me it wasn't a date, and well..." He shrugs a little. "Maybe I'm too old and out of practice, but this sure as hell feels like a date to me."

I shake my head. "You're not. At all, promise. And well...maybe it is." I look to Denver, who's watching both of us carefully, a worried look on their face as they bite their lower lip.

Moving closer to Graeme, I set a hand on his leg, trying to go for reassuring. "I'm glad you're here. I know Denver and you talked... I don't know how much they told you about us." I motion between Denver and me. "But what we're building, and what the two of you are building, don't have to be so separate." I hesitate, but decide fuck it, it's best to get it all out there, rather than potentially be hurt because I was too chickenshit to speak up. "I don't know how any of this works. My track record with relationships isn't good, nor is it extensive, but I think I'd feel...hurt if I didn't know what was going on."

“I trust Denver, but we’re still getting to know one another. You’re something unexpected.” I smile a little, trying to ease the distress I can see in the corners of Graeme’s eyes and mouth. “In a good way, I think. We don’t know each other, pretty much at all. But Denver trusts you, and has spent years getting to know the type of person you are. I don’t think they’d allow either of us to get caught up with someone who wasn’t good at their core.”

“You flatter me,” Denver says quietly. “But you’re right.”

Skepticism etches across Graeme’s face, but after a moment, he seems to relax a bit. “If you’re sure I’m not ruining anything.”

“Positive.” I smile at him.

Graeme shifts and I remove my hand from him, not wanting to make him uncomfortable.

“You can touch me,” he says. “I might be a little touch-starved.” He flushes slightly, his eyes going wide at that confession. “God, just ignore me. There’s a reason I don’t get out much.”

I laugh. “It’s fine. I understand.” Setting my hand on his, I say, “I’m a bit touch-starved as well.”

Denver groans. “God, you two make me want to wrap you up and keep you in my apartment until I can fill you both with adequate love.”

All three of us laugh as their words sink in, and how wrong the meaning could be.

Denver shakes their head and leans over, planting a kiss on my smiling lips. “You know I didn’t mean it like that.”

I squint at them. “You sure? Sounded like you did to me.”

Denver huffs and looks to Graeme. “You got a smartass comment for me?”

Graeme smirks. “I mean, Rory made sure I had condoms, so...”

I laugh and Denver sighs but leans into Graeme and presses their lips together for a quick kiss.

My breath catches in my throat as Graeme moves his hand up to gently thread his fingers through Denver’s honey blond hair. The next kiss they share is slow, tasting, testing, figuring out what the other likes.

I’m not a jealous person by nature, but if asked, I would have told you that seeing the person I’m interested in kissing someone else was on my no-go list. I’m now learning that would have been the wrong answer.

Watching Graeme and Denver together is...intimate. Both of them are gentle with the other, and seeing the care and consideration makes my heart pound as my stomach swoops.

It should be awkward, and in a lot of ways it is, but not because I’m upset or jealous. No...I just don’t want to be on the outside of things.

When they break apart, I reach over and grip Denver’s chin in my hand. They give me a considering look, but I don’t give them time to ask questions, or to assess whatever emotions are showing on my face. I swoop in and kiss them, long and hard.

Denver groans against my mouth and I drink the sound down, kissing them like I’ve never kissed another person before—passionately and full of things I don’t quite understand yet.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathless.

"Wow," Graeme says.

"Yeah," I agree.

"Thank you for inviting me," Graeme says, leaning against his car. "I had a nice time with you both."

Denver squeezes his hand. "I'm glad you could make it. We'll have to do this again. I think it went well."

Graeme looks between the two of us and smiles, his soft blue eyes lighting up. "I'd like that."

Reaching for his other hand, I thread my fingers through his, giving him a shy smile. "Me too."

Graeme leans in and places a cheek on my cheek, making me flush as butterflies erupt in my lower belly. He turns to Denver and gives them the same treatment.

Denver brushes their lips against his and we reluctantly let Graeme get into his car. With one last wave, we make our way over to Denver's car.

"Want to hang out some more?" Denver asks. "Or do you have to work tomorrow?"

"I'm off, and I'd love to extend our time together."

The grin they give is full of promise.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

Pressing Luka against my front door, I kiss him breathless. He clings to me, mouth and body going pliant. Sliding my leg between both of his, I press up into the bulge I find there.

Luka gasps, his grip on me tightening as he grinds himself on my thigh. “Fuck,” he says as I press against him firmly.

“I want to ravish you, Luka,” I whisper as I kiss my way along his jaw. He tilts his head back, giving me access to his slim neck, and I lick at the flushed skin there.

He shudders in my arms. “Den...”

Pulling back, I look into his wide, lust-blown hazel eyes. “Tell me if this is going too fast.”

Luka shakes his head and he slides one hand up into my hair, while the other moves to my lower back, pushing down and encouraging me to grind against him. “I...I want you. It’s been a long fucking time since someone turned me on so much. I want to explore it with you.”

My dick aches with the need to fill this man, but I try hard to tamp the lust down. The last thing I want to do is scare Luka off. “Bedroom?” I ask, unable to keep the need from my tone.

In answer, he uses his grip on my hair to pull my mouth back to his. This kiss is nothing like any other we’ve shared. There’s an edge of desperation to it, one that has me panting and my cock rock-hard.

His teeth scrape against my bottom lip and I moan into his mouth, wanting to keep that sting of pain everywhere.

Pulling away from him is a feat, but I manage, grabbing his hand and leading him through my apartment to the bedroom. The bed is calling for us, the blankets already a tangled mess because I was too excited for my date today to bother with making it.

Standing just inside the room, I cup Luka's face and force his gaze to mine. "You sure about this?"

He bites his swollen lower lip, hazel brown eyes filling with apprehension. "Keep my shirt on? Everything else is okay."

"Of course. Whatever you're comfortable with. The clothes don't even have to come off, if you don't want."

Luka smile softly and drags his hand across my hard-on. "I want to see this dick," he says huskily. "I want to touch it, taste it..."

Groaning, I kiss him again, harder this time, while walking him back towards the bed. Luka's hands slide over my chest and down to the hem of my shirt.

Breaking the kiss, I pull away from him long enough to remove my shirt. "Keep going?" I ask, my hands on the waistband of my jeans.

Instead of answering, he knocks my hands aside and undoes the button and zipper himself. Luka's eyes stay on mine as he opens my pants, the first brush of his soft fingers against the base of my dick has me hissing in a sharp breath.

A few inches lower and his hand will be right where I need it—on my cock. Instead of taking hold of me though, he removes his hand and shoves my jeans to my thighs.

Only then does he look down. His bottom lip is clamped between his teeth and his cheeks are bright red as he stares at my erect cock.

Shoving my pants the rest of the way off, I let them drop to the floor, glad we kicked our shoes off near the front door so I can just step out of them.

“Your turn?” I ask with a raised brow. “Or is this Denver show and tell?”

He laughs a little and shifts from foot to foot, wrapping an arm over his chest protectively.

“I don't want you to be disappointed.”

“Sweetheart, the only way you can disappoint me is by not telling me what makes you uncomfortable. I want you to enjoy yourself. And if all you want to do tonight is cuddle in bed, then I'll understand.”

“But...you... We've gotten this far,” he says.

I nod slowly. “This is as far as it'll go if that's what you want.”

He lets out a slow breath and shakes his head, bringing his arm down and placing both hands on his waist band. “It's not,” he replies softly.

Quickly, as if he's afraid to lose his nerve, he shoves his pants down, leaving him in his shirts and tight black briefs that outline the bulge there.

Groaning, I grab my dick, squeezing it hard for a moment before reaching for him.

“At least take the top layer off?” I grip one side of his open overshirt. “Get it outta the way so I can eat you out uninhibited.”

Luka takes a shaky breath, but shrugs the shirt off and tosses it to the floor.

He's a vision, standing in front of me in his white shirt and those fucking briefs.

Dropping to my knees, I grip his hips and stare up at him.

“This okay?”

He nods, his hands finding my shoulders.

“I need words, sweetheart,” I tell him, a bit of Dom infusing into my tone.

Luka’s gasps but nods again and then says, “Yes, please.”

Leaning in, I press a kiss to the smooth skin just above the band of his underwear. Luka's grip on my shoulders tightens when I kiss along the length of his soft packer.

Using one hand against the base, I press it firmly against him as I tongue the packer through the briefs, soaking them in my saliva.

Luka rocks his hips, small gasps and moans escaping him as he chases the pressure and pleasure.

When I pull back, he whines, clutching at me.

“Shh,” I soothe him, dragging my hands up his thighs, around his hips, to his ass. “I want to taste you. Can I?”

“Yes.” His response is a needy, breathy whisper.

Giving his ass a firm squeeze, I move my hands back to the front and grip the

waistband of the briefs.

With my gaze locked on his, I pull the underwear down, not looking away until I've dragged them all the way down to his ankles. As I help him out of his briefs and socks, I run my fingers lightly over his pale, delicate, freckled flesh.

Luka is trembling beneath my touch, but I keep things slow, steady, and soft. I follow my hands with my lips, kissing and tasting his sweet skin, smiling against it as he shakes and moans with pleasure above me.

When I finally reach where he wants me most, I press my hands against his inner thighs, encouraging him to spread his legs for me.

“Fuck,” I breathe out on a moan. “You're perfect. I can't wait to taste you.”

His T-dick practically begs for my mouth.

“On the bed,” I order, unable to contain the thread of control running through me, not wanting to, especially when Luka reacts so beautifully.

He shivers and scrambles to do what I commanded, dropping to the bed and scooting back. I stop him before he gets too far.

“Grab a pillow. I want you raised up.”

Without question, Luka reaches above himself and snags one of the pillows. He helpfully lifts his hips while I slide it under him. With both hands on his thighs, I spread him open wide, grazing my fingers alongside his T-dick.

He gasps and arches off the pillow, so I tighten my grip—not enough to leave bruises, but close.

“Limits? Places you don't want to be touched? Aside from your chest.”

He shakes his head and then says, “I—I know not everyone likes the...front part. So, you don't have to touch it, if you don't want to.”

For being so brave when he's clearly nervous and unsure, I run gentle fingers up the length of his T-dick. “Sweetheart, I've had my face buried in my fair share of cunts, asses, and tits. Nothing you do or don't have matters to me. So long as I can make you feel good.” With a single finger, I swipe across his hole lightly.

His legs try to close, even as his body vibrates with pleasure and he moans. Using more strength than before, I keep him open for me.

“I...I like it,” he gasps. “I finger myself. S—sometimes I'll stick a toy in either hole and finger the other.”

“ Fuck ,” I groan, my dick aching to be inside this man after hearing those words.

With the last of my sanity, I ask, “What do you call it?”

“My fr—front, or vag. Either works. But...” His hesitation has me raising an eyebrow, and he swallows as the redness across his face and throat deepens. “I like dirty talk,” he whispers. “You can call it whatever you want—only in the bedroom though. I... If it's a cunt or a pussy, it's only behind closed doors.”

I smirk and press closer, lining my face up with his spread open core. “Good to know. Now, put your hands on the bed, hold onto the sheets if you have to, because I'm going to eat your cunt until you're begging me to stop.”

Luka gasps and I dive in, tonguing the head of his T-dick and sucking it into my mouth. His hips buck and I hold him down, keeping firm pressure on his thighs to

remind him who's in charge.

He trembles as I lick and suck at his T-dick. One of his hands reaches for my hair, and normally I wouldn't mind, but I don't like being disobeyed either... We didn't set any ground rules, so I only pull away and look up over the expanse of his body, noting that his shirt has lifted and twisted up above his stomach, exposing his flat abdomen and happy trail.

Luka whines and thrashes his head from side to side before meeting my gaze.

“Hands on the bed, Luka,” I order in a soft but firm tone. “Move them again and I'll restrain you.”

He moans but moves his hand, tangling the top sheet between his fingers.

“Good. Now, grab another pillow and raise your head. I want you to watch me.”

He obeys almost instantly. Folding the pillow in half, he stuffs it under his head and neck.

Keeping my gaze on his, I suck a finger into my mouth, getting it nice and drenched, sucking it like I would a cock.

Luka watches intently, his gaze burning a hole into mine. I keep eye contact for as long as possible as I dip my head and lap at his entrance.

He moans and wiggles his hips. I let him this time, grabbing a leg and maneuvering it to where I want it. He follows my silent cues, letting me manipulate his body as I suck my finger back into my mouth, then spread him wider, getting a direct line to his asshole.

The shout Luka lets out could probably be heard next door, but I don't care. I'm too focused on teasing his ass, even as I bury my tongue in his sweet cunt.

Pulling my finger back, I wet it and another one, soaking them both before swirling them around his hole until it softens enough that I can slide one in.

A litany of sounds pour out of Luka, and I grin against his flesh at being able to give this to him.

My dick aches and pre-cum slides down my tip, but I ignore it. I also ignore the burning in my knees from kneeling on the floor as I give Luka the best head I've ever given anyone.

Moving back up to his T-dick, I lick and suck on it as I use two fingers in his ass.

He can't stop thrusting into each motion, chasing both my hand and mouth.

His legs come up and bracket my head, squeezing against me as he gets louder, and his T-dick spasms against my tongue.

Licking back down to his free hole, I shove my tongue deep inside, using my other hand to rub at his T-dick.

Luka cries out as his body goes taut, and for a few seconds, it feels as if the very air around us stills, before he's shaking against me and coming apart as the orgasm rips through him.

It goes on for a long moment as I finger and tonguefuck him through it, until his cries turn to quiet whimpers and his hips shift, trying to escape the overwhelming pleasure.

Only then do I ease away from him, savoring his taste.

Looking up, I find his eyes closed as he tries to catch his breath, chest heaving and limbs still trembling.

The sight is too much to take and I scramble up off the floor, climbing onto the bed between his spread legs.

Luka tries to reach for me but I bat his hand away, taking my cock in a hard grip. It's not going to take much, not with his taste still on my tongue, and the sight of him spread open for me right before my eyes. Both holes seems to be inviting me in, open and wanting, and I groan as I jerk myself off.

Reaching over, I shove Luka's shirt further up his chest, not enough to expose him, but just so I can get a better view of his flushed skin, his freckles standing out starkly against the pink flesh.

Jerking myself hard and fast, it doesn't take long to come all over his spent T-dick and lower stomach. The sight of my cum on him has me groaning, and my balls ache as I come again.

Gasping for breath, I release my dick and stretch out over Luka, my shaking arms barely holding me up.

We both gasp for much-needed air as we stare at one another, the need now ramped down to something a lot more emotional, but no less intense.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

W rangling feral characters never gets easier. You'd think after five years, and two dozen books under my belt, things would go a lot smoother, but that is not the case at all . It feels like with every book I write, it gets harder to make the characters and plot do what I want, hence why I don't even bother trying to outline anymore. Of course that makes this damn fantasy romance so hard sometimes, because I have to keep it all straight in my head.

Luckily, the plot and romance have come together into something that's not a dumpster fire, so I've had good enough writing days that I feel like I'm actually getting somewhere with the book. Finally, after weeks of beating my head against the wall and wanting to toss the entire thing into the sun.

All part of the process, really. Did I even write a good book if I didn't want to burn it to the ground at least once?

With a groan, I sit back in the booth and rub at my eyes before stretching my arms out in front of me. I still have a lot of work to do, but I'm pleased with what I've done so far. Reaching for my coffee, I'm pleasantly surprised to see a full cup that's still warm, telling me Zo must have dropped by recently to refill. I'm not surprised I didn't notice. With my earbuds in, and focused fully on the scene I've been anticipating for days, the rest of the world kind of drifted away.

After a much-needed drink of caffeine, and removal of my earbuds to give my ears a break, I stand from the table and stretch a little. Proper posture isn't a thing while hunched over my computer, and various body parts are never very happy with me at the end of each long writing session.

In the middle of a stretch, I look over to the front door of Randy's and catch Luka entering, along with Ivy and someone I don't recognize.

It only takes a few seconds for Luka's gaze to find mine and he smiles, giving me a little wave. I wave back and finish my stretching before taking a seat again.

Myles looks up from his own work. "Getting too old for these long hours?" he teases.

"Fuck off."

"That's not very nice."

"Nice is for young people," I tell him. "I'm old enough to not have to be nice, and people will give me a free pass because I'm 'old' and don't give a fuck anymore."

He laughs and shakes his head at me.

Luka sidles up to the table and I smile at him, my heart giving a little kick at seeing him up close. It's been almost two weeks since our first date, and while the three of us have texted, their work schedules haven't matched up for us to get together again.

"Hey, it's good to see you."

"Yeah, you too. I hope I'm not interrupting?"

I shake my head and move over in the booth. "Not at all, we're just working. Or supposed to be, but I need a bit of a break." I gesture across the table. "Have you met Myles yet?"

Luka shakes his head. "No, but I've seen him around a few times when I've come in." To Myles, he says, "I'm Luka."

“Myles. It’s nice to officially meet you. I’ve only had to watch Grae longingly stare at you from across the diner for a short period of time.”

I kick Myles under the table and he smiles brightly at me. “It’s true! Though, I guess it’s better than all the time you’ve spent mooning over Denver.”

Groaning, I palm my face and look up at Luka. “You might be better off with your friends. Mine seems to be in dick mode today.”

“You love me,” Myles shoots back, but I ignore him.

Luka sits next to me and I have to remind myself to breathe. And of the fact I’m an actual adult with a child, because being in this close proximity to Luka has my heart and other body parts doing weird things.

“They’re fine. I think Ivy is pleased that I’m willing to talk to someone other than her, and I don’t know Axel that well, but they were very encouraging, too.”

He leans into me and every part of us that touches lights up. We’re slowly getting to know one another, and every interaction endears me to him more. He’s still a bit shy, and sometimes I can tell his insecurities get the better of him, even over text, but I like his quiet nature, it fits in a lot with my own.

I’ve always gravitated to more extroverted types, but Luka is sweet as hell, and I love seeing both his shy smile and how easily he blushes. It stirs up all the long-forgotten caretaker tendencies in me. I just want to lay him out and ease all the insecurities and self-doubt away.

A hand on my leg startles me out of my thoughts, and I hear Myles snickering across from us as I look into Luka’s hazel eyes.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Yeah, sorry. Lost in my own head.”

“I can see that. I asked about what you were working on?”

“Uhh...” I laugh a little and turn to look at the darkened screen of my laptop, as if that would help.

Myles laughs at my expense—the asshole. I kick him again, and grin in satisfaction when he winces.

“You don’t have to tell me if you’re not comfortable with it,” Luka tries to assure me.

I shake my head. “No, no. That’s not it at all, promise. I just...have a hard time articulating what I’m working on sometimes. I guess I still have this fear of being judged, or laughed at. It’s also awkward as fuck to talk about myself.”

Looking back at Luka, I tell him, “It’s book two in my fantasy series. It’s still a new genre for me, and I’m scared as all hell at fucking it up. I don’t do any plotting or anything, so trying to get all of the pieces to fit correctly without also burning out my creativity by planning too far in advance has been killing me.” I take a breath, realize I’m rambling, and try to rein myself in.

“Anyway, that’s what I’m focusing on now. An epic queer fantasy romance that will hopefully not suck. Normally, I write contemporary queer romance, but I like trying to shake things up. I might have bitten off more than I can chew with this one, but I like it right now.”

Luka smiles. “Well, that’s what matters then, right? That you like it?”

I nod. “Yeah, true. But I also want my readers to like it. It’s their hard-earned money they’re spending, ya know? I don’t want to let them down.”

His gaze softens, and the way he’s looking at me, as if I said something that impressed him, has butterflies taking flight in my heart. “You won’t. That you care so much about what they’ll think and how they’ll feel about the book tells me you’ll do your best to make it worth their time. I think that’s very admirable.”

“You make it sound better than it is. I’m honestly just a nervous wreck.”

He laughs a little. “Aren’t we all? Do you mind if I ask your pen name? I want to check your books out.”

“If he won’t tell you, I will!” Myles says cheerfully.

“Nobody asked you.”

“Payback is a bitch.” He grins and I roll my eyes, accepting that I may or may not have been a smartass when he and Avery were dancing around each other.

“I don’t mind if you read them. Rory and Callum both do, so does Rory’s mother. I don’t write under my real name because Cal was only ten when I started and I wanted to try to keep some anonymity for us—not that it matters now. He’ll tell anyone who is willing to listen to him for more than five minutes. Anyway, my pen name is GR Elliot.”

Luka moves, as if to whip out his phone, and I set my hand over his. “Maybe look it up later? I have accepted the fact that the people in my life will read my books, but it’s still embarrassing as all hell for me.”

“Of course. Sorry. I’m just excited, I’ve never met an author before.”

I huff a laugh. “I promise, I’m not that interesting or entertaining. I’ve lived a very boring life the last few years.”

Luka leans in a bit more. Our faces are so close together now, all it’ll take is the slightest move from one of us to be in each other’s space, lips fused together. My groin tightens at the same time my heart flutters at the thought. Licking my bottom lip in anticipation, I choke down a gasp as Luka’s lips part and his eyes get a shade darker.

“I highly doubt that,” he whispers.

I want to tell him it’s the truth. Outside of work, all I really have going for me is my kid and ex-husband. Neither of those things are usually attractive to other people. Especially the whole ‘my ex is my best friend and we still live together’ thing.

“I should get back to my friends,” Luka says. “I just wanted to say hi, since we haven’t seen each other recently.”

“Yeah. I need to get a bit more work done before calling it a day. But...call me later? When you’re free?”

Luca nods. “I’d like that. Denver is working tonight, so I’m just going to go home after this. I’d like to talk to you more though.”

“Me too.” Taking a deep breath, I gather courage from that long-forgotten place deep inside and ask, “Want to get together soon? Just the two of us?”

“Like a date?” he asks, then immediately blushes.

I smile. “Yeah, exactly like a date.”

“Okay.”

“Good, we can discuss it later.”

“Okay.”

Taking a chance, I lean forward the scant few inches between us and press a quick but firm kiss to Luka’s lips.

He gasps, but doesn’t push me away or tell me no. Instead, he leans into the kiss for a moment, before we both pull away, chests heaving and eyes wide.

His cheeks are a nice shade of pink as he stares at me. “Talk to you later?”

“I look forward to it.”

Luka slides out of the booth and gives me a quick wave before walking off to join his friends.

“Wow,” Myles drawls. “That was both painful and cute, all at the same time.”

I only look away from Luka once he’s sitting down at his table, and when I do, it’s to roll my eyes at Myles. “You could have pretended you weren’t watching,” I gripe.

He shakes his head. “Yeah, no, that was pure front row entertainment. Wasn’t going to pass that up.”

“Why do I like you again?”

He shrugs. “Beats me, but you do, so that’s your problem.”

I roll my eyes and wake my computer, intent on getting some more things done before going home and waiting for Luka to call, as if I can't still feel the press of his lips on mine...

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

I find Val in the kitchen when I get home. They're standing at the stove, while also talking to Jordan over FaceTime.

"What are you making?" I ask.

Valery jumps and spins around, brandishing the wooden spoon in their hand like a weapon and splattering whatever they've been stirring everywhere. "Shit!" They glare at me. "This is your fault."

I raise my hands out in front of me. "I didn't do anything! I asked a simple question!"

"Don't you know not to startle a person when they're cooking!" Val huffs and spins on their heel, pointing the spoon at the phone, where Jordan is currently laughing at their expense. "You, be quiet."

"I'm sorry..." Jordan says through his laughter, and sounding anything but. "You just looked so ridiculous from here."

Valery sticks out their tongue. "Whatever." They sniff and turn back to me. "I don't suppose you're going to be the one cleaning this mess up?"

Shaking my head, I venture further into the kitchen and retrieve their phone from where it's propped up. "Nope, I'm going to talk to my cousin."

Val curses us both out as I walk out of the kitchen and into the living room. Jordan shakes his head at me. "They're so going to poison your food," he says.

“Meh.” I shrug. “I already ate, so no worries there. It’s good to see you.”

“You too. I have to say, I’m disappointed I had to hear about your dating life from Valery.” He gives me his best unimpressed look and I roll my eyes.

“You two need to stop gossiping about my life.”

Jordan grins. “What else would we talk about?”

Huffing, I throw my head back against the sofa cushions. “I don’t know… How about your own love life? Or lack thereof?”

“Sounds boring,” Jordan replies, his shit-eating grin still in place.

“You’re a menace.”

“I’m a delight.”

“You’re something alright,” I grumble. “What, exactly, has Val told you?”

Jordan shrugs and shifts on his bed, jostling the phone around. “Nothing much. Just that you and Denver have moved past the ‘friends’ stage.”

“I do not appreciate this.”

“Duly noted. Now, spill.”

Knowing there’s no way to not tell him, especially since I do actually want to talk to my cousin about what’s been going on—I just have to bitch about him and his best friend gossiping about me first.

I don't actually mind, I know it's their way of expressing their concerns for me. Still doesn't mean I'm not going to gripe about it.

"Denver and I are...dating. We haven't really said the words, but we said we were going to try and see where it goes. We've spent a lot of time together the last two months, and things have been going well. We get along, and we've both admitted to being attracted to the other. So, we're seeing what happens." Biting my lip, I look away from Jordan's intense gaze, knowing I have to tell him everything I've left out, but terrified of his reaction.

"That's not all. Denver is also...pursuing someone else."

My cousin is quiet and I risk a look at the screen, seeing concern etched on his face and in his hazel green eyes. "Really? I didn't think—" He's interrupted by a loud bang and some whining, and he sighs, rolling his eyes. "Hold on."

Biting my lip to stifle my grin, I listen as he mutters curses under his breath, even as he gets up and opens his bedroom door. "You couldn't let me have even an hour to myself, could you?"

I chuckle at the answering whine. Jordan sounds so put out, but I know it's mainly for show. "Yeah, yeah, come on in, ya drama queen."

He flips the camera. "Say hello to your cousin, Luka."

"Hi, Indie," I say to Jordan's three-year-old Border Collie.

The dog barks and tries to jump up at Jordan's phone. "No," he says. "That's not yours."

Indie huffs but sits, staring at me through the screen. She's a gorgeous dog with

bright blue eyes, and long white and golden fur. Jordan raised her from a six-week-old puppy, after her mom rejected her for being the runt of the litter. She's smart as a whip and keeps him on his toes.

"All I wanted was an hour to myself," he tells the dog. Indie woofs at him and he sighs.

Off camera, the snorty noises of a pig come through the phone before Porter, Jordan's two-year-old potbelly, comes through the bedroom door.

"Of course," he says. "Why not make it a party."

The pig bumps Indie on his way past, but she doesn't react, letting Porter flop down on the floor in front of her.

"Sorry about this," Jordan says, walking back to his bed. "It's a mad house here."

"I can tell. I'm surprised Rodey isn't in there as well."

Jordan snorts. "He's currently babysitting, otherwise he would be."

"Uhh... How can a parrot babysit?"

My cousin rolls his eyes. "Someone I know has two goats who both gave birth within a few days of each other. A total of five kids. Well, the one with triplets rejected one. And she's too busy to bottle feed it because they're not her only goats kidding right now, so I offered to take it in. Rodey is fascinated by 'his baby'."

"Do you have time for a kid?" I ask, skeptically. Jordan doesn't only have his own menagerie, but a pretty successful dog training business as well. Another mouth to feed, one that requires so much care, doesn't seem like the best idea to me.

“More time than she does. It’s fine. Juniper is cute, I’ll send you pictures. Back on task now, what’s this about Denver seeing someone else?”

I shrug. “Exactly what I said. They’ve liked Graeme for a long time, and I don’t know, something is starting between them.”

Jordan frowns. “So, what? Is he stringing you both along?”

I shake my head. “No, not at all. I know about it. I’m the one who pointed out that they had mutual crushes on each other. Anyway, all three of us went on a date a few weeks ago and it was...nice. I saw them kiss and it was... Well, it made me hot for one. But I...I don’t know how to explain it. I felt content, maybe? Watching them together. Like they spent so long dancing around each other, but they’re willing to give one another a chance now, and it makes me feel...safe in what Denver and I are building.”

“Really? I didn’t peg you as polyamorous.”

“I didn’t either. But being with them was better than any other date or relationship I’ve ever been in before.

“I spent time with Grae today. It wasn’t planned, or long, but just talking to him one on one was nice. We don’t know each other well, but I want to get to know him.

“I don’t know if anything but friendship will develop between the two of us, but...I like him, and I’m okay with what he and Denver are doing.”

“Okay,” Jordan says slowly. “Just be careful. I don’t want to see you getting hurt because you’re in over your head. I’d hate to have to fly out there and kick some ass.”

I laugh. “Whatever. I promise, I’ll be okay. I think they’re good for me.”

Jordan gives a small smile. “I hope they are, I really do.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

Callum barely waits for me to respond to his knock before he's pushing my bedroom door open. Rory and I have both stopped bitching about it, and are just waiting for the day he walks in on something he does not want to see, in order for him to learn his lesson. The resulting therapy bills will be worth finally getting the boundary thing drilled into his head.

We never claimed to be good parents.

"If I stop asking for a third bathroom, can I have a kitten?" he asks, holding his phone out.

"No. You're not getting a kitten." Maybe. Rory was close to caving, at least.

"But look, it's so cute."

Sighing, I look at the picture of the tiny black and white kitten on Callum's phone.

"That a shelter photo?"

"Yeah. They got a whole litter last week. Most have been adopted, but a few haven't, and this one really stuck with me."

"Callum..."

"I know, I know," he says, tone slightly dejected. "No pets because they're a big responsibility and a lifetime commitment. I've heard it all before. I just..." He shrugs.

"Never mind, it doesn't matter. I'll just ask Nat to keep sending me pictures of Caroline."

He turns to go and I gently reach for him. “What’s wrong, Mon C?ur?”

“Five hours is a long way to be from your best friend. Hell, it’s hard to have a best friend you’ve never even met in person.” He shrugs and gives me a small, sad smile. “I don’t know... It’s just something that’s been on my mind lately. How I hang out with the homeschool group, and they’re friends, but not the type of friends I would want to tell my secrets to, ya know? I guess I want that, in person, not just over the phone like I have with Nathan.”

And now I feel like an asshole. It’s so hard to forget sometimes that Callum is still really a kid. At fifteen, my friendship with Rory was solidified enough to help set the foundation to what we are today.

Callum, for as much of a handful as he can be at times, is a good kid. The no pets thing was established because, at the time, neither Rory or I had the capacity for another mouth to feed. Even when I decided to quit my job because it was sucking the life out of me, I was adamant that I didn’t want to be chasing after another creature all day.

But...if Callum says he needs something, I’m here to listen. Since his best friend, Brianna, moved away a few years ago, he hasn’t gotten close with anyone else. Except Nathan Cassidy, but they live in another state, and Cal apparently needs more.

“I’ll talk to your da when I get home later, okay?”

He looks at me with soft gray-blue eyes that match my own. “Really?”

“I make no promises,” I warn. “But we can discuss it more seriously.”

His smile is bright in a way I haven’t seen in a while, and it pisses me off that I’m just now realizing how good he’s getting at hiding his true feelings from us.

Something else to discuss with Rory later.

“Thanks, Dad.” Callum hugs me tightly before pulling away. “You look hot, by the way.”

I smile, my cheeks heating a little. “Thanks, glad to get your stamp of approval.”

“Where are you going?”

“The aquarium.”

Callum blinks at me. “Really?”

I laugh at the incredulousness in his tone. “Yes, really. Luka’s never been, which I think is a travesty. Don’t judge, you love the aquarium.”

“I do,” he agrees. “It’s just...well, now I can’t take a date there.”

I stare at him. “What do you mean?”

Callum rolls his eyes. “Like, how am I supposed to take any future dates somewhere where I know my dad has wooed his date? It’s weird.”

“You’re weird, Callum. I don’t think anyone but you would ever think something like that.”

He shakes his head. “You don’t get it.”

Clearly not. Another thing added to the Talk to Rory About List. “Are you interested in someone? Is this your strange way of telling me?”

Callum flushes, going bright red. “No! I am far too young to even be thinking about dating right now. I’m just making a point.”

“Uh-huh. Well, you know you can talk to me, right? If and when you ever meet someone you might want to take to the aquarium.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Anyway...good talk. I’m just gonna...go.” He rushes out of the room, stumbling over his feet.

Oh, he's definitely interested in someone, but I'll let him come to terms with it and tell us in his own time. Seems he takes after me in the “be a complete moron about anyone you may potentially be interested in” way, rather than having Rory’s smooth confidence. Poor kid.

The aquarium is just how I remember it, down to the green sea turtle that’s been here since the 70s. Luka, of course, thinks it’s amusing to know I remember being fascinated with said sea turtle when I was a kid.

“This is so cool,” he says, looking down into the tank as we stand at the top of the four-story exhibit.

“Isn’t it. I’ve always loved coming here. Callum does too.” I cringe. “Sorry.”

Luka looks up at me. “What for?”

“Not everyone appreciates hearing about Cal, especially on a date. We’ve...been told in the past that it’s weird to mention him so much. Rory much more than me.”

Luka’s features darken a moment. “That’s bullshit. He’s your kid, a big part of your life. It’d be weird if you guys didn’t talk about him. I don’t mind when you bring him up. It gives me a little more insight into your life, and the type of father you are.”

My chest warms with pleasure and my face heats with embarrassment. “Thank you. I hope so, all we can do is our best and hope we’re not irrevocably screwing him up.”

Luka moves in closer, his arm pressing against mine. “That you’re worried about it tells me you’re doing something right. Just love him unconditionally. And I promise you, you can’t go wrong from there.”

“Speaking from experience?” I ask, my voice soft.

He gives me a small, pain-filled smile. “Something like that. I think things would have been different had I had parents like you and your ex.”

Smoothing my thumb across his cheek, I lower my voice just loud enough to be heard over the sounds of the tank, the employee educating people about the tank, and the people around us. “I’m sorry the people in your life weren’t supportive, but I happen to like the man I’m coming to know. No one should experience life without knowing the unconditional love of a parent, but I know all too well how it happens far too often and easily.

“But you’re here—we’re both here—because we made ourselves into the people we want to be without them. Take pride in that. I love my life, and while I’d love to have my family more involved in Callum’s, I’m also proud and happy of what I’m able to provide him on my own. Your upbringing may have shaped you, Luka, but the man you are today is because it’s who you want to be, not what they want.”

Luka’s lips part and he stares at me with shiny hazel eyes. I hate that he knows what it feels like to have family who doesn’t accept you, especially since I’ve been through it myself, but I meant what I said. We both became better, stronger people because of those who tried to make us fit into their neat little boxes.

“Can I kiss you?” he asks, and then immediately flushes.

With a gentle smile, I move in close, crowding him against the railing behind him.
“I’d like that.”

Luka’s cheeks are a pretty rosy color, but he lifts his chin, his hand moving up to grip the back of my neck and pull my face down to his.

The first touch of our lips is soft and sweet, a barely-there press of mouth against mouth. The second is a little harder, his soft lips pressing firmly to my own. The third has me sweeping my tongue against his bottom lip, tasting him.

Luka gasps and his tongue comes out to play, swooping into my mouth and making me groan. We’re pressed so closely together, our groins rub against one another and I moan as my packer is pushed firmly against my dick.

Our kiss stays slow and soft, as we take our time exploring each other’s mouths. When we have to break for air, the world rushes back in, and the fact we’re in a public place seems to register as Luka groans and tries to cover his reddened face with his hands.

Gripping his wrists loosely, I meet his wide eyes and give him a reassuring smile.
“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about, Amour. I liked it, and I want to do it again. What about you?”

Luka sucks in a breath, and manages to give a small nod. “Yeah... I do, too.”

Pressing a soft, chaste kiss to his swollen mouth, I reply, “Then that’s all that matters.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

Tori and I are finishing up an early lunch when Graeme and Callum walk in. Callum waves when he sees us and Graeme smiles, a soft, sweet expression I've never seen before on his face.

They make their way over and I grin up at them, feeling awkward because I want to drag Graeme in for a kiss, but am unsure how he feels about that type of thing in front of his kid, especially since I don't know if he's told Callum about us yet.

"Hey, it's weird seeing you here without your computer," I tease.

Graeme laughs. "I needed a break, plus?—"

"We're going to pick up my kitten later!" Callum squeals, interrupting him.

Graeme rolls his eyes. "Yeah, that."

"You sound so enthused," I say with a laugh.

Graeme sighs. "It wouldn't have been my first choice, but Callum's shown he can handle it."

"I am the most responsible, thank you," the teen says.

"Do you plan on sitting down, or are you just here to loiter?" Zo asks as they walk up to the table.

"We're going, keep your panties on," Graeme replies. "We'll let you get back to it."

“You could join us,” Tori offers.

“I don’t want to interrupt...” Graeme says, but the way he looks at me tells me he doesn’t want to go either.

“You’re not,” Tori assures him.

“Sit,” Zo orders. “Somewhere, anywhere. You can sit on the floor if you want, just do it.”

Tori slides over in the booth and Callum takes a seat, which leaves Graeme to slide in next to me. My heart warms when he presses his thigh against mine. Even though there’s plenty of room for us both, that he chooses to sit so close does funny things to my heart.

“Now that’s all taken care of,” Zo says. “I’ll be back for your orders.” They flounce off and Callum immediately buries his head in a menu.

“Thanks for letting us sit with you,” Grae says.

I smile at him. “Of course. I’m happy to see you.”

“Me too.” He sets his hand over the top of mine on the table and I let out a stuttered breath. Guess he doesn’t care if Callum knows we’re seeing each other. That thought has me grinning wider even as my heart skips a beat.

“If you two are going to be disgustingly couple-y, I’m leaving,” Tori says. “I can be single and alone in the comfort of my own home.”

Graeme goes to move his hand away, but I flip mine over and hold it tightly.

“Don’t be jealous,” I tell her.

Tori snorts and tosses cash down on the table. “So not jealous. Excuse me, squirt.”

Callum doesn’t take his face out of the menu, even as he lets Tori out of the booth. “I’ll catch you later, Den. Nice seeing you, Grae.”

“You too.”

Tori leaves and Graeme turns to me. “I hope we didn’t run her off.”

I shake my head. “Nah, she’s squirrely about relationships right now, but that’s something she needs to take up with her girlfriend, or ex-girlfriend, or whatever they are, I can’t keep up. It’s not about us.” I give his hand a squeeze. “She would have left either way. Her social capacity is extremely low right now, especially since her top surgery. She’s still recovering, so tires easily.”

“If you’re sure...”

Leaning in, I press a quick kiss to his lips. “Positive.”

“Gross,” Callum says, giving the first indication he’s even noticed anything between me and Grae. “It’s not lunch and a show.”

“Don’t be rude, Cal,” Graeme says, more exasperated than anything.

Zo comes back over, collects Tori’s money, and takes Callum and Graeme’s orders. “Can I get you anything else, Den?”

“A strawberry shake would be nice,” I reply.

“Oh! Me too!”

“No soda then,” Graeme tells him.

Callum sighs but nods. “Fine.”

Zo writes everything down then leaves again.

“Do you wanna come pick up my kitten with us?” Callum asks. “We gotta go get all the cat stuff first, but you can come too.”

“Denver probably has other things to do,” Graeme says in a gentle tone.

“I don’t,” I say.

Callum grins smugly and Graeme raises a brow at him. The teen sighs, long and loud. “I’d really like you to come, Denver. If you want. And if Dad says it’s okay. I want to get to know you better, since you and Dad are kinda a thing now. Luka, too.”

I exchange a glance with Graeme and he shrugs. “It’s up to you.”

Looking back to Callum, I give him a grin. “Sure, I’d love to join you.”

“Awesome! I’m so excited. I’ve wanted a kitten for forever .” Callum starts talking a mile a minute about said kitten, and everything he already has planned out, from the name to where the cat bed he’s going to buy is going.

It’s cute and endearing, sitting here, holding Graeme’s hand while listening to his son. I can almost picture it being a regular thing. We’re just missing one thing—person—but I’m patient enough to wait for what we’re both building with Luka to develop into more.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

“ Y ou didn’t have to feed me, but thanks for dinner.”

I smile as Denver wipes their mouth on a napkin. “It was no problem. It's the least I could do after dragging you everywhere this afternoon. And you’ll have to thank Rory, he’s the cook around here.”

“Dad is terrible ,” Callum inputs, the little shit. “Da’s been teaching me to cook, and he says I might have a chance of survival once I’m allowed to move out.”

“Which will be when Da and I are old and gray, and incapable of taking care of you,” I tell him, only half joking. The idea of Cal on his own in the world is terrifying, and not just in the usual “he’s my baby” type of way. He might be responsible enough for a kitten, but neither Rory nor I trust him to be responsible for himself. The cat might end up as his keeper by the time he’s old enough to be on his own.

He rolls his eyes. “Whatever, old man. Can I be excused now? I wanna video call Nat and show them Jolene.”

The kitten’s new name makes me sigh, but all I say is, “Clear the table, then you can go.”

Callum jumps up and takes everything to the kitchen in record time. The promise of getting to talk to Nathan is always an excellent motivator.

“Thanks for coming with us today, Denver.” Callum hugs them. Den looks surprised, but accepts the affection easily.

“I had fun.”

Callum grins. “Me too! You’ll have to come by more often.”

Denver gives him a small, gentle smile. “We’ll see.”

“I’ll take that—for now. I’m going upstairs, I’ll see you later!” Callum rushes off before he can be told otherwise.

Denver chuckles. “He has a lot of energy.”

“You don’t know the half of it. This is him mellowed out. The excitement of the day is starting to wear on him—I know it doesn’t seem like it, but I can tell. He still has more energy than I could ever imagine though, but today was nothing.”

Denver seems to find that alarming, if the widening of their eyes is any indication. “And yes,” I say, before they can ask. “We’ve had him tested for ADHD and all that, because it’s a natural conclusion. According to the professionals though, he might be a little hyperactive, but everything else lines up within the normal range for neurotypical—not sure Rory and I fully believe that, but for us, as long as it doesn’t seem to be affecting him or causing things to be more difficult, we’ll leave it alone. If we thought he’d benefit from being medicated, we would have pushed for it, but Callum is just...Cal.”

Denver snorts softly. “Seems about right.”

I get up to start on the dishes and Denver follows me. “You don’t have to help, you’re the guest.”

“Please, my mother would be appalled. I was raised with manners.”

I laugh and don't protest when they jump in to wash the dishes while I dry and put them away. We could use the dishwasher, but there honestly wasn't much, and I like the simple domesticity of cleaning the kitchen with Denver. It's something I've never had before, which, considering how long Rory and I were together, seems crazy.

Denver and I move around each other like we've done it for years, and just the simple act of doing a menial chore with someone makes my heart flutter. Being with Denver is something I've wanted for a long time, but convinced myself would never happen. Now, here we are, giving it a chance. Not only that, we're including Luka into what we're building. It's a terrifying prospect, considering how long it's been since I considered dating someone seriously, let alone two people.

That more than one person is interested in me seems inconceivable, let alone getting the chance to be with both of them.

"Hey," Denver's soft tone cuts into the beginning of my spiral. They touch my arm. "You okay?"

Letting out a slow breath, I almost nod but decide to be honest instead. "Eh. My brain's just being stupid."

"Talking helps sometimes," they say softly.

"I'm okay. I just... It's been a long time since I've dated, and I think it's just now hitting me that I'm moving forward with not one but two people. Just need to get my head around it a bit."

"I understand." They run their fingers gently up and down my arm. "I've been attracted to you for a long time, Grae. But it's only now I feel we might have a chance. I'm not good at relationships, at putting myself out there. Weird, I know, considering I'm an extrovert through and through, but it's different when it comes to

people I want to date. Then Luka showed up and I wanted nothing more than to be his friend.” Denver smiles as he trails his fingers up to my face, rubbing over the facial hair I couldn't be bothered to shave this morning.

“He's amazing, Grae. So sweet, shy, and vulnerable. He makes me want to protect him, even while I drag him out of his shell.”

I nod in agreement. “Same. He draws things out of me that I thought I lost when my marriage fell apart.” Concern fills Denver's eyes, but I smile to try to quell it. “You and Luka make me want so much—more than I ever thought I'd get again. I just don't understand why. I feel washed up. Aside from some one night stands, both before and after the divorce, Rory has been my only relationship.

“Not only that, I have Callum. My son isn't a burden, and he's mostly self-sufficient, but he still needs me to be his dad. That's not easy for everyone to handle; nevermind the reactions I get when they realize I'm the one who carried him. Some people get weird at that. It's like they're okay with me being trans until the five foot five, blond hair, blue-eyed reminder stares them in the face.”

Denver laughs a little at my description. “Hey, I like your kid, I always have. I know how babies are made and it doesn't bother me.”

Snorting, I catch Denver's hand in mine, holding it tightly and pulling them in closer. “Yeah, well, some people seem to forget that.”

“Their loss is my gain,” Denver whispers, leaning in for a kiss.

The second their lips touch mine, I groan. Just the feel of them against me has everything in my body lighting up. The simple press of their lips is soft, but it doesn't stay that way for long.

As Denver sweeps their tongue into my mouth, we both moan, and they press against me, their cock brushing against my bulge, making me shudder as the packer presses against my hard dick.

With my free hand, I skim my fingers down Denver's back. They arch into me, making me groan at the pressure when they push their hips harder into mine. Pressing against their lower back, I encourage them to grind their dick against me.

"Fuck," they say, breaking away from my mouth with a gasp.

"We could do that." Sliding my hand down to their ass, I grip the firm flesh.

Denver gasps and pulls their hand out of mine, bringing both to my chest and clutching at my shirt. "Take me to your bed, Graeme. I don't really want your kid to walk in on us."

I groan and laugh at the same time. "Rory will kill me if he has to pay for therapy, so let's go."

Denver untangles themselves, and I miss them immediately. Grabbing their hand, I lead them out of the kitchen and downstairs to my bedroom.

"This is cool," Denver says, looking around at the basement area.

"Yeah, part of the reason we bought the house was because the basement was finished. The laundry room is at the other end." I motion to the door but drag Denver towards my bedroom door.

"The other bathroom is in here," I tell them as we step into the room. "Callum keeps bitching that there's not one upstairs, but it's good exercise for him to go down and use the one on the main floor."

Denver snorts. "I would side with Cal, sorry not sorry."

I sigh, but shut the bedroom door behind us, shoving Denver against it. "I'd prefer to kiss you again, rather than talk about my kid and his many, many demands and whines."

Denver grips my hips, forcing our groins together again. "Yeah?"

"Mmmhmm." Leaning in, I press a gentle and chaste kiss to their mouth. "I want to get my lips and tongue all over you."

Denver tilts their head back against the door, giving me access to their throat. The noises coming from them as I suck a bruise into their delicate skin is music to my ears. Sliding my hands around their waist, I move them down to Denver's ass, pulling them firmly into me. "I want you to fuck me," I whisper into their skin.

Denver's hands clutch at my shoulders before they slide them down to the hem of my shirt, pushing the fabric aside so we're touching skin to skin. "Yes," they hiss. "You want to come on my cock?"

Licking a path along their collarbone, I shove their shirt further aside to kiss and suck at their skin. "Yes, but..." I pull away to look into their lust-filled hazel eyes. "I don't do anal."

Denver licks their lips and swallows. "I'm an equal opportunist, so that doesn't bother me. Just so we're clear, no anal penetration for you, right? Or do you not penetrate others?"

Squeezing and kneading their ass, I assure them, "Oh, don't worry, one day soon, I'm going to get my cock inside you, but not today." I rub myself against them. "If you're good, I might even let you choose which one you get fucked with."

Denver's entire body arches away from the door and they dig their nails into the soft flesh of my lower belly. "Fucking hell," they gasp. "I didn't think I could come from words alone but... Keep talking like that and I won't get a chance to be inside you."

Moving my hands to their hips, I start walking backwards, leading them to the bed. "That would be a tragedy. Though..." I give them my best teasing grin. "It's been a very long time since I've made a person come that way; we'll have to take a raincheck."

Denver laughs and pushes my shirt up, forcing me to release them so we can get the clothing off. "You think you can Dom me?"

If this was a few weeks earlier, I would have said no, but the shifting dynamics have me giving them a cocky grin and a very firm yes.

Helping Denver with their shirt, I turn them so their back is to the bed. Pressing a firm hand against the hard cock in their pants, I listen to the noise they make, soaking up each and every reaction I'm able to pull from them.

Sliding my fingers beneath the waistband of Denver's pants, I'm surprised, and pleased, to discover they don't wear underwear. Unwrapping a person is one of my favorite things, as you learn a lot about them while doing so; such as, which types of touches make them moan and arch, and what they wear—or don't—underneath their clothes.

Denver's cock is hard and ready, but I ignore it in favor of stripping them of their clothes completely, before running my hands up their calves, and following with my mouth—keeping my promise of tasting them all over.

I suck the pre-cum from their dick, but don't take it into my mouth, despite how much we both want it. Denver whines, but allows me to continue my exploration,

sucking bruises into their flat stomach, and then traveling further up to give attention to their pretty pink nipples.

They slide their hands down to my waist, pushing at my jeans, and I pull back enough to shuck them off. “These too?” I ask, hooking my fingers into my underwear, but not removing them.

“Yes, please... I want to see you.”

I suck in a breath at their desperate words. “I...don’t look like you,” I say, suddenly nervous. “I had a meta done, but it was a simple release. I like my parts. I enjoy being fucked and won’t ever compromise on that just because some guys don’t like men with vaginas. And my dick...while not big, is still mine .”

Denver moves in close, hands settling on my chest, just below my scars. I shudder, the area around my pectorals has been sensitive since my top surgery, and Denver’s long, delicate fingers against my flesh heightens the sensation.

“I like you , Graeme. I want you . I don’t care what you do or don’t have.”

I let out a heavy breath. “You’d think this is the first time I’ve had sex since Rory, but it’s not. But none of the others...they haven’t been important to me like you are.”

Their gaze softens and they smile at me. “You’re important to me, too. And I want to make you feel good. Will you let me?”

I give a small nod and Denver smiles softly as they undo my pants, then shove them down my legs. Carefully, I step out of them, my breath hitching at the hunger in Denver’s eyes as they look at me.

“So fucking beautiful, Grae,” they whisper.

The thing is, I feel beautiful, with the way Denver rakes their eyes over my body, though they don't linger on my scars or my not-flat stomach. As they look, they also touch: my nipples, down my chest and abdomen, over my hips, to my thighs, gently parting my legs.

I tremble as their fingers sweep near my groin. My hard cock aches and Denver teases it, brushing their fingers across the length.

I shudder and groan, and Denver grins at me. "Lay on the bed?" they ask softly, careful to not make it an order.

Denver helps maneuver me to first sit on the edge of the bed, and then I scoot back until I hit the pillows. Denver sits between my legs, urging me to lift my ass as they shove their thighs under me.

Once I'm draped across their lap, they bring their hand to their mouth and lick it from the palm to the tip of their fingers.

As I watch them, I shudder and reach for my cock. Denver bats my hand away, lifting an eyebrow. Grinning at them, I lift my ass, trying to entice them to do something.

"You're a feisty bottom, aren't you?" they mutter.

"What do you think?"

Denver shakes their head, but brings their hand between my legs, fingering my cock and making me moan. Throwing my head back against the pillows, I relish in the sensation of being touched.

Denver jerks me off, their fingers wrapped around my short length, gripping me perfectly as they slide up and down.

Gripping the covers, I arch into the touch, every nerve ending is a livewire of desire as Denver expertly gets me off.

“Den... Please... I need more.”

They release my cock and I whine, instantly missing the sensation.

“Shh, I'm going to take good care of you.”

They move their hand to my entrance, one finger slipping inside effortlessly.

“Oh, fuck!”

“So slick...” they murmur, teasing me with one finger before pushing in with two.

“Fuck, baby, you're so tight and wet .” There's awe in their voice.

I huff a laugh. “Since I started T—aside from my nine-month interlude—I’ve been wetter than before I got on hormones.”

“Huh.” They begin fingerfucking me slowly. “Didn’t know that was a thing. I mean, I've been with men who could still get wet, but no one has ever said they got more .”

“News to me, too. Holy fuck!” Denver slides their fingers out, only to return with three. “But I talked to some people back then. A few said it happened to them, but they dried up after a few months or a year or whatever. Others thought maybe the heightened libido and actually wanting to be touched was the cause. Fucking hell! ” I chase after Denver's hand every time they pull out. “Whatever the reason, I'm not complaining. It makes sex easier.”

Denver laughs. “I’m sure it does. And I can't wait to test it out.”

They rub their thumb against my dick and I writhe, the sensation on the borderline of being too much, because I can feel my orgasm building and this is not how I want to come, as spectacular as it'd be.

“Fuck me,” I beg. “I need you to fuck me, Den...”

“Yeah,” they say, voice low and husky. “I'll fuck you. Fuck you so hard it hurts, and you can't help but come on my cock because of how good it feels.”

A full body shiver runs through me as I gasp while Denver continues to fuck me with their hand.

Over and over again, they thrust their fingers deep inside, before it all stops.

“On your back,” I order, too wrecked to remember I'm not supposed to give this gorgeous specimen of a human being commands.

Denver doesn't say anything, scrambling to comply, even as they fist their cock with the hand that was just three fingers deep in me.

The visual has my cock throbbing with pleasure and my thighs are slick with my arousal. My entire body needs Denver, and any lingering doubts or worries don't matter as I swing a leg over them and straddle their hips.

“Lube? Condom?” they ask, hands settling on my hips.

My stomach drops. “Fuck.” I hang my head. “We don't need lube,” I tell them, dragging my dripping wet entrance over their cock. “And I don't have any condoms—I gave them back to Rory because I didn't think I'd need them so soon. Denver's fingers tighten against my hips, stilling my motion. “I didn't expect to sleep with anyone today, so...”

I perk up. “Rory has some. I can run up to his room.”

Denver quirks a brow. “You want to go steal condoms from your ex?”

I shrug. “He won't mind. In fact, if I called him right now, he'd be very encouraging.”

They laugh. “That's a no from me...” They hesitate before saying, “I'm negative, recently tested and everything. I can show you my results, if you want?”

“Not necessary. My...tests aren't up to date, but it's been more than a year since I've been with anyone. And I've only ever had unprotected sex with Rory. That was a long time ago.” Two years, give or take, but I won't tell them that quite yet. Some things about my relationship with Rory should wait.

Denver twitches their fingers against my hips. “So...”

Leaning forward, so their cock pokes right where I need it to, I whisper against their mouth. “So I'm going to ride you now, unless you have any objections?”

Denver shakes their head.

“Good. Then relax and enjoy.”

Gently moving their hands from my hips, I place them on the bed and then rise up, gripping the base of their cock and holding on as I bring it to my entrance.

Ever so slowly, I sink down, pausing to take a few deep, careful breaths as they stretch me so beautifully.

I'm slightly open from the fingerfucking, but still tight enough that there's a bit of pain as I slide down onto Denver's thick cock. It's fleeting, the pleasure of being

stretched open is a heightened sense.

“You can touch me,” I tell them once I’m seated all the way. “But this is my show, understand?”

“Yes. Fuck yourself, Grae.”

I grin. “Oh, Amour, I’m about to rock your world.”

Carefully, I start to move, sliding up Denver’s cock, before rolling my hips and moving back down. Planting my hands behind myself and bracing on their thighs, I give them the ride of a lifetime as I writhe on their cock.

Denver tears at the bedcovers, and plants their feet on the bed—sliding me further down on their cock and making me place my hands on their chest—and then holds still.

“You’re killing me, baby,” they say, breathless.

“Fuck, so good and deep. Haven’t...” Too fucked out to speak, I ride them hard for a few seconds, savoring the intensity before slowing down and grinding on them, rocking my hips slowly.

“Haven’t ever felt like this...” I whisper, finishing my thought.

Denver glides their hands down my back to my ass as I roll my hips into theirs. They slide their hands around to the front, one holding my hip, the other stroking my aching dick.

“You’re going to make me come...” Throwing my head back, I begin fucking myself on Denver faster, chasing the sensation of them deep in me and their fingers around

my throbbing cock.

“Come, baby. Show me how good it is.”

“Fuck, Den...”

The sensations crashing through me are too much and my entire body seizes as I come. The orgasm is not so much rolling through me but crashing , setting every nerve on fire and making me tingle from head to toe.

Denver curses, grips my hips in both hands, and thrusts up into me, fucking me hard and fast, prolonging my pleasure as they chase their own.

“In me, in me,” I mutter, unsure why it sounds wrong to my ears until the fog clears a little as I come down from my high and realize I'm speaking French.

Denver doesn't seem to notice as they thrust up hard and then spill into me, cum painting my still-quivering channel.

We stay like that, suspended in the moment for what feels like an eternity before my arms give out and I collapse on top of Denver.

Their arms wrap around me, holding me close, even as their cock slips out. Our panting breaths are the only sounds in the room, the sweat on our skin cooling and sticking us together as our breaths and heart rates return to normal. Still we don't move, content to hold onto this for as long as possible.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

“Did you know that kangaroos are strong swimmers and can, and will, drown you if given the chance? Never chase a kangaroo into the water,” Callum says as he leans against the railing outside of the red kangaroo exhibit.

I glance at Graeme and he sighs. “He likes facts, and spends way too much time on the internet.” He raises his voice a little. “Cal, how about we not talk about drowning?”

Callum looks back, his blue eyes wide with innocence. “It’s just a fact. Just like how baby kangaroos, or joeys, are born after thirty-three days but then spend a year in the pouch. Or how they can jump six feet in the air.”

“Callum...”

“I’m just saying!” Callum replies, smiling wide. “You know what we should do next?” He doesn’t wait for a reply before continuing, “We should go horseback riding. It’s been forever since we did that. We’ll have to bring Da with us, though, but it’ll be a fun family outing.”

“That’s a great idea,” Denver says from where they’re leaning on the railing next to Callum.

Graeme sighs. “Don’t encourage him.”

Laughing softly, I reach for Graeme’s hand. “I think a group outing would be nice.”

Graeme’s gaze softens as he looks down at me. “You don’t have to cater to the little

shit,” he says. “He doesn’t need to get everything he wants.”

I squeeze his hand. “It’s fine. I like the idea.”

Graeme leans in and kisses me softly. “We’ll talk about it. You might change your mind once you meet Rory.”

His reminder that I actually have to meet his ex-husband sends a fissure of fear through me. Graeme must see something in my face because he kisses me again, lingering for a moment. “It’ll be okay. He’ll love you, Amour.”

“Stop being embarrassing!” Callum calls out. “Let’s go look at the gorillas!”

Graeme rolls his eyes while I laugh, and we follow Callum to the next exhibit hand in hand. Denver falls back to take my other hand as we trail behind the teenager.

“You good?”

“I’m fine, Den. You don’t have to worry about me.”

Denver lifts my hand to their mouth and presses a kiss to it. “But I like worrying about you.”

I can feel the blush creeping up my throat to my face, and though I smile, I look away to prevent from embarrassing myself more.

“Give us some gorilla facts, Cal,” Graeme calls out to his son, squeezing my hand as he does.

Callum spins around, walking backwards, heedless of the people around us as he says, “The western lowland gorilla has a diet of about sixty-seven percent fruit. Three

percent of it is termites and caterpillars, the rest is made up of seeds and leaves. They're the most widespread of the gorilla species, but their numbers have dwindled by more than sixty percent in the last twenty to twenty-five years. It'd take around seventy-five years of them being threat free to come back from the brink of extinction." He trips and almost makes a woman fall over. Graeme lets go of my hand to help his son and apologize to the poor woman who was just trying to walk like a normal person.

Graeme keeps a hand on Callum's shoulder as we find places to stand in front of the gorilla enclosure.

"Did you know they have live cameras that you can watch online?" Callum says.

"How often do you do that?" Graeme asks.

Callum shrugs. "They have set hours, so it's not like I can try to get a glimpse of the gorillas day and night."

"I see you're an animal lover."

Callum smiles at me. "Absolutely. I'd have a menagerie if I thought Dad would let me. As it is, Jolene will be an only child until I move out."

"I've already told you, you're never moving out."

"I could just dump you and Da into a nursing home and be done with it," Callum says with a smile. "You know, if you and Luka keep dating Dad, you'll eventually become my parents as well. Then I can put all four of you in a home!" He cackles evilly.

Denver looks at me with wide hazel green eyes and I'm sure the expression on my face matches their's. My heart beats rapidly and my breath wheezes through my lungs

until Graeme threads his hand through mine.

“Callum...” he says in exasperation.

The teenager shrugs and flashes an innocent smile. “It’s true, though!”

“You know,” Denver drawls, “if that happens, it’ll be four against one, so you’ll be shit outta luck, Cal.”

Callum’s eyes widen and he frowns, shaking his head. “That’s unfair.”

The three of us laugh as Callum pouts and turns back to the glass of the enclosure.

We spend a while in front of the gorillas, stopping at every viewing station to get a different perspective into the enclosure. Callum keeps up a running commentary about what he thinks the gorillas are thinking, or why they’re doing what they do. Some of what he says is laced with facts, but most of it is from his overactive imagination.

“If I were an animal,” Callum says a while later. “I would be a hippopotamus.”

Graeme side-eyes his son. “Why?”

Callum gestures to the pygmy hippopotamus in front of us. “Look at it. Short, fat, and cute. It’s also a loner, only getting with another hippo to procreate. What’s not to love? Plus, look at those ears!”

“Cal has heart eyes for hippos—noted,” Denver muses.

“Pretty sure anything with four legs gives him heart eyes,” I reply.

Graeme wraps an arm around my waist. “I hope this isn’t too boring for you. I know hanging out with my kid all day isn’t everyone’s idea of a date.”

Looking up at him, I frown. “I don’t know who would say that, but they can fuck off. Into the anaconda enclosure.” I shudder as I say it, still a bit freaked out by seeing the huge snake, made worse by Callum’s rattling facts.

Graeme laughs. “I respect people’s decision not to have children, but when you date someone with a child, I think some only have a vague idea of what it means. Cal isn’t a little kid anymore, and maybe it’d be different if he was, but while I haven’t been dating, Rory has. And I’ve seen what he’s had to deal with, and some people haven’t had the best responses when Rory’s had to put Cal first.”

“I’m sorry any of you have had to deal with that,” I say sincerely.

Graeme gives me a bitter smile. “I won’t say it’s fine, because it’s not, but I think it makes finding your people, whether that be romantic prospects or just friends, all the more special.”

Denver moves into Graeme’s other side, wrapping an arm around both of us. “And are we your people? Or potential people?”

Graeme’s soft blue eyes seem to shine, even as he tightens his hold on me. “I would like you to be,” he says softly.

My breath catches in my throat as my insides twist in pleasure. Denver’s hand squeezes my side as they lean in and kiss Graeme gently. When they break away, Denver turns their head and I meet them in a sweet, slow kiss.

We’re surrounded by people, animals, and Graeme’s son, and even though I’m nervous, I don’t let any of it stop me from pulling away from Denver and kissing

Graeme. I never thought I'd be brave enough to show this card, but right now, I feel safe with them, so it's nothing for me to press my lips to Graeme's, sharing the taste of Denver between the two of us.

This moment is one I never expected, but standing in their arms, I realize it's everything I always wanted. The love and care pours off them both, and I will do everything in my power to hold on.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

I don't have many regrets in life, but having Luka spend time with both my kid and my ex, on the same day, is probably at the top of the list. He thankfully is holding his own, but still, it was not the smartest move on my part, mostly because now I have them ganging up on me.

"I have a question," Callum says.

"Please don't ask," I beg.

Cal smiles. "Relax, it's fine. I just want to know if they want kids, because I am not big brother material. I like being the spoiled only child."

"Callum," I try to scold while also holding back a laugh. Rory is no help, the fucker isn't hiding his mirth.

"What?" He shrugs. "It's a perfectly legitimate question! I thought I'd just throw it out there that I am content being the center of your world."

Groaning, I turn to Denver and Luka. "I am so sorry. I'd like to say he's normally better behaved, but well...that'd be a lie."

"It's fine," Luka says around a smile. "I don't mind. I've never really thought about children before. I know I never want to carry my own child, but I haven't given it any thought beyond that."

"Good enough answer." Callum tilts his head. "You're younger than Dad."

I choke. “Callum Elliot, you can’t just say things like that!”

Luka laughs. “It’s fine. I’m twenty-five, so yeah, I’m a bit younger than your parents. Is that okay?”

“Sure. Age is just a number and all that; as long as you treat each other well, I don’t see why it matters.”

I give Rory a look that says ‘Are you going to do something about your son?’, but he just smiles and shrugs—the fucker.

Cal seems to be done with that line of questioning because he turns to Denver next. “What about you, Den? Kids?”

Denver shakes his head. “No, thank you. I specifically make sure to have safe sex because I don’t want children; I mean, to prevent STIs as well, but a lot of it has to do with children.”

“Good answer.” Callum nods. “So long as everyone takes their hormones on time and practices safe sex, we don’t have to worry about any oops babies.”

Luka’s face is bright red but he nods. “A hysterectomy is the second surgery on my list. After top surgery. And I’m very careful with my calendar to make sure I don’t miss a dose. Trust me, there will be no accidental pregnancies here.”

Callum looks at me and I groan. “Jesus fuck. You forget to take your T once, maybe twice, when you’re twenty years old and just starting on hormones, and no one ever lets you live it down.”

“I mean, it’s hard to when ‘oops, I’ve missed two doses’ turns into that .” Rory gestures to our son.

I thunk my head on the table while everyone laughs at my expense. I can admit it's a bit funny now, but when you're twenty and supposed to be on hormones that eventually stop ovulation and all that, getting pregnant is not on your bingo card.

It was a very 'oh shit' moment for Rory and I, as we talked about children but never made any concrete decisions. With my transition, and trying to break away from my family's negativity, plus with how young we were, we both figured it would be a later conversation. Later just came about much sooner than expected.

At least I got a kid who's pretty cool, despite being weird, and a new habit of inputting my hormone schedule into my calendar out of it? Silver linings? Maybe?

"It's okay, Cher," Rory says. "I still love you."

I groan and sit up again. "I hate you."

He smiles. "No you don't, not when I give you beautiful babies."

I flip him off as the laughter starts up again. The sound of Denver and Luka having fun and taking joy—even at my expense—with Callum and Rory warms my heart. It's everything I always wanted with a partner. Though for a long time I thought I had and lost it with Rory, I'm glad to have been proven wrong. Because there's nowhere I'd rather be than here in this moment, with the four people who mean the world to me.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

“How do you have so much energy this early in the morning? Especially after a twelve-hour shift?” I side-eye Axel.

“I’ve been mainlining coffee all night. Don’t tell Lauri.”

I snort and shake my head. Lauri is going to take one look at Axel and know how much caffeine they’ve had. Not that I can really blame Axel, it was a long night of non-stop calls, some more intense than others. I really hate working the overnight shift, it always seems like some type of switch flips whenever the sun goes down.

While working as a dispatcher isn’t my dream job, it’s something that is comfortable for me. I don’t have to face people, and I feel like I’m being useful, most of the time, that is. Sometimes, there are calls that you just know won’t end well, and it hurts because there’s nothing you can do except your job. You have to trust the people you send out will do their job to the best of their ability.

“Are you okay?” Axel asks.

I give them what I hope is a reassuring smile. “Yeah. Just a little tired.”

“We can do this another time? Lauri will understand.”

I shake my head. “No, I want to do this. I just might not be in a very talkative mood.”

Axel scoffs. “According to Lauri, I can talk enough for ten people. Let’s go.”

My smile turns a little more natural because I can believe that. I also can’t wait to

meet this Lauri. Axel talks about them a lot, and I'm very curious to know what type of person can handle Axel's particular brand of crazy twenty-four seven.

For not quite eight in the morning, Randy's Diner is fairly busy. What these people are doing up so early is baffling, but I guess morning people need to eat too.

Axel leads the way to the back section of the diner, and stops at a table where one of the most gorgeous people I've ever seen is sitting. Their reddish-brown hair hangs almost to their shoulders in loose curls, and their dark blue eyes are intense. Their mouth is framed by a short, neatly kept beard and mustache, and though I'm not a huge fan of facial hair, on them, it's hot, especially as the close-kept beard highlights their sharp jaw.

Axel throws themselves into the booth next to the hot stranger and doesn't hesitate, leaning in to kiss them. I slide into the other side of the table, trying not to stare at the study of opposites in front of me.

Where Lauri is dark and intense, their don't fuck with me attitude easily felt, even though they haven't even said anything yet, Axel is all excitable puppy vibes. Their golden blond hair, light brown eyes, and perpetual smile match what little I know of their personality, and while normally extroverts exhaust me, like with Denver, I find myself drawn to Axel's energy.

"Good morning, you must be Luka. I'm Lauri, Axel's partner. I hope they didn't drag you here against your will."

I smile while Axel acts affronted, gasping and placing a hand over their heart.

"It's nice to meet you. No, I agreed to this. I might have been sleep-deprived at the time, but I knew what I was doing."

“I feel attacked,” Axel says with a pout.

“Poor baby,” Lauri says, no sympathy in their tone.

Axel sighs. “Who’s on shift today? I need coffee.”

“You’re not allowed to have coffee,” Lauri tells them.

“That’s not fair! We just got here.”

Lauri raises an eyebrow. “You think I can’t tell when you’re running on a high? I’m the one that has to go home with you. No coffee.”

Axel sighs, but when Maisy comes around, they order an iced tea and pout at me when I ask for a coffee along with my usual water.

“Starting the party without me, I see,” Graeme teases.

Looking up, I grin at him. “Hey, glad you could join us.” I slide over in the booth.

“Sorry I’m a little late. I had to drop my son off with my mother-in-law.”

“It’s fine.” I motion across the table to Axel and Lauri. “This is Axel, we work together, and Lauri is their partner. Graeme is my...boyfriend?” I don’t mean for it to come out as a question, but we’ve never defined this thing between us.

Graeme’s smile is soft and sweet. “Boyfriend is the right word, Amour.”

Axel gags. “Y’all are too lovely and sweet. How long has it been since we’ve acted like that?”

“We’ve been together ten years, so probably nine,” Lauri replies drolly.

Axel sighs. “You make it sound like being with me is such a hardship.” They lay their head on Lauri’s shoulder.

“It is.” Though their response is dry, the look they aim Axel’s way is soft and full of love.

Graeme takes my hand in his. “Now you’re being the sweet ones,” he says.

“Gross,” Lauri replies.

When Maisy returns with our drinks, she takes Graeme’s order before asking if we’re ready for food. Axel orders enough for two people, and my stomach turns at the thought of that much sugar and carbs before I go to bed.

When I ask for just a bowl of fruit, Graeme gives me a look that I’m sure Callum is very used to. “I promise, this is enough. My schedule is all messed up today, and I plan on crashing as soon as possible.”

“Okay...” he says, as if he doesn’t quite believe me.

“I’m the same way,” Lauri offers. “Though mine is from a lifetime of training and actually taking care of my body.” They side-eye Axel, who just grins.

“You work out and eat right enough for the both of us,” Axel says. “Besides, I’m still trim and fit.” They run a hand down the front of their body.

“Good genetics and luck,” Lauri replies with an eye roll.

“Don’t be jealous.”

“Of you?” Lauri raises their eyebrow again. “Never.”

Their banter and openness with each other makes me smile, and it’s something I can only hope to achieve with Graeme and Denver one day. My limited experience has me remaining cautious, because it was the epitome of a shitshow, but seeing Axel and Lauri interact helps show that it’s not impossible to have the life and love I’ve always wanted.

“Thank you for inviting us for breakfast,” I tell Axel sincerely. “It was fun.”

“It was! We’ll have to do it again, yeah?”

“Absolutely.” I chew on my lip for a moment before saying, “Maybe my other partner will be available next time.”

“The more the merrier. We don’t discriminate here.”

“You mean we’ve had our fair share of thirds as well as fourths,” Lauri casually throws out.

“Yeah, that.”

“I don’t know about a fourth...” The very thought makes my head spin. “But the three of us are making it work.”

Graeme wraps his arm around my waist. “I’m sure Denver would love to join in when they can. You guys are a lot of fun.”

“You don’t have to be nice,” Lauri tells us. “We already know we like you.”

Axel elbows their partner. “Shut up, I like when people say nice things about me.”

I laugh. “I like you, too.”

Axel moves in for a quick hug, and I’m too surprised to do anything except let them hold on for longer than normal people would. Though, I’m quickly learning that “normal” and Axel don’t belong in the same category.

Lauri finally coaxes Axel to leave and Graeme turns to me—after he pays for his and my food, despite my protests. “Do you want to come to the house?”

“I need to sleep,” I reply. “Not that I don’t want to, but I really, really need a bed.”

Graeme smiles. “Well, good thing I have one at my house, hmm?”

“I’d hate to be an imposition. Especially when I have no clothes or anything with me.”

“That doesn’t matter. You can borrow something if you want, but I’m not quite ready to let you go yet. You can say no, of course. But you’re welcome to sleep in my bed. I’ll be trying to write for most of the day; I am so close to finishing this book. But I wouldn’t mind knowing you were there.”

“Yeah?” My heart does crazy flips in my chest at his words.

“Yeah. Only if you’re comfortable with that, of course.”

“Take me home, Grae.”

He smiles. “You’ve never called me that before.”

“Blame the sleep deprivation.”

That earns me a laugh. “Let’s get you into bed then. Do you need me to drive?”

I shake my head. “I can follow you. I’m not that tired yet.”

“Okay.” He grabs my hand and drags me out of the diner. I follow, the promise of bed too good to refuse.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

Graeme opens the door with a smile and a kiss.

“I could get used to this type of greeting,” I tease.

He smiles. “Anytime, Amour, anytime.”

“I love the way French rolls off your tongue. Especially when you’re out of your mind with pleasure.” I press against him, listening to his groan.

“I didn’t invite you over for sex.”

“There’s nothing that says that can’t be part of the agenda. Especially if you keep it up with the French.”

He mutters something I have no hope of understanding and I reward him with a kiss.

“I called you an annoying brat,” he says against my mouth.

“Don’t care. Still hot.”

Grae laughs and pulls away. “Menace.”

“Yep. Is Luka still asleep?”

Graeme nods and drags me by the hand from the entryway to the sunroom. “Yeah, I practically poured him into bed. He was so tired. Lucky for him, he doesn’t have to do the overnight shift often; he’s not built for it.”

“Not many are. I’ve gotten used to it, but my natural sleep cycle has always been later than everyone else’s.”

“Mine, too. It helped when Cal was a baby, allowing me to get up with him. I’m not sure how we made it through the first few years, since we were broke college kids and only had Rory’s mother to rely on, but somehow, we made it work.”

“You guys are great parents. I love seeing you with Callum.”

Grae rolls his eyes. “He’s weird as hell, but I kinda love him. He got the best and worst of both of us, but that’s not his fault.”

I laugh and move closer to him on the sofa, our thighs touching. “He’s great. Reminds me of my brother, Paris, actually.”

“Really?”

I nod. “Yeah, he’s really smart, but an odd duck. Of course, he’d probably say that about me, too.”

“I think that’s a sibling’s job. How many do you have?”

“Two, my brother and then Venice is our sister.”

Graeme gives me the same incredulous look almost everyone does. “Your siblings are named Paris and Venice?” I nod. “And you’re Denver?” More nodding.

“Sure am. My parents are...interesting, okay.” I laugh a little. “So I totally get where Callum is coming from. I love my family, but sometimes, they’re too much in my business. It’s nice having their support. I never had to like come out, necessarily, just tell them how I was feeling.”

“Sounds similar to how Rory was raised. His mom, Vera, is really sweet and supportive. She’s never treated me any differently, even when I told her I was a boy, not a girl, when we first met. I was only fifteen at the time, but she took me seriously...and I’d never had that before. Hell, she even encouraged us when we told her we were divorcing. All she ever wanted was to see us happy; whether that was together or apart didn’t matter.”

I place my hand on his leg and he covers it with his own. In a gentle tone, I say, “It’s safe to assume you didn’t have that from your bio family then.”

He scoffs. “Definitely not. The only one who still talks to me sometimes is my sister, and that’s just because she genuinely loves my kid. They’re not close, especially since Callum is adamant that he’s queer as well, but she tries, and that’s more than I can say about anyone else in my family.

“Sometimes, I wish she would decide to leave our lives for good rather than only calling every other month, but it’s better than nothing, and Cal really likes her. Though that has a lot to do with her being a veterinarian, so he gets to visit all the animals when he’s with her.” His hand on mine tightens. “When I got pregnant, she had the audacity to ask if I was ‘done with the trans thing now’.”

I look at him in shock. “You’re kidding, right?”

He huffs a laugh. “Wish I was.”

“And you let Callum around that bitch?”

Graeme laughs, long and loud, the sound making my belly flutter and dick twitch, even as my heart aches for him. “I didn’t, not for a long time. Callum was about...four? When she reached out and apologized. She claimed that she’d had some time to reflect and realized she was wrong about me. I didn’t believe her one iota, and

neither did Rory. We talked to her for a few months, just short conversations as we felt her out, nothing too personal. Then when we were sure she wouldn't be a transphobe around our toddler, Rory took him to meet her and her daughter.

“It hasn't been easy, and there have been a lot of steps backwards, but Rory mostly deals with it, even though she was not happy when I told her we were divorcing. She didn't talk to either of us for about six months.”

“Ugh.” I roll my eyes. “One of those.”

“Pretty much. I stay out of it, and nothing Callum has said has raised red flags—he'd tell me if she was out of line. I don't know if you've noticed, but he doesn't really hold back.”

I can't stop the laugh that escapes me. “Uhh, considering he said he wanted to be an only child because he likes being a spoiled brat... Yeah, I believe he'd speak up.”

“Right, so I'm not too worried. Of course, I'll be pissed if she does ever step out of line, but well...I'd be a hell of a lot nicer than Callum. He's...fiercely protective of Rory and me.”

“You're raising a good one. Even if he's a bit...”

“Strange?”

“I was trying to be nice!”

Graeme shakes his head. “There's no 'nice' when it comes to Callum, you've been around him long enough to know that.”

I snort. “Yeah...” Deciding to change the subject away from barely-tolerant sisters, I

nod to the laptop sitting on the table in front of the sofa. “Am I stopping you from working?”

“Nope. I finished.”

I look at him as a huge smile crosses my face. “Really?”

He grins back and nods. “Yep. Right before you got here, actually. It needs a lot of work, but that’s later Graeme’s problem. For now, it’s done and dusted and out of my hands for at least the next few days, before I go back and clean some stuff up for my beta readers.”

“We should celebrate,” I say with a cheeky grin.

“Oh, we should, hmm?”

“Uh-huh.” Leaning in, I kiss him nice and slow. “Shall we go downstairs and see if Luka’s awake yet?”

He kisses me deeply, tongue sweeping into my mouth and eliciting a moan from me. “J’ai envie de te baiser,” he whispers, making me shudder.

“I hope that was dirty.”

He chuckles. “It was... Let’s go downstairs.”

Extracting myself from Grae is hard, but getting Luka between and under us—or both—is too good to pass up.

Downstairs, I open Grae’s bedroom door to find Luka sitting up in the middle of it, the covers pooling at his waist. His red hair is in disarray, sleep’s still clouding his

eyes, and his chest is on full display.

The small, rounded breasts with their pretty pink nipples are like a beacon and I take a step into the room before Luka registers what's happening and pulls the covers to his chest, his entire face enflamed.

“Shit, sorry,” he says in a high, panicked voice. He drops his gaze to his lap as he leans forward, hunching his shoulders. “I can’t sleep in my binder, and I had my undershirt on, but I must have gotten too hot in my sleep and pulled it off. I do that sometimes.”

“Hey.” I cross the room and sit on the bed, Grae doing the same on Luka’s other side. “It’s okay. I’m sorry we saw something you’re not comfortable with, but it doesn’t change how we see you, Luka.”

He shakes his head, still clutching tight to the covers. “It’s one thing for you to look at what’s between my legs and say that. I know my vag is off-putting to some people, but a hole is a hole at the end of the day, and I have two down there. Plus, the testosterone has done enough over the years to make my T-dick look like an actual dick. I mean, you know , but it’s still a dick.

“This,” he straightens up and gestures to his covered chest, “There’s no hiding these. I got lucky in that I developed small. My sisters and my mother are all in the D or DD range. I was fucking terrified that I’d end up the same and wouldn’t be able to hide them.” He starts crying and all I want to do is wrap my arms around him, but I don’t think he’d welcome my touch right now. “I’ve worked so hard to get to where I am, to prove that I’m the man I am...and fuck, I just wish I could look at myself and see me .”

I...have absolutely no idea what to do or say right now. I knew for years that I didn’t fit into the “boy” or “girl” category. Falling outside the binary code was easy for me.

My family is open and accepting, and didn't care one way or another, so long as I was comfortable and safe in my own skin.

I look at Graeme, who, I'm sure, has felt all or at least some of the things Luka feels about his gender identity.

There's a knowing pain in Grae's soft blue eyes that breaks my heart for them both.

"You said the other night that you plan on having top surgery. Have you set any of that in motion yet?"

Luka nods. "My therapist from California set me up with someone here, and we've been going through the steps to find me a primary and then a surgeon. We've also discussed how I'd pay for it, if, for some reason, my insurance only covers a portion or none at all. She's had patients before with my insurance that had no problem getting their surgeries covered, but you know our healthcare system is a joke at best. So I wanted to be prepared for everything.

"Part of the reason I moved out here is so I could get the rest of my gender affirmation procedures without my family breathing down my neck. They may not speak to me, but you can bet I heard it all once they learned I started T." Luka wipes his eyes, but the damage is already done; his face is blotchy and there are tear-tracks running down his cheeks. He's still as handsome as ever, though.

"When Valery needed a roommate, my cousin practically shoved me out the door and across the country. He was so sure this was the change I needed in order to finally get to live the life I've always wanted. The one I deserve."

"He's right, sweetheart," I say softly. Taking a risk, I set my hand on Luka's leg. "You moving was the best decision, not just for yourself, but for me. You've brightened my life, Luka, and I am so very grateful for that."

He lets out a tear-filled, stuttered laugh. “I don’t see how. I’m a fucking mess.”

“Aren’t we all,” Grae says dryly. “I know where you’re coming from, I truly do. I wish I could say it doesn’t matter what parts you have or don’t have, but I know it matters to you. We were born into the wrong bodies, and fixing that can be a headache and a half sometimes. But you’re wrong if you think we can’t see the person—the man—you are. Your outsides don’t have to match your insides for us to see that, but we’ll never begrudge you for wanting that, as the only person who knows your body and how you feel about it is you.”

Graeme lifts Luka’s face to his and runs his thumb over his tear-streaked cheek. “You’re beautiful inside and out, Amour. Je tombe amoureux de toi tel que tu es.” He leans in and presses a soft kiss to Luka’s mouth. “I know it’s easier to say than it is to believe though.”

Graeme moves off the bed and removes his clothes. When he’s in just his briefs, he tugs them down a little so the scar running across the bottom of his abdomen is clearly visible. Unlike the ones on his chest, this one is darker than his skin tone, rather than fading.

“The one thing I hated about having Callum,” he says, “was actually having him. I couldn’t stomach the thought of giving birth vaginally. I might like getting fucked, but the idea that I had to do what my body was built to, just because of how I was born...” He shudders. “No, absolutely not. Luckily, my doctor listened to my concerns and we had a few different plans in place—because you can never predict how a birth is going to go, but we were as prepared as possible.” He gives a rueful smile then shrugs. “Anyway, I had a hysterectomy with my cesarean, no more babies for me. I love my kid, but no, I couldn’t go through that again.”

Graeme sits back on the bed and takes Luka’s hand in his. “My point is, I wasn’t born in the body that I felt belonged to me, and for close to a year, it wasn’t my own. For a

long time afterwards, as I was healing and having to deal with my fluctuating hormones...I was a mess. Poor Rory.”

Graeme runs his thumb over the back of Luka’s hand as he bows his head. “I hated my body and the way I looked for a long time. I don’t think I have to explain to you how fucking hard it is to find pants that fit when the T is wreaking havoc on your body. Try going through that and then having a baby, then going back on T. It was...not fun. Sometimes, it still isn’t easy to find clothes that flatter my body shape.

“I’ve learned over the years to love myself and what I look like. Yes, that came about because I had some surgeries to help give me the body I feel comfortable in, and if that’s what you also need, then Den and I will be here to support you.”

He releases Luka’s hand and shifts on the bed until he’s sitting in front of him, and gently takes Luka’s freckled shoulders in his grasp. “Top surgery, no top surgery, hormones or none... You’re still a good-looking, sweet, and caring man, and I want nothing more than to show you what I see.”

More tears fall from Luka’s eyes, but these seem different, more emotional than the ones before. “You really mean it?”

Graeme smiles gently. “Yes, Mon Cher, I mean it.”

Luka looks at me and I cup his face with my hand. “Same goes for me, sweetheart. I’ve loved getting to know you, and it doesn’t matter what you look like. As long as you’re comfortable, I’m here for you. And I’ll show you that in every way you’ll allow me to.”

Luka takes a stuttering breath. “I... Thank you. I don’t think I’ve ever really believed that someone could love me, truly love me, for who I am. After all, my family doesn’t, so why would anyone else?”

“Your family needs to be launched into the sun,” I say.

Luka laughs. “Yeah, they really do.” He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, looking between me and Grae. “Thank you, truly. I... I never expected to find this, but I am so, so fucking grateful, and in awe that you’re here with me. That you want me, want this.” He tugs at the covers a little in emphasis.

Leaning in, I kiss him softly. “Sweetheart, I more than want you. I adore you.” It’s not the three words I want to say, but I don’t think any of us are ready for those, at least not today. This moment is heavy enough without more complicated emotions.

“I don’t deserve either of you,” Luka whispers.

“Now that’s a fucking lie,” Graeme replies. He slides his hands across Luka’s shoulders until they’re resting on either side of his neck. Tilting Luka’s head back, he exposes his throat. “You’re fucking beautiful, and you deserve all the nice things we say about you and then some.” Grae casts a sideways look at me before focusing back on Luka. “I want us to show you what you deserve, if you’ll let us?”

Luka swallows and his eyes flutter closed for a moment before he finally says, “Yes.”

Carefully, Graeme guides Luka down onto the bed. He grabs the covers once Luka is resting against the pillows but doesn’t tug them down. “I can get you a shirt, if you want one.”

Luka’s lips part and his chest rises and falls for a moment before he finally shakes his head. “I... It’s okay. I trust you.”

“Say red or yellow if you need us to stop or slow down,” Grae tells him. “Stop will work too, but those are easy to remember, and we’ll follow them instantly.”

Luka nods and mouths, “Okay.”

With a quick tug, Graeme tears the covers off of Luka, exposing him to us both. His chest rises and falls quickly, but neither of us try to tell him to calm down, we know they’re useless words.

We both kiss Luka’s mouth, taking our time with him before moving on. Graeme kisses down his throat, lapping at his collarbone for a moment before sucking up a bruise. Luka moans and arches, his soft moan is music to my ears.

I follow Grae’s example, tasting the soft skin along Luka’s shoulder, throat, and clavicle, connecting his freckles with my tongue, needing to continue to pull soft, sweet sounds from his lips.

Cupping one small, pert breast in my hand, I run my thumb along the smooth flesh. “Okay?” I check in.

Luka takes a stuttering breath but nods.

Trusting him to tell us when he’s reached his limit, I gently run a finger along his nipple, listening to the way his breath catches in his throat. Graeme follows my example, and in tandem, we work Luka’s sweet nipples to hardened peaks, both of us watching his reactions carefully.

His legs shift restlessly, and his back arches, pushing his chest into our touches. His face shows no sign of distress. Instead, his lips are parted as gasps and moans escape from them, while his eyes are closed, head thrown back in pleasure.

Looking to Graeme, I meet his eyes and we seem to come to a silent agreement as, with our gazes still locked on each other, we lower our heads and take a respective nipple into our mouths.

Luka moans, his back arching further, as his hands move to our hair. He doesn't try to guide us, but he does hold on tight, his fingers pulling at our hair.

Dragging my hand down his body, I gently nudge his leg aside, and slide my hand into his briefs. His T-dick is straining, and I don't hesitate to rub my fingers over it, listening to him moan as his body shudders.

Graeme's fingers meet mine and we take turns teasing Luka's T-dick and entrance, as we continue to work his nipples into swollen points.

Pulling back, I sit up to watch as Graeme takes Luka apart. They look good together. Luka's flushed from head to toe, his cheeks almost as red as his hair as he moans and writhes in pleasure. Graeme expertly fucks Luka with his fingers while at the same time, he presses their lips together.

The sight of them makes me moan and my cock throbs, wanting some type of friction, but I refuse to give in, knowing that if I start touching myself now, I won't want to stop until I come.

Moving down the bed, I slide Luka's briefs down and off, then nudge his legs further apart and lean over one thigh, latching my mouth onto his T-dick. His hips thrust up at my touch. I suck and tongue at his T-dick, enjoying the way it feels in my mouth. Sucking two fingers in alongside him, I get them nice and wet before bypassing Grae's busy fingers and pressing against his other hole.

Luka moans and shifts on the bed as I rub against him before pressing one finger inside. Graeme and I begin fucking him in tandem, one of us pulling our fingers out while the other thrusts in, making him whine and cry out at every motion.

Over and over, we fuck him, and I can't help but wonder how he'll sound if we do this with our dicks... The thought of Luka being speared by one of us in each hole at

the same time has my own cock aching.

We fuck Luka until he comes, his whole body shuddering as his cries seem to echo around the room. His ass contracts around my fingers and his T-dick spasms on my tongue. Slowly, I pump into him a few more times before sliding out of his body. I don't want to let go of his taste, but I eventually let his poor, spent T-dick slip from my mouth.

Sitting on my knees, I watch as Graeme also removes his fingers from Luka's body. Before he can do or say anything, I grab his wrist and bring said fingers to my mouth, sucking the taste off them.

Graeme moans and also sits on his knees. His blue eyes are dark with desire, and when I let his fingers go, he tangles them in my hair, drawing me in for a kiss over Luka's spent body.

Our tongues duel for dominance as we reach for one another. There's not a fumble as he swiftly opens my pants and gets my cock out, stroking me from root to tip. His fingers around my dick have me moaning, and pre-cum escapes the head. It's not going to take much before I come.

Grabbing the side of his underwear, I tug them down as far as I'm able to and reach between his legs. Fingering his dick, I jerk him off hard and fast, enjoying the way he groans into my mouth. Slipping a finger inside him, I enjoy how tight and wet he is already. It doesn't seem like either of us will take long to come.

Graeme tugs my bottom lip with his teeth and I shiver, the sharp pain mixing with the pleasure, heightening every sense—as if I wasn't already a livewire of need and desire.

Grae smears my pre-cum around my dick, and his other hand lets go of my hair to

shove my pants further down so he can grab my balls. His warm, tight grip is perfect, and my undoing.

Breaking away from his mouth, I gasp as I come, coating his hand as I shake with pleasure.

Graeme groans and his body tightens around my finger, his dick jerking as I begin to stroke him faster and harder until he comes as well, his body trembling as he does.

Carefully, I release him, making sure he watches as I lick my fingers clean, the taste of him mixing with what lingers of Luka in my mouth. More cum leaks from my cock as I savor their flavors on my tongue before I collapse at Luka's side.

Graeme lays on the other side and reaches across Luka, finding my hand and tangling our fingers together. Luka reaches down and grabs our joined hands, bringing them to rest on his stomach, his hand settling on top. The three of us catch our breaths like that, comfortably content with one another, and connected in ways I don't think any of us expected to be.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

“Professional superkarts can get up to a hundred and fifty miles per hour. I’m like ninety percent sure these are electric, which means the most they’ll get up to is forty-five miles per hour. Shame. When it’s summer, we should find an outdoor track that uses gas cars, to see if there’s a difference.” Callum sounds disappointed as he rattles off the go-kart specs.

“That sounds like a great idea,” Rory says.

“Did you know that this place does one-on-one lessons?”

“No!” Rory and Graeme exclaim at the same time.

Callum sighs. “You guys are no fun. Think of it as practice for when I get my license, which is only in six more months.”

“Please don’t remind us,” Graeme groans.

“My mom said she’d teach him, but I don’t know if I want to put that on her,” Rory comments.

“I’ll race you for the privilege of not being the one who gets to teach Callum to drive,” Graeme tells him.

Rory grins. “Deal.”

Luka and I glance at each other and laugh at their commentary. The last few weeks getting to know Graeme, Rory, and Callum in a family setting has been eye opening.

Seeing them around Randy's was one thing, but knowing them all on a more personal level has only deepened my feelings for all of them—not just Grae.

I knew Graeme came not only with Cal, but Rory too, yet it wasn't until recently that I learned just how entwined their lives are. It's endearing, and a sense of honor rushes through me that I'm allowed to witness the unique bonds they have. They're a family in every sense of the word, even though Rory and Graeme aren't together.

Someone who doesn't know them might think they're only making it work for Callum's sake, but I know differently. They truly love and need each other in their lives, and neither Luka nor I would ever think about asking them to stop being there for one another.

"I have never done something like this," Luka says as Graeme pays our entry fee. "Have you?"

I shake my head. "Nope, I'm just happy it's indoors, though. I didn't know they had these. I guess it makes sense, we wouldn't be able to do it otherwise." Luka makes a face and I laugh.

It started snowing a few days ago, and to say he's already over it is an understatement. Poor Southern California boy, he's in for a rude awakening if he's sick of the snow after less than a week.

"We should go ice skating for the next family date," Callum says as we shuck off our winter gear.

"Family date?" Graeme asks.

"Well, what else do you call it? We're here, as a family, and you're on a date with Luka and Denver. Therefore, it's a family date. Anyway, did you know the first ice

skates were made from bone? And ice skating was one of the earliest sports?”

Rory looks between Luka and me. “What do you think about being on a family date?”

“I mean, I like it,” Luka says. “I...am happy that you’ve so easily accepted us into your lives. It makes me feel special, especially since, aside from Jordan, I don’t have a good relationship with my family.”

I reach for Luka’s hand and give it a squeeze. “I do have an amazing family—who you are never allowed to meet because Callum would get along far too well with my siblings—but I still feel honored and touched that you consider me part of yours.”

“We’re here to have fun, not get all sappy,” Callum gripes.

Grae rolls his eyes, but before he can say anything, the person in charge of the go-karts comes up to us.

“Hi! We’re so happy to have you here. Have any of you done this before?” Callum, Graeme, and Rory nod, while Luka and I shake our heads. “Great, we’ll go over safety features, the rules of the track, get you into your helmets, and you’ll be on your way.”

After all the rules and safety features are discussed, Callum starts up with his internet facts again. “Did you know that go-karts don’t have suspensions and are super safe; the low center of gravity makes them hard to flip, and the roll cages are incredibly handy to have.”

“Are you interested in racing?” the worker asks as he helps everyone find a helmet.

Callum grins, and instead of answering the question directly, he says, “It’s a good precursor to Formula One racing?”

“No!” all four of us exclaim, startling the poor worker and making Callum cackle.

“Okay...” The worker lets out an awkward laugh. “Are y’all ready?”

“Let’s do this!” Callum bounces on his toes and climbs into the first go-kart.

The energy vibrates in the air as we all get settled and strapped into the go-karts. I tighten my fingers around the steering wheel, waiting for the go ahead. As soon as the green light flashes, Callum takes off, his whoop can be heard even over the sound of the engines.

I fall behind almost right away, but I’m not surprised. I’m not the most aggressive driver, and this being new to me makes me a little more cautious. I get used to the feel of the track and how the go-kart handles before I decide to speed up.

As I’m getting comfortable behind the wheel, I watch as Rory clips the backend of Grae’s go-kart, making him spin out. My stomach twists with nerves, but I’m able to move around him as he curses and tries to get his go-kart pointing in the correct direction again.

The next catastrophe is Luka crashing into the wall as he rounds a corner too slowly. My concern for him has me slowing down, and I almost meet the same fate before I correct myself.

Callum beats us all, but no one is surprised. The kid is absolutely ruthless, and despite Rory chasing him for the last few laps, there was no opening where he could take his son. Graeme and Rory also battled it out, each trying to either force the other to crash or spin out as they took their bet seriously.

In the end, Rory comes in second place, causing Graeme to curse, even after we all come to a stop.

“At least I didn’t end up in last place,” Luka teases as we climb out of the go-karts.

“Whatever. At least I didn’t crash by my own making,” I shoot back.

He laughs and pulls me in for a kiss while Graeme and Rory start bickering in French like the old married couple they still are. Luka shakes his head at them and looks at me. “Should we learn French?” he asks.

Callum seems to pop up out of nowhere. One moment, he's peppering the track worker with questions, the next, he's right next to Luka and me. “I can teach you! We’ll go over all the naughty words first!”

I snort. “I’ve never asked, why French?”

Callum shrugs. “Something about them both taking it in high school and continuing on through college. It’s always been part of our lives. When we’re at home, one parent will speak French while the other sticks to English, and I have to respond in the corresponding language. We could do that? Da says the best way to learn a language is to immerse yourself in it.”

“Let us think about it,” Luka says as we trail after Rory and Grae.

“Sure! It’s a romantique language, if you know what I mean...” Callum grins wickedly.

Luka flushes bright red at the implication of our boyfriend’s fifteen-year-old saying stuff like that.

Neither of us should be surprised by Cal anymore, but just when you think he’s been as outspoken as he can be, he goes and says something else outlandish. The boy really needs a warning label.

“Well,” Callum says once we’re outside the go-karting place. “Did everyone have fun?”

Graeme shoots Rory one last death glare before grinning at his son. “You were right.” He says it like it’s the most inconceivable thing to ever happen. “It was fun.”

“Yes!” Callum jumps into the air. “Does this mean we can go ice skating next?”

Luka groans. “In the summer. I am not going fucking ice skating in the winter. If I want to be cold for hours on end, I wouldn’t pay for the privilege, I’d just stand outside.”

I laugh. “You haven’t seen anything yet, sweetheart.”

He glares at me. “Thanks for the reminder.”

Wrapping an arm around his waist, I kiss his temple. “Don’t worry, I’ll help keep you warm.”

“I’ll make hot chocolate once we get home,” Rory offers, shepherding us across the parking lot.

“This really is the best family date so far.” Callum grins and threads his arm through Luka’s, urging the two of us to walk faster.

Snow begins falling, and while Luka whines, I look up at the clouded night sky and smile, agreeing with Callum’s assessment of this being the best date so far.

Page 28

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:29 am

Setting my headset onto the desk, I take a long breath, the need to be 'on' leaving me as soon as I log off.

"You okay, Luka?" Bonnie, the shift supervisor, asks.

I give her what I hope is a believable smile. "I'm fine. Just need some food and sleep, and maybe a trashy TV show to decompress from..." I gesture to the monitor and headset. "All that."

She gives me a sympathetic smile. "Maybe some alcohol, too. You did good."

"Thanks. I'll see you Monday."

"Have a good weekend."

Quickly, I gather my stuff so I can get out of here. It's rare that I have the entire weekend off, but after today, I sure as hell need it. I've had rough calls before, but this was... It's going to stay with me for a while.

I'm almost out the door when Ivy catches up to me. "Hey, I'm meeting Axel at Frisky's later, want to join us?"

"Nah." I shake my head. "Maybe next time. I really need to go home and relax right now."

She gives me a sad smile. "Yeah... I heard about today. You give me or Axel a call this weekend if you need to talk, okay?"

“I will.”

“Good. Go home to your lovers, I’ll talk to you soon.”

Her words help knock some of the sadness from the day away, and I smile shyly as I feel my face heat. “See ya.”

Outside, I head straight for Graeme’s car. I am extremely lucky, and spoiled, that he cares so much about me that he’s willing to drive me to and from work. Because driving in the snow? That’s a hell no on my list. Even when the sky is clear and the roads are snow-free, like now, I’ll pass, thanks. That was one and done for me.

Graeme assures me he doesn’t mind, and he’s the one with the most flexible schedule, so he volunteered to help save me from my anxiety-induced drives every work day.

“Hey, how was your day?” Graeme leans over and plants a kiss on my cheek as soon as I’m settled into the seat.

I sigh. “It...could have been better.”

“Want to talk about it?”

Biting my lip, I look down at my hands in my lap and shake my head. “No... Just a bad call.”

He places a hand on my leg. “I’m sorry, Mon Cher. You know you can talk to me, right? Or Denver? They’ve seen a lot at the hospital, so they’ll understand the not-so-good parts of the job.”

I nod. “Yeah, I know. I just...need to process, and then let it go. It’s not my first, nor

will it be my last call that didn't end well. It comes with the job."

"I don't know how you do it," he says softly.

I shrug. "I like helping, feeling useful, being the person who's there when someone needs their worries soothed, or are facing down their worst moments. Sometimes it's hard, yeah, and it's a pretty thankless job a lot of the time, but... I don't know.

"I sort of fell into it because I needed a job, and I don't know if it's something I'll be able to do forever, but I don't mind it for now."

"Okay, as long as you're happy where you are, Den and I will be here to support you."

"I know." Reaching over, I place my hand on Graeme's thigh, secure in the knowledge that I have people here for me who care and want to be by my side through all my ups and downs. The thought has my throat closing up a little as I choke down tears, the emotions swirling through me becoming overwhelming.

"Rory is with Bertie tonight," Graeme says. "And Cal is spending the night with Vera as they're doing some secret squirrel shit in the park tomorrow."

"Not with actual squirrels, right?" I ask.

He shrugs. "It's Callum, so who knows. Either way, we have the house to ourselves for the night. Denver should be here with the food any second. Why don't you go down and shower?"

"Yeah. I'm stealing your clothes."

He laughs. "You won't hear me complaining about that, Mon Cher."

I leave him upstairs and head down to his bedroom.

I've spent more time here over the last few weeks than I have at the apartment I share with Valery. More and more it's beginning to feel like home, especially when all five of us are around.

I linger under the shower for longer than I probably should since Denver is bringing dinner, but the hot water and alone time go a long way to soothing my battered heart. I cry a little, and though I'm not religious in the slightest, I take a moment to think about the family of the woman who couldn't be saved today.

My heart aches for her and her loved ones, but I know nothing I did or didn't do over the phone would have mattered. I'm just glad I was able to provide what I could at those crucial few moments.

Wiping my eyes, I shut the shower off and get out, taking my time drying myself while I check the mirror to make sure my eyes or expression won't give me away. I don't want Graeme and Denver to worry about me, so I splash some water on my face, trying to get rid of the "I cried in the shower" look.

Sometimes, I really hate how I seem to have gotten all the inconvenient redheaded genes that my siblings missed out on. Like, my sister, Georgia, can full-on ugly cry for an hour straight and then go win a beauty pageant twenty minutes later with only a tissue to clean up her face. It's annoying. Especially since she has flawless porcelain skin, long auburn hair, and clear blue eyes. The rest of us have our mother's hazel eyes, though I'm the only one that got her bright red hair.

Wrapping my towel over my chest, I step out of the bathroom, only to stop short at the sight of both Denver and Graeme sitting on the bed.

"Hey, I didn't keep you waiting long, did I?"

Grae shakes his head. “No, Amour, you didn’t. Don’t worry.”

“Heard you had a rough day, sweetheart,” Denver says.

I let out a shaky breath and nod. “Something like that. It’s fine, they happen.”

“Will you let us take care of you for a while?” Graeme asks.

I look between the two of them, suddenly very aware that I’m standing in just a towel while they’re both fully dressed. While we’ve all seen each other in various stages of undress by now, sometimes I still get a little apprehensive. It's as if I'm worried one of them will change their mind and not want to be with me because I still don’t fully look like the man they want to be with.

Grae gets off the bed. “Please, Luka.”

I realize I haven’t answered, not that I know how to. “Take care, how?”

Graeme sets his hands on my shoulders, gently squeezing them, eliciting a soft moan from my throat as the pressure of his fingers unclenches my muscles. “Denver brought their rope. I want to watch them tie you up and have their wicked way with you, before I swoop in and ease the rest of your worries.”

My stomach flutters and my breath hitches. We’ve talked about doing...things. I know both Denver and Graeme have experience with kink and BDSM. And while I’ve been to two munches with Denver now, I haven’t given much thought to actually trying anything with them.

Though, I have to admit, we all like it when they order me around in bed, and I’ve found it’s easy to comply because I can...shut my brain off and just be.

“Nothing hardcore,” Denver assures me. “I like playing with sensory stuff. Tying you to the bed and driving you to the brink of orgasm with just my touch... You, helpless, unable to see or hear or move... I want that very much, sweetheart.”

My T-dick throbs at Denver’s words. I didn’t realize how much I wanted that until this moment...

“I’m not going to do all that now,” Denver says. “But it’s a fantasy I want us to work up to.”

Graeme runs his hands down my arms, his fingers leaving goosebumps in their wake. “Tonight,” he tells me, “Denver is going to tie you up, drive you to the brink...and then we’re going to fuck you.” I gasp. “Get you out of your head for a little while. What do you think?”

Swallowing, I nod. “Yes, please.”

“Good.” Graeme leans in and kisses me. It’s soft and sweet, but utterly consuming. So much so, I don’t notice Denver moving around the room until they’re behind me and running their hands across my shoulders.

Breaking away from Grae with a gasp, I lean back into Denver, moaning when Grae takes the opportunity to kiss down my neck to the top of my chest. He tugs at the towel, and when it opens, he licks and kisses his way to my nipple.

There’s always a flash of fear initially, knowing that they’re going to touch and kiss that part of me, but then they do and all my worries flutter away as pleasure takes over.

Graeme bites at my nipple, worrying it between his teeth as he rolls the other into a stiff peak. Rubbing my thighs together restlessly as my T-dick aches with need, I let

Denver manipulate my arms. They carefully maneuver them behind my back, their fingers soft and gentle as they caress my skin.

“That’s it,” they whisper into my ear. “Just like this.” They fold my arms together, and after a few adjustments, they begin tying me up.

The rope gliding against my skin is different than I expected. I thought I’d panic or it’d be irritating, but instead, as it slides over my flesh, I shiver. The sensations of having the rope move and tighten against me is unlike any I’ve ever experienced.

My T-dick aches as much as my sore, throbbing nipples do, and the slow building pleasure from being held between the two people I trust the most heightens every sensation. Not only that, my head slowly empties of every thought except the two of them.

Denver runs their hands along my bound arms. “No pinching or pulling?”

I shake my head. “No, it’s...” I let out a gasp as Graeme kneels in front of me, his hands going to my thighs and gently encouraging my legs to part. “It’s fine.”

“Good. Yellow will get us to stop and check on you. Red stops everything. Understand?”

“Yes...”

Graeme leans forward and places his mouth on my T-dick, making me arch into the pleasure. Denver finds my hips and holds me steady as Graeme sucks me off, and I shake with need.

“I want to fuck you,” Denver says, dragging their hard cock across my ass.

Whimpering, I rest my head on their shoulder, trusting them to hold me up as Grae teases my entrance with his finger.

“Let’s get him onto the bed,” Denver tells Graeme.

I whine as Graeme pulls away from me, but move where they want me. Denver guides me onto my back on the bed. It’s uncomfortable to lay on my arms, but not unbearably so, and when Graeme spreads my legs wide and lowers his mouth to my ass, I forget all about how I’m laying.

Graeme’s mouth and tongue lap at my hole, softening it until he’s able to get a finger inside. While he does that, Denver plays with my already stiff nipples, rolling them in between their fingers. Every nerve in my body is on fire between the two of them, and need coils in my gut.

When Graeme starts playing with my T-dick, smoothing his finger across the head before lowering his hand and fingering my entrance, while at the same time still playing with my ass, I lose my mind. My hips buck into him as my head thrashes from side to side. My orgasm coils inside, and right before it explodes, they both stop touching me.

Whining, I arch my back off the bed, seeking their touch.

“Shh,” Denver soothes, running their fingers through my hair. “We’ll give you what you need.”

“Choose your adventure,” Graeme says, drawing my attention to him.

I didn’t even realize he’d left the bed, but I look at where he stands at the foot, three dicks in hand.

My breath catches as I eye each one. They're all very different, and I'd like to feel them all one day, but for now, I nod towards the one in the middle. "The rainbow."

Graeme grins. "Good choice."

He places the other dildos back in a drawer in his armoire before attaching the rainbow one to a harness. Graeme strips off his clothes and steps into the harness, the need steadily building with each second.

My T-dick throbs with anticipation as I watch Grae fish a small vibe from the drawer and turn it on, before sliding it into the pocket attached to the harness. Watching him adjust himself before turning back to the bed, rainbow dick leading the way, has me aching for the feel of him deep inside me.

Instead of sliding into my prepared body though, Graeme pulls me up, forcing me to kneel on the bed before turning me around.

My breath catches as Denver quickly undresses, before laying on the bed and stroking their hard cock.

"Do you want us to fuck you?" Graeme asks.

I nod quickly, hoping to show my eagerness. With his hands on my hips, Grae helps me straddle Denver, their cock teasing right where I need it to.

Denver glides their hands up and down my body. "You're so beautiful," they whisper.

Together, the two of them guide Denver's cock to my entrance, making me throw my head back on a moan.

“That’s it,” Denver whispers. “Your cunt is so tight and warm, made perfect for me.”

Slowly, they both lift me up and then back down onto Denver’s cock. The fullness is exquisite, and I want nothing more than to spear myself on them, letting them fill me, and just...hold them there.

“Stay here, okay?” Graeme says, as if I would want to be anywhere else.

He lets go of me and moves across the bed to pull a condom from the nightstand. Watching him roll it over the rainbow cock before coating it in lube has me rocking my hips in need.

Denver’s fingers dig into the skin of my hips, holding me still.

Graeme settles behind me once more, this time with the bottle of lube in hand. The first touch of his slick fingers to my hole has me moaning and grinding onto Denver’s cock.

Grae doesn’t go slow, entering me with two fingers and slicking up my channel. Groaning, I try to thrust back onto Graeme’s fingers, whining when the grip on my hips tighten.

“Let it happen, sweetheart,” Denver tells me, their firm tone going straight to my T-dick, making it jerk and pulse with need.

Graeme pulls his fingers out and then returns with them lubed up again, only this time there’s three. He stretches me, and holding myself still enough so he can is a feat. Thankfully, he doesn’t take too long getting me ready, because I’m this close to begging.

“I need you to hold very still, Amour,” Graeme says in a wrecked voice.

Pleasure curls in me at the thought of driving him as crazy as he's making me. When his cock presses against my hole, I moan and tremble, wishing I had my hands free so I could use them to help balance myself.

One of Grae's hands settles at my waist, while the other helps guide his cock into me. Moaning, I curse at the feeling of fullness. It's almost overwhelming, having the two of them inside me at the same time.

It might have been a fantasy to be stuffed in both holes at the same time, but the reality is always so much more than expected. In a good way, the best way.

Slowly, they begin fucking into me. It takes a moment for them to find a rhythm, one pulling out while the other pushes in, but soon enough, they figure out a groove, spearing me between them while I'm helpless to do anything but take it.

The pleasure builds in me until I'm gasping, unable to hold a coherent thought except that I need more. More of them, more stimulation on my T-dick, more tugs to my nipples, more of something , anything.

"Please ," I gasp.

"Do you want to come, Mon Cher?" Graeme flicks his finger against my T-dick and my body clenches in pleasure.

"Fuck, keep doing that," Denver gasps out. "His cunt gets so fucking tight when he's close."

"Next time," Graeme muses, "We're going to have to switch."

"Yesss," Denver hisses.

Graeme moves his hand to my throat, holding me there firmly as he fucks me harder, shoving me down onto Denver's cock every time he thrusts in. His soft grunts in my ear, and the way he works my T-dick, are almost too much.

Denver's hands squeeze my hips so hard that I know they're going to leave bruises, and I welcome it. When they thrust up into me hard and fast, I lose it. Trapped between them, my orgasm takes me almost by surprise. As my entire body begins shaking and convulsing on their cocks, my eyes close and I gasp for air.

I lose track of time as my orgasm rolls through me, aftershocks forcing me to jerk on the cocks that are still deep inside me.

Distantly, I'm aware of Denver cursing and coming in me, their seed searing my channel, making another wave of pleasure rush through me.

Graeme fucks into me a few more times before he also comes, his uninhibited groans in my ear causing goosebumps to race down my spine.

Time seems to freeze as we stay in the moment, both of them holding still in me until Graeme finally pulls out, leaving me aching and wanting, even with Denver still buried inside.

My arms are released from their binds, and I moan as blood seems to rush through my forearms and hands, my shoulders aching as Graeme rubs them.

Denver eases me off their cock and sits up, helping Graeme ease the ache in my arms before they lay me down on the bed.

"Okay?" Denver asks, brushing the sweaty hair from my forehead.

I nod. "I'm going to be bruised all over, but I am looking forward to it."

“You’ll tell me if it was too much? First times are hard. I know it didn’t seem like much, but giving up that type of control...it can make you drop hard. So don’t be surprised if you’re a little out of sorts for the next few hours, or even days.”

I give them a gentle smile. “I know. Well, I mean, I’ve been reading the stuff that you sent, and Cin gave me a lot of good material too at the last munch. I promise, I wanted it; it was exactly what I needed after the day I’ve had.”

They kiss me softly. “I love you,” they whisper.

I gasp, my eyes going wide as they fill with tears. “I...I love you, too.”

The bed on my other side dips as Graeme takes a seat after cleaning himself, and his detachable dick, up.

“Je t’aime, Mon Amour.” Graeme gently turns my head to his to kiss me.

“Love you too,” I say against his lips, my eyelids drooping as exhaustion hits.

As I lose the fight against sleep, I can hear my lovers exchanging words of love and kisses above me, and I let the happiness coursing through me carry into my dreams.

SIX MONTHS LATER

“ A re you okay?” Denver sets a hand on my leg under the table, and I pull my attention away from the door long enough to give them a reassuring smile.

“Fine.”

They snort in disbelief, but don’t call me out on it. I’m sure they’re attributing my weirdness to my baby turning sixteen, which is a good assumption. Rory and I have both been out of sorts the last week, because knowing we have a teenager, and our teenager only two years away from being a legal adult, are two very different things.

I am proud of the person Callum is turning out to be, but that doesn’t mean I’m actually ready for him to grow up.

“Dad, are you being mushy again?” Callum asks.

Rolling my eyes, I meet my son’s familiar blue ones, struck, yet again, that this young man in front of me is someone I’m not only raising, but I made . And that gets me a bit mushy.

“If I trusted you, I’d say have your own kid and then come back to me about being mushy.”

Callum is the one to roll his eyes at me. “You’re not supposed to be mean to me on my birthday.”

“Who made up that rule?”

“You did,” Rory answers.

I sigh, because while it's true, it doesn't mean I have to like it.

Looking to the door again, I try to curb my smile when the person I've been waiting for walks in. “Excuse me, I'll be right back.”

Rory leans in to talk to Cal, keeping him distracted for a moment. He's the only other person who knows about my surprise, because like everything to do with Callum, I ran it by him first.

Denver and Luka both give me looks as I leave the table and head across the diner toward the very nervous looking teen.

“I'm glad you could make it.”

I get a small, shy smile. “Thanks for inviting me.”

“Come on, he doesn't know what I'm planning, so let's go surprise him.”

Leading the way back to our table, I step up behind Callum and set a hand on his shoulder, leaning down to speak in his ear. “Someone's here to see you, Cal.”

He looks up at me, brows furrowed. “Who? Everyone is already here.”

I squeeze his shoulder. “Now everyone is here.” Releasing him, I move aside and motion my surprise forward.

Callum turns around, and when he sees his guest, he freezes, eyes going wide. He almost falls on his face as he scrambles to get up, and Rory helps pull his chair away

from the table so he doesn't hurt himself.

"Nathan!" Callum shouts loud enough to get just about everyone in the diner looking over at us, but when they see it's Callum, the regulars shake their heads and turn back to what they were doing.

Poor Nathan is swept up into a hug, and it takes them a minute, but whatever hesitation they may have had eases the longer Callum hangs on. I see their body relax and their hands clutch at Cal as tightly as my son is clinging to them.

Rory gets up and pulls me into his side. "I'd say your surprise is a hit."

Wrapping my arm around him, I lean my head on his shoulder for a moment. "Looks like it." Looking around my best friend, I wave Denver and Luka over. "Do you think he'll let Nat breathe anytime soon?"

Rory laughs. "I wouldn't count on it. Though, Nat doesn't look like they're in a hurry to go anywhere."

I hum in agreement and look over at Nathan's adults, who are watching the teens with what I'm sure are the same sappy/happy looks that Rory and I are giving them.

Denver comes up on my other side and slides their arm around behind my back, over Rory's. "Is this why you've been weird all day?"

I chuckle. "Yes. I wanted it to be a good surprise for him."

Luka leans around Denver. "I think you've done that."

Callum finally pulls back from Nathan, though he keeps his arms around them as he turns to us. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" he exclaims in a jumbled mix of French and English. "This is the best present ever!"

“Better than a second kitten?” I ask.

He looks torn, biting his lip and glancing at his friend for a minute before nodding.

“Yeah, Jolene is fine as an only child. This is perfect.”

“Are you going to introduce your friend to everyone, Cal?” Rory asks patiently.

Callum lets Nat go, only to grab their hand and drag them forward. “These are my parents,” he says. “Rory is my da, and Graeme is my dad—he’s the one who gave birth to me.”

“Callum!” I groan, even as everyone laughs.

“It’s true,” Rory says.

“But he doesn’t have to say it like that!”

“Yeah, well... You should expect it by now, Cher.”

Sighing, I shake my head at how ridiculous my kid is.

“That’s Denver and Luka, they’re Dad’s partners. Dad and Da are not together, even though sometimes I think they forget they’re no longer married.”

Rory groans with me this time.

“You have to admit it’s true,” Denver teases.

“Shut up.” I huff, causing them and Luka to laugh harder.

Nathan gestures to their adults. “This is my brother, Cole, and his partners, Brooks and Lucas.”

I extract myself from Denver and Rory to shake their hands, and after everyone's had a chance to introduce themselves, I gesture to the table. "Shall we sit? I'm sure the staff would appreciate it."

Rory introduces his mother to our guests once we're settled, and then Valery claims herself to be Luka's almost-cousin, which makes Luka sigh in exasperation, but I still maintain I got the most embarrassing and ridiculous introduction.

Luka leans his head on my shoulder while Denver slings their arm around me. "You're a good dad," Luka says softly.

I smile, setting a hand on his leg, and he lays his on top. "Thanks. I try, and Lord knows I've probably screwed up along the way, but I don't think Rory and I did too bad a job." I flip my hand over and squeeze Luka's. "And I'm glad you and Den are here to join us on the rest of our journey—because we're never getting rid of him, you know that, right?"

They both chuckle softly. "Yeah, but that's okay. We love him as much as we love you," Denver says.

"Probably more than we love you," Luka quips.

I laugh. "That's fine. I don't mind sharing with him."

And it's true. All Rory and I have ever wanted was for Callum to have a family who loved him, and when things took a turn with our romantic relationship, it didn't make that any less true. Meeting both Denver and Luka wasn't in the cards, let alone loving them both, but this life and family we're building together is more than I could have ever dreamed.

Sitting here with my partners, my best friend, and our son... It's perfect, even if we aren't. What matters is that this family we have is ours. After everything we've all

been through, we deserve what we have. The rest doesn't matter, so long as we have each other. Anything that comes after this perfect moment right here, is just a bonus.

The End