



Forged (The Art of Love #4)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Nick Turner has always been the big, shy, silent type. He's always let his metalwork and blacksmithing skills speak for him. But now, as a widower with two small children to raise in the midst of the eccentric Hawthorne family and a sculpture that needs completing to make the deadline for a national competition, he knows he's in over his head.

Thank God for Baxter Hawthorne dropping into his life...

Bax Hawthorne is the black sheep of his family. He's an accountant in a sea of artists. But that doesn't mean he's not just as free-spirited and ambitious as his kin. The one thing he never thought he'd be, however, was a father. But when he's thrown into proximity with Nick and ends up helping to take care of his kids in a pinch, all that might change.

Nick could have sworn he was straight, but the closer he gets to Bax, the more he questions that. Could one night of sparks between them end up forging a bond that brings the whole family together?

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ONE

Baxter Hawthorne was the black sheep of the bohemian Hawthorne family. From an early age, when he'd been offered crayons or paint brushes or even clay by his eccentric father or his free-spirited Uncle Robert and Aunt Janice, he'd chosen to play with a calculator instead. Where most of his brothers and sisters and cousins excelled in art classes and afterschool craft clubs, Bax had scored top marks in Maths and had organized his form's debate club. As soon as he'd graduated, he'd taken an entry-level job with a prestigious London accountancy firm, much to the disgust of his twin brother, Blaine, and the rest of the creative Hawthorne brood.

What Bax lacked in artistic endeavor, he made up for in his devout religious practices. Of course, his faith of choice wasn't Anglicanism or Catholicism, or any of the traditional organized religions. He was a Hawthorne, after all, so naturally the faith that had encompassed so much of his life and his outlook on the world was Paganism.

He'd been a member of a coven since he was eighteen and had developed a love for that unique sort of spiritual community that had carried him through some rough times in the past. His beloved cousin Raina's death over a year and a half ago, for example.

Covens could be far more intense than an ordinary religious congregation that sat placidly in an old stone church every Sunday, listening to a grey-haired vicar drone on about purity and obedience. Most sorts of Paganism that Bax had flirted with tended to be far freer with humankind's baser instincts, and sometimes those natural desires found their way into relationships between coven members.

That was how Bax had ended up dating coven-leader Damien for three years. It was part of the reason they'd had such an exciting, adventurous, and occasionally volatile relationship. And it was definitely the reason why, a few days after New Year's, Bax found himself carrying boxes of his belongings in through the family entrance of Hawthorne House and up to one of the family flats on the first floor.

"Think of it this way," Blaine said as he fumbled a box packed with a few of Baxter's more breakable possessions. "You've ended one relationship, but now you have time and mental space to forge all sorts of new relationships with our cousins."

"Blaine, so help me, if you break the scrying glass in that box, I will curse you into next Sunday," Bax replied, trying to keep his face straight as his heart overflowed with affection for his slightly mad twin.

Without so much as a hint of remorse, Blaine peeked into the open-topped box he carried up the stairs. "Is that the black thing at the bottom? Under the crystal ball?"

"Obsidian," Bax said, hefting his duffle higher on his shoulder and shuffling the box of books in his arms.

Blaine paused, staring warily at Bax. "You wouldn't really curse me, would you? I never know if you're joking or not when you threaten me with witchcraft."

Bax fought to keep his expression grim and spooky instead of laughing. "Then you'd better not annoy me."

The twins stared at each other for a moment before Blaine got the joke and laughed. He shook his head and they walked on with Blaine saying, "I can't believe you have a crystal ball. What are you, some sort of circus fortune-teller?"

Bax smirked as they reached the door to the flat Uncle Robert had graciously loaned

him for the duration of his stay in the family's bosom. Not only was he in desperate need of someplace to call home after he and Damien had broken up, Uncle Robert had hired him to audit the books for the Hawthorne Community Arts Center, since there had been so many changes in the way the family did business in the last year.

If Baxter's entire life had to be in turmoil, then at least he could tuck himself away with his family to lick his wound and figure out how to move on.

"Yes," he said with a slight smirk, entering the flat and setting the box of books down on the sofa, then carrying the duffle into the bedroom. "I routinely tell fortunes while swathed in colorful scarves and burning incense at carnivals and parties."

Blaine jerked straight as he put his box down on the coffee table, then blinked at Bax as he came out of the bedroom. "No, you don't," he said. "I can't imagine you going anywhere near a carnival. You're far too fussy and important for that."

Bax laughed and slapped his brother on the shoulder as they headed out to get the last load of boxes from his car. He and Blaine were identical, but only on the surface. They had the same short, slender build, the same soulful, hazel eyes and soft brown hair, but Blaine's hair was always untidy and he dressed like a rainbow had thrown up on him. Bax preferred sartorial elegance, never had a hair out of place, and walked with a straitlaced grace that would have had him called a dandy in earlier generations.

"The crystal ball was a gift from Damien last Christmas," he explained as they headed down the stairs again for the last load, his heart sinking with the words. "It's just for show."

Blaine sniffed. "So was Damien."

Bax couldn't really argue with him. Damien was classically gorgeous and radiated power. He and Bax had met while part of the original coven Bax had belonged to, but

following had never been Damien's forte. He'd broken off from that coven, taking Bax and a few others with him, and quickly gathered a new group around his magnetic leadership.

That undisputedly dominant energy was the reason why Bax had needed to leave the coven when things fell apart between him and Damien. He hadn't just lost a boyfriend, he'd lost an entire spiritual community and his soul's center with it.

"Never mind," Blaine said as they stepped out into the frosty, frigid January morning again. "There are plenty of other weird fish in the sea. I'm certain you'll be casting spells and engaging in sexy fertility rituals with someone much better than Damien in no time."

"Paganism isn't like that," Bax said, rolling his eyes at his brother, as they reached the car.

It was like that sometimes, but telling Blaine would only open a can of worms Bax definitely wasn't ready for.

They were halfway through taking the last of Bax's things out of the car when a dark blue SUV pulled into the family parking lot. Blaine immediately dropped everything, including the backpack filled with candles and herbs he'd almost but not quite slung over his shoulder.

"Ooh! Alfie's here!" he exclaimed, dashing toward the SUV just as a tall, muscular man with a military haircut stepped out.

"Hey, sweetheart," Alfie greeted Blaine, opening his arms as soon as he'd shut his car's door.

Blaine did a flying leap into his soldier's embrace, wrapped his arms and legs around

Alfie like some sort of horny octopus, and kissed him thoroughly. The display went on for longer than it should have, which was typical Blaine.

Bax grinned, shook his head, and picked up the backpack, slinging it over his shoulder. Blaine had just recently started dating Alfie, but it was clear the two of them were meant for each other. They were complete opposites that fit together perfectly. Alfie had just finished a long stint with the RAF and was now beginning the rest of his life. He was adamant that he wanted Blaine to be part of it, and if everything Blaine had told Bax in the last week was accurate, Alfie had a potential job offer to be a houseparent for a local orphanage.

It was sweet, really. Bax told himself he didn't begrudge his brother the happiness he'd found, even though Blaine had started a relationship right as he'd ended one. He told himself he was just giving the two of them space as he quietly headed into the house while the snogfest continued behind him.

He could tell himself whatever he wanted, but it didn't soothe the ache in his gut. If he was honest with himself, Bax loved being in a relationship. He loved being part of something greater than himself. And yes, he loved sex, too. It had been a major part of his and Damien's relationship, and suddenly he found himself facing a long dry spell.

It wouldn't be difficult for him to find a quick fix. He was a member of The Brotherhood, after all, and a trip to one of the clubs in London owned by members of The Brotherhood would undoubtedly end with his ankles up around the shoulders of some buff stranger who liked to play Hide the Sausage as vigorously as possible. Meaningless sex had never really been his thing, though. Frequent sex, yes, but even when he and Damien had been open for the sake of spiritual energy, it had always been with trusted coven members.

As he reached the top of the stairs and headed down the hall with his last load, Bax

considered that he should probably find himself a new coven as fast as possible. But finding a like-minded spiritual community was not as easy as doing an internet search and filling out an application. Especially not for the kind of interactions he was looking for.

He'd just reached the door to his temporary home when the door across from his flew open and a toddler in dungarees burst into the hall.

"Jordan, Jordan, no. Come back to Daddy."

Bax's heart sped up as Nick Turner stepped out into the hall to chase after his three-year-old son.

"Jordan," Nick called again, shuffling his fussy, one-year-old daughter, Macy, in his arms. "You need your coat, young man."

"No, Daddy!" Jordan called out gleefully as he charged toward the stairs.

Bax did not do children. They had no place in a life that had been as adult as his, even before he was technically an adult. He didn't know the first thing about kids, let alone toddlers.

But that didn't stop him from putting down his box and backpack and chasing after Jordan, saying, "I've got him."

Jordan knew Bax. He was family, even if he hadn't spent a lot of time at Hawthorne House until recently. As Bax came after him, he must have seen it as playing. He giggled and continued to run for the stairs. Bax might not have known anything about kids, but he knew tiny people and staircases didn't go together.

"Come here, you," he said, hoping he sounded playful and not terrifying, as he caught

up to Jordan.

He growled playfully as he scooped Jordan up and shifted him so he could hold the boy tightly. Jordan still thought they were playing and laughed uproariously. He also flailed, nearly kicking Bax in the kidney as he strode back down the hall to where Nick was trying to manage an equally wiggly Macy. The last thing he wanted was to drop a child.

“Thanks,” Nick said on a heavy breath as Bax reached him. “They’re in rare form today.”

“Looks like it,” Bax replied, his heart still racing.

He couldn’t help it. Not when he was so close to Nick. Not when he could breathe in Nick’s alluring, smokey scent and feel the strength that radiated from him.

Nick was his cousin Raina’s widower and Hawthorne House’s resident blacksmith and metalwork teacher. As far as Bax knew, he and Raina had met at art school, they’d dated, married, and started a family, and then Raina had been cruelly taken from them in a drink-driving accident close to two years ago. Nick had been devastated, they all had, but instead of going off and starting a new life on his own with the kids, he’d stayed at Hawthorne House and remained part of the extended, eccentric family.

Nick was a quintessential blacksmith with a build to match. He was well over six feet and had arms that were as thick as Bax’s legs. He was broad-chested and meaty while still being incredibly fit. How could he not be when he spent his days hammering iron and stoking an old-fashioned forge?

Bax wouldn’t have minded if Nick wanted to stoke him. Except as far as he could tell, Nick was straight. He’d been married to Raina and had two kids with her, after

all. Not once had Bax heard anything about Nick's previous dating life, and although that didn't necessarily mean he wasn't bi, no one had witnessed Nick flirting with men. Or other women.

Of course, part of the reason for that was squirming in Bax's arms as he stood there, gawping at Nick like a loon.

"Sorry that that one is causing so much trouble," Nick said, stepping back into his flat and leaving the door wide for Bax to bring Jordan in. "Granny is on the way to fetch them, and we're having a devil of a time getting ready."

"Do you need me to help?" Bax asked.

What was he thinking? He wasn't a kid person.

Then again, he knew exactly what he was thinking when Nick turned and bent over to pick up what must have been Jordan's winter coat from the floor. He could spend hours burying his face in an arse like that.

Nick straightened and looked at Bax like he wanted to say it was no trouble, he didn't need help, and Bax was free to go about his business. The pinch of Nick's face and the stress lines around his gorgeous, brown eyes told another story.

"Mum will be here any minute," he said. "I need to get that one in his coat and figure out why this one has been in tears all morning."

Bax's heart went out to him. "Just let me know what I can do," he said.

"Daddy, I want a lolly," Jordan whined as he made an extra push to get out of Bax's arms. "Granny has lollies."

Nick rolled his eyes and shared a look with Bax. “Granny likes to bribe people,” he said.

Bax laughed. “Ah. Yes. Some of us are susceptible to being bribed with things we can lick.”

Everything seemed to stop for a second. A faint flush appeared on Nick’s cheeks. Bax kicked himself for making an off-color joke to a man with a pouty child in his arms. He was so used to throwing out innuendo every three seconds. It was his normal.

The cartoony music of a mobile phone broke the awkward moment. Nick shifted Macy into his other arm and reached for his phone in his back pocket.

“Hello, Mum,” he answered the call. “Yes, yes, we’ll be down in three minutes. Alright.” He ended the call, then slipped his phone back into his pocket. “Hurry up, you lot. Granny is waiting.”

“Tell me what you need me to do to help,” Bax said.

Nick hesitated for a moment before saying, “Let’s swap. This one is already in her coat, but it’ll take some wrestling to get that one to put his on.”

Bax laughed, then set Jordan down so that he could take Macy. The moment Jordan’s feet touched the floor, he bolted. Nick chased after him while Bax tried to coo and entertain Macy. The poor thing was obviously overheated in her coat, which was making her uncomfortable, but there was nothing Bax could do about that.

Nick managed to catch Jordan and shove him into his coat with surprising speed and agility. Bax watched the whole process with all different kinds of admiration. For a hulking blacksmith, Nick was surprisingly gentle with the kids. He knew just what to do to get Jordan to behave and put his coat on, even though it was a huge fuss.

At the same time, Nick looked exhausted. Ever since Bax had started spending more time at Hawthorne House, Nick had looked tired and strained. Raina had been gone for a while now, and while the entire family was still mourning her, Bax was fairly certain that the stress of being a single father weighed on Nick as well. He was a single father who was also a teacher, and if what some of the other family members had told him was right, Nick was an incredible artist as well.

How one man could manage all those things was a mystery. In fact, Bax had a feeling Nick struggled to juggle all those things. He'd be lying if he said that wasn't part of Nick's appeal. Bax wanted to take care of him in every way.

"Yoohoo," a matronly voice drifted in from the hall just as Nick and Bax had pulled things together. "What seems to be the hold-up?"

"Mum," Nick gusted out as he lifted Jordan into his arms. "You didn't have to walk all the way up here."

"You said three minutes," Mrs. Turner said. "It's been six."

Bax arched one eyebrow and exchanged a look with Macy, who wasn't really interested in him. Mrs. Turner must have had a thing for punctuality.

It was more than that, though. Bax had never met the woman before, but at first glance, she seemed to be completely the opposite of Nick. She was tall like Nick, but she held her back too stiffly, and her grey hair was pulled back in a tight bun. From what Bax knew, the Turner family was middle-class, but Mrs. Turner looked like she was trying to be posh. Her wool coat was pristine and had a brooch pinned to one side, and she wore a skirt instead of trousers, even though it was nippy outside.

"Come to Granny, dear," Mrs. Turner said, reaching to take Macy out of Bax's arms.

Part of Bax was loath to let the girl go, but as soon as Mrs. Turner came near, Macy reached out for her. When Bax handed her over, Macy wrapped her arms around the woman's neck. Clearly, they loved each other.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Mum," Nick said, stepping over to give his mum a kiss on her cheek. "Jordan was in rare form this morning. I've only just got his coat on. They're ready to go now, though."

"Good," Mrs. Turner said. "Auntie Joann and I are ready to have a lovely day with our favorite boy and girl." She smiled and nuzzled Macy's face, causing the girl to laugh.

She lost her adoring smile a moment later as she faced Bax again and asked, "Who is this?"

Bax ignored her standoffishness and greeted her with, "I'm Baxter Hawthorne, one of the cousins."

"Another bohemian?" Mrs. Turner said, dripping disapproval.

Bax noted the reaction but ignored it with a laugh. "No, I'm the odd one out in this family. I'm an accountant. I'm staying at Hawthorne House this winter, just across the hall, actually, while I'm auditing the books."

"Oh, an accountant," Mrs. Turner said, warming to Bax instantly. "How lovely. My late husband was a financial planner, so I know quite a bit about accounting."

Bax had the impression the woman was the sort who fancied she knew a lot about a lot of things.

"Is Joann with you?" Nick asked, picking up the nappy bag and shifting forward.

It was a sign for everyone to move, so Bax stepped into the hall.

“She’s waiting in the car,” Mrs. Turner said.

“I’ll carry Jordan down and say hello to her, but I need to get down to the forge so I can work on my sculpture,” he said as everyone except Bax started walking toward the stairs.

“You’re still puttering away on that unwieldy thing?” Mrs. Turner asked.

“It’s my art, Mum,” Nick explained. “And I’ll be entering it in a competition that Hawthorne House is hosting in May.”

Mrs. Turner hummed dubiously.

Bax watched them until they reached the stairs and turned the corner to descend. As far as first impressions went, the jury was still out. He didn’t dislike Mrs. Turner, but he had the feeling she didn’t like the Hawthornes. That counted as a mark against her, as far as Bax was concerned.

It shouldn’t have mattered to him what some matronly woman thought about his family, but it did. As Bax gathered up the things he’d left in the hall and entered his flat to begin the process of sorting his life out, he felt like it mattered a lot. He wanted Nick’s mum to like the family, to like him. Because whether he had a snowball’s chance in Hades or not, he Liked Nick Turner. He liked him far more than he should. So much that he just might try to do something about it.

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TWO

Nick handed his and Raina's babies off to his mum and his sister with profoundly mixed feelings. It was good for the kids to spend time with their granny and Auntie Joann. His family had been nothing but supportive ever since Jordan was born, especially after Raina died.

Admittedly, his mum didn't love the Hawthorne family as much as he did. She was far more traditional in her outlook and had described the Hawthornes as "a bunch of nonconformists" to him in conversation more than once. The fact that she couldn't come up with anything more descriptive to express the way she felt always made Nick laugh. He had no idea how he ended up as a dedicated artist coming from a family like his.

Which was part of the reason he felt vaguely uneasy as he waved after his mum's car as it drove away, then turned and walked around the house and down the hill to his forge. The kids were too young to grasp the differences in the environment they were off to as opposed to home, but it worried him all the same.

He breathed out heavily as he neared the forge, his breath puffing around him icily. Nothing could be done about his mum's or Joann's ways, just like nothing could be done to bring Raina back from wherever people went next.

His love for Raina was definitely still there as he reached the forge and set to work building up the fires that had been banked through the night. Raina had come into his life like a happy bolt of lightning that had pulled his sometimes laser-like focus away from studying metalwork. She'd arrived suddenly, changing everything, and eighteen

months ago, she'd left suddenly, changing everything once again.

He tried not to think about it as he fed coal into the old forge that was built in the seventeenth hundreds, and once that fire was going, he moved to add coke to the specially built firepot of the new forge off to one side of the forge space. The old forge was a miracle in the way it had lasted through centuries of nearly continuous use and still did its job, but the more modern forge was faster to heat and more reliable for his students to learn with.

He used the old forge to craft horseshoes and hinges using historic methods, one of his specialties, but when it came to constructing his larger works of art, like the half-finished unicorn sculpture that was starting to tower over the west corner of the forge, the modern forge and the various blowtorches lined up near the fuel tanks were much handier.

As soon as the forges were heating, he moved to stand in front of the unicorn. It should have been done months ago. The competition Hawthorne House was hosting in May had felt like it was ages away when he'd started his tribute to Raina, but May was starting to feel like it was right around the corner now, despite the January cold.

He crossed his arms and blew out a tense breath as he studied the work he still needed to do. The basic structure was all there. The body, legs, and supports of the rearing unicorn had been relatively quick and easy to make. He was taking a bit more time with the head, which he'd yet to attach, since it needed more detailed work. There was just so much work still ahead of him.

He huffed a laugh and shook his head at himself before moving to the bench where the unicorn head waited for him. That was the story of his life, really. He'd thought things had been hard as a hulking, ungainly art student coming from a family that believed art was just something to fill an empty space on a wall. Doing something other than what his family expected of him had seemed brave and daunting when he

was a teen. He'd had no idea what was in store for him as a single father trying to hold down a teaching job and still be an artist.

As he donned his protective leather apron and safety goggles, then fired up the small blowtorch he would use to affix more strands of hair to the unicorn's mane, he fought off a punch of guilt. Being the best father he could be was his number one priority in life. Paying back the Hawthorne family for their kindness in keeping him and the kids on by being a top-notch forging teacher was number two. Working on his own art and feeding his soul was an increasingly distant third.

Mourning Raina, who had made so many things possible, was barely fourth. It ate him up inside. He'd loved Raina so much, but life went on. He wasn't half as wrecked about her death as Rhys, Raina's brother and his good friend was, and he'd been the one married to her. What kind of person did that make him?

"That looks like intricate work," Baxter's voice startled Nick just as he'd pointed the blowtorch's tight flame at the unicorn head. "Oh, sorry," Bax apologized as Nick flinched and stepped back.

Nick cut the flame and lowered the blowtorch as he turned to the canvas-covered entrance to the forge. Bax had just let himself in. He held two steel travel mugs, presumably with tea, so Nick was ready to forgive him for anything.

"Thanks for your help earlier," he said, shifting his goggles up to his forehead and removing his thick gloves before walking over to take the mug Bax offered him. "Some mornings, the kids can be a handful."

"Yeah, I noticed," Bax said, laughing softly.

Their hands brushed as Nick took a mug, Bax's fingers were half frozen while his were already hot from the fire of his work. All of Bax looked cold, especially when

he hunkered down into the too-thin coat he wore as he sipped from his own mug. It made Nick want to wrap the smaller, more sophisticated man in his arms to warm him up.

He frowned at the urge and pushed it aside as he sipped at the tea offering. Just the right amount of sugar, milk, and tea touched his tongue and warmed his soul, and he hummed in appreciation.

Bax smiled at his indulgent reaction. "I thought you'd like that," he said.

"Tea?" Nick blinked. "I always like tea."

"Did you manage to have a cup this morning, what with all the toddler chaos?"

Nick winced slightly. "No, there wasn't time."

Bax hummed and nodded. "I thought so."

Nick took another drink, feeling suddenly awkward, like he should be doing something to impress Bax, which was silly. "Is that why you came down here?" he asked, hiding his rush of nervous energy by moving to the bench next to the new forge and setting his mug beside the unicorn head.

"Partially," Bax said, helping himself to a seat on one of the stools where Nick's students sat while he was giving demonstrations. Already, it looked like the growing heat of the forge was thawing him. "I'm also hiding from the film crew that's crawling all over the estate grounds."

Nick laughed. "Yeah, I think they're actually filming today. They were waiting for a good frost, and it looks like they got it."

For the last six months, Hawthorne House had been earning extra money to keep it in the black by hiring out the grounds to Silver Productions for filming. The house had been too modernized to use for period dramas, but the extensive grounds had multiple vistas that were ideal for filming outdoor scenes.

Currently, something about knights and royals was being filmed on the grounds. It had been bizarre to stumble across people dressed in medieval clothes as he'd tried to go about his business. The part of the grounds where the forge was located was also used for Hawthorne House's summer Renaissance Faires, and since a fair amount of care had been put into making all the outbuildings look authentic, they were perfect for the background of what the film crew was working on.

The distant background, since Nick's forging classes needed to continue, whether there was a film production knocking around or not.

"Is that the unicorn I've heard so much about?" Bax asked, settling more comfortably on his stool and nodding at the half-finished sculpture.

Nick turned to glance at it for a moment, anxiety pinching his gut. "Yeah," he said, taking up his place in front of the unicorn head again and putting his gloves back on. "I'm way behind where I need to be if I'm going to enter it in the competition this May."

"It looks like you've done a lot of work so far," Bax said with a smile. "It's huge."

Nick grunted, which felt like too rude an answer for someone as lovely as Bax. "I've got the basics down the way I want them, but the devil is in the details."

"So I've heard," Bax laughed.

Nick positioned his goggles again, turned on the blowtorch, and picked up the pieces

that he'd been about to fuse before Bax had interrupted.

Not that he minded the interruption, or Bax's continued efforts at conversation. Bax made him happy for reasons he didn't quite understand.

"The unicorn is a powerfully spiritual animal," Bax said between sips of tea as Nick worked. "It's been celebrated since ancient times for its power and purity."

"Oh?" As much as Nick needed to concentrate on his work, he loved the sound of Bax's voice and wanted him to keep talking. That didn't make a lot of sense to him, but he'd never been one to question or delve too deeply into his gut feelings about things.

And he had a lot of gut feelings about Baxter Hawthorne. Gut feelings that confused him.

"Yes," Bax said. "Unicorns are also renowned for their healing powers. They say if you come across one in the forest, you'll be blessed with wisdom, health, and good fortune."

"If you come across a unicorn in the forest?" Nick asked, sending Bax a quick grin.

"What, you've never encountered a unicorn in the forests around Hawthorne House?" Bax asked, acting surprised.

"No," Nick said, chuckling.

"Pity," Bax said with a shrug. "They're quite beautiful."

Nick peeked up at Bax, trying not to laugh. It wasn't the first time Bax had teased him like that. He'd been cheeky back in the fall, around the time of Raina's memorial

fundraiser.

Remembering that, Nick asked, “Did you learn that while being pagan?”

It was a clumsy question, but ever since Bax had told him that he practiced that old, old religion, Nick had been curious.

“I’ve learned a lot of things while being pagan,” Bax said, taking another sip of his tea, then setting the mug down on the stool beside him. “Mostly, I’ve learned a lot about nature, the cycles of the seasons, and the fact that modern people are far too caught up in transient, material things for their own good.”

Nick grunted as he focused on the metal and sparks in front of him. “I agree with that.”

“It’s what drew me to the older spiritual traditions when I was a teen,” Bax went on. “I’ve always been a nature boy. And Paganism is sexy.”

Nick’s face heated. He glanced at Bax again as he turned off the blowtorch, then deliberately didn’t look at him while making certain the strand of mane he’d attached was where he wanted it to be.

He wasn’t entirely certain why Bax mentioning sex had him so flustered. He wasn’t sexually attracted to men. At least, he hadn’t been in the past. He hadn’t really been sexually attracted to anyone until Raina came along. He’d always thought he was too big and lumbering for anyone to be attracted to, and he’d been much too shy to make a move on the few people he’d fancied in his school days.

“Actually, I guess you could argue that my entire adult life so far has been very, well, adult,” Bax went on, crossing his arms and staring at the old forge in thought. “I mean, I think Paganism is a brilliant religion for children to be raised in, if children

need to be raised in a religion at all. It teaches respect for our planet and acceptance of everyone and their differences.”

Nick glanced up again for a moment before reaching for the blowtorch to attach another bit of mane. He liked the idea of his kids being raised to respect the sort of things that really mattered instead of worshiping money, like so many people these days did.

“But unlike so many of the newer organized religions,” Bax went on, “the old ways embrace sexuality and the powerful magic of intimacy rather than calling it a sin.”

Nick nodded, but kept his eyes glued to his work. Maybe that was why he’d never been particularly interested in going out with girls along with the rest of his art school classmates. He enjoyed everyone’s company as they laughed and swapped stories at pubs or clubs, but when it came to pairing off for the night or even taking someone home, he’d always been disappointed. And disappointing.

“Granted,” Bax went on, holding up one hand, “a lot of the hype about pagans having ritual sex on pentagram altars and orgies to celebrate whatever holiday people think it is that requires orgies is greatly exaggerated.”

“You’ve never had an orgy?” Nick asked, peeking up.

“I didn’t say that,” Bax answered with a sly wink.

Nick heated even more. He was certain Bax was just teasing him again.

At least, he thought Bax was just teasing him.

Fuck. What if Bax wasn’t just teasing? What if he actually had participated in an orgy before? Had he been the one having sex with multiple women—no, wait, Bax was

gay—with multiple men? Had he been the top or the bottom?

Nick doused those thoughts as soon as Bax laughed.

“That got your imagination going,” Bax said, grinning widely.

“I didn’t think I had that much of an imagination,” Nick said what plenty of other people would have said to him after a comment like that.

Bax sat a bit straighter, his eyes widening. “Of course you have an imagination,” he said, then nodded to the unicorn body. “You’re an amazing artist.”

“Hardly,” Nick said, finishing with the piece of mane in front of him, then setting the blowtorch aside so he could refine it. “I’m a great, hulking oaf who likes to bang things is all.”

“Just my type, then,” Bax said, his expressive mouth pulling into a wicked smirk.

A shiver of embarrassment shot through Nick, nearly buckling his knees. At least, he thought it was embarrassment. There was something about Baxter that radiated sexuality so strongly that it affected even him.

“That’s not what I meant,” he said, keeping his face half turned away so Bax wouldn’t see how flustered he was.

“I know, I know,” Bax continued to laugh, holding up his hands as if in a sign of peace. “I shouldn’t joke about these things.”

“I don’t always get jokes,” Nick admitted.

“Practice makes perfect,” Bax said. He looked so happy and at ease sitting there,

saying inappropriate things without a care. “And for the record, it doesn’t matter what you look like or how you present yourself, you create things of amazing beauty. You’re an artist. And you’re apparently a fabulous forgery teacher as well.”

“Forging,” Nick corrected him. “Forgery is making fake things.”

“And nothing you’ve made is fake,” Bax finished his thought easily. He paused for a moment, studying Nick with an uncomfortably intense gaze before going on to say, “Don’t let anyone tell you you’re not an artist. I know artists. I’m one of the few Hawthornes who isn’t an artist, but I know them when I see them. You’ve got talent.”

“Thanks,” Nick said, managing a smile. “I love metalwork, but I haven’t been able to do as much as I’d like lately.”

“Why’s that?” Bax asked.

Nick shrugged as he prepared to work with the third piece of mane. “Because I love my children more. If I had to choose, and sometimes it feels like I have to, I’d choose to be the best father I can be.”

“That’s admirable and sweet,” Bax said, tilting his head a little to one side as he smiled at Nick. “I don’t see myself having kids ever, but I absolutely appreciate the desire to be a good father.”

“Don’t pagans have kids?” Nick asked, then immediately felt it was a stupid question.

“A lot of them do,” Bax said. “A few in my old coven had kids.”

“Your old coven?” Nick asked.

He was asking about the term “coven”, but Bax took the question a different way. “I

had to leave when I broke up with Damien,” he explained, looking sad. “Damien was the high priest, and after we split, it was just too uncomfortable to stay.”

Nick gave Bax more than a cursory glance. He really did look sad about losing his group of people. Nick had no idea what it meant or if it was an ordinary thing or a significant thing for someone who practiced that faith, but he immediately wished he could do something about it.

“How do you find a new covenant?” he asked.

Bax took a breath to answer, but before he could say anything, the canvas flap serving as a door brushed suddenly aside, and Nally Hawthorne stepped into the forge.

“Right. There you two are,” he said, breathless and full of energy. “Dad wants both of you up at the house right away.”

“What?” Bax asked, standing and facing Nally. “Where’s the fire?”

Nally laughed humorlessly. “He wants the film crew out of here as soon as possible, but the director is complaining that he needs more extras so they can get the scene done. He wanted to call some company that provides extras, which would have meant they’d be here an extra day or two, but Dad said he’d provide all the extras they need.”

“Which means us,” Bax said.

“I’ve got a class in an hour,” Nick said.

Nally shook his head. “Not today you don’t. Dad is canceling all classes and shoving all students and teachers into medieval clothes for the filming. That includes the two

of you.”

Nick sighed and set his tools down. He removed his gloves and pulled off his goggles with heavy hands. He desperately needed to work on the unicorn, but he owed so much to Robert Hawthorne that if Robert said jump, Nick would jump.

“How long do you think this will take?” he asked as he untied his apron and stepped away from his workbench.

“All day, I’m afraid,” Nally said. “I’ve got to go break the news to Robbie and Toby. I’ll see you later.”

Nally ducked back out into the cold, leaving Nick and Bax alone again. Nick started tidying things up and locking down anything that could cause a fire or other accident within the forge. Bax rushed to help.

“This could be interesting,” Bax said, smiling as he reached for the same tool Nick was reaching for.

Their hands brushed, and for a moment, Nick felt the urge to hug Bax and keep him warm again.

“Yeah, interesting is one word for it,” he said.

His heart continued to race even after he and Bax moved apart. Something was going on, but at the moment it felt more scary than interesting.

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THREE

Watching a hunky blacksmith at work wasn't exactly the fantasy Bax had imagined it would be. He'd been all set for Nick stripped to the waist and glistening with sweat as he wielded a heavy hammer. He had pictured sparks and fire as the sound of iron on iron rang out in the hot space of the forge.

Instead, he'd been fascinated by the precision of Nick carefully fastening tiny waves of thin metal to a surprisingly delicate unicorn's head while swathed in safety gloves, goggles, and a thick apron.

Honestly, he wasn't sure which was more attractive. He would hold onto his hope of seeing Nick sweaty and soot-covered someday, but in the meantime, simply watching the love he had for his work and the care with which he built his tribute to Raina warmed him more than the fire of the forge had.

He wasn't even upset when Nally came along to burst the cozy bubble the two of them had found themselves in. Bax felt like he'd had a glimpse into a side of Nick that not many people saw, and as they headed up to the house to change into costumes for the crowd scene being filmed out in one of Hawthorne House's distant meadows, they kept that new connection between them.

"It's cold out there, people," the small, pert production assistant in charge of making sure the extras Uncle Robert had thrown together at the last minute made it into the right costumes called out as everyone dressed in the dining room. "Keep your coats and thermals on under your costumes, but make certain Wardrobe conceals them and approves of you before you leave the house."

“Something tells me Wardrobe will never approve of me,” Blaine commented as he adjusted the ragged tunic he’d been given over his dark blue coat.

Bax laughed. “No one ever completely approves of you,” he said, nudging his twin.

“Oy! Alfie approves of me,” Blaine snapped back.

“Where is Alfie, then?” Bax teased him. “And why are you back here already? I thought the two of you had an appointment at the orphanage.”

Blaine sent him a wary look. “Alfie is at the appointment. Uncle Robert phoned to tell me I had to come back and be a medieval peasant or heads would roll.”

“Aren’t heads rolling in this particular scene anyhow?” Nick commented as a harried PA worked to fasten his costume around the bulk of his coat.

“Good point,” Bax said, grinning. He was impressed that Nick would try to joke with him. Then again, he’d delivered more than one off-color joke to Nick before, and he had no intention of stopping now. Maybe he could be a good influence to get Nick to loosen up a lot more if they became friends.

Right. Friends. Because that was all Bax wanted from Nick...not.

They were friends, though. As the costume fitting progressed, the two of them continued to banter and grin at each other over the whole ordeal, and when they were shooed along to make-up, which Nick insisted he didn’t need, since they would just be part of the crowd while the real actors did the work but which he got anyhow, Bax watched him carefully for any signs of whether he stood a snowball’s chance in hell at more.

It was impossible to tell.

“You’ve got fantastic lips,” the buxom make-up artist painting Nick’s face flirted with him as she had him captive in her chair.

“Thanks?” Nick said smiling a little, but mostly keeping his face neutral so the woman could work.

“I bet your sweetheart loves kissing lips like those,” the woman went on, leaning closer to him.

Bax knew a come-on when he saw it, but Nick, bless him, was clueless.

“I don’t have a sweetheart,” he told the woman.

“No! A catch like you?” She swayed even closer, breasts first.

“My wife was killed in a car crash twenty months ago,” Nick said, like he was pointing out the weather.

The make-up artist immediately pulled back, her face falling. “Oh, sweetie, I’m so sorry,” she said, then proceeded to finish Nick’s face with utmost care...and no flirting.

Bax fought not to grin as his make-up was finished, too. It felt wrong to laugh at Raina’s expense, but Nick was just so beautifully oblivious that he couldn’t help but smile.

As they were moved along, out of the house and down to the field that had been set up like a medieval town square for the execution scene, Bax kept a sharp eye on Nick’s interactions with everyone from the production crew to the students.

“Isn’t this fun?” a young woman who evidently knew him asked as they were moved

into positions for the scene.

Her eyes were full of stars and admiration for Nick, but Nick just answered, “Yeah. Who would’ve thought this was what we’d be doing today, eh?”

As they waited for further instructions and for the cameras to be put into place, Bax started to see the whole thing as a kind of game. Just because Nick didn’t flirt back with the two women who had smiled at him didn’t mean he didn’t like women.

He watched to see if Nick spent a little too long staring at the male star of the film, who was wrapped in a down coat, as he and a few of the other leads waited for the scene to start. When Nick didn’t show much interest, Bax tried following his line of sight to see who Nick was staring at. Mostly he was busy watching the cameras or gazing off in the direction of his forge.

“Filming is such hard work,” he said, deciding to try a different tactic and attempt to snag Nick’s attention himself.

Nick laughed and pivoted slightly to face him. “I’ve heard people say it’s mostly a lot of waiting around.”

“It definitely is,” Bax grinned. He inched slightly closer to Nick, then said, “We need to figure out something to do to pass the time.”

“Yeah, that would be helpful,” Nick said, glancing toward his forge again.

“I guess orgies are out,” Bax said.

His comment had exactly the effect he’d hoped for. Nick whipped to face him, and even with movie makeup, his face glowed red.

Bax laughed. "I imagine that they got up to all sorts of mischief in the Middle Ages," he went on, backing off just slightly.

"I suppose so," Nick mumbled.

"Right, then," Bax said with a nod. "I'm imagining that my character is the town crier. By day, he goes around calling out announcements when people need to know things, and by night he cries out for other reasons as he partakes in subversive bacchanals."

"Didn't they burn people at the stake for being witches when they did that back then?" Nick asked.

It was just a question, but he inched closer to Bax, almost protectively, as he asked it.

"Nah," Bax said, even though he wasn't actually an expert on the history. "Burning at the stake was reserved mostly for heretics. And the witches that got into the most trouble were women who were guilty of the heinous crime of having a backbone and sticking up for themselves."

"Wasn't sodomy punishable by death, too, in the Middle Ages?" Nick asked.

Bax gave Nick a look like he was impressed. It could have just been a throw-away comment, or Nick could have been talking about him, since he was openly gay. Then again, maybe he was thinking about himself and how he would have been treated in the Middle Ages, too.

"It depended on where you were and who you pissed off," he answered. "As with most of history, they didn't have social media, so if you weren't blatantly obvious about who you liked to get naked with, no one would really know."

Nick hummed sagely and nodded.

Bax was teetering on the edge of asking something outrageously bold, like “Do you ever fancy men?” when the director called them all to attention.

“Right, you lot. In this scene, Henry is being marched up to the gallows, so we need you all to cheer and holler or look horrified as you see fit, got it?” the director instructed them.

What followed was fifteen minutes of pandemonium as the extras dove into their roles while the lead actor marched about twelve yards six or seven times. After that, everything stopped again as the cameras were adjusted to shoot the same scene from a different angle. For continuity’s sake, the extras were all told to stay right where they were.

“So what do you think?” Bax asked as the production crew’s attention turned elsewhere.

“About what?” Nick asked, swaying a bit closer to him.

Bax wanted to turn and throw himself into Nick’s arms so they could cuddle for warmth. He might be able to get away with saying it was platonic. Not that he wanted it to be platonic.

“Are we for this Henry bloke having his neck stretched or are we against it?” Bax asked.

He got lucky when one of the other extras accidentally bumped him from behind, giving him an excuse to lean into Nick for a second.

Nick reached out like he would balance Bax. His hand spread across Bax’s back to

steady him. Bax wished he would keep it there, but he let it drop.

“I’m against anyone being hanged for their crimes,” Nick said, sounding adorably good as he did.

“What?” Bax teased him. “Even last week, when Boris the miller’s son was caught drowning that sack of puppies in the river?”

Nick snapped a look at him and said, “What?”

Bax grinned and continued spinning his tale. “If you ask me, Old Boris has always been a nutter. Remember last year during harvest, when we were helping the farmers to bring in the sheaves and he was caught enjoying himself a little too much with Dan the cartwright’s donkey?”

Nick laughed. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Bax took a risk of pushing things a little farther, all in the name of research, of course.

“We’d gone off to sit under the shade of an old oak tree, just the two of us and a jug of Matilda the Brewer’s finest mead. The lord of the manor was off fighting the Crusades and since no one was watching, we decided to cuddle up for a quick nap.”

Nick sucked in a breath, but whether that was because he’d caught on to the fiction Bax was weaving or because he liked the idea of the two of them cuddled up under an oak tree with a bottle of mead was yet to be determined.

“Right,” he said, drawing the single word out. “It was just after we’d danced the maypole and...and did whatever else people did to entertain themselves back then.”

“Which also involved dancing the maypole ,” Bax said, throwing as much innuendo into the comment as he could.

Nick flushed a deep shade of red and glanced down with a smile. It was the single cutest thing Bax had ever seen anyone do, but it still didn’t enlighten him as to whether Nick was strictly straight or not.

“I suppose you think this Henry bloke should hang,” Nick went on, throwing himself into pretend. “You were cheering awfully loud just then.”

“I’m the town crier,” Bax said with a shrug. “I do everything loud.”

“Everything?” Nick asked, a decidedly naughty look in his eyes.

Bax thanked all the old gods and the new that he was such a bad influence on his friend. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” he asked, arching one eyebrow.

Nick laughed and blushed, but whatever hope Bax might have had of digging a little deeper to find out if he had a chance was cut short as the production crew ramped up activity again.

The rest of the morning was spent in the same stop-and-start cycle of filming what would probably end up being three seconds in the film, finishing one bit, then reworking the camera angles so that they could shoot the same bit again. They’d progressed a little by lunchtime, enough so that they were filming longer stretches of dialogue as Henry talked his way out of being hanged. By the time they got to that point, though, most of the extras weren’t needed as the scene could be shot in such a way that they weren’t in any of the shots.

“I can’t decide if I’m happy about being cut from the rest of the scene or ecstatic,” Bax said as he and Nick walked back up to the house along with the others who the

director had decided wouldn't be needed for the rest of the scene.

"I'm ecstatic," Nick said, a heaviness in his voice that said he meant it.

"Aaw, don't you like spending time with me?" Bax asked. The question was a risk, as was the way he threw his arm over Nick's shoulders like they were best friends.

"No, I love spending time with you," Nick said, too fast to be anything but perfectly honest. That had Bax smiling from the inside out. "It's just that I'm desperate to get work done on Raina's unicorn."

Whatever warm, fuzzy feelings of hope had been building in Bax flattened. "I've lost out to a unicorn," he said, letting his arm drop. "I can't say that would be the first time."

The joke went over Nick's head.

"No, I didn't mean that I don't like being around you," he said, stumbling over his words a bit. "I definitely like spending time with you. I don't really have a lot of friends, well, other than the Hawthorne family, and it's just nice to spend time with you."

Bax grinned, his hope sprouting anew. He still didn't have the first idea if he actually stood a chance of having his fantasy of Nick naked and covered with sweat coming true, but he didn't feel like that door was entirely shut either.

"Do you need help polishing your unicorn?" he asked, unable to keep a straight face.

Instead of blinking and blushing, Nick sent him a sideways look and said, "That one was just blatant."

Bax laughed out loud. “I can’t be subtle all the time. Sometimes you just have to ask for what you want.”

They were near the fork in the path that led either to the house or to the forge, so Nick stopped, causing Bax to stop with him.

“What do you want?” Nick asked.

There was a sort of frustrated spark in Nick’s eyes and a tension to his shoulders that puzzled Bax. His first instinct was to make some sort of joke that wasn’t a joke in return, but he didn’t see that going over well. If he didn’t joke, though, he didn’t really know how to respond.

What did he want? To get in the pants of his dead cousin’s possibly straight husband? That didn’t seem right. To have Nick smile at him and call him a good boy, like he had with his toddler son? That didn’t seem at all right either. To have a genuine and yet also sexual connection with a man he admired and felt drawn to? That was definitely it, but without knowing which way Nick went, asking for what he wanted could backfire on him spectacularly.

He was saved from a potentially disastrous answer by his phone pinging in his pocket. It was just a WhatsApp message, he could tell from the sound, but instead of ignoring it like he should have, he scrambled under the layers of costume and coat to reach for his back pocket.

“I can give you some privacy if you’d like,” Nick said, turning like he would head on to his forge.

“No, it’s just a text,” Bax said, praying Nick wouldn’t walk away.

Nick waited as Bax freed his phone and tapped the screen a few times to get to the

message. What he saw sent his heart plopping to his feet.

The message had been sent to the group chat for his former coven. It was an announcement of their upcoming Imbolc celebrations and a request for people to help out with the feast and ritual preparation. In the past, Bax had always been the one to plan the midwinter ritual welcoming the first signs of spring and to gather the elements they would need.

“Is something wrong?” Nick asked, taking a step closer to Bax.

“No,” Bax answered, lowering his phone. He cleared his throat in an attempt to banish the knot that had formed there, then said, “I’m still on the group WhatsApp chat for my old coven. They’re just planning for Imbolc.”

“What does planning for Imbolc mean?” Nick asked.

“Imbolc is one of the eight major holidays of the pagan calendar. It’s High Winter, a celebration of the first signs of spring.” He gestured to the set where they’d just been filming. “The Early Christian Church changed it into the celebration of Candlemas, when the candles in churches would be blessed, which is basically celebrating the return of more light to the world. It’s generally celebrated with a similar ritual of light and with a feast. I used to be in charge of my coven’s?—”

His babbling explanation was cut off by another notification from his phone. Bax lifted his phone to take a look only to find a notification that he had been removed from the group chat.

It was like a dagger in his heart. Just like that, someone had clicked a button somewhere, and now he was truly cut off from the people who had played such a meaningful role in his life for the past few years. It hurt more than the conversation he and Damien had had that had ended things.

“You okay?” Nick asked, stepping closer to him still.

“Yeah,” Bax lied. “I think they sent me the message by accident. I’ve just been removed from the group.”

He swallowed, then glanced up and met Nick’s eyes. He saw sympathy and strangely enough a similar sort of grief.

“That sucks,” Nick said.

He then did the last thing Bax expected and the one thing he wanted more than anything. He stepped forward and folded Bax into a warm hug.

It was everything Bax had dreamed of. Nick’s body was bigger than his and so solid. He could lean into it, close his eyes, and feel truly enveloped. Even though they’d been outside all day, Nick smelled of fire and metal. He hugged Nick back without thought or expectation. Instead of being something sexual or a prelude to more, the hug was affectionate, genuine, and perfect. Nick wasn’t just an object of lust, he was the kind of man Bax could see himself spending his life with.

“Hey, you two. Don’t wander off with those costumes. They belong to the production company,” Robbie’s amused voice broke the moment.

Bax sucked in a breath—which was probably the wrong thing to do, since it filled his nose with Nick’s smoky scent—and rocked back.

“Shit. I don’t have time to go up to the house and change,” Nick said, almost like the two of them hadn’t had a moment. “Can you take this back up for me?”

He started shrugging out of his costume even before Bax said, “Yeah, sure.”

Bax would have made a joke or said something witty and brilliant about helping Nick to undress, but all the energy had been sucked out of him and even Nick's brilliant hug hadn't put it back. He was a man without a coven. He would need a lot more hugs from Nick to replace the part of his soul that had just been ripped out.

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FOUR

For the next week, Nick couldn't get Bax out of his head. He'd been anxious about losing much-needed sculpting time to Robert's insistence that everyone at Hawthorne House should spend the day pretending to be a medieval peasant, but thanks to Bax, he'd had a lot of fun. He'd been well aware that Bax had been teasing him with the stories he'd made up, but strangely, Nick didn't mind.

Those fun and games weren't the reason Nick couldn't shake Bax off for the next few days, though. As he fed the kids supper once they'd returned from his mum's, bathed them, then tucked them into bed, he worried that Bax was sitting across the hall in his generic family flat feeling alone. As he took a moment to play with the kids the next day, he hoped that Bax had someone to make him smile and laugh. As the week wore on and he instructed his class in a few more advanced techniques for creating balustrades, he found himself wondering if Bax was sitting by himself in one of Hawthorne House's unused offices or if he had company while he reviewed the arts center's books.

It all boiled down to those text messages Bax had received when the two of them had been standing there after filming. Nick might not have been the most savvy person on the planet when it came to emotions, but he knew sadness and disappointment when he saw it. Bax had lost a load of friends all at once, and as cheery and cheeky as he seemed most of the time, Nick could see that it bothered him.

He was concerned about his friend feeling alone and unloved, that was all. It was the same concern Raina had had for him when she'd approached him at uni and invited him out for drinks with a few of her friends.

Of course, it wasn't exactly like that. He'd ended up marrying Raina. That definitely wouldn't happen with Bax. Bax wasn't his type at all. Bax was a man, for one, and he wasn't attracted to?—

That train of thought was cut completely short as he glanced up from his work in the forge and spotted Bax jogging along the path that ran through the Renaissance Faire village. It was early in the morning on the Saturday after the filming day and Nick was up early and working on the unicorn. The forge was hot, so he'd rolled some of the canvas sides up to ventilate the area a bit better, which gave him a beautiful view of the surrounding vistas. It was still January and chilly, but the weather had warmed up a tiny bit.

That was probably why Bax was jogging in shorts, his pink legs exposed to the elements. He wore a long-sleeved shirt that was already a bit sweaty and clinging to his torso, which told Nick he'd been out running for a while. He really was fit for an accountant. That wasn't the first morning Nick had seen him out jogging or walking around the estate early in the morning. He was reasonably certain the way Bax always went outside before dawn every day had something to do with his faith, but he hadn't asked about it.

As soon as Bax jogged out of his view, Nick started. He hadn't realized he'd been staring. He hadn't realized the sight of Bax jogging was something worth staring at. Bax was objectively handsome, though. There was nothing unusual about noticing an objectively handsome man.

Except once again, he couldn't shake Bax from his thoughts as he finished some of the fine details of his unicorn head and set his work aside. Maybe Bax was running from something. Maybe he needed someone to run after him and let him know everything would be okay, that life went on after loss. Nick knew all about that.

He forced himself to concentrate on cleaning up the forge and securing the fires so

they would be ready later, if he could find the time to come back and work. He needed to get back up to the house and see to his kids. His sister-in-law Rebecca was looking out for them at the moment, but she had to go out, most of the other Hawthornes were busy that weekend, and he couldn't keep relying on his mum to do his parenting for him. Besides, he wanted to be a good dad, and a good dad prioritized his kids over his art.

He was adamant about that, but it didn't stop him from glancing wistfully back over his shoulder at the pieces of his unicorn before leaving the forge and treading back up to the house.

"Daddy! Daddy!" The kids were full of energy and greeted him enthusiastically once he made it back to his flat.

"Alright?" he greeted them with a laugh, picking Jordan up when he charged right into his leg. "Let Daddy have a shower before you go throwing yourself at me."

"Daddy, I want crumpets and jam," Jordan told him.

"You can have crumpets and jam," he said, his heart filling with love for the simple wishes of his babies.

"Um, no they can't," Rebecca said, coming out of the kitchen with Macy in her arms. "You're out, love. You're out of almost everything. When was the last time you went shopping?"

Nick answered with a sigh. Buying groceries was one more thing that seemed to fall through the cracks as he tried to juggle all the balls. Delivery services didn't like to go all the way out to Hawthorne House either.

"I guess we know what we're doing today," he told Jordan. "Just let Daddy shower

first.”

Jordan hugged him then squirmed to get down. Rebecca was alright with staying an extra fifteen minutes as he cleaned himself up, but that was it. He raced through his shower and dressing, then dove into full dad mode.

That was how Bax found him several minutes later, as he carried both kids out into the hall, dragging Macy’s buggy behind him with one foot. Bax had just come out of his flat as well, looking freshly showered himself and smelling like heaven.

“We have to stop meeting like this,” Bax said with pretend seriousness, as if they were conducting some sort of secret affair, which was ridiculous, instead of doing normal, everyday things with kids in tow.

He laughed anyhow as he adjusted his hold on Macy to stop her from slipping out of his arms. “We should meet down at the forge where it’s quiet and cozy more often, then,” he joked right back.

It didn’t feel like a joke, though. He wasn’t sure what it felt like. He didn’t want to examine why he’d said it too closely.

Fortunately, Bax laughed. “Do you need help?” he asked, holding out his hands like he would take one of the kids.

“We’re just going to Sainsbury’s to stock up,” Nick said, pulling the buggy around so he could deposit Macy in it, which was a feat of incredible dexterity, considering he had Jordan in his other arm.

Jordan took advantage of the movement to slither out of Nick’s hold and to make a beeline straight through the open door into Bax’s flat.

“Jordan, come back,” Nick called after him.

“Hold on there, little tyke,” Bax laughed, rushing after Jordan. “Just where do you think you’re going?”

He managed to catch a giggling Jordan and bring him back into the hall, shutting the door behind him. Jordan had no fear in general and seemed to take to Bax immediately.

That did things to Nick’s insides that he definitely wanted to avoid.

“I, er, wouldn’t say no if you wanted to carry him downstairs and help me get him into the car,” Nick said, fighting not to be bashful about it.

“I’ll come along and help with the shopping trip, if you’d like,” Bax offered as they all started down the hall.

“Don’t you have something grown-up and important to do?” Nick asked, pushing Macy’s buggy.

Bax shrugged. “Not really. I was actually going to head out to the shops myself. We can kill two birds with one stone.”

Bax grinned at Jordan then turned to smile at Nick as they started down the stairs, carrying the buggy as they went.

That smile felt like comfort personified to Nick. It was so genuine and so freely given. And for a change, it wasn’t filled with sympathy or pity. Far too many people had treated Nick like being a widower was the central focus of his existence now and it just wasn’t.

Piling the kids into the car and making certain everyone was secured in their car seats pushed away any thoughts except the practical. Once everyone was secured, Bax was seated in the passenger's seat beside him, and they were on their way into town, Nick was too busy focusing on fighting weekend traffic while singing along to the kids' music he put on to think about how nice it was to have Bax with them for the errand. And once they reached Sainsbury's parking lot and had to get the kids out and organize buggies, there wasn't time to feel anything but grateful he had Bax along to help with the chaos.

"I never did trust the big Sainsbury's," Bax said as they started up the aisle between the food and the clothing sections, Macy sitting in the buggy—which earned him a few disapproving looks from his fellow shoppers—and Jordan holding his hand as he walked.

"Why not?" Nick laughed, pausing to grab a few boxes of kids' snacks that were on sale. The Hawthorne family might have supported him by offering a home and occasional childcare, but he was still trying to raise two kids on an artist's income.

"It's all just so...commercial," Bax said, making a face at a flashy display of Valentine's Day candy that had already been set up.

Nick laughed. "It's commercial because this is commerce," he said. "And the big store is perfect, because you can get everything you need in one trip."

Bax hummed, then sighed, "I suppose so."

Nick grinned at him, certain Bax was having a go at him with his pretend stuffiness. He would have found a way to keep the banter going if Jordan hadn't yanked his hand away and gone charging after a shelf of soft toys that was part of the Valentine's Day display.

That was how the pandemonium started. Jordan went off like a shot, Bax chasing after him. Macy was riled up by the sudden activity and tried to stand in the buggy. That caused one of the employees to come over and lecture him on how children were not allowed to ride in the buggies.

Bax caught Jordan, but since Nick now had to lift Macy and carry her around, they were both short on hands to push the buggy and put much-needed supplies in it.

When they headed down the veg aisle and Nick grabbed a few bags of salad, Jordan shouted, “No! Ick!” and flailed in Bax’s arms. Bax wasn’t used to managing a three-year-old and got too close to a display of sacks of potatoes. Jordan grabbed at one of them and had just enough strength to upset the balance, sending potatoes spilling everywhere.

That had the same employee who had yelled at him about letting Macy ride in the buggy chasing after them with hellfire in her eyes. Nick couldn’t help but mutter, “It wouldn’t have happened if kids could ride in the buggies,” before racing to get out of the veg section entirely.

Once they were a few aisles over, Bax burst into laughter. “Did you just tell a store employee off?” he asked, shifting Jordan to his other arm.

Nick blushed and admitted, “Yeah, I did.”

That sent Bax into more laughter, which had Jordan laughing along with him.

It should have been a frustrating and embarrassing moment, but Nick’s heart felt light. He loved seeing his kids happy, even if they were chaotic when enjoying themselves. He loved the sound of Bax’s laughter, too. Something about seeing both Bax and his babies happy, happy and together, filled him with emotions that he couldn’t quite name, but that made him feel like everything would be alright.

Those good feelings stayed with them for a few minutes and they actually managed to accomplish some serious shopping. It wasn't exactly like things had been with Raina. That had been a very different sort of relationship. But the closeness Nick was beginning to feel to Bax touched a spot within him that had been empty since Raina's death.

They'd almost found everything they needed and were just turning the corner of the last aisle when Nick came close to ramming his cart into...his mum?

"Mum? What are you doing here?" he asked, suddenly tense. He glanced quickly at Bax, like he'd somehow done something wrong.

His mum looked at Bax as well, then stepped forward to take Jordan out of his arms.

"Hello, dear," she said, meaning Nick. She settled Jordan in her arms but only smiled at him for a moment before going on with, "I do occasionally shop for groceries as well, you know."

"Of course," Nick said. He shifted around the end of the cart so that he could kiss his mum's cheek. Macy squirmed and fussed like she wanted to go to Granny, but his mum mostly ignored her.

"Baxter, isn't it?" she asked Bax.

"It's good to see you again, Mrs. Turner," Bax said, smiling as openly as he usually did.

"Did my son rope you into childcare?" she asked with the wry sense of humor she had.

Fortunately, Bax heard the question for what it was and laughed. "It just so happened

that I needed a few things as well,” he said. “Nick, Jordan, and Macy graciously allowed me to tag along.”

“Well, as long as my son didn’t push you into anything you don’t want,” his mum answered.

Nick frowned slightly, no idea what she meant by that. “Bax has been a real help. The kids are restless this morning.”

“Well of course they are, dear,” his mum said, smiling at Jordan. “It’s a Saturday morning. Children are always restless on Saturday mornings. They should be at home with their toys and someone to mind them.”

Every muscle in Nick’s back went tense. “They don’t have to stay at home,” he argued. “Kids are portable, after all.”

“And they need stimulation,” Bax added, nodding at Nick.

Before he could think about it, Nick nodded back with a grateful half-smile.

His mum noted the exchange and pursed her lips as she studied the two of them. “Do you have children, Baxter?” she asked.

“Oh, no,” Bax answered with a laugh. “I’ve never been much of a family man.”

For some reason, those words hit Nick wrong. “You’re good with them, though,” he said.

Bax shrugged. “They’re good kids.”

“Are you married, Baxter?” Nick’s mum asked, like it was a deeper iteration of the

question she'd just asked.

Nick was mortified, especially when Bax lost his smile and stood a little straighter, like he understood what the question really was.

"No," Bax answered carefully. "I recently broke up with my boyfriend of three years."

Nick's mouth twitched at the clever way Bax told his mum what she really wanted to know.

"I'm terribly sorry," she answered, then ignored him and turned to Nick. "Kate Danbury was asking about you the other day."

"Oh?" Embarrassment even stronger than what he'd felt when the store employee told him off washed over Nick. "How is Kate?"

"She's splendid," his mum said, becoming animated for the first time in their conversation. "You know she and that Paul chap divorced last year."

"I'd heard," Nick muttered. He sent Bax a sideways look to make sure he wasn't as uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was going as he was.

"Joann and I ran into her at the café," his mum went on. "She was telling us all about how difficult the dating world is these days and how impossible it is to find a nice, stable, interesting man."

"Um, I, er...."

"I told her all about your work at the arts center and that sculpture you're building," his mum went on with a surprise smile. "She found that very interesting."

His mum had always been mystified by his interest in art. Her smile now wasn't about anything he had or hadn't accomplished, it was purely a signal that he was supposed to be interested in Kate Danbury.

He wasn't interested in Kate Danbury or anyone else. He definitely wasn't ready to date. Not when he could barely juggle his life the way it was.

Lucky for him, Macy burst into tears just then, saving him from having to answer.

"Would you like me to take her?" his mum asked as he hugged Macy closer, patting her back and trying to soothe her. Kids picked up on the feelings of their parents, though, and since Nick wasn't feeling very soothed, he definitely didn't expect a miracle.

"No, I've got her," he said, rocking Macy gently in his arms. He sent Bax a glance, then looked at his mum again and said, "We were just about finished here. We should get a wiggle on, pay for all this, and get the kids back home as soon as possible."

His mum just hummed in answer, like she didn't think he was capable of managing his own kids. "Anytime you need help," she said, leaving the offer open-ended.

"I can take Jordan back," Bax said, moving in for the handoff.

For a second, Nick was convinced his mum wouldn't let Jordan go. She narrowed her eyes at Bax defensively and only let the boy go because he reached for Bax.

Nick was relieved. If Jordan hadn't wanted Bax to carry him, he had a feeling his mum would have opened a whole other can of worms.

"It was nice to meet you again, Mrs. Turner," Bax told his mum with a smile as Jordan threw his arms around his neck. "I'm sure we'll see each other again."

“Yes, I suppose we will,” Nick’s mum said, then turned to Nick. “Call me when you have a chance, dear. There are some things I’d like to discuss with you.”

Dread filled Nick’s stomach, but he kept smiling, kissed his mum on the cheek again, and as soon as she pushed her buggy on into the wine section, he blew out a breath and widened his eyes at Bax in a sign of relief.

“Come on,” Bax laughed, taking hold of the buggy’s handle and pushing it on. “Let’s get you lot home.”

Nick managed a small laugh. He didn’t mind it when Bax tried to take care of him. In fact, strange though it was, he felt like he could definitely get used to it.

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FIVE

Bax couldn't remember the last time he'd been so exhausted, and that was before they'd left the store. It wasn't just that the kids were squirmy, although he'd had no idea that two small humans under the age of four could squirm, wiggle, wail, and run as much as Jordan and Macy did. It gave him an entirely new respect and sympathy for the beleaguered mums whose kids acted up in public places.

The kids were only half the reason Bax was almost panting with exhaustion by the time they paid for their groceries and loaded everything into Nick's car to head home.

"Your mum is...charming," he said once he was secure in the passenger's seat and Nick was backing out of the parking place.

Nick only laughed humorlessly, then concentrated on getting them out of the parking lot.

Bax wasn't certain he should bring up the subject again. Nick's tension was glaringly obvious, but offering help and advice where someone else's family was concerned wasn't exactly a way to endear oneself to them.

And Bax desperately wanted to endear himself to Nick.

Nick was stressed, that much was clear to him. It was hard to tell why. There were so many things that could have been getting Nick down, from Raina's passing to the upcoming sculpture competition that Bax knew he wasn't ready for. If there was one thing that the time the two of them had spent together over the last week had taught

him, though, it was that Nick was doing an astounding job of holding it together under trying circumstances.

He deserved a break. He deserved to be treated with kindness and comfort. He didn't deserve to have his mum try to set him up in the middle of a grocery store while side-eyeing his company.

Mrs. Turner had definitely been side-eyeing him. It matched the disapproval he'd felt from the woman on their first meeting. Bax couldn't figure out what she disapproved of, though. Nick was surrounded by people who loved him and supported him. The Hawthornes had taken Nick in as one of their own.

"Mum is incredibly traditional," Nick said almost out of the blue once they were on the main road heading out to Hawthorne House. "She likes things a certain way. She always has. She's a good person and an excellent granny, though."

"I don't doubt that she is," Bax said, glancing over his shoulder to where both kids were quickly falling asleep in their car seats. What he did doubt was what Nick's mum's definition of being a good person was.

"She's been so worried about me since Raina died," Nick went on with a shrug before making a turn, eyes pinned to the road. "When I was younger, she'd tell me she was giving up all hope of having grandchildren. She said I was too shy and awkward to ever attract a wife."

Bax frowned, mostly at the way Nick didn't seem to find anything wrong with that statement. He stopped himself just short of saying that maybe Nick would have found himself a husband, though. He didn't want to end up fishing for information about someone's sexuality the same way Mrs. Turner had fished with him.

"Don't you have a sister?" he asked instead.

Nick smiled. “Two, actually. Joann still lives at home with Mum. She’s a primary school teacher, actually. I also have an older sister, Candice, who married a Canadian and moved to Halifax a few years ago.”

“Oh. That’s nice.” It was a silly thing to say, but the vibe in the car was suddenly awkward, and Bax didn’t want to say the wrong thing.

He could practically feel Nick thinking as they drove on. Judging by the frown he wore, those thoughts weren’t great. Bax wanted to reach out and rest his hand on Nick’s massive thigh, squeezing it to let him know everything would be alright. He wanted to reassure Nick that he had a friend and that he would do whatever Nick needed him to do to help him deal with, well, life.

Granted, the fantasy of a hot and sweaty Nick covered in soot from the forge definitely hadn’t gone away, but if all Nick needed was a friend right now, Bax wanted to be that friend.

Being Nick’s friend included doing things he never in a million years would have imagined himself doing.

“Undo the fastenings carefully,” Nick whispered as the two of them stood in the open doors on either side of the car, leaning into the back seat where the kids were sleeping. “He’ll be out for a while after the morning he’s had.” He gestured to the straps holding Jordan into his seat.

“He’s not going to kick up a fuss if he wakes up and we’re not in the car anymore?” Bax asked, following Nick’s lead and freeing Jordan from his seat.

Nick shook his head. “Kids go to sleep in one place and wake up in another all the time.”

“I can’t decide if that would be exciting or unnerving,” Bax said, grinning across the cramped and messy back seat of the car at Nick.

Nick glanced up at him and smiled when their eyes met. The car suddenly felt warm to Bax, and he was afraid that his excitement in that moment of connection between the two of them would wake Jordan up.

Jordan stirred but didn’t wake as Bax pulled him up and settled him in his arms. He wasn’t sure he was holding the boy right. Sleeping toddlers were entirely different beasts than awake and running ones. Everything Bax knew about kids could be written on a single sticky-note, but if it meant he could spend more time with Nick, then he’d learn.

“There you are,” Aunt Janice greeted the two of them as they brought the kids into the house. “Had a bit of an outing, did we?” she asked as she fell into step with the two of them as they carried the kids upstairs.

“Just to Sainsbury’s,” Nick said quietly as their footsteps echoed in the stairwell.

“A date with the kids to Sainsbury’s, eh?” Janice asked, peeking sideways at Bax.

Bax flushed hot, which surprised him. He wasn’t at all the sort to shy away from innuendo. He was the one flinging innuendo all over the place most of the time. But the look in his Aunt Janice’s eyes as they reached the upstairs hallway made him feel like he’d been caught being naughty.

“We ran into Bax just as we were leaving,” Nick said calmly, like he hadn’t caught the hint at all. “He was on his way to the same place, so we went together.”

The thing about Nick that Bax was beginning to see was that he was smarter than anyone gave him credit for. He was cleverer than he gave himself credit for. There

was a fair chance that he knew exactly what Aunt Janice was implying but had ignored it on purpose so he didn't give himself or his feelings away.

"Well, if you'd like, I can keep an eye on these two while you carry the groceries up," Aunt Janice said as they approached Nick's door.

"That would be lovely, Aunt Janice," Bax said, giving her cheek a kiss as they paused and waited for Nick to shuffle a sleeping Macy around so he could unlock his door.

It struck him as funny that he did the same thing with Aunt Janice that Nick had done with his mum in Sainsbury's. But as soon as they were in Nick's flat, Aunt Janice proved just how different she was from Mrs. Turner.

"Look at that sweet face," she cooed as she took Jordan from Bax's arms. "Isn't he just a perfect angel?"

"He's a hellion and a thorn in my side," Nick said with a broad grin as he carried Macy straight into the flat's second bedroom, which was set up as a nursery.

"Yes, but even angels can be naughty little boys sometimes," Aunt Janice said.

She grinned at Nick as he spoke, though Nick was too busy with Macy, then glanced over her shoulder at Bax.

Bax leaned against the doorframe, shook his head, and rolled his eyes. His Aunt Janice was a troublemaker.

Unless she knew something about Nick that Bax didn't.

That thought buzzed around Bax's insides as he and Nick made another trip down to the car to fetch all the groceries. Unsurprisingly, Nick was able to bring everything up

at once by looping a dozen heavy bags over his massive arms. On the one hand, it put Bax to shame as he carried up his measly two bags. On the other, it made him weak in the knees to see that sort of display of Nick's strength.

They parted ways so that Bax could take his groceries to his own kitchen. He raced through putting everything away, and within five minutes was back at the door to Nick's place. The door that had been left open, though whether by accident or because someone was playing Cupid, Bax didn't know.

He had a pretty good idea which of those two things it was when Aunt Janice announced, "I have some free time this afternoon. Why don't the two of you take these sandwiches I've just made down to the forge so you can work on your sculpture for a while, Nick? Bax can help you. Don't worry about the kids. I can't wait to play with them when they wake up."

"Thanks, Janice," Nick said with a grateful sigh, going to inspect the cool bag on the kitchen counter. "I should probably be here to play with the kids myself when they wake up, but I do need to work on the sculpture."

"That's why you should take Bax with you," Aunt Janice said, feigning innocence. "I'm sure he'd be helpful with your tools."

Bax crossed his arms and sent his aunt a pretend scolding stare, shaking his head as he did. She was as much of a troublemaker as...as the entire Hawthorne family. No wonder Uncle Robert had fallen for her all those years ago.

"Take a few of those beers in the fridge with you," Aunt Janice told Nick as he finished putting away the last of his groceries. "They're wedged way back in the bottom of the fridge, which tells me you haven't had any for ages, which also tells me you haven't loosened up in ages. Eat, drink, and be loose."

Bax laughed out loud. If that wasn't the motto of the Hawthorne family, he didn't know what was.

Surprisingly, Nick followed Aunt Janice's advice without too much fuss. He grabbed a few things he said he would need to work on the unicorn, then he and Bax took their lunch and headed out.

"Yep," Bax said as they headed down the hill with the skies clouding over and spitting light rain down on them. "Your mum and Aunt Janice are complete and polar opposites."

Nick laughed. "You can say that again."

"I'm not certain they're even the same species," Bax said.

He swayed closer to Nick to avoid a small pit in the path. Their shoulders bumped. Bax could have sworn Nick sucked in a breath, but he didn't want to make a big deal about it.

He also didn't want to step away from Nick and walk with a respectable distance between the two of them, but he did.

"The entire Hawthorne family is full of free spirits," he said as they approached the forge.

"Really. I hadn't noticed," Nick said in a voice so flat it was almost sarcasm. Bax hadn't ever heard Nick say anything sarcastic before. It was exciting.

Bax laughed as they ducked under the canvas shielding the doorway and into the surprisingly warm forge. Nick put the cool bag down on one of the benches, then immediately set to work checking the fires and feeding them so they would be hot

enough for working, or so Bax presumed.

It was just the two of them, and with the canvas walls of the forge rolled down, it felt like they were alone and sheltered from the world. Maybe that was what made Bax bold.

“How on earth did you end up with someone like Raina when you come from the family that you do?” he asked as he helped himself to one of the beers and took a seat where he could feast on the sight of Nick working.

Nick huffed a laugh. “She found me,” he said. “After that first time she invited me out to the pub, she refused to let me go. That’s really the whole story of how we ended up together.”

“And you didn’t date anyone before her?”

“Not really.” Nick shrugged. “I mean, I fancied a few people, but I couldn’t stomach the thought of bringing them home so my mum and dad could scrutinize the hell out of them.”

Bax nearly swallowed his beer wrong and fell off his stool. Fancied a few people , not a few girls . It could have been a slip of the tongue or it could have been deliberate. He needed more information.

“So that’s the only thing that stopped you from bringing someone home to meet the parents? The fear that they’d be scrutinized?” he asked, getting up and moving closer to the newer forge, where Nick was shifting parts around and doing things that were way above his technical know-how.

“I saw the way they were with Candice’s boyfriends,” Nick said, glancing quickly at him before finishing with the forge. “I didn’t want to wish that on anyone.”

“But you wished it on Raina,” Bax pointed out.

“Raina was a force of nature. She wished it on herself,” Nick said with a fond smile.

“That she was,” Bax agreed.

He still didn’t have the information he really wanted, though. Was Nick bi? And if so, was the heat growing between them more than friendship?

They moved to the side of the forge where their lunch waited. Bax made a point to sit closer to Nick than he would have if he didn’t particularly care about someone. He tried to make it look casual, but as they munched on their sandwiches, he rested his knee against the side of Nick’s beefy leg.

“I don’t think your mum likes me much,” Bax said with his mouth half-full.

Nick laughed out loud. “Mum doesn’t like anyone.”

“She likes Kate Danbury,” Bax said, taking a risk and imitating the way Mrs. Turner had said the woman’s name.

Nick flushed the cutest shade of pink. “Maybe I should say that Mum doesn’t like any of the Hawthornes,” he said.

That got a reaction out of Bax more than Nick saying he actually wanted to go on a date with Kate Danbury would have.

“I’ve noticed,” he said. “It’s inconceivable. The Hawthorne family is the best. We’re eclectic and creative and we take risks. And we’re all pretty cute, if I do say so myself.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s the reason she doesn’t really like any of you,” Nick laughed. “That and the fact that the entire family is queer as a unicorn in heat.” He nodded to his half-finished sculpture.

Bax laughed at the metaphor, but his laughter stopped abruptly. “She’s not homophobic, is she?” That would explain a hell of a lot.

Nick shrugged. “I don’t think it’s that specifically. She loves that one guy on Antiques Roadshow.” Nick rolled his eyes. “What she really doesn’t like is people who don’t fit into her box of how she thinks people are supposed to be.”

That made all the sense in the world, too.

“How does she think you should be?” he asked, even though it felt like a huge risk.

Nick tensed almost imperceptibly, then blew out a breath and sagged. “I should be predictable and stable. I should be rushing to find a new wife to take care of my babies for me so that I can go off and be, I don’t know, an accountant?” He grinned at Bax.

Was the man trying to make him fall head over heels in love? Bax was already well on his way to being lost where Nick was concerned. To have the man tease him and be so open with him was a better aphrodisiac than any magic he’d ever been involved with in the past.

“What do you want?” he asked, taking the biggest risk of all and reaching out to rest his hand on top of Nick’s hand where it rested on his thigh. “Who do you want to be?”

Nick slowly raised his eyes to meet Bax’s. There was something there other than casual friendship or family closeness. It was raw and vulnerable, like Nick trusted

him with the fragility of his emotions.

Better still, Nick twisted his hand so that he could hold Bax's as he said, "I just want to be a good father and a good man. I want to be true to myself and my art, too, but instead, since Raina's death, I feel so distant from it. For more than a year, I feel like I've just been going through the motions, trying to figure out who I am now, without her."

"It takes time to move on when you've had a big life change," Bax said.

No sooner were the words past his lips than they circled back to hit him in the heart. He knew what he was talking about a little too well. He'd just ended not only a relationship, but a fellowship with some of the few people he'd ever met who understood him on a deeper level.

Nick wasn't the only one flailing around like a tired kid in a supermarket, just wanting to go home. Bax was right there with him.

"Yeah, time," Nick said with a sad smile. "At least we've got each other while that time passes."

It was such a simple thing to say, but the words nearly knocked the wind out of Bax. The words and the genuine affection in Nick's eyes. They had something. They absolutely had something. Bax just needed to figure out what it was and how far it could go.

"Come on," he said, pulling his hand out of Nick's and slapping his thigh. "Let's do some art. I don't know anything about forging or metalwork, but if you tell me to hold something, I can hold it."

It was a sure sign of how much he was genuinely falling for Nick that he didn't even

turn those words into an innuendo.

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SIX

Throughout the next week, Bax remained at the forefront of Nick's thoughts. It was the weirdest thing. He woke up in the morning wondering if Bax had had a good night's sleep. He got the kids up and fed them breakfast while contemplating asking Bax if he wanted to come over and have breakfast with them. During the day, as he taught his classes and worked on his sculpture, every gust of wind or random person walking past as the film crew wrapped up their work at Hawthorne House made him look to see if Bax might visit him at the forge.

It was getting ridiculous. Especially when Bax was nowhere to be found up at the house on Friday evening.

"You haven't seen him around, have you?" he asked Blaine when they met in the hallway after Nick had gone to pick up the kids after they'd spent the afternoon with Granny Janice.

"Oh, he's not here," Blaine said, coming out of his flat and locking his door behind him. "There's a formal dance at The Chameleon Club tonight and a bunch of us are going to that."

"A formal dance?" Nick asked. "Like in school?"

That would explain why Blaine was dressed in a plaid suit with a flouncy collar and why, if Nick wasn't mistaken, he was wearing eyeliner and lipstick.

"Absolutely like in school, but a million times gayer," Blaine said with a broad grin.

“I feel like the star rugby player asked me to be his date.”

Nick laughed, but he felt more anxious than amused as Blaine sauntered off, probably to meet Alfie and head to the dance. Why he was anxious, he didn't know. The Chameleon Club was a fancy club in the heart of London owned by The Brotherhood, which was a centuries old organization of gay men. They looked out for each other's welfare and had tight social connections. It was probably exactly the sort of organization Bax needed after losing his coven.

That was the problem, though. As Nick got the kids settled in the lounge and started supper, he couldn't shake the uncomfortable feeling that niggled him like an itch in the middle of his back. Bax should find a new social group of people like him. That didn't mean they wouldn't be friends anymore. That wouldn't mean Bax would leave him behind.

Why should it matter to him in any event? He and Bax were just friends. That was all they could be considering Nick wasn't gay.

Even thinking that sent even more itchy, uncomfortable feelings shooting down Nick's back. He wasn't gay. He'd only ever liked women. Except for maybe Matt Allenson, who had been in one of the Art History classes he'd taken at uni. Matt had been extremely feminine and had flirted shamelessly with him. He'd already started dating Raina at that point. Raina had teased him mercilessly over the way he blushed and turned shy whenever Matt was around. She'd joked about Matt being his crush. But she'd never seemed genuinely jealous, so Nick had always brushed the entire Matt thing off as silliness.

Bax wasn't like Matt, though. He wasn't feminine, although he was gentle and graceful. But not when he was working out or going on one of his long nature walks.

Nick started joining Bax on his nature walks a few days after the Sainsbury's trip. It

was a ridiculous thing to do, what with the amount of work he needed to get done in the forge and the care and attention the kids required.

“You need more exercise,” Bax told him when he hemmed and hawed about accepting the invitation that first morning he was asked. “Something more than wielding a blacksmith’s hammer, at least. There’s nothing wrong with your arms, but a little walk now and then will be good for your heart.”

Nick wasn’t so sure about that. Several days on, and it was his heart he was most worried about.

“I wish it would snow more in England these days,” Bax commented as they strolled briskly through one of the wooded sections of Hawthorne House’s grounds. “Imbolc is the celebration of midwinter and all about looking forward to spring. There are a few rituals I’d like to bring into my practice that require snow, but that certainly isn’t going to happen this year.”

Nick felt unaccountably bad about that. He felt bad for not being able to give Bax a load of snow to play with. That didn’t make any sense at all.

“So that’s what this festival is, then?” he asked, his breath puffing in the frosty air in front of him as they walked up a small incline. “It’s a snow thing?”

“No,” Bax laughed. “It’s kind of the opposite, really. Imbolc is a fire festival. It’s the festival to honor the goddess of the hearth, Brigid.”

“But it’s celebrated in the middle of winter?”

Bax shrugged. “What better time to celebrate the warmth and light of fire than at a time when everything is cold and dreary outside?”

“You’ve got a point,” Nick said.

It was definitely something to think about. He’d always loved working in the forge in winter. The contrast of blasting red and orange heat inside and cold grey and brown outside had a sort of poetry in it, like opposites attracting.

He glanced at Bax just then and found him smiling and pink-cheeked. That smile sent a rush of warmth through him that made it feel like he had some sort of smoldering forge fire growing within him.

It was a silly thought. Bax was a friend, the closest friend he’d had since Raina had died. Maybe he was just so starved for connection with an adult that he had put more significance into their friendship than he needed to.

Then again, when he’d been over-attached to his friends as a kid, they’d always let him know by pushing him away. Bax definitely wasn’t pushing him away.

“I guess I can make do and figure out another way to celebrate the holiday without snow,” Bax went on as they reached the edge of the woods and started across a swooping, frost-covered field that was filled with wildflowers in the summer. “It’s more about the fire and the feast anyhow.”

“You should hold your ritual, or whatever you call it, in the forge,” Nick suggested with a sudden smile. “The forge is all about fire. We could even set up a barbeque of some sort so you could roast a pig or something.”

Bax laughed out loud. The sound sent shivers down Nick’s back that he tried to ignore.

“I wouldn’t know where to start roasting a suckling pig over an open flame,” Bax said. “But maybe I could find some sort of Dutch oven and a chicken or something

and roast it with a bunch of root vegetables.”

“Is that what you’re supposed to do for an Imbolc feast?”

They’d reached a bench that Robert’s father had installed that looked out over the view of the field, and Bax veered off the path to sit for a moment. Nick sat with him, glad they weren’t in a rush to get back to the house and everyone else in his life.

“You can do whatever you want for an Imbolc feast,” Bax explained, stretching his arm out along the back of the bench. That brought his hand into contact with Nick’s arm, but he didn’t seem to notice. “I might have been in charge of planning the ritual for Imbolc, and pretty much every other holiday, in my old coven, but my friend Gerald, who was an excellent cook, was in charge of the menu. He used to come up with something weird and different every year. He said it was an exploration of culinary proportions.”

He laughed, but that laughter faded quickly. Nick’s chest squeezed as he watched Bax’s smile fade and his expression turn wistful as he stared out over the field. He wanted to do something. He wanted to make Bax’s world better.

If he was honest, he wanted to throw his arms around Bax and hug him the way he had when Bax had been removed from that group chat. He’d been trying hard not to read too much into that simple gesture, but it had felt good. Bax’s body was solid and fit, even though he was on the small side. There was nothing feminine about him, so Nick had dismissed his feelings as just being friendship.

“I could help with your celebrations, if you need help,” he offered.

He should not have felt so nervous about making the offer. It absolutely should not have made him jumpy and worried about rejection or being laughed at. He wasn’t asking Bax out on a date or anything.

Bax turned to him, his smile lighting up once again. “Really?” he asked. “You’d want to help me celebrate?”

“Of course,” Nick said, then rushed to add what felt like a necessary, “That’s what friends are for.”

He caught the slightest flicker of something in Bax’s expression. His eyes dropped quickly to Bax’s lips, which were soft and pink from the cold. The pulse of excitement Bax’s lips gave him made Nick quickly snap his eyes up to meet Bax’s, but that didn’t help the roaring uncertainty and...discomfort? Was it discomfort that buzzed through him, settling in places he didn’t want to think about?

“You’re a good friend, Nick,” Bax said, brushing Nick’s arm.

His touch lingered. The air between them seemed charged, like a storm was about to break out. Their eyes stayed locked, and Bax pressed his lips together like he was going to say something. Or maybe do something. Bax definitely had an energy about him that said he was about to do something .

Nick held his breath. Did he want Bax to do something? He’d never been particularly physical with his affection, except with Raina. That was more about what Raina wanted than what he did. He certainly hadn’t kissed anyone since Raina.

Why was he thinking about kissing anyhow? Kissing Bax?

It didn’t feel like a bad idea.

It felt like a terrible idea.

“We should probably be getting back,” he said in an embarrassed rush, standing and starting forward without checking to make certain Bax would follow. “I’m so far

behind on the unicorn.”

“And I’m farther behind with the arts center’s books than I want to be,” Bax agreed, standing and falling easily into step with Nick, like nothing had happened between them.

Nothing had happened between them. They were just two friends talking, two friends who had both experienced a kind of loss recently and who were leaning on each other for emotional support. That was it. Nothing to see, nothing to write home about.

“What are you going to do once you’ve finished auditing the arts center?” Nick asked, more panic swirling in his gut with that question than he wanted. Would Bax leave? Would he head off to London or someplace where he would be around people like him?

“I’ve already started the process of opening my own accounting firm,” Bax said. “I’ve filed the necessary papers to register the business. I’ve been working as an independent accountant for six months or so now, but I’d like to expand that.”

“Expanded accounting,” Nick laughed.

He immediately writhed with embarrassment. He was babbling and laughing for no reason. Bax would think he was an absolute nutter.

“I’ve got this idea that I’d like to specifically serve the LGBTQ community and hire LGBTQ staff,” Bax went on as if Nick wasn’t the most ridiculous person on the planet. “Back in the Victorian heyday of The Brotherhood, there were all sorts of accountants and lawyers and the like who specifically served that community. Call me sentimental, but I’d like to carry on with that tradition.”

“And you’d have a built-in clientele, what with The Brotherhood still existing and

all,” Nick said.

“Well, yes, there is that,” Bax said, smiling.

Nick smiled in return, but he didn’t feel at all happy. If Bax got involved with The Brotherhood there would be no possible way he would want to stay at Hawthorne House. He’d be off swanning around London, meeting all sorts of fascinating and beautiful men. Men who didn’t have two small children to raise. Men who weren’t towering blacksmiths who couldn’t even talk to a friend without worrying they were making an arse of themselves.

But why did it matter to him what Bax thought or who he met and potentially dated?

Because it did. That was all there was to it. It mattered to Nick that Bax was close to him. It would matter if that closeness suddenly vanished.

“Thanks for the walk,” Bax said once they’d made it back to the house and had crossed into the family’s portion of the building.

“Anytime,” Nick said, hoping he sounded smooth and relaxed when he was anything but.

“I might just have to take you up on that,” Bax said with a wink as they started up the stairs.

Nick laughed, not because it was funny, but because his heart was so filled with giddy uncertainty that if he didn’t laugh he’d probably wail like Jordan having a fit.

That jumble of emotion immediately took a backseat when they reached the upstairs hallway only to find his mum standing in the doorway of his flat, arguing with Imogen, his babysitter.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered, picking up his pace. Bax followed him. “What’s going on here?” he asked once he reached his mum.

“Oh, hello, dear,” his mum said, perfectly calm. “I’ve decided to spend the day with my grandbabies, but this poor woman seems to object.”

“I didn’t know she was coming to fetch them today,” Imogen said, looking nervous.

“I didn’t know she was coming either,” Nick said, glancing from Imogen to his mum.

Bax swayed to his own flat’s door, but before he turned the handle to go inside, he sent Nick a questioning look.

“It’s fine,” Nick said, smiling both at Bax and at Imogen. “We can figure this out.”

Bax nodded, then winked at him before heading into his flat and shutting the door behind him.

That wink felt like it might unravel Nick’s soul.

He took a breath and turned back to his mum and Imogen. “Mum, you know you need to call before you come fetch the kids. You can’t just decide to have them.”

“I did call,” his mum said, looking offended.

Nick frowned and reached for his phone in his back pocket. Sure enough, he’d had a missed call from her roughly an hour before. He’d just begun his walk with Bax when she’d called. He hadn’t heard the ring or felt the vibration.

“Sorry I missed it,” he said then went right into, “Imogen is here for the day. I’m paying her and she probably needs the money.”

“I do,” Imogen said hesitantly. “But I’ve also got a paper to write for half-term.”

“There you have it,” Nick’s mum said with a nod. “Imogen has a paper to write. I’ll take the babies so that you both can be free. I’ll even pay for your time,” she told Imogen.

“Really?” Imogen brightened. “That would be ace.”

Nick’s mum arched one eyebrow at her lingo, then marched into the flat like everything had already been decided.

Nick and Imogen followed her into the flat. Imogen gathered up her things then said goodbye to the kids and headed out.

“You didn’t need to chase my babysitter off like that,” Nick said as he helped his mum get the kids into their coats while she packed their nappy bag.

“I didn’t chase her off,” his mum said. “I freed up her time and yours. Besides, I love spending time with the babies.”

Sometimes Nick wondered about that. She certainly took her time before coming over to pick Macy up and bounce her in her arms.

Nick ignored her comment in favor of chasing Jordan to put his coat on, but everything came to a screeching halt when his mum said, “You should just let me keep them.”

Nick straightened abruptly, pulling Jordan up into his arms as he did. “I beg your pardon?”

His mum turned to him with her serious discussion face. “I’ve been thinking about it

quite a bit lately, and I think you should hand the children over to me to raise.”

“No,” Nick said, laughing at the ridiculousness of the idea. A wave of fear pulsed underneath his laughter, though. “I don’t need anyone’s help raising the kids.”

“Don’t you?” his mum asked as Jordan whined and tried to get down. “You’re always giving them over to babysitters.”

“Because I have a job,” Nick said. “Most people have jobs and put their kids into some sort of daycare.”

“But you don’t have to, darling,” his mum argued. “I live less than twenty minutes away, I’m retired, and Joann also lives with me. She’s trained in these sorts of things, you know.”

“I’m trained in them, too,” Nick said, trying not to get upset. Jordan was wiggly enough already, and the kids had a way of picking up on his mood.

“You are not,” his mum said with a frown.

“I’ve been a father for three years plus,” Nick said, moving to the couch so he could set Jordan down and do up the zip on his coat. “If you ask me, that gives me more experience than anyone who went to school for early childhood development.”

“You’re a single man in your prime, Nicholas,” his mum said. She was clearly exasperated, since she was using his full name. “You should be out dating. You should be looking for a new wife to help raise your babies and so that you can have more.”

Those words felt like ice water trickling down Nick’s back. He didn’t want to date. At least, he didn’t want to go out with a bunch of women he wasn’t interested in. He

didn't want to pick at all his reasons why, though.

"If you found someone else, you could move out of this madhouse and find a place of your own," his mum said once he finally sorted Jordan and picked him up again.

Nick blew out a breath. If he'd had a free hand, he would have rubbed it over his face in frustration. That's what the whole thing was about. His mum wanted him to move away from Hawthorne House. Knowing her, she probably wanted him to cut ties with Raina's family entirely.

"No, Mum," he said as calmly as he could. "I'm not farming out my children like they did in the old days. We're doing just fine as we are."

His mum sent him a withering look as they headed out into the hall. She didn't say anything more about her plan as they took the kids down to her car, but that didn't mean she wasn't thinking about it. Nick chose to ignore the issue as he bundled his babies up to go spend a day with Granny, but despite having given his mum a firm no, he would have been an idiot to think the whole thing was settled. His mum didn't give up that easily.

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SEVEN

Something was there. Something was definitely there. Nick had started joining Bax on his morning walks on a regular basis, even though Bax was fully aware that he had a thousand other things to do. Walking or jogging through the wintry grounds of Hawthorne House quickly became a daily thing for the two of them, and Bax had never been more excited.

He was even looking forward to Imbolc, despite losing his coven. Once he'd been taken off the group WhatsApp chat, that had been it. He hadn't heard a single thing from any of the people who had once been as close to him as his own family. Damien probably had something to do with that, since his ex was jealous for attention. Bax should have been devastated by being cast out, but instead, he spent the day of Imbolc working on the arts center's audit and walking around the house with a spring in his step.

Maybe it was silly of him, but he took extra care dressing and getting ready for the feast that Nick had offered to host in the forge. Nick had insisted that he take care of the food, and Bax had everything ready for a short ritual to honor the hearth and welcome the light of spring into the world. He also prepared by making sure his hair was brushed just so, his natural fiber trousers, top, and vest looked good on him, and he even put on a touch of musky cologne that he always wore when he had a hot date.

Not that an Imbolc feast and ceremony in Hawthorne House's forge was a hot date. But it was definitely a chance for him and Nick to connect on a higher level. He knew for a fact that Mrs. Turner had taken Jordan and Macy for the night, which meant he very well could have Nick all to himself for a significant amount of time. Part of him

wondered if he should pack lube and condoms in his ceremonial bag along with candles and incense, but that would have been rushing way ahead of himself.

He did think about it, though.

Just as the sun was setting, he donned his coat and made his way down to the forge, filled with a sense that anything could happen. Whether Nick was fully aware of his sexuality or not, Bax was convinced he had a chance. Tonight was the night when he could?—

His hopeful thoughts were cut short by the sound of multiple people laughing and chattering on the other side of the curtains of canvas that protected the old forge from the elements. The voices were happy and they definitely belonged to members of the Hawthorne family, but they made a weight of disappointment descend on Bax's shoulders. He hadn't realized anyone else had been invited to the celebration. So much for being alone with Nick for the evening.

"There he is," Rhys greeted him as soon as Bax slipped under the canvas serving as a door. "We've been waiting for you."

"Yeah, you're the one who has to show us how to do this," Blaine said, coming over to give Bax a hug.

Bax forced himself to laugh and smile at the forge filled with people. Blaine was there with Alfie and Rhys had brought Early, of course. Rebecca was there with Claudia and Nigel, the two people she was dating. Robbie and Toby were over by one of the tables, helping themselves to punch from a bowl that looked like it belonged at a nineteen-thirties dinner party. Nally was nibbling from a charcuterie board on one of the other tables. And to Bax's surprise, Rafe, who he'd thought was still in America doing a glassblowing internship, was there talking to Nick by the forge.

They all turned to Bax and called out greetings as Blaine drew him farther into the cozy comfort of the forge.

“Isn’t this fantastic?” Blaine asked as Bax veered to the side to put his ceremonial bag down. “Nick invited us all. He said it was important for you to have a coven around you for holidays like this.”

“I don’t know the first thing about Paganism, but I’m willing to give it a go,” Nally said with a bright grin. “It’s actually really cool.”

“Pagans have orgies and things with their rituals, don’t they?” Nigel asked.

“Shut up, Nigel,” Rebecca giggled, slapping his arm. She looked like she might be up for anything, though.

“I have it on good authority that Pagans don’t always have orgies with every ceremony or ritual,” Nick said, moving away from whatever was cooking in a Dutch oven on the forge’s fire and coming to join Bax at the table.

“That’s no fun,” Robbie said, elbowing Toby as the two of them grinned at each other over their crystal punch cups.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Nick told Bax in a quieter voice as Bax started unpacking his ceremonial elements. “I read up on Paganism, and the internet says that covens are up to thirteen people, and that they’re essential for ceremonies like this. I asked around, and the family was excited to be here to support you.”

Bax could have complained that he just wanted to spend time with Nick. He could have said it didn’t really matter how many people you had for a holiday ritual and that plenty of people practiced solo. But the hope that glittered in Nick’s eyes as he smiled at Bax, brimming with energy, was way too endearing for Bax to complain.

“No, this is great,” he said, meaning it to a certain degree. “The forge looks amazing.”

He and Nick looked around together. Someone, possibly Nick, had decorated the space with evergreen boughs, but also with flowers that looked like they’d been purchased from a corner market. The feast was laid out like the two of them were hosting a small party. Aside from the charcuterie board and punch, there were buns that looked freshly baked, some sort of soup that was staying warm on a hot plate, and whatever was cooking in the Dutch oven smelled amazing.

“I had a little help with the decorations,” Nick said with a wry grin. “Jordan insisted on being in charge of the flowers.”

He nodded to one corner of the forge, where crushed flower petals had been strewn haphazardly over a few of the stools.

Bax laughed, more out of pure tenderness of heart that Nick would go to all the effort than because it was actually funny.

“Where are the kiddos tonight?” Blaine asked, leaning on the opposite side of the table from where Bax had finished taking everything out of his ceremonial bag and laying it out.

“Oh, my mum has them,” Nick said, going suddenly stiff.

“Again?” Rebecca asked, coming to stand with them. She picked up one of the special painted candles and examined it with an impressed face.

Nick sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. “She wants to spend more time with them,” he said.

The rest of the family gathered around the table as Bax set up his altar and positioned the candles the way he wanted them, like the ritual might start any minute and they didn't want to miss it.

"I just got back from the States and I've hardly had any time to see my nephew and niece," Rafe said. "How often does your mum take the kids?"

"A couple times a week," Nick said. He paused, far too tense for the tone of the conversation, then blurted out, "She wants to take them permanently."

The reaction from the other Hawthornes was instant.

"What?"

"That's barbaric. Separating kids from their dad?"

"Who does something like that?"

They all spoke over top of each other.

"I told her no," Nick said, raising his hands like he had to settle everyone. "I'm not giving my kids away."

"Why would she even ask?" Rebecca demanded.

Nick sighed and glanced at Bax. It was like he was either asking Bax for help or searching for forgiveness from him for something that hadn't happened yet.

Bax replied with an encouraging smile and rested his hand over Nick's, which he'd put on the table.

More than one set of Hawthorne eyes noticed the gesture.

“Honestly, I think she doesn’t approve of you all,” Nick said. He didn’t move his hand away from Bax’s. If anything, he swayed slightly closer. “She’s very conservative, and she thinks you lot are a bunch of bohemians.”

“Well, we are a bunch of bohemians,” Rhys said.

Bax smirked. Rhys was the least bohemian of the Hawthorne, aside from him, but he had a point.

“She can’t do anything legally, can she?” Early asked, looking nervous.

“No, no,” Nick insisted, waving the idea away. “The worst she can do is make a lot of noise.”

That seemed to satisfy most of the family, but Bax knew Nick better than that now. Making a lot of noise would upset him, especially if she was persistent about it.

Nick cleared his throat and said, “Let’s not worry about all that for now. The pheasant is probably done by now, since it’s been cooking for over an hour.”

“Pheasant?” Blaine whipped to face the Dutch oven tucked into the coal of the old forge. “Why on earth are we having pheasant?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever had pheasant in my life,” Rafe laughed.

Nick shrugged and sent Bax the most adorable, bashful look. “It felt like the most Pagan sort of bird I could find on short notice.”

Bax laughed. He wanted to throw his arms around Nick and hug him forever in

thanks for everything he was doing. He wanted to do a hell of a lot more than that. But not with the combined force of the Hawthorne family right there to watch.

Instead, he went with Nick to check on the pheasant while everyone else spread out again, nibbling at the charcuterie board or helping themselves to soup.

“This really is perfect,” Bax told Nick as they stood beside the forge, checking the contents of the Dutch oven as heat radiated around them. There was something about the heat of a forge that had been in use for hundreds of years that felt primal and magical. Perfect for rituals of all kinds. Bax made a mental note to figure out other ways to use the forge in the future.

Assuming he would still be at Hawthorne House when other important celebrations rolled around.

Not that he was in a hurry to go anywhere.

“I don’t actually know what I’m doing,” Nick said.

There was a tightness and desperation in his expression as he said that, even though the words seemed casual on the surface. The way Nick gazed at him, like he was searching for the answer to an important question, filled Bax with the need to give Nick everything he could and more.

“You’re doing fine,” he said quietly, resting a hand on Nick’s arm. “I know this is all new to you, but really, you’re doing great. Just follow your instincts.”

He absolutely meant something other than orchestrating an Imbolc celebration. For a second, he was certain Nick knew what he meant, too. Nick leaned closer, but when Rebecca called from the other table, “Do you have the spoons for this soup over there?” Nick jerked away from Bax.

“I’ve got them,” Nick said, stepping back and reaching for a rustic basket on a stool beside the forge. He picked the basket up and grinned at Bax. “I made all these spoons. I went through a cutlery phase a few years ago.”

Bax had to take a deep breath to shift out of the intimate gear he’d been about to throw himself into. He made himself look at the basket of spoons. The spoons had his immediate attention once he saw how pretty they were.

As soon as the feast part of the evening truly got underway, it was easier for Bax to put aside his expectations and his disappointments. The Hawthornes really were a fun bunch. Growing up, they’d gotten into more trouble, and grown closer together while doing it, than most families ever were.

At the same time, Bax noticed his cousins whispering to each other while glancing in his and Nick’s direction. He and Nick had taken seats next to each other at the table where the feast was served, and the others seemed to grasp some sort of significance in that.

The first hint that something was afoot came when Rafe quietly excused himself, claiming jetlag, and headed back to the house. A few minutes later, Nally went after him.

“I’d love to stay,” Rebecca said as the meal portion of the evening was winding up, “But Claudia has just remembered we were supposed to meet up with some friends at the pub.”

“We were,” Claudia said far more emphatically than she needed to, her face flushed pink.

“It’s alright,” Bax laughed, pretty sure he knew what his cousins were up to.

The others hung on for a little bit longer, probably because they thought it would be obvious what they were doing if they all ditched them at once. Robbie and Toby wandered off fifteen minutes after Rebecca and her beaux, pretending that they just couldn't keep their hands off each other, which might not have been pretend, actually. Blaine and Alfie claimed they'd just received a phone call from the orphanage that they had to deal with immediately a short while after that. At least Rhys and Early stayed around long enough to help clean up the feast.

While they were gathering up plates and cutlery and putting them in a bin to take up to the house to wash, Bax's phone buzzed in his pocket. He was certain it would be one of his cousins who had already left texting to explain they were trying to get him and Nick alone, but when he looked at his phone, the name "Callum" popped up.

Frowning, he stepped to the side and tapped to look at the full message.

"Hey, Bax. I just found out you left Damien's coven. We've got a spot in ours if you're looking for a new home. Come on over to Gretta's place tonight and join us for Imbolc. We'd love to have you."

Bax blew out a breath. Callum was a friend. He'd left Damien's coven shortly after Bax had joined to start his own. They'd always got along well. Really well on an occasion or two. Being offered a place in Callum's coven was exactly what he'd hoped for, exactly what he wanted.

He glanced up at Nick, who was over by the old forge, sorting the Dutch oven and the last of the pheasant and veg that had been cooked in it. He had his work gloves on and was using tools to move it to a cooler part of the forge. He must have felt Bax looking at him, because he glanced up and smiled when their eyes met.

Bax's heart rolled in his chest. Something was definitely going on between the two of them. Whether Nick knew it or not, he had a chance.

He glanced down at his phone again and quickly typed, “ Thanks for the offer, but I’ve got things covered tonight. Happy Imbolc .”

He sent the message, then switched his phone to silent and put it on the table next to him. Then he walked over to Nick and asked, “Need help?”

“I think I’ve got it,” Nick said. “The Dutch oven is too hot to clean out at the moment, but as soon as it’s cool, we can take it up to the house.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Nick looked up and around the forge. His expression dropped to worry. “Where did everyone else go?”

Bax twisted to look at the now empty forge. He knew the answer to that question, but he shrugged and said, “I guess they don’t feel comfortable performing a Pagan ritual.”

Nick sent him a flat look. “It’s the Hawthorne family. They’ve probably been secretly performing Pagan rituals for centuries now.”

Bax laughed. “I wouldn’t be surprised.”

Nick’s smile returned. “Are you ready to do the ritual part?”

“Sure,” Bax said. “It’s not particularly complicated. The Anglican Church is way fussier than I am about their rituals.”

True to his word, he kept the Imbolc ritual as simple as possible. Nick stood with him as he recited the poem he’d written about Brigid and the joys of the hearth and as he called on her and the elements to welcome the renewal of the light and the beginning

of spring.

Nick lit the candles with him, taking the ceremony far more seriously than most people who didn't know what they were doing would have. It endeared Nick to him even more.

"Is that all there is to it?" Nick asked once the candles were lit, a few more words were spoken, and they stood back to appreciate the glow.

"Well, we could have done more," Bax said. "And we should have started with the ritual before the feast, but everyone else was here, so it seemed like a good idea to feed them first."

"Shit, sorry," Nick said, blushing adorably. "I didn't know."

"It's fine," Bax laughed, turning fully to him. "You did amazingly for your first time. I can't thank you enough for doing all this and for making me feel so at home."

He intended to leave it at that, but something within him wouldn't let him. He stepped forward, placing a hand on the side of Nick's face, and lifted on his toes so he could touch his lips to Nick's.

It was just a brush at first, barely qualifying as a kiss. Bax couldn't leave it there, though, especially when Nick sucked in a breath and raised a hand to Bax's waist. He practically shivered with energy, so Bax shifted forward and kissed him more deeply.

Nick was perfectly still for a moment. Everything seemed to hang in the balance. The forge was silent and expectant with only the crackling of the forge's fire whispering through the air. The scent of smoke and food and beeswax from the candle surrounded the two of them. Bax was just beginning to be terrified that he'd made a terrible mistake when Nick seemed to relax and kiss him back.

It was still only a brief, closed-mouth kiss, but the intention was definitely there. When Bax rocked back, letting Nick go, Nick had his eyes closed.

“Thank you,” Bax said, his voice hoarse.

Nick opened his eyes and met Bax’s. There was so much heat and promise in his gaze, but there was uncertainty and even fear, too. But those tighter emotions were secondary to the desire that was pulsing from Nick, like a seed about to sprout.

“Should we clean up?” Bax asked quietly. He could tell Nick needed something to move out of the intense moment. Nick needed time.

“Yeah,” Nick said, blowing out a breath.

Bax turned to his altar to begin putting things away. He couldn’t wipe the smile from his face, even if it was just a tiny bit gloating. Nick was within his reach. The two of them could actually have something. The possibilities were endless.

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EIGHT

That kiss.

Nick could mark his life by a series of moments that had changed everything for him. Being accepted into art school. Meeting Raina. Marrying Raina. When each of his kids was born. The crash that had taken Raina from him.

That kiss.

Everything Nick thought he knew about himself had been blown completely out of the water in the course of a single evening. Although looking back on things, it had been much more than a single evening. It had been every walk he and Bax had taken together, every time his heart sped up when Bax laughed. The moment Bax joked with him at Raina's memorial fundraiser counted in there, too.

Honestly, if he looked farther back, he could reasonably say it started with Matt from uni. That hadn't been as much of a fluke as he'd thought. Raina must have sensed something about him back then, but if she'd tried to tell him more directly, he hadn't listened. He could even see how the way he'd always been deeply attached to his friends in school as a sign of what he'd been oblivious to all this time.

He wasn't as straight as he'd always assumed he was.

He had no idea what to do about it. It wasn't like he was going to rush into London and demand membership in The Brotherhood. He still had kids to raise, classes to teach, and a unicorn sculpture that he was falling more and more behind on.

He did manage to find time to finally weld the unicorn's head to the rest of its body two days after Imbolc. As soon as the joins were complete and stable, he took a step back and looked into the unicorn's still hollow eye sockets.

"You knew," he told it, feeling like he was looking into his own soul. "Of course you knew."

The unicorn seemed to grin back at him with Raina's mischievous love of romantic drama. That only squeezed Nick's heart harder and made him feel like he was tumbling down a hill, unable to stop himself, but enjoying the thrill.

Knowing he might just be falling was one thing, running into Bax in the halls every day was something else entirely.

"I missed you on our walk this morning," Bax said in the evening, two days after Imbolc, when they ran into each other in the hallway.

"I...er...the unicorn...and the kids...." Nick's face felt like it was on fire and he couldn't make himself stand still. His gaze kept wanting to drop to Bax's mouth. And farther. He wanted to look at Bax's body to see if he had any sort of sexual reaction.

He refused to let himself go there, though. Mostly out of fear. He already knew that he found Bax attractive. Looking at his body was like entering the metalwork studio for the first time and seeing a bunch of strange and intriguing tools that he didn't have the first clue how to use, but that he wanted to play with.

"It's alright, Nick," Bax said with a soft laugh. He rested a hand on Nick's arm. "I get it."

"Are you sure?" Nick asked, going all hot and immediately wanting to kick himself.

Bax's smile stayed bright and cheeky. "I think I do. It's a lot to get used to. I assume you're taking some time to process."

"I...um...yeah, I guess that's it." Bax let his hand drop, so Nick immediately rushed on to, "It's not that I don't want.... I mean, I liked kissing you."

He felt stupid for lowering his voice as he said that. They were in Hawthorne House, for Christ's sake. The entire Hawthorne family was queer in every which way. Even Raina had been open about having relationships with girls before she met him.

"Take your time," Bax said.

He then did the complete opposite of what he'd said by leaning in and stealing a kiss. Then he rushed off with a giddy grin, probably to do something even more contradictory, like crunching numbers for the arts center.

Nick shook his head and continued down the hall to his flat.

He was twisted around enough already, so opening the door and finding his mum there with the kids instead of Imogen was not anything he was ready for.

"Hello, dear," his mum said from the kitchen, where she was deep in the middle of cooking supper. "You're looking a little flushed. I wish they wouldn't make you work outside, like a common street person."

Nick pressed his lips together and frowned as he went to pick Macy up from the playpen in the middle of the lounge floor. Both of his babies instantly started squealing for his attention as soon as he came through the door. Once he had Macy secure, he picked up Jordan in his other arm. Right now, he had the strength to lift both kids, but Jordan was growing like a weed, and someday managing both of them like that would be too much, even for a blacksmith.

Which was one argument as to why he wanted his babies with him as much as possible.

“You’re cooking?” he asked as he carried the babies into the kitchen.

“Someone has to,” his mum said, still giving most of her attention to the pots and pans on the hob.

“I do know how to cook,” Nick said. “I was planning to make spaghetti tonight.”

His mom tsked. “Spaghetti is far too messy for toddlers. They need good, wholesome food that can be cut into small, manageable pieces.”

Nick thought about arguing for all of three seconds before deciding it wasn’t worth the hassle.

“You look overtired and flustered,” his mum said, leaving the hob to take Macy from him.

“I’ve got them both,” Nick said, unable to keep Macy as long as he was holding Jordan. Macy let her granny know just what she thought about that by screaming.

“Hush, darling,” she said, pulling the hand Macy had just stuck in her mouth out. She turned to Nick and said, “You don’t need the stress and strain of taking care of these dear ones when you have so much else to do.”

Nick arched an eyebrow. He pretended to be interested in what was cooking so he could step out of the line of his mum’s confrontational stare. “I love my children. I love taking care of them.”

“Yes, but you’re a man, dear,” his mum insisted. “You should be the breadwinner,

not the caregiver.”

“Mum, that’s so twentieth-century,” he said, turning to her with a sigh.

“You’re young, Nicholas. You have a life to live.”

Nick narrowed his eyes. “I’m not giving my children to you. They stay with me. End of discussion.”

His mum hummed and turned back to the stove with Macy squirming in her arms.

“How is your sculpture progressing?” she asked with a sneaky sideways peek.

Nick sighed. That comment was as much an argument for him to give her the kids as blatantly asking for them. Instead of rubbing a hand over his face in exasperation, he grabbed Jordan’s hand and pretended to be a big, ugly ogre devouring it. That made Jordan laugh hilariously, which made everything better in his soul.

“I got a lot of work done on the unicorn today,” he said as if speaking to Jordan. “The structure is all in place, and now it’s just a matter of refining the details.”

“The clock is ticking, isn’t it?” his mum asked. “Wouldn’t it be nice to have loads more free time for your art, and for other things?” She sent him a look that obviously meant dating.

“End of story, Mum,” he said, meeting her eyes firmly. “End of story.”

He doubted it was the end of the story, though.

It wasn’t the end of the story when his mum showed up two days later to take the kids to her place because Imogen needed to study. Apparently. It wasn’t the end of the

story when she asked to have them for the entire weekend. Nick flat-out said no to that.

Of course, then he had to come up with a way to justify why he wanted the kids with him that weekend. He didn't have a specific reason, but the part of him that balked at outright lying to his mum about anything demanded some sort of an alibi.

"I should just be able to tell her to mind her own business and be done with it," he told Bax on their walk Friday morning. "I'm a grown man and she's overstepping."

Bax hummed, his manner and his strides calm and easy. "She's your mum. I wouldn't want to tell my mum off for anything either. Even if she was wrong."

Nick turned to study him. "Has your mum ever been wrong?"

Bax snorted, then said, "No, of course not. She's my mum." He then grinned wickedly.

Nick found himself smiling and feeling lighter, even though it didn't make any sense.

Except it did make sense if he could just let himself acknowledge the truth that was staring him in the face.

"Mum was shocked when I told her I was joining a coven back when I was eighteen," Bax said. "She accused me of being a witch, which I guess technically I am, and said she wouldn't speak to me until I saw sense, as she called it."

"Obviously, you didn't," Nick said.

Bax shrugged. "I believe what I believe. She's had to accept that. But it was painful to have to go through those years when she disapproved of me. She saw sense

eventually. She did marry a Hawthorne, after all, and Dad convinced her it was in our blood to do whatever we want to do. Your mum will come around, too.”

Nick hummed doubtfully. His mum was stubborn.

Bax swayed closer to them as they walked, then reached for Nick’s hand. Nick flinched away from the unexpected gesture at first, but he recovered and slowly slipped his hand into Bax’s. Bax was definitely a witch. There was more magic in holding his hand as they walked than he’d ever encountered before.

More than that, Bax immediately came up with the perfect solution to his weekend problem.

“You know there’s a winter festival over in Maidstone this weekend,” he said. “I’ve never been, but I hear it’s a lot of fun. Food, games for the kids, shops selling all sorts of things. We could all go.”

Nick’s eyebrows shot up and he gaped at Bax. “You’d actually want to give up your weekend to chase me and the kids around a winter festival?”

Bax smiled and shrugged. “Sure. Why not?”

Another thrill of excitement shot through Nick. If Bax was willing to spend time with the kids as well as him, maybe there really could be something between them.

Bax stayed true to his word. Saturday morning, he showed up bright and early on Nick’s doorstep, ready to help stuff the kids into their coats so that they could set out for Maidstone and the winter festival.

“You’re getting pretty good at that,” Nick said, nodding to Bax as he unbuckled Macy from her car seat and lifted her into his arms.

“Who would have imagined,” Bax replied with a wry laugh.

Nick tried not to read more into the comment than was there. Was Bax just humoring him where the kids were concerned to get into his pants or something? Bax wasn't a natural with kids, but he'd been doing alright. Maybe it was all a show, or maybe it would grow old and he'd change his mind and bugger off.

“Ooh! I smell caramel!” Bax said to Macy. “Can toddlers eat caramel candies?”

“Maybe a little,” Nick said, lifting Jordan into his arms and using his hip to shut the car door. “Fair warning, she'll make a complete mess of it.”

“I think I'm up to the challenge,” Bax said with a wink as they headed off toward the booths and shops.

Nick was worried Bax would get bored of carrying Macy around, that the amount of attention kids needed would ruin the entire experience for him. He would have brought one or both of the buggies with them for the kids, but there were a lot of people wandering up and down the high street and the buggies would have been more trouble than they were worth.

At the same time, there was something deeply satisfying about him and Bax working together to keep the kids entertained while they wandered through the festival. Jordan and Macy were too young for most of the activities, though Jordan did spend five minutes completely absorbed in coloring a snowflake at one of the tables. Five minutes was about his upper limit for attention span, though.

“Do you want a coffee?” Bax asked Nick at one point, after they'd been wandering for nearly half an hour.

Nick twisted away from where he and Jordan had been looking through a shop

window at a display of candies to find Bax staring longingly at the coffee shop across the way. With an inward wince, Nick realized he'd barely paid any attention to Bax at all.

"I wish," he said, shuffling Jordan in his arms as he started to squirm and whine while reaching for the candy window. "I'm not sure I have enough hands for this one and a cup of coffee."

"I could hold it for you," Bax said, his eye dancing with mirth and suggestion.

Before the teasing could even land, Macy wriggled in his arm, trying to get down. Instead of flirting and throwing around innuendo, Bax had to focus on not letting Macy fall.

It wasn't what he wanted. Nick was sure of it, though he tried to fight the thought off. He heard his mum's voice in his head saying that young men should be free to live their own lives. That didn't just apply to him. Bax shouldn't have to be tied down to a man with two small children. He was used to an adult world.

"Oh! Look. The coffee shop has hot chocolates, too. Could the kids have those?" Bax asked.

Nick admired his determination to carry on and give them all a treat.

"We could try," he said. "I think I have some spare sippy cups in here that we could put the hot chocolate in."

They headed to the outdoor coffee shop, and as Bax bought their coffee and hot chocolate, Nick did his best to get the kids settled and to find the sippy cups in the nappy bag he'd brought with him. The kids were ready for a rest and behaved fairly well when Bax returned with the treats.

“You really don’t have to do all this if it’s too much,” he said once Bax was seated across the table from him, as he poured hot chocolate into the sippy cups and tried to keep them out of his babies’ reach until they were cool. “This isn’t exactly the best way to date.”

“Who said this was a date?” Bax asked, leaning back in his chair and grinning at Nick over his coffee cup.

“Oh, er, I didn’t mean that,” Nick rushed to cover his slip. “It’s definitely not a date with kids. Not that I would say no to going out on a date with you.”

He couldn’t believe he’d just said that either.

“I mean, I don’t know what this is, but I know you’re not used to hanging around with small children,” he rushed on. “If you’re disappointed, I would understand.”

Bax was still grinning. In fact, he looked like he was having the time of his life just watching Nick fall apart with embarrassment. “I’m not disappointed,” he said. “Definitely not disappointed.” He winked, then sipped his coffee.

It was a blessing that the kids were there and that the hot chocolate was cool enough for them at that point. Nick needed the distraction to cool the heat in his face and the arousal that zipped around his body. He was now willing to call those feelings he hadn’t been willing or able to name arousal, but he still didn’t know what to do with them.

He barely had a chance to drink his coffee before the kids were done and ready to move on again. Toddlers had a different pace than adults, and as Bax stood and offered to carry Macy for a while and to hold Jordan’s hand as he walked so Nick could finish his coffee, Nick could only hope that Bax could keep up.

He hoped Bax would want to keep up. As they walked on, looking at displays of lights and stopping to listen to a singer, he could imagine how perfect everything might be if Bax was there to help for more than just an afternoon. He could hardly remember what it was like to co-parent. Macy had only been a month old and Jordan less than two years old when Raina had died.

It wasn't just about having help with the kids, though. It was about having someone to share his life with. Someone he clicked with and could explore new things with. Everything with Bax was new, and for the first time in a long, long time, Nick felt ready to try something new.

"Listen, about that date," he said after another forty-five minutes of walking around, when he'd finally worked up his courage.

"Yes?" Bax asked, turning to him with a growing smile.

Nick opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, he spotted his mum and Joann heading toward them. Not only that, Kate Danbury was chatting away with them.

His mum stopped when she spotted them, then changed direction.

"Good heavens, Nick," she said. "Is this what you meant when you said you had plans this weekend?" She glanced to Bax as though he were the plans.

"Hello again, Mrs. Turner," Bax said, looking like he might burst into laughter.

"Hi, Mum," Nick said, fighting not to feel like he'd been caught doing something wrong. "Fancy running into you here."

"Do I know you?" Joann asked, narrowing her eyes slightly at Bax.

“This is Baxter Hawthorne, Raina’s cousin,” Nick introduced him, then turned to Bax. “This is my sister, Joann.”

“Nice to meet you,” Bax said. He could only nod to Joann, since he had a wiggly Macy in his arms.

“And this is Kate,” Nick’s mum said, suddenly smiling at Nick. “We were just talking about you.”

“It’s been ages, Nick,” Kate said, stepping forward to give Nick a hug that he hadn’t asked for. “I was so sorry to hear about Raina. If you ever want anyone to talk to, you know I’m here for you.” She flicked her long, blonde hair back and made eyes at him.

Nick could have died on the spot, he was so embarrassed. He was pretty sure he knew what all the talk about him had been about.

He glanced at Bax apologetically, ready to take Macy if he needed to. He found Bax grinning at him like the day’s entertainment had just begun.

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NINE

Bax probably should have been offended. It was plain as day what Mrs. Turner was doing. Whether she'd trotted out Kate whoever she was deliberately or whether it was a complete accident that Kate just happened to be spending time with Nick's mum and sister in the same place and same time as Nick, Mrs. Turner's intent was obvious. The woman had given him a death glare as soon as she'd spotted him where Bax figured she thought her Kate bait should have been.

"Thanks," Nick said uneasily in response to Kate's obvious flirting.

Nick was saved from having to face the awkward situation directly when Jordan made a break to chase after a small dog someone had let off its leash.

"Excuse me one second," he called over his shoulder as he raced to catch up with Jordan.

Macy didn't like her dad and brother leaving. She was tired and fussy by that point anyhow, and she burst into wails while reaching for Nick from Bax's arms.

Mrs. Turner tsked and stepped forward to take Macy away from Bax. "You shouldn't be holding her like that," she said.

Bax's patience evaporated in an instant, and instead of letting Mrs. Turner take Macy from him, he stepped back and turned partly to the side, pretending to soothe Macy when he was straight-up blocking Mrs. Turner from having her.

“We’re just a bit tired, aren’t we?” he cooed to Macy, bouncing her in his arms.

By some miracle, Macy curled into Bax, flopping her head on his shoulder and throwing her arms around his neck like she was ready to give up and fall asleep. All while still crying, though.

Nick returned with a whining Jordan in his arms just in time to see the near exchange. “Mum, Macy is fine with Bax,” he said offhandedly.

“Doggie,” Jordan continued to whine, reaching for the terrier, whose owner now had it on a leash.

“We’ll go look at doggies later,” Nick tried to soothe him.

“Wow, you’re so good with children,” Kate commented, batting her eyes at Nick.

“Yes, well, I am their father,” Nick said.

Bax caught the irritation Nick was trying to hide. He couldn’t help but grin. Nick saw the expression and instantly relaxed, grinning back.

“Why don’t we walk with you for a while?” Mrs. Turner said, as if she’d just had the best idea ever. “There’s so much for the children to see here.”

Translation, Nick and Kate should walk around together, fall in love, get married, and have more babies.

“I think that’s an excellent idea,” Kate said, boldly stepping forward and focusing on Jordan. “Would you like to go for a walk with me, Jordan?”

Bax tried to keep his smirk to himself. Miss Kate must have been primed with all the

important information about Nick, including his kids' names.

"Er, we've been walking around for a while," Nick said, glancing from Kate to his mum and sister to Bax. "I was just about to suggest that we take the kids home for a nap."

"Nonsense," Mrs. Turner said. "Children are far more resilient than you think they are. A walk would be lovely."

Bax nodded slightly to Nick, letting him know it was alright. In fact, the part of him that liked an occasional bit of drama was desperate to see how the set-up would pan out. Obviously, Nick wasn't going to go for Kate, but it would be interesting to see how he handled it.

They walked on, and exactly as Bax predicted, within a minute, Nick and Kate were walking together in front of their group, and as they moved on, Mrs. Turner and Joann slowed down, putting more distance between them.

"You really should let me carry the baby," Mrs. Turner said, dropping all pretense of friendliness.

"No, we're alright," Bax said, keeping his tone light. He still found carrying a baby around to be awkward and unnatural for him, but it was much easier when Macy was exhausted. Without really being able to see her, he was fairly certain she'd already fallen asleep on him.

"How does Nick know you?" Joann asked like she was a police investigator and Bax was a prime murder suspect.

"I'm one of the nefarious Hawthornes," Bax said, grinning at her as he patted Macy's back awkwardly. "We met ages ago through the family."

“Oh, so you’re an artist,” Joann said, wrinkling her nose.

“I’m an accountant, actually,” Bax said. “I’m currently auditing the arts center’s books.” Although he was just about done with that and would soon need to figure out an excuse to stay at Hawthorne House longer.

That thought had him watching Nick’s back as he and Kate moved slowly farther away from the rest of them. Uncle Robert would absolutely let him stay at Hawthorne House as long as he liked, no questions asked. But would it make Nick feel awkward to know Bax was staying for him?

“Does Nick approve of you holding his daughter?” Joann asked on.

Bax pulled himself out of his thoughts and his eyes off of Nick’s backside to stare at her. “Yes,” he answered, no idea why it was even a question.

“But you’re gay, aren’t you?” Joann went on.

The question was so ridiculous Bax nearly laughed. “Yes. Strangely enough, gay men were granted the right to hold babies by the Rights of the Person Act of twenty-fifteen,” he said, making something up with a straight face.

Joann huffed impatiently. “I just meant that gay men usually don’t like children.”

Bax’s eyebrows shot up. “That’s an alarming generalization. I happen to know several gay couples with kids of their own. I’m assuming they like those kids, although we do get irritated when they use our rainbow flags for dress-up.”

Mrs. Turner definitely wasn’t amused by the sharp joke. She huffed and shook her head. “Don’t you think Nick and Kate look charming together?” she asked, changing the subject.

“I suppose so,” Bax answered, grinning. “You’re being very obvious, you know,” he added.

“Obvious? What do you mean by that? What’s obvious?” Mrs. Turner demanded, flustered.

Bax just laughed and shook his head.

They walked on for several more minutes, pausing at one point so Jordan could watch the ducks at a pond just off the high street. Mrs. Turner and Joann gave up trying to alternately interrogate Bax and convince him that Kate was the ideal match for Nick when Bax made it clear he thought they were hilarious. When they stepped aside to get coffees at one of the outdoor stands, Bax did what he was certain they didn’t want him to do and walked up to join Nick and Kate.

“I’ve wanted children for the longest time,” Kate was chattering away. “They say twenty-seven is not too late to start having them, but I definitely feel my clock ticking. I want some of my own, of course, but I wouldn’t mind being with a man who had some of his own already.”

Bax wanted to snort at her heavy-handed hints.

While Nick was giving most of his attention to Jordan, which was probably a defense mechanism as much as a requirement of being a good father, he glanced at Bax and straightened a little once Bax drew near. Nick was visibly uncomfortable, but Bax knew him well enough now to know the strain on his face meant he was holding onto his patience by a thread.

Still, he wasn’t expecting it at all when Nick swayed subtly closer to him, like they were standing side-by-side in solidarity, then turned to Kate and said, “Actually, Kate, while I’m flattered by your interest, Bax and I are sort of together.”

Kate wasn't the only one who gaped in shock. Bax could have been knocked over with a feather, too. Joy burst inside him and rippled through every part of him, like the water in the duck pond when Jordan picked up a stone and threw it in.

That was the perfect distraction for Nick to back away from the declaration he'd just made. Before either Kate or Bax could fully react, he scooped Jordan up into his arms with a quick, scolding, "No, Jordan. We don't throw stones at ducks."

While Nick was still dealing with the inevitable temper tantrum Jordan threw after that, Kate turned to Bax and muttered, "Oh my god. I didn't know Nick was gay. His mum told me he was looking to date again."

"In all fairness," Bax said, taking pity on Kate and shifting closer to her, so he could speak to her like they were on the same team, "Mrs. Turner is in denial. But she is right about Nick being ready to date again." He winked at her for good measure. Miss Kate wasn't the enemy, and her reaction convinced Bax she felt genuinely bad for getting the wrong end of the stick.

She was still embarrassed enough to make an excuse to leave as soon as Mrs. Turner and Joann caught up to them with their coffees.

"It's been great catching up with you again, Nick, and it was nice to meet you, Baxter," she said, nervously fiddling with her purse and sliding away from their group. "I've just remembered that my brother needs my help with something this afternoon. I'll call you later, Joann."

"Wait, what? Where are you going?" Joann followed Kate as she marched quickly away.

"What did you say to her?" Mrs. Turner asked, frowning more at Bax than Nick.

“I told her I wasn’t interested in dating,” Nick said. It was a little bit of a lie, or maybe a big lie, but if Nick wasn’t ready to come out to his mum, it was good enough.

“Really, Nicholas,” she huffed in exasperation. “I work so hard for you, but you’re constantly rebuffing my attempts at making you happy.”

“I think we have different definitions of happiness,” Nick said in a flat voice.

“Now I have to go after Kate and apologize,” she said, shaking her head as if Nick had created the problem, not her.

She said a few curt goodbyes, kissed her grandbabies, then walked off, visibly disappointed.

“Now she’s upset,” Nick sighed.

“She shouldn’t have stuck her oar in like that anyhow,” Bax said as they turned away from the duck pond and headed back into the heart of the high street.

Nick grinned suddenly. “Stuck her oar in?”

“You know,” Bax said, relaxing more by the second. “It’s an old phrase for interfering.”

“I know that, I just didn’t expect it coming out of you.”

“There’s a lot of things you might not expect to come out of me,” Bax replied with a teasing grin.

Nick laughed. It was the best signal that all was well between them that Bax could

have had.

They walked on. Macy continued to sleep, and Jordan ended up slumping against Nick's shoulder and nodding off, too. They really should have headed home at that point, but it was nice to just walk together without interference from the kids while looking at shop windows and light displays. Bax would have greatly preferred if the kids weren't there at all, but not because he didn't like them. He longed for the moment when he would be able to spend adult time with Nick doing adult things.

Ironically, as his mind started to wander to some of those adult things, he was distracted by a call of, "Bax, is that you?"

He and Nick both turned to find a tall, gorgeous man in a dark green peacoat with a russet scarf wrapped fashionably around his neck heading toward them.

"Callum," Bax greeted his friend. He suddenly felt awkward about having a toddler asleep in his arms.

"I thought that was you," Callum said as he reached them, managing to look like he belonged in the pages of a fashion magazine instead of sweaty and winded, like Bax was sure he looked. "Is that a baby you're carrying?" he asked as if it were ridiculous.

"Yep," Bax answered, trying to sound casual but having to fight off irritation and awkwardness as he did. "This is Macy Turner-Hawthorne, that one there is Jordan Turner-Hawthorne, and this is Nick Turner, their dad."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Callum said, flashing his perfect smile and holding out a hand to Nick. "Callum Orville."

Nick shifted a heavy, sleeping Jordan in his arms so he could take Callum's hand and shake it in return. "Hi."

Callum immediately turned his attention back to Bax. "I was sorry you couldn't join us for Imbolc last week."

More unwanted emotions washed through Bax, heating his face and neck. "I had other plans," he said.

"Of course, of course," Callum said, holding up a hand. "The invitation was very last-minute."

"Oh. You're the one who invited him to the celebration," Nick said.

Bax wasn't sure if he felt happy or uncomfortable that Nick had made the connection. He'd only mentioned Callum's invitation after the fact and in the vaguest terms, like it hadn't been a big deal.

"Were you celebrating together?" Callum asked, something unreadable in his eyes as he glanced between Bax and Nick.

Bax had the feeling that Callum didn't approve of the two of them being together any more than Mrs. Turner did. He could have just been hypersensitive after the encounter with Mrs. Turner, though.

"We did, yes," Nick answered.

"I didn't realize you practiced the old ways," Callum said, trying to be funny.

"Oh, I don't," Nick said. "Bax showed me what to do, though."

"I see," Callum said, his smile brightening a bit. "And what do you do?"

Nick shuffled a bit. "I'm a metal artist," he said.

“I beg your pardon?” Callum blinked rapidly, looking genuinely curious.

“I teach metalwork and blacksmithing at the Hawthorne Community Arts Center,” Nick explained.

Callum drew in a breath, like he’d just connected the dots. “Of course, you do,” he said with a cheeky grin. “With arms like those, how could you be anything but a blacksmith?”

Bax didn’t know whether to wince or laugh at the speed with which Nick blushed. Callum was the second person in as many hours to hit on him. Clearly, Nick wasn’t used to that sort of attention from women or men.

The moment moved on when Callum turned to Bax again and said, “You know the invitation to join my coven is still there. Any time you’d like to come by and spend some time with us, you’re welcome. Ostara is a way off, but we’re already making plans.”

“Thanks,” Bax smiled. “That’s definitely something to consider.”

“It’s just that I heard you’re searching for a new group,” Callum went on, going so far as to rest a hand on Bax’s arm. “You’re always welcome.”

“I appreciate it,” Bax said.

He should have pulled away from Callum’s touch, but something held him there a second or two longer. He missed being the carefree, flirtatious adult he was when he’d been with Damien. When Callum finally did let go, he left Bax filled with nervous energy.

“Isn’t this festival smashing?” Callum asked, glancing around at the decorations and

people. “I was so excited when I heard Maidstone was having a winter festival. It’s not exactly Pagan, but at least it’s Pagan-friendly.”

“Oh yeah,” Bax said, making conversation. “I saw Veronica Merriweather with a booth of candles and charms down at the bottom of the high street.”

“Did you pick up anything?” Callum asks. “She gives a discount if she knows you’re a practitioner.”

“I didn’t,” Bax said. “My arms are a little full at the moment.”

In fact, they’d been aching with Macy’s weight for the last ten minutes.

“I see,” Callum said, then laughed. “You’re the last person I would have imagined to see with small children like that, but it suits you.”

Callum was just being polite. Underneath his smile and sophisticated manner, Bax was certain he was trying to match up some of their more heated moments from the past with what he saw in front of him.

The moment turned weird fast.

“Well, I’ll be seeing you,” Callum said. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Nick.” He reached for Nick’s hand again and made a mock swoony noise when Nick gripped his in a firm handshake. “And I’ll speak to you soon,” he added for Bax before walking on.

The silence that followed in his wake had Bax’s back itching.

“He’s...interesting,” Nick said.

“Yes, he is,” Bax laughed as they headed on toward the parking lot. “Callum has always been a bit...colorful.”

“He offered you a place in his coven?” Nick asked, lowering his voice slightly.

Bax wasn't so oblivious that he didn't catch the hint of sadness and worry in Nick's voice.

“He did,” Bax said, swaying close enough to take Nick's hand, although it took a bit of coordination, since they were both holding sleeping children. “I have to think about it, though.”

“Isn't that what you want?” Nick asked. “You've been looking for a new coven.”

“I have,” Bax conceded. “But you can't just join any old group that offers. Joining a coven is a deeply personal, spiritual choice. You have to make sure the group is right. It's a lot like getting involved in a new relationship.”

Nick glanced at him and their eyes met. It was pretty clear to Bax that Nick was wrestling with all kinds of new emotions. He had more than his mum playing matchmaker to contend with. He was a father, a teacher, an artist, and thanks to Bax, he was struggling with a whole new understanding of his sexuality.

Bax wanted to make things easier for him instead of adding to the pile of confusion Nick was dealing with.

“Right now, I just want to be with you,” he said, smiling over Macy's sleeping form. “That's enough for me.”

“You're being generous,” Nick said with a sheepish smile. “I'm more trouble than I'm worth.”

“You absolutely are not,” Bax scolded him. He then shifted to a wicked grin and said, “You’re going to be so worth it.”

Nick’s face went even redder, and he lowered his eyes. It was the cutest thing Bax had ever seen. Nick might have been a giant of a man, but he could blush like a little boy sometimes.

Bax loved it. He loved the sweetness that shone through Nick’s strength. He loved how good Nick was and how hard he tried to be what others needed him to be. It was well past time for Nick to take something for himself, though. Bax was determined to find a way to give him what he deserved and more.

TEN

Nick felt a buzz like he'd had a dozen black coffees as he drove Bax and the kids home. It was meant to be an ordinary outing to entertain the kids for a day. Instead, it had turned into an entirely different sort of "outing".

He still couldn't believe he'd told Kate that he and Bax were together. He could barely believe that the two of them were together.

They were, weren't they?

Yes, they definitely were. The entire afternoon had felt like proof of it. They'd worked well together to make sure the kids had a good time, they'd had a bit of time to walk around with just each other, sort of, when the kids had fallen asleep, and they'd even held hands at one point.

Wow. He was dating a guy.

And his mum probably knew now, too. He'd told Kate, and Kate had probably turned around and told his mum and Joann.

Shit. He'd accidentally come out to his family.

Oh God. He was gay. Well, bi. But, yeah, he had a serious thing for a man.

"Are you alright?" Bax asked after they'd been silent in the car for about ten minutes.

“Yeah,” Nick lied.

He thought about it and peeked sideways at Bax as he made the last turn that would take them back to Hawthorne House.

Bax wasn't fooled.

“Okay, I'm not alright,” he confessed. “But I'm not bad. I'm not freaking out. I'm not.”

Bax laughed and reached over to touch his arm. “You can freak out. A lot of things just happened.”

“I didn't come out, did I?” he asked with a wince.

Bax grinned like Nick had told a joke. Nick loved his grin. He loved his smile and his easy manner. If he was willing to let go of his fears and his assumptions about himself, he would go further to say he liked Bax's lips, liked his body, liked the way it felt when the two of them hugged. Just one more push, and it wouldn't have to be a strong one either, and he might just be willing to explore those feelings further.

Like, naked farther.

“Coming out isn't necessarily some huge declaration or a super intense moment where you sit across the table from your loved ones and say, ‘Mum, I'm bisexual’,” Bax said.

Nick blinked and gripped the steering wheel harder. “Are you bisexual?”

Bax laughed loud enough to fill the car with joy. And, unfortunately, to wake the kids.

“No,” he answered as he twisted to face the trial that was Macy and Jordan waking up from their naps and finding themselves in their car seats. “You’re the bi one, love. I’m completely gay. It’s only ever been men. Give me dick over pussy any day. Hello, you two!” he finished his declaration in a childish, sing-song voice.

Nick smiled despite his anxiety. It wasn’t particularly logical, but he was relieved that Bax was just gay. That meant he had less competition for Bax’s attention.

Of course, that was ridiculous, too. Bax could pay attention to whomever he liked. It wasn’t like he didn’t have at least two other small humans that demanded his full attention most of the time anyhow.

Speaking of which, their conversation, which had seemed incredibly important, was cut short as soon as Jordan and Macy were fully awake. They were close to home anyhow, and as soon as the babies were aware of their surroundings and their captive audience of two, they demanded everything from snacks to cuddles, once they got out of the car, and kept both Nick and Bax on their toes for the remainder of the afternoon.

“Are you sure you want to stick around for supper?” Nick asked as he puttered around in the kitchen, fixing kid-appropriate chicken nuggets and chips. Vegetables, too, because he’d be damned if he turned into one of those dads who didn’t make their kids eat their vegetables. “None of this is particularly fun.”

“Of course, it’s fun,” Bax said, stepping into the kitchen to take over some of the food prep as Nick stepped away to see what had started Macy screaming in the other room.

It wasn’t. Being a father was amazing and rewarding, and he loved his kids, but taking care of two tiny humans who needed intense amounts of focus wasn’t always fun.

Bax gave it his all, though, which Nick noted and appreciated. He wasn't a natural with children, but he was learning. Part of that day had been all about Bax learning just how much work went into parenting. Nick could tell there had been a few moments when Bax's patience had worn thin. When Jordan threw a fit about his chips being too small, for instance. And when Macy decided it would be more fun to play with the red sauce than to eat it.

"You really don't have to stick around for this part if you don't want to," Nick insisted again after supper, while cleaning up the carnage of the simple meal. He and Bax had barely been able to shovel food into their own mouths with the kids in such high spirits.

"I want to stick around," Bax said, grinning with particular heat at Nick as he wiped Macy's face and hands. "I can't wait to see what comes after this bit."

Nick's face heated. He was curious about what might happen next, too. Everything between him and Bax felt so ripe and full of promise. His libido was dying to know what sort of mischief he could get up to, despite the fact that he still didn't know what he was doing in that department. He hadn't had time to look it up online, and had been far too embarrassed to ask any of the knowledgeable Hawthornes.

"After this bit comes passing out on the couch with CBeebies playing in the background," Nick laughed.

Bax smiled at him with that look that made Nick feel like he was standing on the precipice of a whole new world.

"I'm here for it," he said confidently.

Nick hoped that confidence would last through playing on the carpet after supper, then through bedtime. Bax bowed out of bedtime, saying he didn't know whether it

was appropriate for him to be in the same room with the kids when they were undressed. That was a can of worms that he had no idea if he was ready for. Was it appropriate? Would it be if the two of them were in some sort of serious, committed relationship? How did people navigate that fine line between stranger and family anyhow?

By the time baths were finished and the kids were dried, their bums in fresh nappies, and tucked into bed, Nick was ready to crawl into bed himself. It had been a long, long day.

He dragged himself back to the main part of the flat, bracing himself for the clean-up he knew had to happen in the kitchen, but was surprised to find that Bax had cleaned everything up already.

“You’ve even loaded the dishwasher,” he said in utter amazement as he stepped into the kitchen.

Bax laughed and turned away from the sink, where he was rinsing the rag he’d used to wipe down the counters, and reached for a towel to dry his hands. “Just because I’m not a father doesn’t mean I don’t know how to clean up a kitchen.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Nick said, still glancing around the space in amazement.

“It was my pleasure,” Bax said, putting the towel back then walking over to Nick. “So is this,” he added, then grasped the sides of Nick’s face and pulled in for a kiss.

Nick should have expected it, but the kiss surprised him as much as finding a clean kitchen had. Mostly, it surprised him with how much he enjoyed it. Bax was warm and smelled good, despite it being the end of the day. He kissed with so much confidence that Nick couldn’t help but surrender to it.

He expected the kissing to go on, wanted it, even, but Bax pulled back and smiled at him. “Let’s grab a beer and have a seat on the couch,” he said.

Nick’s temporary warmth and ease tightened into worry. That was the sort of thing someone said when they wanted to have a serious talk. He wasn’t sure he had the brain cells for any sort of serious talk.

But once they had their beers in hand and were settled close together on the couch, toys scattered on the floor around them, Bax just sat there, smiling at Nick like he was a relaxing television program that he had been looking forward to watching all day.

“Hello,” he said as Nick started to grow tense beside him.

“Hello yourself,” Nick answered. He was terrible at flirting, terrible at peopling. But something about Bax put him at ease, even though he thought he should be more nervous than anything around him.

“You look knackered,” Bax went on. He used his free hand to brush Nick’s cheek and the day’s growth of beard that now fuzzed the bottom half of his face.

“Kids do that to you,” he said. “I don’t know how you’re still on your feet, since you’re not used to the pace.”

“I’m not on my feet, I’m on your couch,” Bax said.

Nick laughed and took a sip of his beer, since he didn’t know what else to do.

Bax drank as well, and even though Nick felt the conversation should probably be going somewhere, it didn’t. It was just the two of them sitting on the couch, kids’ telly playing in the background, drinking beer and staring at each other with

increasingly goofy grins.

Nick wished he was a brilliant conversationalist, like Raina had been. He wished she was there so he could ask her what he was supposed to do with all the new and hot feelings racing through him. Of course, if Raina was there, he wouldn't be contemplating kissing Bax again.

God, he wanted to kiss Bax again. He wanted to do more than that. He wanted to tackle him and cover his body with his own. He wanted to learn what a man's body felt like when things were hot and heavy. He wanted to play with another man's cock and balls and discover whether he really liked it as much as he was beginning to believe he might.

"What are you thinking about?" Bax asked, twisting to put his half-finished bottle on the table that ran along the back of the couch.

Nick's face blazed hot at the question before he could even contemplate the answer.

He surprised himself when he replied with, "Why did you turn Callum down when he invited you to his coven?"

Bax's hazy, sexy look mellowed into something more serious. "It isn't what I want right now," he said.

Nick frowned slightly. "But it's what you wanted a few weeks ago, when you first came to Hawthorne House. I thought you would still want something like that."

"I want you."

The words were so bold and raw that Nick couldn't breathe for a second. For once, Bax wasn't teasing or joking. The heat and the need were all there, in his eyes. He felt

them reflected in himself.

“I want you, too,” he said quietly.

“Then take me,” Bax said, his voice dropping to a deep, sonorous tone.

Nick jerked like he would move forward, but the kinetic movement didn’t go anywhere. It just made him look anxious and twitchy.

“I don’t know how,” he admitted, his eyes glued to Bax’s.

Bax shrugged one shoulder and managed to look dead sexy while doing it. “Follow your instincts.”

“I don’t really have instincts here,” he admitted, his arousal racing fast toward embarrassment that would destroy the moment. He couldn’t continue to hold Bax’s gaze, especially when he confessed, “Raina is the only other person of any sex I’ve ever been with. I didn’t know what I was doing with her at first either.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Bax said with the most intriguing combination of compassion and arousal. He scooted closer, took Nick’s beer from his hand and put it on the table, then inched closer still. “It’s okay.”

Nick’s heart and head pulled hard in two directions. His heart trusted Bax and was certain it would be okay, but his head thought it was everything that was the opposite of okay.

Before either of them could get the upper hand, Bax slipped an arm around his waist and pulled him forward into another kiss. It was exactly what Nick wanted and what he needed to settle the raging insecurities inside him. He wanted this, wanted to kiss Bax and to learn what it was like to be with a man. He wanted connection and

intimacy.

“How far do you want to take this?” Bax asked between kisses, his breath hot and wet against Nick’s lips.

“I just want you,” Nick answered. “I don’t know what I’m doing, but I want to learn.”

Bax smiled his way into another kiss. As he did, he swept a hand down Nick’s side, then across the front of his jeans to rub and palm his growing cock.

Nick gasped and broke out in shivers as pleasure shot through him. His cock filled fast, pressing uncomfortably against his zipper. At the same time, he loved the feeling. It was the answer to the question he’d been asking himself since his heart had started to fall for Bax.

“Can I take it out?” Bax asked, leaning back to look into Nick’s eyes.

Nick swallowed, then nodded. The only way to truly learn what he wanted was to cross every boundary he’d previously had.

Bax smiled, then dropped his gaze so he could watch what he was doing.

Nick watched as well as Bax worked open the button of his jeans then drew the zipper down. Whether he was going slowly to be seductive or to give Nick a chance to adjust, it had to be the most erotic thing he’d ever experienced.

The head of his cock was already poking through the opening of his boxers, but Bax didn’t take it out that way. He nudged Nick to lift his hips, then he pushed his jeans and boxers down enough to scoop in and draw everything out. His balls tightened and his cock bounced up as Bax palmed them while drinking in the sight.

Bax definitely looked at everything. His pupils shot wide and his face flushed as he studied Nick. Nick spent all of two seconds hoping Bax liked what he saw before his brain started to blank entirely as Bax stroked the underside of his cock from his balls to his tip. Pleasure flooded him as Bax closed his hand around his shaft and pulled his foreskin down to expose his already damp tip.

The pleasure was so powerful as Bax stroked slowly up and down, gazing intensely at him, that within seconds, Nick started to feel the tell-tale signs of orgasm. He wanted to thrust into Bax's hand and watch his seed spill all over it, but he wanted a lot more things than just that.

"You're a big boy," Bax said, peeking up at Nick with a mischievous look.

It was a silly, borderline crass thing to say, but it did exactly what Nick needed in that moment. It made him laugh.

"I'm proportional," he said, relieved that laughing pulled him back from coming the second Bax had a hand on him.

"Mind if I taste?" Bax asked.

A shudder of need pulsed through Nick. He couldn't form the words, he could only nod.

For a split second, as Bax bent forward, bringing his mouth closer to his cockhead, Nick panicked. He didn't know what he was doing. Would Bax expect him to suck his cock in return? The idea intrigued him, but he wasn't sure he was ready.

A second later, as Bax's warm, wet mouth kissed his tip, then as he bore down, taking his entire head into his mouth and brushing it with his tongue, none of that mattered. He couldn't think, couldn't feel fear or worry. He could only groan as heady pleasure

raced through him.

Fantasies started spinning in Nick's mind, blending with reality. He loved what Bax was doing and wanted more. He imagined himself fully naked gripping the sides of Bax's head while he thrust into the heat of Bax's mouth. That image morphed back into what was really happening in the moment as Bax slurped and sucked and took Nick deeper into his throat.

Bax moaned in appreciation as he took Nick in deep, and Nick cried plaintively in response, pushing his hips up off the couch as he did. He'd never been sucked off like this before. No wonder blowjobs were such a big deal to some people. They were quickly becoming a big deal to him.

When Bax pulled back suddenly, panting, Nick came close to whining.

"You're close, aren't you," Bax said. It wasn't a question. He knew.

"Yeah," Nick panted, nodding tightly.

Bax grinned and rocked back all the way. He eyed Nick's thick, spit-slick erection as it stood up against Nick's belly then asked, "Do you want to keep this going in the bedroom? Preferably with both of us naked?"

"Yes," Nick gusted in answer.

Bax's grin widened, and he stood, trousers bulging, and offered his hand to Nick.

Nick took his hand and let Bax pull him to standing. His cock bobbed enthusiastically in front of him as he searched for the remote to turn off the telly, then as they headed down the short hall to the bedroom. He didn't bother tucking himself away, because as soon as they were in the bedroom, they both stripped naked as fast as they could.

Nick's brain was shot and he didn't question himself for being hesitant ten minutes before, then suddenly rushing to get out of his clothes as fast as he could. He was usually tidy with his things, but he left his clothes on the floor where they dropped before racing to the bed. He couldn't take his eyes off Bax as he stretched to take his shirt off, revealing a trim, strong torso with just a bit of hair, then as he bent to push off his trousers and underwear.

It was the first time Nick had ever seen another man naked and aroused with the intent to have sex with him. As an artist, he'd seen plenty of naked bodies, but this was absolutely, one hundred percent different. Bax was gorgeous. His thighs were strong and his legs were long. His balls were already drawn up, and as he stood once his trousers were gone, his cock bounced proudly in front of him, as ready as Nick's was to get right to it.

"You're beautiful," Nick managed to gasp out, unable to tear his eyes away from Bax's body.

"You're amazing," Bax said, smile broad. "Let's fuck."

Again, Nick was sure he'd said something outrageous to shock him out of his head. He was grateful for it and had just enough presence of mind to stride forward and take Bax into his arms. Their naked bodies pressed together. The crush of their cocks between the walls of their bodies felt so good that Nick doubted he was going to last long.

They kissed and groped each other. Nick forced himself not to think, just to feel and act. He still didn't know what he was doing, but he knew what he wanted now. He wanted as much of Bax rubbing against as much of him as possible.

"Bed," Bax managed between their fevered kisses.

Nick nodded and stepped to the side to throw a few pillows and stuffed animals onto the floor. He pulled back the sheets, and as soon as he was halfway horizontal, Bax threw himself into the bed with him.

Each time their bodies came together, Nick felt like he understood how things should be a little more. He wanted to touch and caress every part of Bax. His back felt particularly good, but not as good as his arse. As soon as Bax pushed him to his back and straddled his thighs, Nick couldn't get enough of squeezing and fondling Bax's arse as it spread over him.

"Still don't know what I'm doing," he panted between kisses as Bax braced himself on top and devoured his mouth.

"Don't care," Bax replied, panting. "I just want you."

It was frantic and artless. Their hands were all over, grasping, feeling, and stroking. They kissed each other's mouths like they could find the secrets of the universe there. Nick was certain he should be doing something more. Guys fucked each other's arses, right? He could definitely get on board with finding Bax's hole and pushing in.

There wasn't going to be time for that, though. He knew as soon as Bax started jerking against him, rubbing their bodies together in a way that brought delicious friction to Nick's cock. Nick didn't stop to question whether he was doing it right or wrong. Whatever it was, it felt good. And when Bax reached a hand between them to hold their cocks together while he thrust, Nick lost it.

His orgasm rolled over him like a wave crashing. He cried out into Bax's mouth as jet after jet of cum spilled from him, making Bax's hand and their bellies messy. He would have been embarrassed about how fast his orgasm had hit and how he hadn't even put his dick where it was supposed to go, but a minute after him, Bax sped up his thrusts then pulled his mouth away from Nick's to cry out as he came hard over

Nick's already wet belly.

Right way or wrong way, they'd both climaxed. From there, Bax flopped to his side and pulled him over so he could wrap his entire body around Nick's. Nick was exhausted and the post-orgasmic glow was going to make him fall asleep in seconds, he was sure, but they continued to kiss and pant and touch each other as much as possible.

"Alright?" Bax asked at one point in a breathless pant.

Nick could only nod and smile. He was more than alright. He'd enjoyed the fuck out of that, even though he felt like it had just been entry-level gay sex. It didn't matter what their bodies had done, though. His heart felt light and his soul pulsed with warmth and affection. There would be so much more to come between them, but what really mattered in that moment was that he had Bax in his arms and in his bed, his most private space. He'd found something precious, and there was no way he was going to let it go.

ELEVEN

All the candles Bax had lit, incantations he had spoken, and intentions he had put out into the universe to find a new spiritual home, which a lot of other people would have called prayers, the gods had definitely delivered. All through February, he was happy. He and Nick were happy. They were together, and within days of the winter festival, everybody knew it.

“I think the two of you make an outstanding couple,” Rafe commented as he sat at one of the other desks in Hawthorne House’s office, poring through a catalog of glass-blowing supplies. Now that he was back, and with the spring session of classes starting in early March, he had been throwing himself at the task of updating and stocking the glass shop, which had been built in one of the outbuildings that had once been a stable. “I always thought Nick was as bent as the rest of the Hawthornes, even though he’s not one of us by blood.”

“Every person on this planet is a little bent,” Robert said from where he was trying to do something on Rebecca’s computer on the other side of the office, though he was about as comfortable with computers as he was with bramble patches. “There is no such thing as completely straight.”

“My parents would argue with you on that one,” Early laughed as they stepped into the back part of the office to fetch a stack of photocopied papers. “Then again, they also think people are rigidly binary.”

“We all know how wrong they are,” Robert said, glancing up from the computer and winking at Early.

Bax felt so warm at the exchange. He was ridiculously proud of his family, of how open their minds were and how accepting they were of everyone. All the reasons that people with so-called traditional morality despised them—like Nick’s mum, in all likelihood, though Bax still hadn’t figured the woman out—were the very values that he prized the most. The world might not have shared the Hawthorne family’s outlook yet, but Bax hoped it would someday.

“I think you and Nick make a wonderful couple, too, by the way,” Early said before heading back to the front part of the office.

“I’m almost sad we didn’t have some sort of a pool about when the two of you would get together,” Rafe joked as he finished typing his order into the computer, then leaned back in his chair. “If I’d been home last fall, when the two of you first made eyes at each other, or so I’m told, I would have organized the most epic betting pool this family has ever seen.”

“Yes,” Robert fired back at him with a cheeky grin, “and we would have started a pool for when you’re going to run off to some foreign country and abandon your family again.”

Rafe straightened with a look of mock surprise. “I’ve never abandoned my family,” he said. “I just have a fine appreciation for travel and absorbing the culture of foreign countries by living in them for a while.”

“Translation, I would rather be anywhere else but in England, at Hawthorne House,” Robert said, still teasing.

“That’s not true,” Rafe protested. “I just have...reasons why I would rather be somewhere else.”

“What’s his name?” Bax asked, laughing. “Or is this an ‘a man in every port’ sort of

a situation?”

“That’s not it at all,” Rafe said. “I don’t have anyone special anywhere.”

“He had a bad break-up about three years ago that started this whole travel thing,” Robert told Bax with a sly look.

“Oh, I get it,” Bax laughed. “I’ve done the whole running away from heartache, too.”

It could be argued that coming to stay at Hawthorne House to do the audit was running away from Damien. That might have been his reason for arriving there, but it wasn’t his reason for staying.

In fact, when he finished the audit at the end of February, Bax didn’t make any plans to move out or move on. His intention all along had been to launch his own LGBTQ-supporting accounting firm, and he could do that from Hawthorne House as easily as he could from an expensive office in London. Uncle Robert was more than happy to let him take over one of the empty classrooms and set it up as office space.

“The Hawthorne family is incredibly generous,” Nick said as they talked about all their new endeavors in bed on the first day of March and the new session of classes. “They could have kicked me and the kids out anytime they wanted.”

“Uncle Robert and Aunt Janice would never do that,” Bax said, sliding one of his legs between Nick’s until he could feel Nick’s balls against his thigh. “They love you. We all love you.”

They were lying side by side. The room was still dim in the early morning light, but he could see the sparkle that his comment brought to Nick’s eyes. It was still way too soon for the L-word, but Bax felt all of the emotions behind the word. Not to mention how intensely he felt the other L-word, lust.

Nick made the low, growly sound that drove Bax crazy and rolled into him, pinning him to his back. For a guy who hadn't ever examined his sexuality, Nick was embracing that part of their new relationship thoroughly.

He pressed his body along Bax's and swooped down to draw a searing kiss from Bax's mouth. Nick had grown incredibly adept at kissing him with the fire and passion that Bax liked. After a few fumbling weeks of figuring out what they both liked and wanted, things were definitely starting to click. The magic moment had come when Nick discovered that he didn't have to be gentle or soft with him and that Bax actually liked their size difference and the feeling of being overpowered.

Once the pieces fell into place, Nick had become an incredibly topdy top, and Bax had no complaints at all about being a bottomy bottom. Bax had talked him through a lot of the aspects of having a relationship with a man that he'd been clueless about, from positions to PrEP, and now they were in a place where everything was just about perfect.

"You look cute talking up the family first thing in the morning," Nick growled, sweeping a glance down to Bax's pebbling nipples.

"I feel cute whenever I have your big, blacksmith's cock hot against my thigh," Bax flirted in reply.

"I can tell," Nick said. He reached a hand between them to palm Bax's straining erection.

They'd been at it for weeks now, but he still caught his breath every time Nick touched his cock. It was like he was so surprised that he could bring another man off that he couldn't keep his hands off. That had been particularly mind-blowing a few days before, when Nick had stepped up behind him at the kitchen counter while he was making them sandwiches for lunch, unbuttoned his jeans, slipped his hand in,

and stroked him off. Bax had been so startled by the treat that he'd just braced his hands against the counter and come within a minute.

Thank the goddess the kids hadn't been there. Mrs. Turner had them over at her house that day, which was probably why Nick had been so bold in the first place.

They didn't have to worry about unbuttoning anything now, since they'd spent the night naked together in Bax's bed. The kids were asleep in Nick's flat across the hall, as the gentle drone of the baby monitor beside his bed told them. Nick didn't seem at all fussed as he lowered himself for another kiss.

"Is there some sort of Pagan ritual for starting a new session of classes?" Nick asked, moving to kiss the spot under Bax's ear, his morning growth of beard scratching the soft skin of Bax's neck. "Some sort of fertility rite for productivity?"

Bax hummed and threw his arms and legs wide, offering himself to his lover. "You're doing it now."

"I thought so," Nick smirked as he pushed himself up a bit.

He leaned over to grab the bottle of lube from the bedside table, and with a blossom of laughter that he couldn't control, Bax grabbed the pillow that he'd used the night before and slipped it under his lower back.

The light was still dim, but the blanket fell back as Nick knelt between Bax's legs, squirted lube on his hand, then slicked it over his thick erection. Bax could hardly breathe as he watched him. He knew it wasn't the done thing to be greedy for his partner's size. It wasn't the size of the boat that mattered, it was the motion in the ocean. He just really had a thing for all of Nick's body, how massive his muscles were and how powerfully he was built. His cock fit right in with that, feeding the fantasy that he was being ravaged by a mythical creature or the god Hephestus every

time the two of them were together.

He was definitely ravaged when Nick quickly lubed his hole then grabbed his hips and lifted them so he could take what he wanted and push in deep. Bax stifled his initial moan of pain as Nick stretched his ring, then let that breath out on a vocal sigh as Nick worked deeper. More often than not, he felt like Nick was splitting him in two when they went at it like this, but he'd be lying if he said he didn't like it.

Nick was still kneeling, gripping Bax's hips hard, and watching the way their bodies joined as he pounded into him. Bax gorged himself on the sight of Nick's powerful, hairy body taking what it wanted from him. He gripped the bedsheets tightly with one hand and his dick with a loose enough grip to stroke and lost himself in the bliss of being fucked into oblivion by a man who could snap him in two if he wanted to. It was so primal that he didn't even mind any potential mess.

He was stretched and pinned and Nick had just figured out how to slam his prostate to the point where he rolled his eyes back when a shuffle and whimper sounded from the baby monitor.

"Shit," Nick hissed, completely losing his rhythm and pulling out. Jordan's tinny, whining cry grew louder, and Nick scrambled back. "Shit, shit, shit."

Bax was left stunned, splayed, and inches away from orgasm, his hole throbbing, as Nick nearly tumbled off the bed and raced for the bathroom. He panted, eyes wide, hand still moving slightly on his dick as the warm, delicious sensation of being stuffed full petered out into the hollowness of his body closing up again.

By pure willpower alone, he was able to rub a small, unsatisfying orgasm out, but it was ruined by the sound of Macy joining her brother in crying.

"I didn't hear them stirring," Nick said, running back into the bedroom a second later,

looking marginally cleaned up. He grabbed his pajama bottoms from the floor and nearly fell over putting them on, then reached for his robe on the wall hook next to Bax's. "They get upset when I'm not there when they wake up."

That was all he said before tearing out of the room, through Bax's flat, and over to his own.

A couple seconds later, as he gingerly pulled the pillow out from behind his back and winced as he sat up, Bax heard Nick cooing a morning greeting to his babies through the monitor.

A twist of irritation shot through him, but he forced himself to breathe it away and swing his legs around to get out of bed. He was dating a single father with two small kids. The kids would always be Nick's priority. That was absolutely the way it should be.

But that didn't stop him from turning off the baby monitor with a burst of jealous force and stomping into the en suite to take a shower. Things had been thirty seconds away from brilliant between him and Nick. He could have had the orgasm of his life and the deep, deep pleasure of Nick spilling his load inside him if the kids could have just slept for five more minutes.

By the time he was done with his shower and dressed for the day, Bax had managed to let it go. If he wanted Nick, and he most definitely did, he had to accept certain things about him. He liked the kids. He wasn't a natural with them, but he liked them. He was learning. His whole life was new, so it was only right that he adapted to the additional newness of being with a man who couldn't and shouldn't make him the sole center of his focus.

That didn't stop his brain from grumbling that at least Damien never pulled out and left him inches from coming because a baby cried somewhere as he headed

downstairs to his new office.

“What’s gotten into you?” Rhys asked when Bax ducked into the arts center’s office to grab a tea.

Bax huffed an ironic laugh. It was what had slipped out of him that bothered him.

“Just the usual perils of dating a single father who needs to put his kids first,” he answered.

Rhys nodded. “Interrupted, eh?”

“Yep,” Bax replied with a sigh. “I’m trying not to complain,” he went on. “I’ve got work to do anyhow. I didn’t really need to spend the whole morning in bed.”

“How’s the new accounting business coming along?” Rhys asked.

Bax winced. “Alright. Not perfect. I need more clients before it can really be considered a business, and I’ll admit, I’m being picky about my clientele because of my mission.”

“Have you tried The Brotherhood?” Rhys asked. “I bet a lot of them need an accountant. Or how about your old friend Callum? The one who keeps trying to woo you to join his coven?”

Heat flushed through Bax. He didn’t exactly feel guilty about the way Callum had tried to call or text him a few times per week since they’d met at the winter festival. There was nothing flirtatious or suggestive about Callum’s messages. He just really wanted Bax to join his coven. His overtures were friendly and concerned for Bax’s well-being.

There was the tiny caveat that Bax had found out from one of his other friends, that Callum had stopped dating the guy he'd been seeing off and on for a year. But if Bax stopped talking to every one of his gay friends who had just been through a break-up, he wouldn't have any friends left.

"Callum could be an option," he admitted, taking his tea and heading out the office door, Rhys walking with him. "He owns a florist shop and has a lot of connections in the gardening world."

In fact, Callum might be an excellent resource for finding work. As long as he wasn't trying to swerve around Nick to get into his pants. Callum had seen the two of them together. He was smart enough to figure out they were dating. Bax didn't think he was the type to steal someone else's man, or at least to try, since there was no way he'd be stolen from Nick, but you never knew.

He decided to try his connections with The Brotherhood first. Once he was settled in his office, he went through his contacts and compiled a list. It was still far too early in the morning to start making phone calls to old men with money, though, so within an hour, he hit a wall. That was the problem with starting a new business like the one he wanted. Working hours were all well and good, but you couldn't sit at a desk for nine hours a day wishing and hoping clients would drop out of the sky.

It was getting close to nine-thirty by the time he decided to take a walk down to the forge to ask Nick's opinion on Callum. He and Nick had been doing other things instead of their morning walks of late and he needed the exercise. Besides, if he was going to approach a guy who had even a hint of interest in him about work, he was damn sure going to run the idea by his boyfriend first.

He felt better just making the decision to seek Nick out. It was still cold outside, but spring was beginning to peek its way out from the browns and beiges of the landscape surrounding Hawthorne House. Soon, the earliest spring flowers,

snowdrops and crocuses, would begin to poke up through the dead leaves. The trees would show pale green buds, then unfurl into full, green leaf.

It was a fitting metaphor for the new life he was building for himself. He was a new man discovering new things. And sure, it was painful to have your lover rush off to tend to his kids in the middle of sex, but at least they'd had the moment they'd had. He wasn't even sure if Nick had rubbed one out in the bathroom or if he was starting his day with blue balls. Who knew? Maybe they'd have a moment at the forge where he could drop to his knees and give Nick the relief he needed.

That blissful fantasy flopped hard as Bax approached for forge only to hear voices. It was warm enough that Nick had taken down the canvas walls surrounding the forge, leaving the whole thing open to the elements. A second too late, Bax remembered Nick's class schedule for the spring session meant he taught at nine in the morning on Mondays.

Instead of slipping into the forge to ask his boyfriend's permission to contact someone who might be interested in him and to give him a blow-job, Bax showed up just in time to interrupt Nick giving his initial safety talk to the half-dozen adult students taking his blacksmithing class. It seemed somehow fitting that Nick's almost completed unicorn statue grinned down at him from the corner of the forge, reminding him of something else that demanded Nick's attention before him.

Whatever sullen emotions tried to reach up and ruin Bax's mood, they were thwarted as soon as Nick saw him approaching and broke into a smile. That smile shot straight to Bax's heart, letting him know everything would be alright.

Nick continued with his lecture, which was basically, "Don't do anything stupid and don't touch hot coals without protective gloves", but his arrival had been noticed. A few of the students twisted to take a look at him as Bax walked into the forge.

One of those students, who was seated near the back, was Callum.

“Oh, hello,” Callum said, momentarily ignoring Nick’s lesson. “Fancy seeing you here.”

TWELVE

“Shit, shit, shit.”

Nick continued to swear as he dashed across the hall from Bax’s flat into his. It was a good idea for him and Bax to have their adult time in Bax’s apartment. Not only was there no chance of the kids accidentally walking in on something they shouldn’t see, but it helped him to shift gears in his mind so he could give Bax his full attention. Or at least as much of his full attention as he could.

The baby monitors were a necessity, but sometimes, just sometimes, like that morning, when he’d been balls-deep in Bax, so close to coming that he could taste it as he watched Bax get lost in pleasure, they were a colossal pain in the arse.

“Hey, babies. I’m here,” he said as he hurried into the nursery that Jordan and Macy shared. He went on to sing his usual morning greeting, “Good morning to you, good morning to you, good morning, dear babies, good morning to you.”

The babies calmed their sleepy morning fuss and reached out to him as he scooped up first Macy, then Jordan.

“That’s better,” he cooed in his daddy voice, praying he didn’t smell too much like sex and Baxter.

Then again, they were toddlers. They wouldn’t know what the smell was.

He was used to their morning routine, as frantic as it could be. He got the kids up,

plopped them in front of the telly, feeling deeply guilty about rotting their brains and how it made him a terrible dad, then filled small bottles for them. While they zoned out in front of CBeebies, he quickly jumped into the shower to clean up the remnants of his night with Bax.

“Shit,” he hissed into the shower spray. He’d run out on Bax more or less in the middle of things, before either of them could get off.

That was why his balls ached so much. He had been so focused on getting back to the kids that he hadn’t even taken a second to jerk off in Bax’s bathroom before racing to take care of his kids.

By the time he turned the shower off, quickly toweled off, and scrambled to put his work clothes on, he felt like the worst boyfriend in the history of the world. He didn’t even feel like a good father, really. Someone somewhere would probably take him to task for having the telly babysit his kids while he showered. At least he’d gotten into the habit of showering with the bathroom door open in case they needed him for anything. They were too young to worry about seeing him naked, but Jordan in particular was getting older by the second. There’s been a couple times that winter when Nick had caught his son staring at his genitals with more curiosity than indifference.

He couldn’t not shower with the door open, though. He couldn’t leave his babies alone for too long either. There really wasn’t a good solution, unless he locked them in some sort of cage while he took a shower.

A knock on his flat’s door just as he and the kids were finishing up a slightly more substantial breakfast pulled him out of his racing thoughts.

“Morning, Mr. Turner,” Imogen said, all but stumbling into the flat with her book bag, her coat half undone. “Sorry I’m late. I had a night class last night and overslept

this morning. I'm not sure how this term is going to work, to be honest. I have so much work, and I've got a few classes coming up that I will have to take during the day. Your mum said she could take the kids when she needs to, though."

"Thanks, Imogen," Nick said, the tightness in his chest that he always felt when anyone mentioned his mum having the kids gripping him. His mum still pestered him on a weekly, sometimes daily, basis about having the kids live with her. "I've got a nine o'clock class on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays this semester, and I want to put in at least half an hour of work on the unicorn before then, so I have to run. But we'll talk about this later."

Imogen waved goodbye and went straight for the kids, who loved her. That was one less thing for Nick to worry about.

One less thing out of what felt like a million. He still had to prepare for the new class, even if that just meant setting out a display of all the equipment they would be using during the session. He really did want to get a few minutes of work done on the unicorn, too, once the forges were warmed up. It was so close to being done, but every time he looked at it, he saw another join that needed smoothing, a bit that needed sanding, or a minor detail that he should really add to make the whole thing shine.

And then there was Bax. He huffed out a breath thinking about Bax as he reached the forge and went through his routine to rekindle the fires and bring the whole thing up to the temperature he needed to work. He adored Bax. He couldn't believe that he'd found so much happiness, closeness, and satisfaction with another man.

Of course he was bi. How had he not realized that before? Touching, kissing, and fucking Bax came as naturally to him and gave him just as much pleasure as being with Raina had. Sexy times with Bax were like opening a brand new box of candy that he'd always known about but had never tasted and discovering it was his new

favorite thing.

He was still a little squeamish about the idea of Bax fucking him, but Bax said if he was strictly a top, that was fine. He'd had his mouth around Bax's cock once at this point and had liked it much more than he'd thought he would. He was still a little squiffy about swallowing, but then again, he also found wiping snot off his own babies' noses gross, so it might not have just been the whole eating cum thing.

He'd be willing to give it a try for Bax, though. There was something undeniably hot about having a guy panting and sweating with pleasure because you had them in your mouth. He needed to learn how not to choke when Bax went deep, though. Or maybe that was the whole point of?—

“Is this where the forging class is?”

Nick nearly leapt out of his skin at the question, asked by a burly young woman with her hair tied back in two ponytails. God help him if she had the ability to read minds.

Which was a ridiculous thought, but still.

“Yes, this is Introduction to Blacksmithing,” he said, forcing himself to greet the woman with a smile.

He glanced at the clock fastened to one of the beams on the side of the forge. They had fifteen minutes until the class started, but it wasn't unusual for students to arrive early on the first day of class.

The woman came forward with a slight glitter in her eyes and held out a hand. “I'm Lauren Michaels,” she said as Nick took her hand to shake it. “I'm a friend of your sister Joann's, actually. She told me I should take your class.”

Nick nearly groaned. Not only had his mum not given up on trying to take his babies from him, apparently she and Joann hadn't given up on finding him a new girlfriend either.

What would they think if they'd known he'd been daydreaming about sucking Bax's cock when their latest offering had made her appearance?

"Hi, Lauren," he greeted her. "It's nice to meet you. I've just got a few more things to set up for the class, but feel free to look around while I do. Just don't touch anything until after the safety briefing."

"Sure, sure," Lauren said. She followed him as he moved to the shelves and cabinets at the back of the forge. "Need any help?"

He wanted to say no and to add that if Joann had sent her to woo him, it wasn't going to happen. He was spared from having to hurt anyone's feelings when two other students showed up.

"Welcome," he greeted them, avoiding Lauren's offer. "Make yourself at home. Look around, but don't touch anything until after the safety briefing."

Lauren didn't seem offended by his lukewarm reaction to her. Maybe she was just there because she was interested in forging.

He put his worries as far out of his head as he could as the new students settled into the forge. Not only did he have to set out the tools and instruments he would be introducing everyone to, now he felt like he had to keep an eye on everyone to make sure they didn't do the one thing he'd told them not to do and touch stuff.

It was a lot like being a dad to toddlers, actually. People seemed to think women were better at multitasking than men, but Nick was pretty sure multitasking was something

everyone had to learn when they became a parent so that the next generation didn't accidentally kill themselves. That went for students as well as kids.

His new class seemed like they were going to be pretty responsible. The two new arrivals were college guys who Nick immediately pegged as the kind who played D&D, especially when one of them asked if they would be learning how to forge swords.

"No," he answered with a laugh. "This is basic blacksmithing. You'll be learning how to make a rod of iron into a square-sided spike and, if you really get the hang of it, how to make a horseshoe."

"Oh, good," a new, chipper voice said. "I've always wanted to learn to make my own horseshoes."

Nick turned around and his heart sank as he saw Bax's friend Callum striding into the forge.

Even dressed in heavy dungarees and work boots, Callum managed to be a picture of sartorial elegance. He wore a tweed newsboy cap, but his hair was perfectly coifed under that. He smiled broadly at Nick as he walked right into the forge, shrugging out of his long wool coat, and hung it on one of the pegs at the edge of the forge as if he owned the place.

Inadequate didn't begin to describe how Nick felt in Callum's presence.

"Callum," he greeted the man. "Are you taking this class?"

"If that's alright with you," Callum said, the picture of old fashioned friendliness.

"Er, of course," Nick said, shuffling slightly.

He fumbled the pair of wolf jaw tongs he'd been about to put on the demonstration table, dropping them on the toe of his boot. The clumsy gesture had him hissing and bouncing back on one foot for a second before he could bend and pick the tool up. As he stood, he bumped his head on the side of the clamp he'd fastened to the edge of the table earlier.

"Haven't had our coffee yet, have we?" Callum joked with him.

"No," Nick laughed in reply, even though he felt a thousand times more embarrassed than clever.

"No worries," Callum said. "You're still the expert here. Head bumps or no."

Nick couldn't tell if Callum was making fun of him. He couldn't tell if Callum was genuine in his appreciation as he looked around the forge or if he really was as fascinated with everything as he pretended to be. He was one of those people who was just so vibrant in everything they did that it was impossible to tell if they were naturally exuberant or mocking you so subtly you couldn't tell.

Worse still, Callum looked good no matter what he was doing, whereas Nick already had a smudge of soot across his face somehow, before he'd actually done anything that could be considered blacksmithing.

"Welcome to Introduction to Blacksmithing," he greeted the class more formally once everyone was there. "I'm Nick Turner. I've been working in a forge since I was seventeen. If you've had a chance to look around, you've been able to see that not only do I make things like hinges and horseshoes—" he picked up an old horseshoe he'd made from his demonstration table, "I sculpt in metal as well." He held out a hand to Raina's unicorn.

"That's magnificent," Callum said brightly. "Your attention to detail is spot-on."

Nick stood there frozen and flummoxed for a moment. Did he mean that or was he somehow taking a dig at him?

He shook his head and went on. “Since this is an introductory class, we’re going to spend most of our time learning technique instead of making anything elaborate. Apologies if you thought you would have your own samurai sword by the end of May.”

The class chuckled. Callum laughed freely.

The joke wasn’t that clever.

“Now, before you do or touch anything, we need to run through what all of the tools are, how they’re used, and most importantly of all, we need to talk about forge safety. So grab yourself an apron, a pair of gloves, and some goggles, and we’ll get started.”

The class followed his instructions, collecting the required items from storage at the side of the room. Nick couldn’t help but watch Callum as he slipped gracefully into an apron, picked out gloves like he was in some London shop, and smiled at Lauren as they both chose goggles from the shelf. Even preparing for hard, sweaty work, Callum was his own work of art.

On top of that, Nick just bet that he didn’t have kids. Kids who would cause him to run out on Bax in the middle of sex. Callum was probably an amazing lover, too. He probably knew all the tricks of the trade to have Bax howling with pleasure in bed and coming like a fountain as they humped like bunnies.

With someone like that practically begging Bax to run away and join his coven, why would Bax ever stay with him?

The thought was so intrusive and vicious that Nick jerked a little as it hit him. He

fought off the rush of inadequacy that thinking about Callum and Bax together gave him by focusing on feeding the fire in the old forge and getting it ready for the demonstration he was about to do. He needed to focus. Children and fire were two things you could never take your eyes off of.

As soon as the class was kitted up, Nick had them gather around the forge itself so he could point out all the different parts and explain what they did. He talked about the differences between the hundreds of years old forge and the new, gas-powered forge and explained why a forge that had been built in the eighteenth century was still just as good as it had been before the French Revolution.

Once that was done and none of his students managed to burn themselves or their clothes, he had them take their seats again while he explained each of the different tools.

He was halfway through that explanation and had just taken a small rod of yellow-hot metal from the forge to demonstrate how to safely strike it against an anvil to shape it when he spotted Bax strolling in to join them.

He smiled. He couldn't help himself. Bax was the best thing that had happened to him in ages. He didn't look upset or angry with him for running out earlier. In fact, Bax looked as contented and sexy as ever. The heat in his eyes matched that of the forge behind him.

In a heartbeat, all of the fear and insecurity spitting at Nick like sparks flying from a mismanaged fire settled. There was no mistaking the way Bax looked at him. The sizzle in the air between them was probably obvious to anyone with eyes. It gave Nick the confidence to go on.

“Make sure you have a firm grip on your tools before you hammer anything,” he said, striking the quickly cooling rod a few times. “I can't tell you how many accidents

we've had because of dropped iron when it's yellow to cherry red. That's why we wear protective clothing. You do not want to?—"

"Oh, hello," Callum greeted Bax while Nick was still in the middle of speaking. "Fancy seeing you here."

Every one of Nick's insecurities came rushing back at him, and his grip on the tongs loosened enough for the glowing iron rod to slip on the anvil.

Fortunately, he was able to catch himself before everything he'd just told his students, the ones who were paying attention, not to do happened. He thought fast enough to pretend he'd done it on purpose.

"See how easy it is to lose focus?" he asked before carefully moving the rod back to the fire.

"You handled that brilliantly," Lauren said, smiling at him.

"Handling it brilliantly would have been not letting it slip in the first place," he said with a sheepish smile. "Now, if everyone wants to grab a set of tools and get set up at one of the stations in the forge, we'll take our first steps to making something useful."

The students started to move, and Nick forced himself to the thing he'd purposefully ignored until then, Bax and Callum talking. From the look of things, Bax had answered Callum's greeting while Nick had gone on with his demonstration. The two still seemed to be exchanging pleasantries, but as soon as the other students got up to claim one of the workstations, Callum did a doubletake, then stood as well.

"I guess I'd better focus," he told Bax. "I'm here to learn metalworking from a master, not to chat, after all." He nodded to Nick with a smile, then went to collect tools with the other students.

Nick let out a breath, trying to dispel his uneasiness with it, and headed over to Bax. More than anything, he wanted to greet Bax with a kiss, but between the fact that he didn't want to get dirt or soot on Bax's clean clothes and the sense of propriety that told him kissing in front of your students wasn't a good idea, he held back.

"Sorry," Bax said before Nick could get out his own apology for running out that morning. "I forgot you have a new schedule this session. I don't want to interrupt."

"I'm glad you came down here," Nick said, smiling at Bax with his whole heart. "I feel like I owe you an apology for—" He finished by clearing his throat when one of the college guys veered close enough to overhear them.

"Perfectly understandable," Bax said, holding his hands up, like they were discussing how Nick had drunk out of Bax's coffee cup instead of leaving him all hot and bothered and spread in the heat of the moment. "The kids come first."

"You should have come first," Nick murmured.

Bax gasped, his face brightening into joy. "Nicholas Turner, did you just make a sexy joke?"

Nick blinked and thought about what he'd said. Only then did he catch the possible double entendre in his words.

"No," he laughed. "I wasn't trying to make that joke, but I guess I did."

Bax laughed along with him, which set the world to right again.

Until Callum stepped up and said, "What did I miss?"

Nick wanted to punch the sophisticated, smarmy bastard in the nose.

Except, Callum didn't really deserve that. It wasn't fair of him to start off whatever association the two of them might have with jealousy.

"Nothing," Bax answered, just a touch frosty. "We'll talk later," he said, winking at Nick.

"I hope so," Callum answered, like Bax had been talking to him. "I'm determined to convince you to join the coven, after all."

Bax laughed, but Nick could see in his eyes that he didn't really find it funny. "Later," he said, brushing Nick's arm.

Bax winked as he turned to go. Nick caught himself sighing, half because he was head over heels in love and half because everything seemed so much harder than it should have been between them. If it wasn't the kids, it was his class. And now Callum had thrown his spanner in the works. But wasn't that just the way of everything in his life right now? Kids, Teaching, Art, and Bax.

"Right, let's get started," Callum said. "I can't wait to learn how to wield the element of fire like a pro. Then maybe I'll snag the attention of a man like Bax, too."

Nick dragged his focus to Callum in time to have Callum wink at him, like the two of them were coconspirators in the art of love.

Or maybe like Callum was acknowledging his competition where Bax was concerned.

Either way, uneasiness rippled down Nick's spine. It was going to be a long spring.

THIRTEEN

Nick felt threatened by Callum. Bax had picked up on that during his visit to that first forging class. It had been subtle then, but as the week wore on, Nick's tension in the morning when he would be teaching his Intro to Blacksmithing class was palpable. Bax tried to do whatever he could to alleviate Nick's worries, from being cuddly to deliberately not mentioning Callum in conversation, but he wasn't sure it was doing any good.

He got where Nick was coming from, to a certain point. Despite being in his early thirties, Nick was a brand new gay. Well, he was new to having a gay relationship. He probably looked at Callum the way Callum would look at him if he'd suddenly been asked to put together a sculpture rivaling Nick's unicorn for a metalworking competition after just one class.

Then again, with Callum, he would probably face the challenge of creating a larger-than-life metal sculpture after one metalworking lesson with a smile, and then accidentally create a masterpiece that the Tate Modern wanted for their collection.

Which was the heart of the problem, really.

Bax couldn't do anything to change their circumstances or work on Nick's self-esteem issues for him. All he could do was love Nick as close to the way Nick needed to be loved as he could. He was still figuring out what that meant, but he was in the early days of infatuation, when his heart was still on fire and his whole world seemed to revolve around making his big bear of a man happy.

Honestly, he was ready to move past the silly, squirrely, early days of love to build a more solid, natural relationship with Nick. He didn't mind doing things like deliberately not asking Callum for referrals to people he knew who might need an accountant, but he really could have used that resource. The Brotherhood was an excellent place for him to start building a client list on his way to forming a thriving company, but a lot of its members already had accountants they were happy with.

By the end of the week, Nick was still showing signs of strain.

"Your new classes are going well, though," Bax said as he sat on one of the benches in the forge in the middle of Friday afternoon, watching Nick polishing the unicorn with some sort of electric polishing thing to make particular patterns in the metal of its body. "Nobody has complained to Uncle Robert, at least."

Nick huffed a laugh and glanced up at Bax. How the man could look so sexy wearing plastic safety goggles was beyond Bax. "It's too early for complaints," he said. "They'll be keeping it all inside right now and grumbling to each other for another week still."

"Oh, come on," Bax said, grinning. "You're an amazing teacher. Every time I've snuck down here to see what you're doing, everyone looks happy and engaged."

Nick tensed despite the compliment, and Bax wondered if he was thinking about Callum. It was barmy, but with the mood Nick had been in all week, his darker thoughts were probably whispering that Bax had dropped by the forge briefly that morning to check Callum out instead of to bring Nick coffee and make sure he was okay.

"You're a good teacher, Nick," Bax said, sliding off his stool and moving across the forge so he could throw his arms around Nick's shoulders once he put his tools down. "A very good teacher. And you're a good father, too," he said, knowing that was

another point of stress for his sweetheart.

Nick let out a breath and circled his arms around Bax, bringing him close enough to kiss. “Thanks.”

Bax kissed him back, letting the moment between them linger and pulse with warmth. Nick responded with enthusiasm, which had even more sparks flying between them.

Good. That was the way it should be. Nick deserved a little adult time to explore himself.

“I’ve got a surprise for you,” Bax said, grinning as he rocked back, keeping his arms around Nick.

“Oh yeah?” Nick smiled, relaxing more by the second.

“Mmm hmm. I called your mother this morning and asked if she could take the kids overnight tonight,” Bax said.

“You did?” Nick’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “You called my mum?” When Bax nodded, Nick said, “The two of you hate each other.”

“I don’t hate your mum,” Bax said. “I’m just unwilling to wither under her disapproving glare because I’m not a woman and can’t give her more grandchildren.”

Nick chuckled and rolled his eyes. “Sorry about her.”

“Good or bad, she said she’d take the kids tonight,” Bax went on. “Which means you and I can have a leisurely, romantic evening together that can last all night.”

Nick grinned sheepishly. “I’m flattered that you think I could go all night.”

“I’m sure you could, given the right motivation,” Bax said.

“And what motivation would that be?” Nick asked, flushing with lust.

“Something like....”

Bax left the sentence unfinished as he sank to a crouch, dragging his hands down the length of Nick’s body as he did. Nick was wearing his heavy, protective apron, and as Bax lifted it and ducked under to rub his face against the already growing bulge in Nick’s trousers, he sucked in a breath.

It wasn’t supposed to be anything, but as soon as Bax was close to the heat and scent of Nick’s groin, he changed his mind about how far he was willing to take things and reached for Nick’s zip. A quick blow job in the forge was just what the two of them needed to?—

“Oh! Sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt the two of you.”

Early’s gentle voice sent a shock of embarrassment straight down Bax’s spine. Nick leapt back, bumping into his unicorn as he did, which had the whole thing tipping slightly. As Nick turned to steady the sculpture, Bax bounced to his feet and turned to Early.

“Gosh, I’m sorry!” Early gasped. “Truly. It’s just that Nick wasn’t answering his phone and one of his students, John Kilpatrick, called to say he won’t be able to make it to the afternoon class.”

Nick cleared his throat and acknowledged Early’s message with a rough, “Thanks.”

“I’d better leave you to it,” Bax said, lifting his shirt a few times to get some air against his overheated skin. “I’ve got plans to execute anyhow.”

Nick sent him an adorable, embarrassed, hungry look and said, “Okay.”

“I really didn’t mean to interrupt,” Early whispered as they and Bax started back up to the house. “I know you two don’t get as much time together as you’d like.”

That simple statement surprised Bax. Had everyone at Hawthorne House noticed how difficult it was for him and Nick to just date?

As soon as he got back to the house, Bax hurried up to his flat to begin preparations. He was determined that everything should be perfect. He wanted to give Nick a night he’d never forget, an adult night he’d never forget, which involved an elaborate meal with things like oysters and steak that kids would turn their noses up at. He already had a bottle of wine at the ready that paired with the steak. After dinner, he had several things in mind for the bedroom, including a few toys that Nick might not have had a chance to play with before.

Just thinking about it all had Bax’s heart singing as he hopped around his flat, getting everything ready. Nick wasn’t the only one who needed an adult night. It wasn’t just the spiritual community of a coven that Bax missed from his life before coming to Hawthorne House. He missed unfettered sex and an adult mindset. He missed having his arse pounded by someone whose focus was on him completely and who was just as dedicated to exploring sensuality and satisfaction. He’d only begun to realize how important that part of his life was after it had gone away.

By the time six o’clock rolled around, everything was set, the candles were lit, the low music was playing, and all that the sexy night needed was Nick.

Five minutes after six, Nick still wasn’t there.

Ten minutes later, Bax gave up waiting with a sigh, buttoned up the shirt he’d left undone to give Nick a feast for his eyes, and headed out to the hall to knock on

Nick's door.

He was met by the sound of two babies crying before Nick even opened the door.

"Shoot, what time is it?" Nick asked, sending a harried glance over his shoulder, like there was a clock on the wall.

"Quarter past six," Bax said, stepping into Nick's flat.

It looked like a kid bomb had gone off. There were toys everywhere, the telly was on, even though no one was watching it, and the dining table off to the side was covered not only in remnants of snacks, but in wadded up tissues as well.

"I'm sorry," Nick said, rushing in to give Bax a quick kiss, even though he had a wailing Jordan in his arms. "I didn't think it was that late. Mum called half an hour ago to say she wasn't able to take the kids tonight after all and Imogen wasn't able to stay late. I tried asking Janice and Robert if they could watch the kids, but they're off in London tonight for some fundraising thing."

Bax vaguely remembered Aunt Janice saying something about that the day before.

"Your mum called at the last minute to cancel?" he asked, crossing his arms and watching as Nick carried Jordan over to the table and stood him there so he could wipe the wailing boy's nose. "Did she give a reason?"

"Not a real one," Nick said. He sent Bax an apologetic look over his shoulder that said he knew what his mum was up to as much as Bax did. She'd canceled on purpose to thwart Bax's plans.

"We can still have supper," Nick said, desperation in his eyes as Jordan tried to fight the nose-wiping. "We might just have to have it in here, though. The kids have come

down with this cold that's been making the rounds. They're all sorts of snotty and out of sorts at the moment."

"I can see that," Bax said.

One part of him urged him to go over to the playpen and pick up Macy, since she was crying and obviously miserable. Another part of him wanted to cry and be miserable right along with her. He needed an adult night with Nick. He needed some time for the two of them that wasn't about kids and responsibilities. He desperately missed being himself and conducting his life the way he wanted to.

"Is it too much to ask for you to bring whatever you made for supper over here?" Nick asked hopefully. He finished cleaning up Jordan, walked him over to the playpen, and exchanged him for Macy, which did not make Jordan happy.

"I'm not sure the kids would like oysters, grilled steak, and cipollini onions with Meyer lemon nori butter," Bax said, fighting to keep the resentment out of his voice.

"Oh," Nick said, deflating a little as he pulled a handful of tissues from the box to wipe Macy's snotty face. "That sounds amazing, but no, they wouldn't eat it."

"I can pack it all up and put it in the fridge so we can have it later," Bax suggested.

Nick's face pinched and lifted several times as a whole set of emotions ran through him. Finally, he said, "I'm not going to be able to leave them tonight, even to go across the hall. Not when they're sick like this."

"I understand," Bax said, nodding and pushing himself forward. He grabbed the rubbish bin from the kitchen and brought it to the table to help Nick by cleaning up some of the mess. "Why don't you deal with the kids and I'll see what you have in your pantry for all of us."

“That would be lovely,” Nick said, gusting out a breath.

He peeled away from a clingy Macy long enough to kiss Bax’s lips, but it was a cursory, ordinary kiss and not the kind he’d been hoping for that night. As soon as it was done, he had to give his full attention to his crying, snotty kid.

It was completely unfair of Bax to feel as much resentment as he did while carrying the bin back to the kitchen, then checking the pantry. Kids always came first. They couldn’t take care of themselves. They were sick. There was no possible way he could compete with that.

But that was the problem. There was no way he could compete with Jordan and Macy for Nick’s attention. Ordinarily, someone might have been able to step in to help, but luck was against them that night. It was wrong and selfish for Bax to be as irritated by the whole thing as he was.

There was nothing to be done but to toss a frozen pizza in the oven along with some chips from a bag, then to head over to his place to blow out candles, pack his gourmet meal away in containers, and put all the toys and lube back in the drawer of his bedside table.

“We could have had so much fun,” he sighed as he shut the drawer, then headed back over to Nick’s place.

“I’m really, really sorry about this,” Nick said as Bax walked back into the flat with one smaller container filled with bits from the supper he’d made. “My mum is a cold and cruel woman. I’m certain she’s doing this as a way to convince me to give her the kids permanently.”

That statement stopped Bax’s resentment in its tracks.

“That’s awful,” he said, putting the container of supper on the counter in the kitchen, then moving to pick Jordan up from the couch. “Is she really still on about taking the kids?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Nick sighed.

That was as far as the conversation went. The kids were done eating, they were seriously flagging, especially since Nick had just dosed them with baby cold medicine, and it was time for them to go to bed. Bax helped by carrying Jordan into the nursery that he and Macy shared, but he felt uncertain and uncomfortable about undressing a child he wasn’t technically related to.

“It’s fine,” Nick said, a hint of impatience in his voice as he stripped Macy and changed her nappy. “I know you don’t have any dubious intentions toward the kids. They’re not going to explode if you take their clothes off. Jordan’s nighttime nappies are over there.”

Bax swallowed hard, trying not to be squeamish and reminding himself that helping with toddlers was an act of love as much as cooking a gourmet meal. That didn’t stop him from dreading what he would find when he took off Jordan’s nappy.

Fortunately, it was nothing gross. Jordan cried the whole time Bax fumbled his way through cleaning him with a wipe then putting a new nappy on, which he was sure he did wrong. He’d always imagined changing nappies was something you did for sweet little infants, not snotty, groggy three-year-olds who were having a bad night.

“There we go,” Nick said, somehow managing to sound loving and in control as he settled Macy into her crib. “Sleep it off, sunshine,” he told her, then bent over the crib to kiss her head.

He then came over to Bax and Jordan, taking Jordan from the changing table where

Bax was still trying to get his arm into his pajamas. Nick slipped it in with no effort at all, then carried Jordan to his crib. Jordan lay down, but it was clear from his continued, squelchy crying that he wasn't feeling well and was miserable.

"They'll feel better in the morning," Nick said as he turned off the light and stepped into the hall with Bax. "At least, I hope they'll feel better in the morning." He sent Bax a wide-eyed look of dread.

They headed into the main room and set to work cleaning up the remnants of the hasty supper, along with what felt like a thousand used tissues. As much as he tried to bat them away, unkind thoughts kept attacking Bax. He hoped he didn't catch the kids' germs. He hoped they slept into next Thursday. Maybe Mrs. Turner really should take the kids.

He stopped himself at that last thought and mentally slapped himself. Mrs. Turner was a manipulative shrew who was trying to bend her son to her will. Nick loved being a dad. Taking his kids from him would kill him.

But that was part of the problem, wasn't it?

"Can I heat up this amazing food you made for me in the microwave?" Nick asked, stepping up behind Bax as he cleaned the kitchen counter. He circled his arms around Bax to grab the container that had been left out and kissed Bax's neck.

Bax melted, but too much of the melt was from the withering thought of how futile it was for him to vie for Nick's attention.

"Yeah, that should be fine," he said. He twisted in Nick's arms and embraced him. "Whatever you want."

He wiggled his eyebrows, hinting that he really would give Nick whatever he wanted,

but instead of taking the bait, Nick smiled and said, “Good, because after that palaver, all I want is to sprawl on the couch with food in my belly and my man in my arms as we watch the football or whatever.”

Bax smiled and lifted to his toes to kiss Nick, but his heart flopped. “I’ll pour us some drinks,” he said, then peeled away.

“Just water for me,” Nick said, dousing his hopes for a romantic night even more. “I’ll need to be on top of my game if the kids wake up sick in the middle of the night.”

“Whatever you want,” Bax said, though it was harder to keep his smile in place.

They puttered around the kitchen, settling in for a painfully ordinary evening. Just before he sat down, Bax found his phone and discovered he had a message waiting. A message from Callum.

“ I know you’re not desperate to join a new coven, but we’re starting our Ostara prep, and again, we’d love, love, love you to come join us. ”

Bax swallowed hard and stared at his phone. Ostara and any number of other ceremonies and celebrations with a bunch of free-spirited, like-minded men without the encumbrance of small children or snot, nappies, frozen pizza...and Nick?

“Are you joining me?” Nick asked, patting the spot beside him on the couch.

“Yeah, just a second,” Bax said.

He turned his back to Nick and quickly typed a return message to Callum. “ I’ll think about it .”

He let his hand hover over his phone for a second. It felt wrong. It felt like cheating. Even though it wasn't a romantic invitation. It was a coven, a spiritual group that he could belong to. Nick could join him, if he wanted to. It wasn't a competing relationship. It would have been the same if someone had invited him to join the parish church choir.

Except it wasn't and Bax knew it.

He sucked in a breath, hit send, then put his phone face down on the table and hurried away to join Nick on the couch.

"This is cozy, isn't it?" Nick asked, tired and a little uncertain, if Bax was reading him right.

"Yeah, sweetheart," Bax said, cuddling up to Nick's side because he knew Nick needed it. "This is fine."

His heart sank. It wasn't fine. None of this was what he wanted. He didn't know if he was going to be able to make this work.

FOURTEEN

Nick didn't know what he was doing. Relationships were supposed to bring peace and fulfillment to someone's life. Raina had made his life infinitely better just by being a part of it. Bax made him extraordinarily happy, too, in so many ways. Thanks to Bax he was discovering an entirely different side of himself, a part that had always been there but had been dormant until now.

And it felt like everything was falling apart.

He'd only just managed to be a dad, a teacher, and an artist. Now he was trying to be a good boyfriend, too, and instead of making his life better, he felt like he was constantly a half-inch away from falling apart.

"You look tired, dear," his mum told him two weeks after his disastrous night with Bax.

It hadn't actually been disastrous. Yes, their plans had been forced to change and the kids had been sick, but in the end, he and Bax had spent a low-key evening cuddled up on the couch before going to bed, to sleep only, in Nick's bed. Jordan had woken up once during the night, but he'd been able to handle it without waking Bax. Or, at least, if Bax had woken up, he'd rolled over and gone straight back to sleep.

What a wonderful thing it would be to get a full night's sleep!

"I am tired, Mum," Nick said as he hoisted the kids' nappy bag over his shoulder and scooped Macy into one arm so he could carry her downstairs to his mum's car. "I'm a

single father of two kids with a full class schedule this session and a sculpture that's just been officially entered in the competition that's happening in less than two months. I'm exhausted."

He didn't add that he was also juggling a new relationship that he desperately wanted to work. His mum would only glare at him. She knew, of course, but she still didn't fully accept that he was bi and in a relationship with a man.

She glared at him anyhow as she carried Jordan down to Hawthorne House's family parking lot. One day soon, Nick knew he would have to sit his mum down and have the talk with her about how he and Bax were officially dating and how that wasn't going to change anytime soon, so she needed to accept it and treat them both accordingly.

He wondered why he hadn't talked to her about that already. Did that mean he wasn't convinced that he and Bax would last?

"Darling, I know you think I'm beating a deceased equine, but whenever you're ready for the children to come live with me, you know you need but say the word," his mum said once they had the kids secure in their car seats.

"Yes, Mum, I know," Nick sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I haven't changed my mind. The answer is still no. They're my kids, I'll raise them."

His mum pursed her lips and stared at him before relenting with an impatient breath. "Well, if you ever feel you need more time for your art," she said, then narrowed her eyes slightly and added, "Or anything else."

"Alright, enough. Have a good day, you two," he said, leaning down to wave to his babies through the backseat car window.

“Goodbye, dear,” his mum said before kissing his cheek and slipping into the car.

Nick stepped back and waved as his mum backed up. He stayed where he was, watching her car retreat down the drive, a tight, painful pull forming in his chest. He loved his kids more than anything in the world. They were definitely the most important things in his life, more important than himself. But maybe he was being selfish keeping them with him. Bax wasn't the only one not getting the attention he deserved. His kids needed more focus than he was able to give them.

He shook his head and turned, not to head back into the house, but to walk around the perimeter until he met the path heading down to the forge. The thought crossed his mind that he hadn't had time to go for a morning walk with Bax in weeks. Back when the weather was brutal, the two of them had gone out nearly every morning. He understood now that that was their way of flirting and getting to know each other better. They'd been motivated to spend that time together. Now that they were actually dating and sleeping together, they were lucky if they had time for a kiss and a tickle in the morning before they each had to dash out to take care of work and kids.

What if he did let his mum take the kids? What would mornings look like then? He wouldn't have to get up when Jordan and Macy got up and then focus on them to the exclusion of everything else. He could laze away in bed with Bax on the weekends, making love and getting to know him on a deeper level. They could take their morning walks in weather that was actually nice without him having to constantly check his phone in case Imogen needed him to handle something with the kids that she couldn't.

As he entered the forge and started the process of feeding the fires for the day, his gaze kept shifting to his unicorn. It was mostly done now, but all the other things he'd planned to make for the upcoming metalwork and blacksmithing convention Hawthorne House was hosting in just a few weeks had fallen by the wayside. If the kids were taken care of somewhere else, he might have time for more art.

He didn't like the direction his thoughts were headed and went about his morning prep with a frown. He was a dad, first and foremost. He was determined to be a good dad. But he was also a man. The number one thing Bax had taught him so far was that he had needs. That wasn't just some corny thing that horny people said. Now that he knew how amazing sex could be, his libido was constantly screaming at him.

He deserved a chance to listen to it and to act on it without interference.

"That's an awfully serious look for this early in the morning."

Nick straightened from where he'd been prepping a few rods of iron in the fire so they'd be ready for the day's project, creating S-hooks, to find Lauren just coming into the forge.

"Hello," he said, somehow managing a smile for her. "I was just concentrating."

Lauren hummed like she didn't quite believe him as she shrugged out of her coat and hung it on one of the hooks around the perimeter of the forge. "You can tell me to bugger off if you still need thinking time. I'm early for class."

"No, I'm fine," Nick lied. "I've just got a lot on my mind lately."

"Yeah, Joann was telling me the other day how stressed out you are between the kids being sick and everything else," Lauren came over to lean against the table closest to where Nick was working.

"The kids are doing much better," he said, still trying to be friendly. He was glad he was wearing his goggles. They gave him the illusion of distance between him and his sister's attempt at a set-up.

Although that wasn't entirely fair to Lauren. They were a few weeks into the class

and she hadn't pushed too hard or given him any reason to think she was there for any reason other than interest in metalworking.

That wasn't the case for a certain other student.

"Oh, have we started already?" Callum asked as he bounced cheerily into the forge. "I'm not late, am I?"

"Nope," Nick said, not trusting himself to actually look at Callum in case the sheer force of his jealousy knocked the man over. "I'm just prepping."

"And I was just asking about his kids," Lauren said. "I'm friends with Nick's sister."

Callum hung up his coat then came to join them, saying, "I'm friends with Nick's boyfriend."

Nick peeked up at Lauren, his face heating. He hadn't stood up on a bench and made any great announcement to the class that he and Bax were dating, but word had gotten around. He was anxious about what Lauren thought of their relationship, but more because of what Joann and his mum thought.

Lauren didn't bat an eyelash, though. "What a coincidence," she said, smiling at Callum. "How do you know Bax?"

That right there was proof that Lauren knew everything.

"We used to belong to the same coven," Callum answered, as smooth as you please, as if people walked around admitting to being Pagan every day.

Then again, Lauren didn't so much as blink at that either, so maybe it was just his hang-up about alternative lifestyles.

Or rather, it was his mum's opinion infecting his own way of viewing the world.

"Ooh, Pagan," Lauren said, shifting on her stool to give her attention to Callum instead of Nick. "I had a college friend who was a practicing Pagan. Happy Ostara, right?"

Callum laughed charmingly. "Not quite yet," he said. "In about two more weeks."

"Oh, right," Lauren said. "Ostara is the Spring Equinox, right?"

"Correct in one," Callum said with a broad smile. "You folks stole quite a few of our springtime rituals to make your Easter," he added, like he was scolding a disobedient child.

Lauren laughed. "Don't go blaming me. I'm agnostic at best. But I do love a chocolate egg."

"Eggs are signs of fertility," Callum said sagely. "So are hares. They both started out as Pagan symbols and traditions."

"Oh, same with hot cross buns," Lauren said, lighting up. "I remember reading about this. Everyone thinks hot cross buns are a symbol of Christianity because of the cross, but the cross is actually an ancient Celtic symbol for the division of Heaven and Earth and the human and the divine."

Callum looked absolutely delighted by Lauren's explanation. "We'll make a witch of you yet," he said.

Nick's heart sank to his feet and beyond as the two of them laughed together. He hadn't known any of that, not a bit. He barely knew there even was a Pagan holiday that matched Easter, though now that he thought of it, he was sure he'd heard all

about how all of the Christian holidays were originally Pagan holidays. Before Bax had explained things back at Imbolc.

His shoulders suddenly felt heavy and his steps leaden as he finished with the rods in the fire, then headed to the side to get the handouts the class would need for the day's project. Here he was dating a Pagan and he didn't know the first thing about some of the most important events of his spiritual calendar.

"I've been pestering Bax for weeks about joining us, but you should come, too," Callum was in the middle of saying, to Lauren, definitely not him, when Nick walked back that way with his stack of papers.

He paused for a second as his heart lurched. Callum had been pestering Bax for weeks about joining him for Ostara?

But of course he had. Bax had been open and honest about Callum wanting him to join his coven. Bax wasn't lying or hiding anything from him. Maybe Callum had contacted him more than once or twice, but that was fine. He didn't tell Bax about every phone call or invitation out that he got from his friends. Not that he had many outside of the Hawthorne family.

Those were all easy things to think, but they had a hard time truly sinking in.

"You should come, too, Nick," Callum added, drawing Nick into the conversation as he walked past, putting the handouts on everyone's workstations. As soon as the invitation was made, Callum slumped and said, "Then again, the way we celebrate Ostara isn't exactly family-friendly."

"Ooh!" Lauren said, brightening even more. "Tell me more."

"It is a holiday celebrating fertility, after all," Callum said with a cheeky wink.

Lauren laughed. Nick pretended to, but his mood was turning sour in a hurry.

“It’s not really as naughty as all that,” Callum went on, speaking mostly to Lauren as the rest of the class arrived. “My particular coven just includes, shall we say, fertility symbolism in our otherwise very tame rituals. But you should have seen us, me and Bax, back in the day when we still belonged to our original coven. Damien, Bax’s ex, too. There was one time when our coven leader decided we should really go all in with the fertility aspect of the whole thing. I think I had a sore bum for a week after. But Bax was absolutely spectacular.”

Lauren burst with laughter. Nick’s gut twisted.

“Alright, if you’re all ready to get class started,” Nick said, pretending he wasn’t painfully aware of the conversation as he raised his voice to bring it to a sharp end. “Today’s lesson is about making S-hooks, so if you all want to get your anvil set up, find a pair of tongs, a hammer, and a twisting spanner, we’ll get right to it.”

Lauren and Callum continued to laugh and chat about Ostara, complete with innuendo, as they headed off together to collect their tools. Nick rubbed his forehead in an attempt to dispel the headache that was forming behind his eyes and tried to swallow away the nausea that was creeping up on him. Maybe he’d caught germs from the babies. Or maybe he just couldn’t stomach being slapped in the face with the fact that he was the worst possible person Bax could be dating.

At least the lesson went well. Part of the reason for that was because Nick was so frustrated that he put all of his effort into making not one demonstration S-hook but four as his students looked on. They were damn good S-hooks, too, even if he didn’t have the slightest idea what he would use them for. At least he was good at something.

He managed to push his writhing emotions to the back of his mind, but they were

definitely there as he walked around, helping his students with their task and stepping in to guide them where they needed it. Callum made a perfect S-hook on the first try, of course, but his second and third weren't nearly as good.

Nick felt a wicked amount of satisfaction in that.

He wasn't sure if it was a good thing or an absolutely terrible one when Bax wandered down to the forge just as the class was finishing up and putting away tools.

"Now that's a sight I like to see," Bax greeted him with a heated look, sweeping Nick's dirty, sweaty body with an appreciative look.

"Is it though?" Nick asked, knowing damn well he was being too impatient and standoffish with the one person, the one adult person, he cared about more than anyone else.

Bax flinched then frowned. "Something wrong?" he asked.

Before Nick could answer, Callum came bounding over.

"Bax! I'm so glad I caught you in person today," he said. "I've just been having a grand time telling Lauren and Nick about Ostara and all the preparations we've been making to celebrate this year. You know I'd love to have you come and join the fun, even though it won't be quite as much fun as it was back in the heyday." He wiggled his eyebrows.

Bax clearly knew exactly what Callum was talking about. He let out a breathy laugh, lowered his head slightly as a blush painted his face, then peeked at Nick. "Those days are long gone," he said.

Nick stiffened. Had Bax said that because he missed those days? Because he regretted

tying himself to a single father who had no idea what he was doing?

He shook his head slightly and used a bit of clean-up at the forge as an excuse to turn away.

“Perhaps,” Callum said. “But there’s going to be a picnic, weather permitting, egg decorating, a plant exchange, and, of course, a fertility ritual. Not that kind of fertility ritual, though.” Nick looked up in time to see him wink at Bax.

The sick feeling in the pit of Nick’s stomach returned. He couldn’t give Bax any of that. He wasn’t cheery and carefree. He had a ton of cares. Two in particular.

Although a picnic and egg hunt for the kids would be a lot of fun. They could do something like that at Hawthorne House. Robert and Janice had talked about hosting an Easter Egg hunt for kids for years. Macy wasn’t old enough, but Jordan might be. He might love it.

But it wouldn’t be anything close to what Bax was used to.

“I’m pretty sure we have plans here,” Bax replied to Callum, moving closer to Nick. “But I appreciate the invite.”

“The invitation remains open,” Callum said as he packed up his things. “For you, too,” he told Lauren.

Nick glanced up briefly as the two new friends headed out of the forge together, then threw his attention back into tidying up from the morning class and beginning preparations for his afternoon class.

“I’ve been thinking about you all morning,” Bax said, sidling up close to him and slipping his arms around Nick as soon as all the students were gone.

Nick smiled tightly and hugged Bax back briefly, then wiggled out of his embrace so he could continue setting the forge to rights.

Bax's smile dropped. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," Nick lied.

He immediately kicked himself for hiding things from Bax. They were supposed to be dating. Raina had never let him hide anything when they'd been together.

He blew out a breath then turned to Bax and said, "If you want to go spend Ostara with Callum and his lot, then you can go."

A whole flurry of emotions passed through Bax's expression before he settled on concerned. "I do miss having a coven," he said with a nod. "But if you're worried, even for a second, that there could even be a hint of a possibility of anything between me and Callum, don't."

"I'm not worried," Nick said, uncertain if it was a lie.

He put down the tongs he'd just collected and gave Bax his full attention.

"Bax, you know I care about you," he began.

"Yes," Bax said with deep, deep concern in his voice.

"I just worry that I'm not enough for you, that I'll never be able to give you what you need," Nick said in a rush.

Bax held absolutely still for a moment. He glanced at Nick, holding his gaze, but took forever to say something.

“I’d be lying if I said everything between us has been smooth sailing from the start,” he said, sending a spike of terror through Nick’s already roiling gut. He then stepped right up to Nick, slipping his arms around him, and holding their bodies together as he said, “But I love you.”

Nick caught his breath so fast and hard he nearly coughed. “You do?”

“Yes,” Bax said, his usual, impish smile returning. “I love how good and diligent you are in everything you do. I love how you care about everything and everyone, from the Hawthornes to your students to your wonderful, sweet children.”

“They’re not always sweet,” Nick said, his heart fluttering and banging against his ribs. “And I care about you, too. That’s why I worry so much.”

“Why are you worried?” Bax asked bluntly.

He deserved a blunt answer. “Because I don’t think I’m good enough for you. I have too many things going on and I’m not great at sex.”

Bax laughed. “You’re perfectly fine at sex,” he said.

“Since when has ‘perfectly fine’ ever been a compliment?” Nick asked, feeling better by the second. This was the way he wanted things to be between the two of them. This was the lightness and banter that he dreamed of when he thought about himself and Baxter as a couple.

“‘Fine’ is a stepping-stone to ‘stellar’,” Bax said, his voice taking on a sexy purr. “I know we’ll get there someday.”

“I’m just worried we won’t get there soon enough for you,” he said. “I...I love you, too, Bax, but I don’t think I’m enough for you.”

“Silly,” Bax said, making the single word into the sexiest thing Nick had ever heard.

That could also have had something to do with the way Bax kissed him once it was spoken. The kiss was so powerful that Nick leaned back against the nearest table and widened his stance so Bax could plaster himself against him and so their mouths were closer to the same level. He kissed Bax in return, letting all his worries go and just enjoying the moment.

“You are enough for me,” Bax said breathlessly when their kiss ended. “Everything else is just stuff that needs to be worked out.”

“Are you sure?” Nick asked.

“Yes, love, I am,” Bax said, then kissed him again.

Nick wrapped his arms around him and gave him the best kiss he could manage. It wasn't time or attention, but it was the best he could do in the moment.

Strangely, it felt like enough. It was a tiny seed that made him confident that he could give Bax more. He wanted to give Bax more...somehow. There had to be a way to make that happen.

FIFTEEN

He could do this. As March wore on, Bax was certain he could ignore all the other stresses and pressures surrounding him and Nick to build a meaningful, lasting relationship. The two of them were so compatible on so many levels. The more they got to know each other, the more it was clear they had the same sense of humor, the same love of nature, and the same outlook on the world. Nick respected his beliefs and showed interest in learning about them, and he was dynamite in bed, no matter what he thought about himself.

That was possibly the best surprise of those early days of their relationship. For a man who didn't think he was particularly sensual and who had zero experience with other men before Bax came along, Nick was everything he craved in a sexual partner. His inexperience made him eager to please, which meant he held nothing back. There were a few times when Bax had been worried they would break the bed with their energy. Every time Nick apologized for accidentally leaving bruises, Bax assured him that he loved it.

But there were other, little things that started to creep in and ruin what should have been an amazing time in their relationship. That morning when Nick had rushed out of Bax's bed because his kids woke up wasn't a one-time occurrence. In fact, it quickly got to the point where they didn't bother trying to make love in the morning because the kids would inevitably call Nick away.

Then things reached a point where Nick decided it wasn't such a great idea for him to spend the entire night in Blaine's bed after all.

“You’re more than welcome to join me over at mine,” he said as he balanced himself over Bax a few minutes after they’d finished, once the snuggly afterglow had worn off. “I wouldn’t say no to a guest in that big, cold bed.”

Bax grinned up at him reaching up to caress Nick’s face. His tired heart was heavy, though. “Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes,” Nick said, lowering his big, strong body over Bax’s so that he could kiss him and press their flesh together.

It was one of those head-spinning kisses that Bax loved, and even though he’d just come not ten minutes before, his cock was starting to perk up again.

Until Nick pushed himself up again and said, “Of course, you’d have to have pajamas. Jordan can get out of his crib and has been wandering into my room lately. I think Macy is just about to figure out how to get free, too. They could show up in bed between us at any second, so pajamas are a necessity and canoodling is probably out.”

Bax blew out a breath and sagged. “I might stay here, then,” he said, still trying to smile. “I’m knackered anyhow. I think I’ll just sleep.”

Nick’s face pinched for a second, like he was well aware of the problem that kept wedging its way between them. He didn’t say anything about it, though. They both knew the middle of the night, just after sex, wasn’t the time to address the elephant in the room.

That elephant would have to be addressed at some point, Bax knew. He could do this, he could have a relationship with a sexy, single father, but as time wore on and he spent more nights sleeping alone, his positive mantra grew more and more strained.

“You look a bit tired,” Callum told him a week before Ostara, when the two of them ran into each other in the front hall of Hawthorne House. “Staying up late with your man?” he asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

Bax laughed, but he wasn’t amused by the question.

“I’ve just had a lot of work lately,” he said, rubbing his face in a bid to shake the tired off. “Who would have thought it was so difficult to get an LGBTQ-supporting accounting firm off the ground?”

“Oh!” Callum perked up. “Are you starting your own firm? Do you need clients? Because I’m part of the Surrey and Kent LGBTQ Small Business Association, and I can think of loads of people who would be happy as Larry to hire one of our own to service all their accounting needs.”

A swoop of dread pooled in Bax’s stomach. He’d deliberately avoided asking Callum for help because of Nick’s insecurities. But here Callum was, offering him what could be a golden opportunity to make his dream business a success.

Instinct and the part of him that cared deeply for Nick and didn’t want to do anything to hurt him warned him not to take Callum up on his offer. But another, older part of him urged him to accept the help. Three months ago, he would have leapt at Callum’s offer without hesitation. The man he’d been when he and Damien split, when he committed to starting this new life, wouldn’t have waited or let someone else’s feelings interfere with what could be a vital business decision.

It felt a little too much like Nick was holding him back. In more ways than one.

“Yeah,” Bax said at last, giving up his moral struggle and opting to pretend it was purely a business decision. “I’d love your help with the business association.”

“Excellent,” Callum said, clapping a hand on Bax’s shoulder. “I’ll send you a message with the link to the association, and if you give me your information, I’ll pass it along to a few blokes I know.”

“I appreciate it,” Bax said, shoulders dropping. Callum’s hand still rested on one of his shoulders, and it felt like a weight of defeat.

Worse still, Rafe happened to be walking from the classroom hallway toward the office, and his eyebrows went up as he spotted Callum touching him.

“You know,” Callum went on, not noticing that they had an audience, “Ostara is this Friday. We’re beginning celebrations on Friday evening and carrying them into the weekend. I’ve invited you before and I know you have other plans, but it really would be a joy to have you join us.”

He moved his thumb slightly as he pulled his hand back, brushing it against Bax’s neck. The subtle movement was deliberate. Callum’s invitation was clearly for more than just an Ostara picnic.

“We’ll see,” Bax said with a tight smile, then took a step back.

He and Callum said their goodbyes, and as soon as Callum left, Bax headed for the office. His smile dropped, and a whirlwind of anxious thoughts hit him. The man he’d been before coming to Hawthorne House would have jumped at Callum’s invitation. And not the one to join his coven for Ostara, or permanently. He would have bent over and offered Callum his arse in a heartbeat back in the fall. They’d been together before, and Bax’s memories of those nights were good.

“Ouch,” Rafe said as Bax walked into the office kitchen to grab a tea.

Bax was so lost in his thoughts that he flinched a little and snapped his gaze up to

meet Rafe's eyes guiltily.

"You look like a man staring down the barrel of a moral dilemma," Rafe went on, leaning against the edge of the counter as the kettle boiled.

"Down the barrel?" Bax blinked, trying to divert the inevitable conversation. "You've been in America too long."

Rafe shrugged. "The metaphor seems appropriate," he said. "Since what I saw out there has the potential to blow your head off."

Bax desperately wanted to argue his innocence and tell his cousin that nothing untoward was going on. The trouble was, he couldn't.

"I don't know what to do," he confessed in a tired voice, leaning against the perpendicular counter and rubbing both hands over his face.

"If you're done with Nick, you owe it to him, to all of us, to end it quickly and easily instead of dragging him along," Rafe said in a surprisingly firm voice.

Bax let his hands drop and stared at Rafe, forlorn. "I don't want to end things with Nick. I love Nick. I really do."

"Have you said the words?" Rafe asked.

"Yes, actually," Bax straightened a bit. "A couple weeks ago. And frequently since then. And I mean them, too. I've never met anyone like Nick. I've never met anyone who feels so much like the perfect man for me. He's kind and good, creative and funny when he wants to be, and between you and me, he's amazing in bed."

Rafe looked surprised for a second before frowning again. "He's one of the best men

I know,” he said. “Raina picked a good one. If you hurt him, her ghost is going to haunt you for the rest of your life.”

Bax winced. “I know,” he said. “I don’t want to hurt Nick. Believe me, I don’t.”

“But?” Rafe asked.

Bax sighed. “I feel like I’m lost somewhere in this relationship. It’s not at all what I’m used to.”

“Let me guess,” Rafe said with a lopsided grin. “You’re used to sunshine and moonbeams, sex at every hour of the day and night, and you and your boyfriend being the center of each other’s worlds.”

Bax felt sick with guilt at how easily his cousin had pegged him. “Is that really so wrong?” he asked, playing devil’s advocate with himself. “I’m a man with needs and a life. I’m used to a different pace of life, different expectations.”

“Yeah, and you’re dating a man with two small children,” Rafe said.

“Trust me, I know,” Bax said.

He winced at how harsh those few words had sounded. They made him sound like a selfish brat.

He let out a breath and leaned forward as the kettle clicked and started making himself a tea. “I am well aware of how selfish I sound right now,” he said, not looking at Rafe, who was watching him intently. “I love Nick’s kids, Raina’s kids. They’re already related to me by blood. I just never thought I’d be in any sort of parental position. I imagined myself having a much more adult life.”

“Nick probably imagined that, too,” Rafe said.

Bax sent him a flat, sideways look as he took the bag out of his tea. That thought had never occurred to him, which made him feel even more selfish. Of course Nick had wanted an adult life before the kids came along. “You’re not helping here,” he said.

Rafe laughed unexpectedly. “What do you want me to say? That you’re in danger of ruining a really good thing?”

“I’m not going to ruin it,” Bax said, throwing his teabag into the compost bin on the counter a little too forcefully. “I know it’s a good thing. It’s one of the best things that’s ever happened to me.”

“So?” Rafe said, twisting to make his own tea.

Bax sighed. “So this isn’t who I thought I was. It isn’t necessarily who I want to be.”

Rafe grinned and shook his head. “How old are you, Bax? Twenty-five?”

“Twenty-six,” Bax mumbled.

“And aren’t you always talking about the natural flow and change of the seasons and all that Pagan shit?”

Bax clenched his jaw. “Are you making fun of my faith or just using it to make a point?”

“Using it to make a point,” Rafe said without pause. “And that point is that seasons change. You’re young, but maturity is creeping in on you. You need to change with the seasons and accept that life looks different for different people at different phases.”

He had a point. But Bax rejected the idea that just because you got older you had to give up freedom and spontaneity.

“I love Nick,” he said, both in reply to Rafe and to circle back around to his own thoughts. “I think I could love him a lot more. We’re really good together. And just because he’s a father in his thirties doesn’t mean he has to be a slave to his responsibilities.”

“Um, when those responsibilities are toddlers, yes, he does,” Rafe said.

“How would you know?” Bax snapped, more irritated than he should be. “You’re not a father. You’ve been an international playboy, traveling the world blowing glass, and probably anyone with a sparkle in their eyes for you.”

Instead of getting angry with him, Rafe grinned like a Cheshire cat. “You’ve been waiting ages to use that one, haven’t you.”

Rafe’s humorous response took some of the edge off Bax’s frustration and he smiled. “Of course I have. It’s too good not to use.”

Rafe laughed and finished stirring sugar into his tea. Then he left the mug where it was and turned to give Bax a surprise hug. “Relationships are hard,” he said. “The best ones take even more work than the crappy ones because they mean more. You and Nick are perfect for each other, but that doesn’t mean everything will be easy at every step of the way. I’m sure the two of you can figure this out.”

Bax hugged his cousin back, willing his words to be true, even though uncertainty still gripped his gut. “How did you get so smart about relationships?” he asked. “You hate commitment.”

“I despise it,” Rafe said, letting Bax go. “I’d rather be dangled out one of the attic

windows by my balls then get involved in anything resembling a serious relationship.”

Bax laughed. Rafe was one of the more commitment-phobic members of the Hawthorne family, as his long string of exes showed.

He was about to say something to tease Rafe about it when Nick came striding into the office kitchen with an ancient book open in his hands and an excited look on his face.

“Bax, there you are,” he said, glancing from whatever was on the pages of his book to Bax with a smile. “I found this amazing book in the old library. It’s Victorian or something, and it’s all about ancient folk traditions. Which is the polite, Victorian way of saying it’s about Pagan holidays. It’s given me some ideas for how we could celebrate Ostara.”

Bax’s insides did about two dozen sorts of pinchy, flippy things at the force of Nick’s smile and his energy. “Really?” he asked. “What does it say?”

He peeked sideways at Rafe, who slipped subtly out of the room wearing a teasing grin.

“It talks about a lot of things that people used to do to welcome the spring back in ancient times,” Nick went on, not noticing the deliberate way Rafe left them alone. “And if the Victorians were calling the times ancient, they probably really were.”

Bax hummed and shifted so he could stand by Nick’s side and slide an arm around his waist so the two of them could look at the book together. Nick, in turn, shifted the book to his other hand so he could wrap his arm around Bax’s shoulders. Bax breathed in his smokey, spicy scent and snuggled into his warmth.

“The book talks about painting eggs and hiding them, which isn’t a surprise at all,” Nick said as the two of them stood together, looking at the yellowed pages of the book. “What do you think about this idea of making flower crowns and garlands, too? And making a special bed in the garden to plant seeds in. I think the kids would love playing in the dirt as they planted seeds. It would be a great way to get them involved that wouldn’t detract from what the adults could be doing.”

Bax sucked in a breath as his heart pounded against his ribs. Nick was trying so hard to accommodate him and to get the entire family involved. He was a horrible, rotten person for even considering breaking things off just because he couldn’t have everything his way all the time.

“If you’re alright with your babies getting mud in every crevasse and cranny, then I think it would be a great idea to involve them,” he said. If he said it enough times, he might actually start believing it, too.

Nick pivoted to grin at him. “If they get messy, that just means we can clean them up,” he said. “And then put them to bed and take a nice, long, hot bath of our own.”

Bax couldn’t help but smile at that. Nick had yet to master the art of a subtle, sexy grin. He looked more like a bear who found himself a ball to play with, but Bax loved it. More than that, it was the thought that counted.

“I love the idea of a bath,” he said. He plucked the book out of Nick’s hands and set it on the counter along with his forgotten tea, then shifted to embrace Nick tightly. “I love the idea of you naked however I can get you.”

“I like that, too,” Nick said, dipping down to kiss him.

Bax melted as heat infused him. Nick had become such a good kisser.

At the same time, the tension of what he wanted and reality pulled hard within him. The guilt he felt was crushing. Nick was trying so hard and here he was, grumbling and complaining because he couldn't have the man he loved more and more with every passing day all to himself.

“So what do you think?” Nick asked when he ended their kiss and pulled back. He reached for the book again. “Should we plan for a whole Ostara celebration with the entire Hawthorne family? You could lead the ritual part of it, like you did with Imbolc.”

Bax smiled. “Yeah, let's go for it,” he said. “I love all these ideas, flowers, planting, and all. And maybe once the kids have gone to bed and we've had our bath, we could dive deep into some fertility rituals as well.” He wiggled his eyebrows for good measure.

Nick laughed and leaned in to steal another kiss. “You're on,” he said. “I'm going to go see if there's a good spot to make a garden. I'll see you later for supper.”

Bax leaned toward him, hoping for another kiss as Nick turned to go, but Nick was too absorbed in his thoughts to see what he wanted.

It felt a little too on the nose for Bax. His smile dropped and all the uncertainty that he thought he'd just chased away sank back on him.

He could do this. Really, he could. He could learn to set aside the intensity of his wants and needs, and he could learn to be a better man for Nick.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, shattering his confidence in those thoughts. His stomach dropped even farther as he held his phone up and saw an incoming message from Callum with a link to the Surrey and Kent LGBTQ Small Business Association. The text came complete with a set of emojis of bunnies, Easter eggs, flowers, and a

single heart. The invitation there was clear.

Bax shoved his phone back in his pocket without answering the message. He grabbed his now cool tea and chucked the lot of it into the sink before slamming the button on the kettle to heat it again a little too hard.

He couldn't do this. Love shouldn't be so hard. It shouldn't mean sacrificing everything he was and wanted to be. The things that he wanted mattered, too.

SIXTEEN

Nick had never looked forward to a holiday as much as he looked forward to Ostara. Not even Christmas when he was a kid.

Well, maybe Christmas when he was a kid, because he'd been a kid and it was Christmas.

This particular Ostara felt like it carried all the significance of every Christmas he'd ever celebrated and a few Easters as well. He was happy, his life was heading in a direction that he liked, but he could feel that it was all hanging by the thinnest of threads.

Bax was restless. He wasn't used to dating someone with so many other responsibilities. Nick knew it and felt it like a sunburn that he couldn't get rid of, because the sun just kept shining.

He craved the sun. He wanted a relationship with Bax almost as much as he'd wanted one with Raina. He'd loved Raina with his whole heart, and it felt a little weird to love again, but he was definitely in love. And this time, he hadn't let love come to him, he was doing absolutely everything he could think of to reach for it and keep it.

"Do we have everything we need for the egg hunt tomorrow?" Nick asked as he and Bax gathered everything they would need for the more ritualistic part of the Ostara celebrations that they'd do that night, on actual Ostara. The fun stuff for the kids would mostly take place the next day, during daylight hours.

“I have the dye right here,” Bax said, holding up the package of commercial stuff they’d picked up at Sainsbury’s on their last trip. “And all the stickers you bought for the kids are on the table there.”

Nick glanced at the table in the lounge. They were in his flat, since it was easier to keep the kids entertained with their own toys. For once, Jordan and Macy were in a good mood and perfectly happy to entertain themselves on the floor in front of the telly, although the telly was turned off and music was playing instead.

“Good, good,” Bax said as he crossed to the fridge to fetch the platter of snacks he’d prepared earlier in the day, while Nick was still teaching his afternoon class. “The table is already down in the garden?” he asked as he and Nick crossed paths in their buzz of activity.

Nick went to the fridge to fetch box drinks to tide the kids over until the ceremony gave them something to focus on. “Your altar is all set up and ready to go,” he said, turning back to Bax with a wink.

He’d never been the least bit interested in religion until Bax had come along. He’d never been interested in a lot of things until Bax. There was something fun and satisfying about preparing for a ritual that would celebrate a power higher than him, though. If that meant sticking an old table in the garden, draping it with a pink cloth, covering it with flowers, a small brazier, a chalice, and some other things that he still wasn’t sure of the use for, and calling it an altar, then he was all for it.

“The rest of the family will be down to join us as soon as they’re finished with their classes and what not,” Nick added as he headed back into the lounge to give the box drinks to his kids. It wasn’t really time for a snack, but if he gave them something now, they’d be less likely to fuss when the adults were trying to concentrate for Bax’s ritual.

He smiled to himself as he straightened after handing over the treat. It was a small thing, but the fact that he was trying to think like an adult and make the Ostara experience as close to what Bax needed as he could felt like progress to him. He was too well aware that he fell short of what Bax wanted in so many ways. Every time one of the kids cried or asked for his attention when he was trying to give Bax what he needed made him ache with regret and anxiety.

He lost his smile.

He shouldn't be putting his kids aside for a romantic partner.

Bax might leave him if he lost patience with the kids.

He was shortchanging himself by letting his babies get between him and an adult relationship.

He couldn't be what everybody needed all the time without losing his mind.

Those thoughts and more poked at him practically every hour of every day.

"Hey." Bax's gentle voice snapped him out of the grip of worry. Bax rested turned him to face him and smiled. "You're doing great. This is going to be fun. It's supposed to be fun."

"It's definitely fun," Nick said, pulling Bax into his arms.

He bent down to slant his mouth over Bax's. Bax embraced him and deepened their kiss. It felt so good and so right. Almost right enough to banish the fear that it would all vanish in an instant if he didn't do everything right.

The only other lover he'd ever had had been torn from him, thanks to a tragic car

crash. He knew he could survive the loss of love, but he desperately didn't want to have to go through that again. Things with Bax were still new, but they held so much promise that he would hate it if Bax decided he couldn't put up with his baggage and left.

"Stop going all tense," Bax said, cradling the side of Nick's face and fixing him with a serious look. "It's going to be okay. We're alright."

"Of course we are," Nick said, then moved in for another kiss.

Bax's body felt so good against his. His imagination conjured up all sorts of images, some fantasy, some memories, of the two of them naked and sweaty. Bax made him so happy. He was desperate to return the favor and make Bax happy, too.

"Daddy!" Jordan gasped from the other side of the couch, where he was standing in a sea of toys.

Nick pulled back but kept his arms around Bax as he turned to see what was the matter. Jordan was staring at him and Bax with a child-like, exaggerated look of shock.

"You kiss Bax!" Jordan added, in case Nick had any doubt about what had him shocked.

"Yes, I did," Nick said, feeling simultaneously giddy and embarrassed that his three-and-a-half-year-old had caught them in the act.

"You don't mind, do you?" Bax asked, letting go of Nick and stepping back.

Nick couldn't tell if he was asking him or Jordan.

“I don’t mind if you don’t mind,” he answered, grabbing Bax’s shirt and pulling him back for another quick kiss.

Jordan laughed. Macy laughed because he laughed. That made him, and even Bax, smile.

It was going to be alright.

A minute later, as Nick and Bax walked around grabbing all the things they would need for the ritual and the kids, there was a knock on the door.

Before Nick could even call out, “Come in,” the door opened to reveal his mum.

“What’s all this?” his mum asked as soon as she saw everything he and Bax were carrying. She moved straight over to all but yank Macy out of Bax’s arms.

“Mum, what are you doing here?” Nick asked, heart racing with the need to either fight or flee, he didn’t know which.

“I thought I’d come take the children off your hands for the weekend,” she said, as if that were the most ordinary thing in the world. “Joann said that Lauren told her something about a picnic that was happening here tomorrow and I thought I would take these little burdens off your hands.”

Half a dozen frustrations crashed into each other within Nick at once. He hadn’t asked for his mum’s interference in his life, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself from trying to be his puppet master. He’d tried gently telling her no, but she was his mum and “No” wasn’t something she was used to hearing.

“We’re having a picnic tomorrow for Ostara,” he told her, continuing to gather the things for their ritual as if his mum wasn’t there. “We’ve planned a lot of things for

the kids to do. There's going to be an egg hunt and everything."

"Egg hunt?" His mum looked taken aback. "Easter isn't until next month."

"Ostara," Bax corrected her as he picked up the platter of snacks, since his mum had Macy. The tension that radiated from him and the tight line of his mouth weren't good signs. "It's always held on the Spring Equinox, which is today."

"What on earth are you talking about?" Nick's mum said, dripping disapproval.

"Bax is Pagan, Mum," Nick said. "Ostara is one of the important Pagan holidays that predates Easter and that Easter was based on, so we're all celebrating."

It was a huge risk to let that cat out of the bag, since his mum already didn't like Bax for turning her son gay—she hadn't said those words exactly, but Nick was a hundred percent certain that was what she thought. Revealing the whole Pagan thing might just set her over the edge. But it was the least Nick could do to stand by his man.

Sure enough, as they all headed into the hall carrying bags and snacks and kids, his mum bleated, "What?"

"Pagan, Mum," Nick said, suddenly feeling incredibly tired.

"Good Lord, you must be joking," his mum said as she followed them to the end of the hall and down the stairs. "I was willing to let the homosexual thing slide. Everyone goes through a phase like that at some point in their life. But witchcraft? I absolutely draw the line at exposing my grandchildren to witchcraft."

"You do realize how offensive it is to berate someone else's faith, don't you, Mrs. Turner?" Bax said casually as they reached the ground floor and headed to the outside door.

Nick sent Bax an apologetic look. He was grateful when Bax smiled and even winked at him in return, but he could see the same strain and exhaustion with it all in Bax's eyes that he felt himself.

"Witchcraft is not a religion," his mum insisted, her shoulders stiff and her nose tilted up. "It's a ridiculous fancy that teenage girls take to when they're being rebellious against their parents."

"Paganism has been practiced in Britain for thousands of years, long before Christianity," Bax said, though he wasn't enthusiastic in his own defense.

That panicked Nick. His mum was just one more thing to grate on him and make him second-guess their entire relationship. It was one more reason for Bax to turn around and run.

"It's very much a religion, Mum," Nick said, determined to do whatever he needed to keep Bax with him and happy. "I think it's nationally recognized as well. There are ceremonies at Stonehenge at Yule and Litha."

Bax glanced quickly at him like he was impressed Nick knew the names of the midwinter and midsummer holidays.

Nick smiled back at him, glad he'd been reading up on all things Pagan, not just Ostara. It was all a part of his efforts to meet Bax where he was used to being.

"Stonehenge," his mum scoffed as they walked along the path that went past the family parking lot and into the back garden. "They're a bunch of hippies and deluded tourists, that lot."

"Stonehenge might be filled with tourists," Bax said, slightly more energy in his words, "but I can assure you, there are plenty of us who still practice the old

religions.”

Nick’s mum clenched her jaw and used the excuse of a squirming, fussy Macy to ignore Bax’s answer. She was seriously starting to annoy Nick. The only thing that gave him a hint of satisfaction was that Macy was reaching for Bax, like she wanted him to carry her instead of Granny.

“There’s nothing wrong with Ostara,” Nick said, losing his patience. “Easter is pretty much the same thing. Christianity stole most of its major holidays from the pagans anyhow.” A burst of inspiration hit him as they neared the edge of the garden and he said, “Why don’t you stay and do the ritual with us? Then you can see that it isn’t witchcraft at all.”

No sooner were those words out of his mouth than he saw the looming, silver glint of his unicorn statue rolling into the garden from the other side of the house. More than that, Rhys and Early, Robbie and Toby, Blaine and Alfie, Nally, and Rafe were all either pushing or pulling the cart someone had lifted it into, and they were all dressed in what looked like adult-sized chorister’s robes. Robert and Janice were with them as well, and so were Rebecca and her two lovers. The entire Hawthorne clan had turned out at exactly the right and wrong time.

“Oy, Bax!” Blaine called out, rushing ahead of the others to meet them at the table that was decorated like an altar. “We’re ready to ritual the fuck out of Ostara. And look! We brought the unicorn up to be our craven idol!”

Nick closed his eyes and shook his head. Of all the things they didn’t need just then....

“Horsey!” Jordan called out, then wriggled to get down.

Nick was carrying too many things to stop him, and instead of telling Blaine and the

others off for not taking things seriously and causing trouble, he had to grab the bag that tried to fall off his shoulder and chase after Jordan instead.

“This isn’t witchcraft,” Nick’s mum hissed, glaring at the pack of Hawthornes in their robes as they brought the unicorn statue to rest behind the altar table. “This is Satanism.”

“Mum, it’s really not,” Nick said, a headache beginning to pound him.

“Idolatry isn’t a part of Paganism,” Bax said, walking forward with a little too much annoyance in his steps and putting his load of snacks and things down on the edge of the table. “I didn’t ask for this.”

“Sorry,” Blaine said, losing his goofy grin. “We just thought that the unicorn would be a nice touch.”

“It’s not ready to be moved out of the forge yet,” Nick said as he dropped his bag and caught up with Jordan. “I haven’t tested its stability.”

“Is this why you’ve been making this monstrosity?” Nick’s mum demanded. “To worship in your Satanic rituals and to make a mockery of everything that Christ lived and died for?”

Things were getting desperately out of hand fast.

“No, Mum. I made the sculpture because it’s art and for the competition in May,” Nick said, frowning at Raina’s family.

“It does look nice, though,” Rhys said apologetically.

“We can take it back, if you’d like,” Nally offered with a genuinely penitent look.

“No, it’s fine,” Bax said with a sigh. “Let’s just get the ritual over with so we can move on to dinner and egg decorating.”

“Ritual?” Nick’s mum asked. She turned to him with a demanding look. “You’re engaging in crude rituals now? And you’re involving my grandchildren?”

“Mum, no!” Nick shouted, losing his patience. “It’s just a service, like any other religious service. It’s to honor something higher than us.”

“If this is the sort of thing you expect me to allow you to expose my grandchildren to then you are gravely mistaken, Nicholas,” his mum said, practically quivering with upset. “I’ve let this madness go on long enough. You’ve fallen prey to this viper’s charms.” She threw out an arm toward Bax, which gave Macy the opening she needed to squirm so much Nick’s mum was forced to put her down. “I will not let this continue,” she went right on with her rant as she straightened.

“I’m a grown man, Mum,” Nick told her, trying not to shout as Macy toddled over to him and threw her arms around his leg. “You don’t get a say in who I love or what I do.”

“You’ve been corrupted by this family’s wickedness,” his mum raged on. “I knew there was something wrong with Raina Hawthorne when you first brought her home. I should never have let your relationship with that outrageous woman continue.”

“I beg your pardon?” Rhys demanded, stepping forward to defend his sister.

“Raina was the very best of us,” Robbie also came to her defense.

The rest of the Hawthornes looked mutinous as well.

Nick’s mum barked a laugh. “I can believe that. I can believe it because I have the

evidence of how maniacal this entire family is standing right in front of me.” She waved a hand over the collected mass of Hawthornes as though dismissing them all.

“I invited you to join us for this celebration because I thought you might learn something from it,” Nick said, raising his voice. “You’ve done nothing but interfere and criticize since you got here. If you’re going to have an attitude like that, then you can just leave. This is Bax’s day, Bax’s celebration, and all I want to do is make it nice for him.”

“You want to appease your wicked lover you mean,” Nick’s mum seethed, glaring at Nick then at Bax, then back to Nick again. “I consider it my sacred duty to rescue you from this, Nicholas. I will not rest until you see how despicable these people are and until you leave them and come home where you belong.”

“You can’t tell me what to do,” Nick shouted, simultaneously furious and embarrassed, and feeling like an absolute child himself.

It didn’t help that his shouting upset both Macy and Jordan. His babies burst into tears, which had all of the Hawthornes upset as well.

Nick bent to pick up Macy, but his mum tried to race in and get her before him.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he demanded, grabbing Macy first, then taking a step back.

“I’m taking the children,” she said, going after Jordan when she saw she wasn’t going to get Macy. “I’m taking them home with me so they won’t be influenced by this madhouse anymore.”

Rhys was close enough to pick up Jordan and move him out of Nick’s mum’s way, but that tiny victory was immediately overshadowed.

“Enough!” Bax shouted, holding out his hands. “I’ve had just about enough of this. I wanted to find a coven to celebrate my faith with, but this is ridiculous. This isn’t what I want at all, none of it! It’s too much. Can’t I just have thirty seconds of peace to practice my faith and be who I am?”

It might have sounded like his question was directed at everyone, or even just Nick’s mum. Nick felt Bax’s outburst like it hit him square in the chest, though. They locked eyes, and Nick saw the frustration and hopelessness in Bax’s soul. He was losing him. He was losing the best thing to happen to him since his babies were born.

As if to prove that, Bax broke eye contact and turned to go. Nick caught his breath and jerked forward as if he could stop him. He froze, though, when Bax stormed past Raina’s unicorn statue. As he walked past, his foot caught on the rope attached to the front of the cart the others had used to roll the sculpture into the garden. Bax was angry enough that he pulled hard in an attempt to free his foot.

The entire cart lurched. The sculpture teetered. Everyone seemed to gasp or hold their breath. Nally was quick enough to dart out of the way as the unicorn unbalanced entirely and went tumbling, smashing down over the altar table with a sickening crash.

SEVENTEEN

As soon as Bax felt the twist and tug in his ankle as he tried to free his foot from the rope he knew he was in trouble. He watched in what felt like slow motion as the wagon holding Nick's unicorn sculpture, which had been accidentally parked on a broken and unstable part of the garden path, tipped and then spilled, sending the statue tumbling right onto the table.

The sound was horrible, like crumpling aluminum foil and splintering wood magnified by a thousand. The snacks he'd placed on the table scattered, the flowers were crushed, and he was pretty sure the glass goblet he'd intended to use for the Ostara ritual shattered. Bax didn't care about any of that, though. His eyes went wide and his stomach dropped at the sight of months of Nick's hard work twisting, bending, and snapping as the unicorn hit the ground.

"Oh God, no!" Nally called out, rushing forward like he could do something to stop the carnage.

It was futile. The damage had already been done. As the proverbial dust and the actual debris settled, a sickening silence fell over the lot of them.

Bax glanced at Nick, dreading what he would see. There were no words for the guilt that sliced through him, like the jagged, broken edges of the ruined statue in front of him.

Nick had gone completely white. He stared at the destroyed altar and his broken unicorn with wide, disbelieving eyes. The only thing that knocked him out of the

moment of horror was Macy writhing and crying in his arms.

Nick moved slowly to comfort and settle her. Bax watched him suck in a breath and rub her back before he raised his eyes and met Bax's.

Instead of the fury and bitterness Bax expected to see there, Nick's expression was blank. Completely blank. Like he didn't know what to do or think or feel anymore. It hurt far worse than ordinary anger would have.

"I'm sorry," he said, the words gusting out of him. "I'm so sorry."

He'd intended to walk away, leaving the chaos and frustration of Nick and his mum and the kids, and really the entire Hawthorne family behind him. Not forever, just long enough for him to gather his thoughts and settle himself. Instead, he headed back, stepping around the twisted remains of the unicorn to get to Nick.

"I am so incredibly sorry," he said, tears stinging his eyes. "I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

"Are you really surprised?" Mrs. Turner inched forward, glaring at him. "This is what happens when you?—"

"Mum!" Nick shouted, twisting to frown at her. "Enough. Be quiet for once."

Mrs. Turner was so startled that she stepped back and pressed her fingers to her thin lips.

Nick turned back to Bax, taking a deep, ragged breath. Again, Bax was certain he was about to be chewed out, but Nick said, "Don't go," in a tight voice. "Don't walk away from me."

Bax blinked, his mind reeling as he fought to adjust to the exact opposite of what he'd been certain would happen.

"I've wrecked all your hard work," he said, shifting to look over his shoulder.

Rafe, Alfie, and Rhys were trying to lift the broken unicorn upright while Toby, Robbie, and Rebecca's Claudia moved around, picking up bits of the table and some of Bax's ceremonial tools. Nally stood to one side with Jordan holding his hand, both of them looking startled.

"It's just a sculpture," Nick said, his gaze still focused on Bax. "I'll either fix it or melt it down and make something else. It's a thing. You're a person. I can't replace you."

The tears that had threatened earlier stung harder, making Bax's eyes water. "Don't say that," he said. "Your art means something. It's not inconsequential. And I know this sculpture was for Raina. It's not scrap metal, it's you."

"It might as well be scrap metal," Nick said, adjusting Macy in his arms as she settled a little. "Yes, my art is important, but something has been off with that piece since I started making it. I can deal with fixing it, but I don't think I could deal with you walking away and us losing this thing we have growing between us."

"I wasn't leaving you," Bax said, moving closer to Nick. He reached out, but instead of touching Nick, he rubbed his hand over Macy's back, calming her a little more. "I just needed a timeout. Yes, it all got a bit too much for me. Things do sometimes. But a walk and a few deep breaths would have fixed everything."

He switched hands, caressing the side of Nick's stubbly face. "I'm not going anywhere. Yes, things are strained, but I?—"

His tender words were cut short by Jordan's sudden, ear-splitting howl of pain.

Bax caught his breath and whipped around as Nick lurched forward. Jordan had stepped into the mess of twisted metal and splintered table. There was no telling exactly how he'd done it, but his hand was completely sliced open, along with a bit of his forearm. Blood seeped out everywhere.

"Jordan," Nick gasped. He pushed Macy into Bax's arms then leapt forward to rescue Jordan.

Everything that had ground to a halt moments before raced into motion. Rafe, Rhys, and Alfie hastened their efforts to get the gnarled sculpture out of the way as Nick swept Jordan up into his arms and moved him to a clear spot of grass to get a better look at his cut.

"Water!" he called out. "I need water to clean this and see how deep it is."

Janice and Robert scrambled to look for water.

"It looks really deep," Blaine said, grabbing a bottle of water that had been with the refreshments and crouching by Nick's side. He opened it before handing it over.

"What happened?" Bax asked, struggling to keep Macy from wriggling out of his arms. "I didn't see."

"He reached out to touch the metal just as we lifted the sculpture," Rafe said, striding back around to where Nick was washing out a screaming Jordan's cut. "It happened so fast that I didn't see more than that."

"My poor baby," Mrs. Turner wailed as she pushed Rebecca out of the way so she could kneel by Nick's side. "He'll lose too much blood. It looks like you nearly sliced

his hand clean off.”

From where Bax was standing, it didn’t look like Jordan was in any danger of losing his hand, but he was losing a lot of blood.

“Should we take him to A&E?” he asked, uncertain whether he should join the crush of people crowding around Nick or stand back.

“I’ll run upstairs and get your car keys and wallet,” Rebecca said, running off.

“We could call an ambulance?” Rafe suggested.

“It’s not that bad,” Nick said, “but the bleeding doesn’t look like it will stop. It’s okay love,” he tried to soothe Jordan.

Jordan wasn’t having it. The poor boy was clearly in pain.

“If you’re taking him to the hospital, you should go immediately,” Blaine said, taking the empty water bottle when Nick handed it back. “Wrap his hand and arm tightly in a towel to stop as much of the bleeding as possible.”

There wasn’t much in the way of towels immediately available, but Rhys ripped part of the tablecloth that had been on the altar and Nick used that to wrap Jordan’s hand. Once that was done, they got up and hurried to the parking lot, to Nick’s car. Rebecca met them there with the keys.

“I want to come with you,” Mrs. Turner insisted. “He’s my grandchild and he needs me.”

Nick sent Bax a wary look as he fastened a still-wailing Jordan into his car seat. Bax wasn’t sure whether he was looking for permission or support or something else.

“I’ll sit in the back with the kids to try to keep them calm,” he offered, ignoring Mrs. Turner entirely.

“Thanks,” Nick said, seemingly relieved.

“You won’t leave me behind,” Mrs. Turner continued to insist as Bax fastened a struggling Macy into her car seat. “I’m far more important than this person here.”

Nick briefly met Bax’s eyes again before straightening and opening the driver’s door. “If you’re coming then get in,” he told his mum before settling into the car himself.

As soon as Bax had Macy strapped in, he climbed awkwardly over her to squash himself into the space between the two seats. Jordan was beside himself, but settled a tiny bit when Bax held his uninjured hand and talked to him.

The trip to the hospital was a complete blur. Both kids were crying and Bax was vaguely aware of Mrs. Turner shouting at Nick from the front passenger’s seat. She turned a few times to try to reach for Jordan, but Jordan kicked out and she stopped. Nick stared straight ahead as he drove, and for all Bax knew, he didn’t hear a word his mum shouted at him.

They were a screaming ball of pandemonium by the time they reached A&E. Jordan had settled a little in the car, but as soon as they parked and Nick fetched him from his seat, he started up again. Whether that was because he was reminded of the pain or because of Mrs. Turner’s attempt to shout instructions at everyone from Nick to Bax to the nurses who dropped what they were doing to see what was the matter, Bax couldn’t tell.

“He sliced his hand on sharp metal,” Nick explained as the nurses quickly ushered him back to an emergency examination room. “No, it wasn’t dirty. Yes, I think he needs stitches.”

“Sir, madam, you can’t come back here,” one of the nurses stepped in front of Bax and Mrs. Turner, blocking them from following Nick and Jordan.

Bax nodded and stepped back, but Mrs. Turner threw a fit.

“That’s my grandson!” she shouted. “He’s injured. He could bleed to death. I need to be there with him.”

“Madam, we’ll do everything we can for him,” the nurse said holding up her hands. “He’ll be just fine. We’ll let you know as soon as he’s been treated.”

Mrs. Turner didn’t like being told no and continued to argue with the nurse. Bax held a miserable Macy closer and walked her to the far end of the waiting room, near to a collection of kids’ books and toys, but she wasn’t interested.

“Ssh, ssh,” he tried to comfort her, bouncing her in his arms a little. “Everything’s going to be okay. Jordan and Daddy will be okay.”

He hoped he wasn’t lying to a toddler. The truth was, he had no idea what was going on. He’d never had to deal with an injury like that. He’d never had to be on his own with a crying toddler and an irate grandmother in a hospital waiting room either.

“This is your fault,” Mrs. Turner hissed at him after giving up her fight with the nurse and marching across the waiting room to Bax. “None of this would have happen if you hadn’t lured my son into doing horrible things.”

Bax was not in the mood to deal with insults like that. “What Nick does with his own time is none of your business,” he said, trying to keep his voice low.

They weren’t the only ones in the waiting room. Half a dozen people sat there waiting and now watching them instead of the telly on the wall.

Mrs. Turner didn't seem to notice or care they were being watched at all. "He's always been such a good, bright boy. Quiet, but not gay." She lowered her voice to a whisper to say "gay". "I don't know what you did to change him, but I want him changed back."

Fury rose in Bax, but he tamped it down for Macy's sake. "He's not a duvet cover. No one can change him. He's his own person."

"He never would have turned to sodomy if you hadn't forced him to," Mrs. Turner continued. She gasped and reeled back, eyes wide. "You cast some sort of spell on him, didn't you? You and your witchy practices."

If Bax had had a free hand, he would have rubbed it over his face in exasperation. Maybe it was just the intensity of the moment, but Mrs. Turner had crossed over into ridiculous territory.

"I'm dating your son, Mrs. Turner," he said, still trying not to draw focus, which was impossible. "I didn't force him into anything. Honestly, you're the one trying to force him into a heteronormative relationship by dragging women out of the woodwork and attempting to set him up. Just let him be, alright? Just let him be himself."

"This is not who he is," Mrs. Turner insisted. "You Hawthornes have corrupted him. You've twisted him like that wretched statue."

Bax winced. He didn't need the reminder of the carnage he'd caused. Nick was wrong when he said his unicorn, and all the rest of his art, was unimportant. It was a major part of who he was, a part he needed to focus on more for the sake of his soul.

"Now is not the time to have this conversation," he sighed, bouncing Macy in his arms and rubbing her back as she calmed a bit more. "How about you go wait on that side of the room and Macy and I will wait here, and we'll sort this mess some other

time.”

“Give me the baby,” Mrs. Turner said, trying to reach around Bax’s arms to take Macy.

“No,” Bax said, turning to shield Macy from her.

It was stubborn of him, but the fact that Macy clung to him and tried to avoid her granny helped him to feel like it was a good idea.

Mrs. Turner gave up when the nurse who had stopped her from following Nick earlier came out of the corridor and called her name. She abandoned her struggle for Macy in a hurry, leaving Bax to soothe and settle the little girl all over again.

“Mrs. Turner, Jordan has a deep cut across his hand,” the nurse said, just barely loud enough for Bax to hear. “The area has been cleaned and numbed, and we’re just waiting for the doctor to come and give him stitches.”

That was all Bax needed to hear. He turned away as Mrs. Turner fired more angry questions at the nurse, but he was satisfied with the treatment Jordan was getting.

“There you go,” he told Macy in a sing-song voice that was probably all wrong to use with toddlers. “Big brother is going to be alright.”

Macy went from crying to sniffing and moaning as Bax walked her over to a large window that looked out on a tiny garden and the road beyond. He positioned himself so Macy could watch the traffic and activity around the hospital as she plunked her head on his shoulder and gradually grew heavier. Within a few minutes, she was asleep.

Bax finally had three seconds to breathe and catch up with the situation he was in.

That didn't make him feel better, though. It kind of made him feel worse.

What the hell was he doing? The last place on earth he would have expected to be on the night of Ostara was in A&E with a toddler sleeping in his arms while his boyfriend's mother argued with the hospital's staff. He should have been at a celebration, at Callum's celebration, drinking and laughing and giving thanks for the spring. He should have been warming up for a night of adult fun and abandon, not just as a way of honoring fertility, but to connect with the man he loved.

This wasn't the life he was meant for. Sure, he loved Macy and Jordan. He would have even if he wasn't in love with Nick. They were Raina's kids, his family. He loved Nick more and more with every day, but loving him wasn't as simple as the movies made it out to be.

A part of him argued that love meant changing parts of who you were to fit with the person you loved, but he wasn't sure if that was real or just something cute that could be put in a meme. It didn't seem like a great idea to subvert who he was for the sake of someone else. That couldn't possibly be a good idea.

So where did that leave him?

It left him with a toddler asleep in his arms while he looked out a hospital window at rushing traffic on Ostara instead of celebrating with friends.

"Hey."

Bax wasn't sure how much time had passed when Nick's quiet greeting shook him out of his thoughts. He turned, and his heart throbbed in his chest for a moment at the sight of his lover, exhausted, wan, and holding a sound asleep Jordan in his arms. Jordan's entire forearm was bound, with only the tips of his fingers poking out from the bandage securing his hand.

Despite all his misgivings, Bax melted a little at the sight. Nick was such a great dad, which made him a great person, which sent Bax's heart soaring. Who would have thought a guy could look so sexy with dark circles under his eyes and spots of dried blood on the sleeve of his shirt?

"How is he?" Bax asked, brushing his free hand over Jordan's hair.

"Traumatized," Nick said with a sigh. "Probably more from Mum's carrying on than from the stitches."

"Where is your mum, by the way?" Bax asked, looking around.

Nick humphed. "She called a cab to take her home when I told her I didn't need her help."

"That doesn't sound good," Bax said.

Nick winced. "Could be worse. I think she was as tired as these two by the end."

"Do you need me to drive home?" Bax asked, realizing just how exhausted Nick was.

Nick looked like he would refuse, then blew out a breath, his shoulders sagging. "Alright," he said.

They turned to go. Nick fished around in his pocket for his keys and handed them over to Bax. Everyone was tired. What was supposed to be a family-friendly Ostara celebration had turned into an incredibly crappy night. Instead of a picnic, the next day would probably be filled with taking care of Jordan and assessing how to fix the unicorn.

None of it was what Bax wanted to do, but at the same time, he didn't want to do

anything else. He didn't want the whole, messy situation he'd fallen into to exist at all. But there was no way to fix what was already broken. He would either have to give up what he wanted to make Nick happy or leave...which would make them both miserable.

EIGHTEEN

In the weeks right after Raina's death, Nick had been completely numb. It was strange and uncomfortable to have a moment that you could point to, a specific, neon moment, when everything in your life changed. He had his life before Raina and now after.

He had his life before Bax, and he had his life now.

There wasn't a specific moment that Nick could point to that had changed everything. Maybe it was the first time they'd met, although that had probably been way back when he'd been dating Raina and she'd introduced him to her huge wild family. It could have been that moment at the fundraiser, when Bax had mentioned he'd be staying at Hawthorne House for the winter. Or maybe it was that first, quiet conversation they'd had in the forge.

It didn't really matter. Bax was in his life now, and as the exhaustion of the traumatic Friday evening wore off, after the additional fuss of feeding, changing, and bathing Jordan and Macy once they'd made it home from the hospital, he and Bax passed out in his bed together. They'd rolled out of bed on Saturday morning to deal with more drama as Jordan realized his bandage wasn't coming off and he couldn't use his hand. Through it all, Nick realized he didn't ever want to lose Bax. Ever.

It was Sunday afternoon now. Macy was back to normal and Jordan was on his way to healing, though he was still grumpy as all get-out. Janice had volunteered to watch the kids for the afternoon so Nick could face his next challenge, repairing Raina's unicorn.

He let out a sigh as he stood in front of the broken sculpture, trying to figure out where to start. One entire side of the work had been squashed when it had fallen into the table, but it wasn't as bad as he'd feared at first. The body of the unicorn had remained more or less intact. That was where the thickest, heaviest bits of work were, and a fall into a table wasn't enough to dent it.

It was the rest of the work, the fine, fiddly bits, like the mane and tail, that had suffered in the crash. The horn was hopelessly bent now, too. The unicorn's pose was rampant, so the two legs that were up in the air had broken. Jordan had cut his hand on the raw edge of one of those. They weren't destroyed completely, but they needed serious work.

It could be fixed. With a little time and effort, the whole thing could be repaired.

"Best get started, then," he sighed, then headed off to the side to don his apron and goggles and to fetch the tools he'd need for the job.

The weather was warming quickly, so all of the canvas that had sheltered the forge during the winter was rolled up. That gave Nick a wide view of Hawthorne House's grounds. The film crew would be coming back in a week to shoot a few more scenes for the medieval movie. Nick wondered if he and Bax would be dragged into being extras again.

He smiled as he grabbed his favorite tongs from his special shelf. Only now did he realize how hard Bax had been flirting with him when they'd been filming that scene. Lord, but he'd been dense back then.

His smile faltered as he caught a hint of movement between the trees, where the path he and Bax, back when they were taking walks in the morning, liked to walk wound through the woods. He craned his neck and stood on his toes, trying to figure out if the movement was Bax taking a walk now.

Not that he liked the idea of Bax taking a walk without him. Bax could do whatever he wanted whenever he wanted, but going on a walk without him felt a little too close to Bax pulling away.

He shook his head at himself and moved on to where he had the sculpture set up right next to the new forge. He would start by repairing the unicorn's legs, since they were the biggest job. From there he'd redo all the fiddly bits.

Ten minutes in, and his thoughts were more on Bax than his work.

Bax had been wonderful, both in watching Macy when they were at the hospital and yesterday, when his focus had to be on Jordan all day. Bax had played with Macy, fed her, and even changed her, which Nick knew he still felt a little awkward about. He'd taken such a huge weight off his shoulders.

And plunked that weight right down on his own.

Bax wasn't as comfortable with the idea of parenting as he pretended he was. Nick didn't have to sit him down and have an entire conversation with him about it to know. He was struggling, and that worried Nick. If something wasn't done soon to make everything okay, he was at serious risk of losing Bax for good.

"It looks like that's coming along nicely."

Nick jerked away from smoothing the join where he'd just reattached the unicorn's right hoof to find Rafe walking into the forge with two steaming mugs. The split second of hope he had that Bax had joined him flattened, but he recovered quickly at the sight of Raina's brother.

"It looked worse than it is when it fell," he said, putting his tools down, pushing his goggles up to his forehead, and walking over to see if one of the mugs Rafe had was

for him.

“It’s tea,” Rafe said, handing one of the mugs over, then leaning against one of the worktables. “I didn’t know if you were a coffee or a tea guy.”

“I can go either way,” Nick said, then laughed loudly at his inadvertent joke right before bringing the mug to his lips.

Rafe laughed with him, and instantly, half the anxiety that had been pressing down on Nick mellowed.

“I should have known that you weren’t entirely straight,” Rafe said, smiling, then taking a sip of his tea. “Anyone who would throw their lot in so thoroughly with this family couldn’t possibly be entirely straight.”

“Are any of the Hawthornes entirely straight?” Nick asked, then sipped his tea.

Rafe cocked his head to the side in exaggerated thought, then nodded. “Yes. We had a great-aunt Mildred who was straight, but that was during the war, so who knows?”

Nick grinned and leaned against the table opposite Rafe. It was wonderful to have friends. The Hawthorne siblings could have kept him on the outside when he and Raina had married. They could have waved goodbye to him and the kids after Raina’s death. Nick was forever grateful that they’d kept him warm and cozy in the fold.

“How are you holding up?” Rafe asked. The significant feeling of his words hinted that he meant more than just Jordan and the squashed unicorn.

“I’m doing alright,” he said, crossing his ankles and warming his hands around the mug. “Nothing has been broken that can’t be fixed.”

Rafe gave him a lopsided smile. "I assume you mean more than just the sculpture?"

Nick nodded. "The doctor who did Jordan's stitches said the wound could have been a lot deeper. It'll be a pain in the arse trying to keep a three-year-old from using his dominant hand for the next few weeks, but at least he won't remember it once he's healed."

"For all you know, this could end up being his first childhood memory," Rafe said.

Nick grunted. He wasn't sure he liked the idea of that. He also didn't love being reminded that people tended not to remember anything about their first few years of life. It meant his kids probably wouldn't remember their mother. Macy definitely wouldn't. Raina had died when she was a month old.

He wondered if they'd remember Bax. If he had his way, they wouldn't have to remember Bax because Bax would be a part of their lives. It was probably too early for him to be thinking that way, but he couldn't help it. When he fell, he fell hard and fast.

"You've got a very expressive face, you know," Rafe said.

"Sorry," Nick replied, realizing he'd been lost in his own thoughts for a second. "I was thinking about Raina." That wasn't the whole truth, so he added, "And about Bax."

Rafe nodded, as if he knew exactly where those thoughts had taken him. "Raina would be proud of you, you know," he said.

Nick had to take a quick gulp of tea to swallow the sudden lump in his throat. "Thanks."

“I know she’d give her blessing to you and Bax,” Rafe went on.

Nick finished swallowing and nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure she would.”

Rafe looked surprised that he would say that. “I’m glad you recognize that. If you were Rhys, I’d be sitting here lecturing you about how you have to move on with your life and how Raina would have wanted it that way.”

Nick laughed, but he still felt like Rafe was poking him.

“I think I’m falling in love with Bax,” he said far more openly than he’d speak to pretty much anyone else. “I mean, I know I love him, but I think I’m really, really falling hard.” He didn’t know why talking to Rafe was easy. The man had an openness about him that exceeded even the usual Hawthorne family standards.

“It’s pretty obvious to all of us that he’s head over heels for you, too,” Rafe said.

Nick smiled and felt his face flush over that.

A second later, the mountain of his worries fell down on him again.

“I’m worried that he’ll leave me,” he confessed, then quickly drank the last of his tea.

“Why the hell would he do that?” Rafe asked, setting his mug aside.

Nick shrugged and stared into his empty mug. “He’s so sexy and carefree. Before we met, he had an entirely different kind of life. I know that the kids annoy him sometimes.” He paused. “I know I annoy him sometimes.”

Rafe made a face. “I’m pretty sure that everyone annoys everyone else, even the people they love the most, at least some of the time.”

“Yeah, but I can’t offer Bax the things he wants and needs.”

“Says who?” Rafe shrugged. “You offer him something different.”

“Do I really?” Nick asked. “He already has a family in you all. He even has Jordan and Macy because they’re family. He could walk away from me tomorrow and still keep the rest of you.”

“Why would he want to walk away?” Rafe asked.

“Because I’m not enough for him,” Nick said, pouring out all his insecurities, whether they were logical or not. “Or because I’m too much. Because I’m not what he’s used to or what he needs. He deserves someone who can go on walks with him and celebrate his religion with him. Someone he can go to bed with whenever he feels like it and not be interrupted by kids waking up from a nap.”

“So that’s what worries you?” Rafe asked. “You think that Bax will break up with you because of the kids?”

Nick opened his mouth to deny it, but he couldn’t.

“Yes,” he said, rubbing a hand over his face. “That’s exactly what I worry about.”

“Well, first, I don’t think that’s going to happen,” Rafe said.

Nick wasn’t so sure and made a face to express that.

“Second,” Rafe went on, ignoring his look, “You’re a single father. You have kids. You can’t change that. If Bax loves you for who you are, which I’m convinced he does, then he’ll love you for the kids, not despite them.”

“Parenting doesn’t come naturally to him,” Nick argued.

“Does it come naturally to any men?” Rafe asked. “Women, I get. They come with wombs. Although I don’t think it’s really fair to throw that on them or to play into gender stereotypes,” he added, like he was arguing with himself. “Whatever the case, I happen to believe being a good parent is something we learn, not something we’re born with. Science might disagree with me, but I think it’s something that could be taught.”

Nick stared at him. “I’m not sure if you’re making this easier or harder,” he said.

Rafe laughed. “I’m not sure either. Too long, didn’t read, Bax loves you. I think the two of you have serious potential to go the distance with this love affair. God knows the entire family wants the two of you to stay together.”

“Really?”

“Hell yeah. We’re all giddy with glee that we’ve managed to catch you a second time.”

Nick laughed. It was reassuring to know the Hawthornes were happy with his and Bax’s relationship. His family definitely didn’t like it.

But that raised all sorts of other questions. He wanted to make things with Bax work, but now he felt like he had the weight of the Hawthorne family’s expectations pressing down on him, too.

“I don’t want to let any of you down,” he said, growing serious.

“Don’t worry about us,” Rafe said, pushing himself straight and grabbing both mugs. “It’s your life. You deserve to live it however you want.”

He gathered both mugs in one hand, then thumped Nick on the arm before heading out of the forge.

“Thanks for the tea,” Nick called after it.

“We should spill it more often,” Rafe said with a wink, then ducked out of the forge.

Nick watched him for a second before putting his goggles back on, donning his gloves again, and going back to work on the unicorn.

His heart felt a little lighter, but his thoughts continued to race. He wanted Bax more than ever, knowing the family liked the idea of them together. He felt comfortable and whole with Bax for the first time since Raina’s accident. It wasn’t that Bax completed him or anything half as Hollywood as that. Bax just helped him to be himself.

Rafe was right. He deserved to be himself. He was just discovering who that was. He loved his kids more than anything, but life wasn’t just about one thing or another.

Relationships weren’t just about one thing or another either. He wanted to find and learn about himself, but he wanted Bax to feel happy and fulfilled as well. Bax wasn’t just an extra that he tacked onto his life, like the unicorn hoof that he worked to reattach to one of the rampant legs. He couldn’t just fit his lover into his life whenever it was convenient for him. He needed to give Bax more, more time and more of himself.

His thoughts swirled harder and harder as he worked on buffing the metal to hide the seam in the unicorn’s legs. The sparks that flew off the metal felt like the dangerous seeds of the idea that had taken hold in him and didn’t seem to want to leave.

There was a way he could devote more time to Bax and to their relationship. It was a

way that was staring him right in the face and that had been there all along. It would tear his heart out, but it might just make it easier to keep another part of his heart with him.

He rolled the idea over and over as he finished his work for the day, then as he cleaned up the forge and prepared it for class the next morning. Once the idea grabbed hold, it didn't want to let go. He would catch all kinds of hell from the Hawthorne family, but if it made Bax happy, he was willing to consider drastic measures.

Once the forge was tidy and prepped for the next day, Nick went to grab his mobile phone from where he'd left it on his shelf. He took it to one of the outer walls that looked out on the growing green of Hawthorne House's landscape, wedged himself against the wall, took a deep breath of the forge's familiar, smoke-and-metal scent, then dialed his mum's number.

"Nicholas, what is it?" his mum answered, already frantic. "Is it Jordan? Has something else happened to his hand? Is it infected?"

"No, Mum, it's not that," Nick said, unable to keep the annoyance out of his voice. "Jordan is fine. Well, as fine as you could expect a three-year-old with a stitched-up hand to be."

"Is he in a lot of pain? Did you give him the painkillers from the hospital?" his mum asked. "I have my doubts about the strength of the medicine they gave him."

"It's fine," Nick said. "It makes him drowsy, which is actually a good thing this early in the game, if you ask me."

"Where is he?" his mum asked. "Put him on so I can talk to him."

Nick sighed and rubbed his face. “He’s up at the flat with Janice looking after him and I’m down at the forge.”

His mum tsked. “Janice Hawthorne knows nothing about how to properly care for children.”

“Mum, Janice raised seven children,” Nick said. “She knows her way around kids.”

“And look at how they all turned out,” his mum muttered.

Nick blew out a breath. His mum wasn’t making things easier on him. His emotions were already all over the place with the idea brewing in him.

“All that aside,” he said, his heart suddenly racing, “I’ve been thinking.”

“Yes?” his mum asked suspiciously.

“I’ve been thinking that maybe you’re right. Maybe I do need a little time for myself.” He wouldn’t bother telling his mum that it was actually time for Bax he was looking for.

“Nicholas, are you saying what I think you’re saying?” his mum asked, hope simmering in her voice.

Nick swallowed. “I’m saying that maybe we could do a trial run, a trial only ,” he emphasized, “of the kids staying with you for a while.”

“Yes, Nick, this is perfect,” his mum said, running away with the idea, like he knew she would. “I have their rooms ready right now. Just give me the afternoon to do a bit of grocery shopping and I’ll come pick them up this evening.”

“Mum,” Nick said, every instinct in him wanting to tell her to slow her roll.

He wasn't sure this was a good idea. In fact, he thought this was a terrible idea. He didn't want to be separated from his kids, especially not when Jordan was injured. He didn't want to wake up to a quiet house or do nothing but sit around on the couch all night staring at the telly.

But he wouldn't be doing that. He would be sitting on the couch at night with Bax. He would wake up in the morning with Bax in his arms and be able to make love to him without any fear of the two of them being interrupted. He could take Bax out and do grown-up things with him. He might even learn more about Paganism and help Bax find a coven to belong to. Maybe he could join it, too.

Bax. He was doing this for Bax. He wanted the relationship to work, but to do that, sacrifices had to be made. It would be hard, really hard, but it would also be temporary.

He had no choice. Try as he did to tell himself otherwise, he couldn't shake the feeling that if he didn't give up his kids, Bax would abandon him.

“Alright,” he said, letting out a breath and slouching as he sat. “Come over later and fetch them. I'll pack some things up so they're ready.”

“Excellent,” his mum said. “I knew you'd make the right decision, dear.”

They said goodbye and hung up. Nick sagged even more. He wasn't sure if he was making the right decision at all.

NINETEEN

He was in the right place at the right time with the right people. Or so Bax tried to tell himself as he sat at one of the communal tables in The Chameleon Club's dining-room-slash-ballroom on Sunday afternoon.

"So this accounting firm of yours would specialize in serving the LGBTQ community?" the club's current Director of Finance, Lloyd Bennett, asked as he sat across from Bax.

Lloyd was relatively young, but the sharp way that he dressed and the seriousness on his face when he looked at Bax made him feel like he was part of a bygone age. He held a lot of sway, though, not only with the inner workings of the club itself, but with its members as well.

"That's the aim," Bax said, sitting straighter and speaking in a more refined manner himself. Lloyd had that effect on everyone. He was a living, breathing time machine that recreated the Victorian era within a ten-foot radius of wherever he sat. "It's in keeping with the mission of The Brotherhood," Bax went on. "I'd like to serve the community in every way I can."

"Not just paying dues?" Lloyd asked with a sly grin.

"Right," Bax laughed.

He suddenly froze, wondering if Lloyd was joking or not. Come to think of it, he wasn't sure that he had paid his dues for the year yet. That wasn't at all a good look

for someone trying to market his accounting business.

“My hope is eventually to employ LGBTQ accountants and other staff as well,” he went on, hoping Lloyd wasn’t assessing how much money he owed as the two of them chatted over tea and some truly excellent Victoria sponge. “Which is why I wanted to approach you first with my plans.”

It wasn’t entirely true. Bax had a whole pile of resources that Callum had sent him. He could have launched his business and had more work than he knew how to handle if he started contacting the names Callum had given him from the Surrey and Kent LGBTQ Small Business Association. Something about accepting Callum’s help like that didn’t sit right with Bax.

“I must say, your plans intrigue me,” Lloyd said. “The Brotherhood has a list of friendly accountants, if you catch my meaning, but none that are specifically tailored to our members’ needs.”

As Lloyd went on, talking about some of the services available to members and needs that he saw within The Brotherhood, in the slowest and most droning voice possible, Bax’s attention drifted.

He hadn’t started contacting Callum’s friends yet because accepting that kind of help felt like cheating. It probably wasn’t. Business was business and his and Nick’s relationship was separate from that. It felt like it, though.

Every thought Bax had these days felt like cheating. Even sitting at a table with Lloyd, nodding in what he hoped was the right places as Lloyd listened to himself talk, felt wrong. Nick needed him, now more than ever. He should be standing by his man and giving Nick all the support he could.

He should, but that part of him that longed to be free rebelled at the idea. He

shouldn't have to give up everything he was and everything he wanted just to be with someone.

But who was he, really? And what did he want? He thought he had a quick, definitive answer to that question, but that winter had changed a lot of things. Being with Nick and seeing a different side of life, a side he never thought he'd see, had opened his perspective in a way nothing else had.

"So I don't think it would be out of the question at all for you to include something in next month's newsletter and to post a notice on the board," Lloyd finished up his monologue, reaching for his teacup. "In fact, I believe many of our members would welcome a business like yours."

"Thanks," Bax said, taking the last biscuit from his plate and dipping it in his lukewarm tea. "I really appreciate this. Launching a business is always hard, but in this economy, it feels even harder."

"There's nothing particularly wrong with this economy," Lloyd said, bristling a little. "It's all a matter of care and perspective."

Bax swallowed gingerly, regretting that he'd set Lloyd off on one of his favorite subjects. As liberal and progressive as most of The Brotherhood were, there were plenty of members, like Lloyd, who would support the Tories until they nailed their coffin closed.

He had just resigned himself to another fifteen minutes of nodding and humming as Lloyd explained why there was nothing really wrong with the economy when, of all people, Callum swooped in and plopped into the seat beside Bax.

"Hello, all," Callum said with his usual cheer. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything. Only, I saw the two of you here and I simply had to join you. You look as though

you're having quite a jolly conversation."

"I was just explaining to Baxter about how the British economy is as strong and vibrant as it's ever been," Lloyd said, suddenly stiff and pinched. Lloyd and Callum were about as opposite as people could be, and Lloyd clearly had no love lost for Callum. "If you will excuse me," he said, placing his hands on the table then standing, "I see someone I need to chase for their membership dues."

Bax's stomach tightened with dread, not just because he was certain he'd be next in the dues hunt.

"Would it be terribly rude of me to say I'm not sad to see the back of him?" Callum asked, leaning closer, like they were conspiring. "It also gives me a better opportunity to catch up with you."

He rested his hand on the table for a moment so close to Bax's that they were almost touching. A heartbeat later, he reached for the teapot in the center of the table and poured tea into one of the cups set around in the empty places at the table.

The hair on the back of Bax's neck stood up. Callum hadn't wandered by randomly, and if he was a betting man, he would have said Callum wasn't at The Chameleon Club that day by accident either.

"You're staring at my hands, I know," Callum said as he continued to fix his tea. "You're wondering how someone who has been taking a blacksmithing class for the last month can still have such smooth hands."

"I wasn't, but now that you ask." Internally, Bax winced. He should be shooing Callum away. He was taken. He was with Nick and they were happy.

But were they?

“The gloves your beau provides for us do a brilliant job of protecting my hands,” Callum said. “Frequent manicures take care of the rest.” He laughed as he stirred his tea.

“There’s nothing like a good manicure,” Bax said, hoping the comment was just generic enough to....

To what? Did he want to chase Callum away? Or did he want to talk business with the man, like he’d come to The Chameleon Club to do? Or were his motivations for not getting up and heading back to Hawthorne House darker than that?

“Your man has large, rough hands,” Callum went on, taking a biscuit from the plate in the middle of the table. His movements were tight and almost nervous. “I bet that’s nice.” He wiggled his eyebrows as he bit into the biscuit.

Bax shifted to face him more fully. “Is there something I can do for you, Callum?” he asked, worried about where the conversation was going.

Callum swallowed his biscuit, sipped his tea, then leaned closer to Bax to murmur, “I’m certain there are a lot of things you could do for me.”

Bax froze. A few months ago, that was the kind of joke he would have made. He would have absolutely taken Callum up on his flirting and flirted right back.

Now, though, it felt saccharine and inappropriate.

Callum put his teacup down and scooted even closer to Bax. “Look, I’ll be honest with you,” he said. “I signed up for the forging class in the hope that I would see you more often, that we could rekindle our old friendship.”

Bax wanted to shout, “I knew it!” He’d been suspicious of Callum from the start, and

it turned out those suspicions were warranted. Instead of feeling flattered, he felt like he'd nabbed Callum with his hand in the biscuit jar.

"And?" he asked, prompting Callum to go on.

"And I really wish you'd come and join our coven," Callum said, his expression one of exaggerated pleading. "We could really use a dedicated, creative, organized member like you. So many of the younger people who join covens these days are going through some sort of phase and aren't really serious about practicing. But if they could see someone a bit closer to their age who takes the faith seriously and understands all its nuances, it would be life-changing for them."

The words sounded pretty, but Bax was still suspicious. "A lot of younger people are searching for a faith system that aligns with their values more than traditional organized religions do," he said uneasily.

"Precisely," Callum said, planting his hand on Bax's as it sat on the table.

The touch was electric, but not in the good ways that touching Nick were. It was like someone had thrust his hand into an electrical socket.

He pulled away and cleared his throat. "I don't know, Callum," he said. He reached for his teacup only to find he'd already drunk all the tea. He wouldn't be able to hide from his discomfort that way.

"Alright, you've found me out," Callum went on, as if Bax had interrogated him. "It's you I want." He inched closer to Bax and lowered his voice. "I've always been fond of you, Baxter. We've had some good times together. If I hadn't been with Stephen at the time and you hadn't been with Damien, I would have pursued something with you."

“I’m not sure—” Bax began.

“We have a chance now, though,” Callum interrupted. “I can’t imagine that you’re actually serious with Nick. He’s a lovely man and a brilliant artist and teacher, but he’s not our sort at all.”

Bax frowned as deep, roaring protectiveness for Nick rolled through him. “Nick and I are together,” he said.

“Yes, but should you be?” Callum asked.

Bax opened his mouth to defend his relationship, but Callum cut in once again.

“Nick is rough around the edges. He doesn’t understand deeper things. If we lived two hundred years ago, he’d be the grubby blacksmith shoeing your horses while you lived in the manor, commanding an army of servants.”

Bax gaped at Callum, blown away by the classism that he hadn’t realized Callum clung to.

“My dad was the second son and I’m way down the list of his heirs,” he said, though even that defense felt like he was buying into Callum’s warped worldview.

“And Nick has kids,” Callum went on, ignoring his argument. Unfortunately, he hit on the biggest argument Bax had been having with himself. “Who wants to spend all their time running around after mewling children?” Callum asked. “Children are such a bother. They’re messy, you can’t hold a conversation with them, and you certainly can’t express yourself fully when they’re around, if you know what I mean.”

Bax clenched his jaw and forced himself to breathe before saying anything he might regret. A wealth of feelings that were new and raw, but that had been hiding under his

restlessness and uncertainty, suddenly welled up.

“I happen to love those children,” he told Callum. “They’re my cousin Raina’s children. They’re Hawthornes. And they’re adorable.”

Callum’s face started to lose color and he leaned back a bit at the force of Bax’s words, like he realized he’d said the wrong thing. “Oh, I?—”

“Yes, children take a lot of attention and effort to raise,” Bax went on. “Usually there are at least two people involved in the process, but Nick is doing it all on his own. He’s doing an amazing job, too. And yes, sometimes he has to prioritize the kids over me, but I’m not so sure I really need to be at the center of his attention all the time either. I’ve got a business to build, a family to enjoy, and a faith that, as you said, I’m serious about. I need to give my time and attention to those things, too.”

It was suddenly so clear. Relationships weren’t about obsession with the other person. He’d seen relationships where the partners focused only on each other and nothing else. They tended to fall apart spectacularly once the infatuation stage was over. A real partnership was about facing the world together.

He didn’t need Nick to ignore his kids so he could cater to every one of his whims. It probably wouldn’t be good for him to always get his way anyhow. Even though it stung a little to be interrupted when he wanted to spend focused time with Nick, there had to be a way they could work together to find other time for each other. They lived in a gigantic manor house filled with family. Help was right around the corner at any time of the day or night.

“I’m sorry, Callum, I’ve got to go,” he said, standing and stepping away from the table.

“So you’re not going to join me?” Callum asked, his expression pinched to false

innocence and one last hope of swaying Bax away from what he wanted so desperately he could feel it in the beat of his heart.

“No,” Bax said, then nodded goodbye.

He’d been stubborn when it came to what he thought he wanted from a relationship so far. Rafe was right in saying people changed and grew. Changing and growing was the reason he’d split with Damien in the first place. He’d left that relationship because it wasn’t right for him, and it had stopped being right for him because he was a different person now than he’d been when he and Damien had started dating.

He was a person who needed more than just a lover and a coven to serve his needs. He needed to be part of something bigger than himself, part of a family.

The drive back to Hawthorne House felt like it took forever, but it gave his sprouting thoughts time to grow and develop. He didn’t know what the future had in store for him and Nick, he just knew that he wanted to find a way to make it work. That would take giving up some of his ego on the one hand and probably some changes on Nick’s end as well. He needed to be careful not to frame the changes that both of them needed to make so they could grow their relationship with each other as demands, but instinct and his understanding of Nick made him certain they could work it out.

He was in a good mood as he drove into the family parking lot at Hawthorne House, but that mood was instantly shattered at the sight of Nick packing the back of his mum’s car with boxes and suitcases. Something more than just an overnight visit was going on.

“What’s all this?” he asked, jumping out of the car and striding quickly over to Mrs. Turner’s car.

“Bax,” Nick greeted him with a wide smile.

As much as it was clear Nick was happy to see him, it was also clear that Nick was stressed and anxious. When he hugged Bax in greeting, he held on a little too tightly and pressed their bodies together a little too long.

“What’s going on here?” Bax asked when Nick finally let him go.

“My son has finally come to his senses and agreed the children should live with me,” Mrs. Turner answered for him as she approached from the house, a wailing Jordan in her arms.

Bax realized Macy was already strapped into her car seat and was crying as well. “You’re giving the kids away?” he asked, feeling like his mind was exploding with shock.

“Just on a trial basis,” Nick said, raising his hands like he was defending himself. “Just for a little while so that we can have some time together.”

Bax gaped harder, his chest squeezing so hard he couldn’t breathe for a moment. “You’re giving the kids away because of me?” he wheezed out.

Nick’s tense look turned to all-out panic. “I don’t know what else to do, Bax,” he said, raising his voice. “I love you and I want to spend time with you and build a life with you. I haven’t felt this way about anyone but Raina. But the kids keep getting in the way, and I’m barely keeping my head above water as I juggle them and us and work and art. I don’t know what else to do. You’ll leave me if I can’t give you everything you need.”

Bax was simultaneously angry and miserable for Nick. His heart broke knowing that he’d had even a small part in Nick doing something so drastically against what his soul was probably telling him.

“I love you,” he said, his anger making the otherwise tender words harder than they should have been. He stepped closer and hooked his hand around the back of Nick’s neck, holding him there. “I love you no matter what, Nick. Are things perfect between us? No. Do we have things to work out? Yes. Everyone does. But you don’t have to get rid of the kids for me.”

“It’s just temporary,” Nick said, his eyes glassy as emotion got the better of him.

Jordan continued to scream and reach for his daddy throughout their whole exchange, despite Mrs. Turner’s efforts to hold him clamped to her. Bax couldn’t take it anymore. He broke away from Nick, marched over to Mrs. Turner, and pulled Jordan from her arms,

Jordan clung to him, wrapping himself around Bax as if he was as good as Daddy, or almost. He held on so tight and hid his face against Bax’s neck as tears, snot, and spit soaked his shirt that Bax’s heart nearly squeezed right out of his chest.

He didn’t just love Nick, he loved the kids, too. It was just like he’d told Callum at The Chameleon Club. Jordan and Macy were family. They were already a part of him. They shared his DNA. There was no way in hell he was going to let Nick sacrifice them to the mad idea that he had to choose between the kids or him.

“I’m not letting you send the kids away,” he told Nick firmly, even though his heart was melting more and more by the moment. “You don’t have to choose between them and me. I never imagined myself as a parent, no, but I can change. Everyone can change. We can figure this out, Nick. We can figure out how to have the time we need for each other and to keep the kids safe and happy with us, too. It doesn’t have to be one or the other.”

“But I can’t give you what you need,” Nick said, breaking into tears as he crossed his limit. “I don’t want to lose you, but I don’t know how to give you everything you

need when I have so many responsibilities already.”

“We’ll share the responsibilities,” Bax said, moving in to hug Nick with his free arm.

“We’ll figure out what we’re doing together.”

Jordan had stopped crying and was just gasping and shuddering in the aftermath of his outburst. He had enough awareness to push himself away from Bax and into Nick’s arms. That freed Bax up to fetch Macy from her car seat.

“What are you doing?” Mrs. Turner demanded. “Stop that!” Bax imagined that if she had an umbrella with her, she would have been beating him with it. He ignored her as he pulled a crying Macy into his arms. “Nicholas, stop this. Tell him to put Macy back in the car.”

Macy clung to Bax as fiercely as Jordan had, and Bax hugged her tightly in return.

“No, Mum,” Nick said, looking intensely at Bax as he and Macy joined him and Jordan. “I’ve changed my mind. The kids are staying right here with us.”

TWENTY

That was the moment. It was the moment Nick knew would begin the rest of his life. Just like the day he'd asked Raina to marry him. He could tell from the smile of pure joy on Bax's face, and he could tell by the warm, settled feeling that spread through his gut, encircled his heart, and made his entire body hum with rightness.

"What do you mean the children are staying here?" his mum asked, her lips thin and her words tight. "We made an arrangement, Nicholas."

Nick sighed and pulled his gaze away from Bax. Really, he wanted to forget everything and kiss Bax just then. Hard. Whether the kids were watching or not. In fact, he wanted his kids to see. He wanted them to see that Daddy was happy and that Bax was part of their family.

"I've changed my mind," he repeated for his mum. "I don't know what I was thinking earlier. There's no way I could give my babies to someone else to raise, even to you. I love them and I want them with me always."

"Nicholas, this is ridiculous," his mum huffed. "Children belong in a stable household with traditional values. They should not be raised in a heathen paradise as this one with a...a sorcerer exerting his influence over them."

Nick grinned. He wasn't sure why. It wasn't funny. His mum was insulting the man he loved. But even he had to admit that it was ridiculous that she'd gone from accusing Bax of witchcraft to labeling him a sorcerer in a matter of a few days.

“Mum, I love you, but I also love Bax,” he said, walking around to the back of her car and starting the process of taking out everything he’d just finished packing. “I claim temporary insanity brought on by stress, exhaustion, and just not trusting the man I’m in love with enough to feel like everything will be alright.” He probably could have used both hands to unpack the car, since Jordan was clinging desperately to him like a monkey, but he kept one arm around his son as he pulled the larger of the suitcases out and set it on the tarmac. “I love you,” he told Bax as he straightened. “And everything will be alright.”

“Damn right it will,” Bax said, leaning in to kiss Nick’s lips.

Nick’s mum made an exasperated sound and stepped forward, like she would come between them. “And now he’s using rough language around the babies?” she demanded.

“Mum,” Nick sighed.

There really wasn’t anything else he could do. His mum was who she was, and she wasn’t going to change that for anything.

He didn’t need her to. For too long, he’d relied on her for most of his support, but now he had Bax. It was wild how one moment, one action, could change his outlook on everything and shift his burden.

“You’re sure you’re alright with taking the kids and everything back upstairs?” he asked Bax, just in case.

Bax laughed as he lugged the other suitcase out of the car while Macy flopped her head against his shoulder, her hand in her mouth for comfort. “I am absolutely alright with it,” he said. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Nick's heart squeezed again, and he inched in to steal one more kiss before facing his mum.

"Thanks for being willing to take the kids and thank you for all you've done for me in the last few years, Mum," he said. "I'm not going to stop you from seeing your grandkids or even from watching them now and then, if you want to, but they're not going to live with you."

"This is outrageous," his mum said, so angry he was surprised she didn't stomp her foot. "You cannot be serious about allowing them to continue to live here. Can't you see how this place has infected you?"

"We'll come back down for the rest of the boxes and things once I get the kids settled," Nick went on, ignoring her.

"Er, we can take some of those."

Nick twisted to see Blaine and Alfie coming out of the house, Blaine hurrying like there was a fire and Alfie striding with long, calm steps.

"We were just coming to find you anyhow," Blaine said as he reached them. He zipped right past Nick to grab one of the boxes from the car. It was a heavy one. "Uff. Alfie, you get this one. It needs your muscles. I'll just take the suitcases."

"Alright," Alfie said, nodding to Nick's mum as he strolled past and continued unloading the car.

Nick's mum shook with rage. "I mean it, Nicholas," she said as if she'd been making threats throughout the whole exchange. "If you refuse to let the children come with me, then I won't ever babysit for you again. You'll have the full responsibility for the children on your own shoulders."

Nick glanced across to Bax, who was trying to help his overexcited brother reach for some of the boxes that had been pushed deeper into the car. Bax straightened and looked at Nick like he was trying not to smile.

Nick turned back to his mum and said, “Something tells me I won’t have trouble finding help with the kids. I do want you to be a part of their lives, though. You’re their granny.”

“Get all of that out of my car,” his mum ignored him, circling around the back of the car to direct Blaine and Alfie as they emptied it. “I want all of it gone. Take the car seats, too. I offered you help, you turned it down, and now you’re on your own.”

Nick stood where he was, shaking his head in amazement as his mum made certain everything belonging to him and the kids was removed from her car. Once it was, before they could start taking things up to the flat, and without saying goodbye to him, his mum got in the car and sped away.

“Is she going to be alright?” Alfie asked as he stacked the cardboard boxes, then lifted the entire pile.

“Yeah,” Nick said with a sigh. “She just hates not having her own way.”

Bax huffed a laugh, but kept his comments to himself. Which was one of the reasons Nick loved him so much.

“Why were you looking for us?” Bax asked once they were all upstairs, as Blaine started unpacking the box of toys.

“Oh!” Blaine said, straightening suddenly, a soft toy elephant in his arms. “We’ve got a surprise for you.”

“A surprise?” Nick asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Well, it’s more for Bax, but we are all hoping you’ll want to be a part of it, too,” Blaine explained.

Nick was worried and glanced to Bax to tell him as much.

“A surprise for me?” Bax asked.

“Yes,” Blaine said. “Come downstairs to the garden and see.”

Nick had no idea what kind of madness they were in for, especially if Blaine had planned it all. But his heart felt light after taking back his kids. He felt like he’d taken back his life and like he and Bax were finally on the right track to building a strong, lasting relationship. He could face whatever Blaine had come up with feeling the way he did.

He was surprised when they rounded the house only to find pretty much the entire Hawthorne family save Ryan, who was still in Milan, camped out on the lawn with a picnic set up around them. They were spread out over several blankets and Nick spotted a lot of the eggs and flowers and things they’d been planning to use for their Ostara celebration among them. Along with that, a small table had been set up to one side with all the ceremonial things that had been on Bax’s altar before the unicorn had fallen on it.

Nally saw them coming and jumped quickly to his feet, saying, “Oh! They’re here!”

The rest of the family dropped their conversations and finished swallowing the food and drink they’d been enjoying as they got to their feet, too.

“Surprise!” Robert called out.

The rest of the family joined him with surprises of their own.

“You’ve resurrected the Ostara picnic,” Bax said, beaming as they joined the rest of the family.

“Isn’t Ostara all about resurrection?” Blaine asked, hurrying forward to join the rest of the family instead of standing with Bax and Nick.

Alfie joined them at his more sedate pace. “No, that’s the wrong religion, sweetheart,” he said, winking at Blaine.

Nick laughed, not bothered about whether the joke was sacrilegious or not. “This is great,” he said, looking around at the baskets and platters of food and the pile of dyed eggs in the center of the blanket. He didn’t mind letting Jordan down so he could run over and investigate. His entire family was there to catch Jordan if he got out of hand.

“It’s not just the picnic and the fun things,” Janice said, taking Robert’s hand and coming forward to greet Nick and Bax at the side of the blankets. She addressed Bax as she went on to say, “We’ve given it a lot of thought, and we’ve decided as a family that we’d like to learn very much more about Paganism as a faith system.”

Nick burst into a smile and turned to see what Bax thought of that.

“Hold on,” Bax said, laughing. “Are you telling me that the entire Hawthorne family wants to convert to Paganism?”

Janice and Robert exchanged a loving, teasing look before facing Bax again. “Yes,” Robert said with a casual shrug.

“The entire family?” Nick asked.

“You have to admit, it’s awfully cool as far as religions go,” Nally said, looking excited and abashed.

“Sure beats most other religions out there,” Robbie said with a shrug. Toby elbowed him like he’d said something shocking, but he was grinning.

“We don’t know much about covens,” Janice went on. “I mean, Robert and I belonged to a cult briefly in the seventies, and I think I might have had an affair with a high priestess when I was in my early twenties, but that’s not the same thing as forming a proper coven for serious spiritual pursuit.”

Nick had to cover his mouth with one hand to hide his amusement. He peeked up at the blue sky and the puffy clouds whizzing past and thanked Raina for bringing him to such a weird, wonderful family.

Bax was suddenly far more serious than Nick thought the moment called for. “Hold on,” he said. “Are you all telling me that you want to form a coven for me?”

“Basically, yes,” Blaine said, his mouth half full with the bun he’d snagged from one of the plates while Janice was talking. “We know you’ve been longing to have a spiritual group again and that nothing that’s come along has been quite right. We might all be a disaster, too. But we’d like to learn, and we’d like you to teach us.”

Bax laughed and shook his head. “You realize you’re all ridiculous, right?”

The Hawthornes exchanged looks and shrugs before Robert, definitely acting as head of the family, said, “Yes, of course. We always have been.”

Nick couldn’t stop smiling. It was all too perfect and bizarre. “Well?” he asked Bax. “I’m game if you are.”

Bax shook his head and rolled his eyes, but he couldn't wipe the smile off his face either. "You all will be the death of me," he said. "Paganism was the one unique thing I had to set me apart from the rest of the family. Now you're taking that from me, too?"

"You're still our only accountant," Blaine told him, making a face as he did.

Bax laughed louder. "Alright, then," he said, chuckling. "If you really want to do this, I guess I'm now the Hawthorne family's spiritual leader."

Nick was glad his mum was gone. She might have tried to take the kids away by force if she could see what was happening. But he'd never been happier. He loved the way the Hawthornes went all in on a barmy idea. He didn't think it was all that barmy, really. He liked what he'd learned so far about Paganism, and he had no qualms at all about raising his and Raina's kids with a respect for nature and the forces of the Universe.

They were welcomed onto the picnic blankets with hugs and cheers from the other Hawthornes and sat down with the kids to enjoy the picnic feast that they should have had the day before. Everyone was in a good mood and full of questions for Bax about what being officially Pagan entailed.

"You should have asked me what this all means before making the decision to convert," Bax teased them as they finished supper and started in on pudding.

"I'm still waiting for the part where we get to have orgies," Blaine teased his brother.

"Blaine, it's a family coven," Bax told him with pretend disdain. "There definitely won't be any orgies here."

"That doesn't mean there can't be other naughty rituals and things," Toby said,

looping his arm around Robbie's shoulders then kissing him sloppily.

It was all such a good time that Nick didn't even think about telling the rest of the Hawthornes about the confrontation with his mum and her declaration that she wouldn't babysit anymore until the meal was done and Bax got up to set up his altar for a short ritual. The Hawthornes were both outraged by his mum's stubbornness and quick to offer their help caring for the kids.

Everything would be alright. The Hawthornes around him were living proof of that. And it looked like they were all serious about being Pagan, too. Bax talked everyone through the symbolism and significance of the springtime ritual he'd had planned for the other night, and they each played their parts as candles were lit, poetic prayers were offered, and flower garlands were passed around so everyone in the family could wear one as they planted seedlings in the garden plot that had been set aside the other day.

"I think this whole thing is going to work out after all," Nick said hours later, as he and Bax got ready for bed in Bax's flat. Early and Rhys had volunteered to be on kid duty that night so that the two of them could have the whole night and part of the morning to themselves.

"What whole thing?" Bax asked as he tugged off his shirt and set it aside.

Nick forgot what he was saying for a second as desire rushed through him. "Everything," he said, his voice on the rough side as he stepped over to Bax and pulled him into his arms. He'd already taken his shirt off, so they were skin to skin, heat to heat. "The family being Pagan, everyone helping out with the kids, and most of all, us."

He smiled, but that wasn't enough to express the joy he felt at everything working out in the end. He pulled Bax tighter and slanted his mouth over his in a deep kiss.

It was so new and so natural to be with Bax that way. He'd been so worried at first, but now it felt like home as he wrapped his arms around Bax while deepening their kiss. He spread one hand across the muscles of Bax's back, digging his fingertips in, and slid the other down under the waistband of Bax's trousers to grab his arse. That muscle was firm and delicious, and when he stretched his fingers into the cleft between Bax's cheeks, he loved the reaction he got.

Bax gasped then groaned into Nick's mouth, pressing his arse into Nick's grasp. "You make me so hot," he purred as he stepped back from the kiss and reached for the fastenings of Nick's trousers. "I want you in me."

Nick made a rumbling sound of approval and kissed Bax again. That kiss was short-lived as Bax undid his zipper and sank to his knees to tug Nick's trousers down.

Nick sucked in a breath as Bax slid a hand up his eager shaft, then held the base so he could lean in and lick the tip. Pleasure shuddered through him as Bax pulled his foreskin back to kiss and mouth him. He might have been working off instinct when making love to Bax, but there was something to be said about Bax's experience as well.

He had to grab handfuls of Bax's hair and widen his stance to keep himself from being knocked over by the pleasure of Bax's mouth on him. All that hot wetness as Bax bobbed deeper and deeper on him, going so far as to gag himself once or twice, had Nick seeing stars. Bax gripped his thigh with his free hand at first, but when he moved it to cup Nick's balls, the whole thing nearly ended after barely beginning.

"Too close," he hissed, rocking back so his wet cock popped free from Bax's talented mouth. "I want to last longer than that."

Bax grinned up at him with a throaty laugh. "I thought the family had the kids all night," he said. "Who knows how many times we could get each other off without

being interrupted.”

Nick laughed, combing his hand through Bax’s silky hair. “After the weekend we’ve had, I’ll probably fall dead asleep after the first orgasm.”

Bax sent him a cheeky look as he pushed himself to stand, sliding his hands over Nick’s hips and sides as he did, and playing his fingers through Nick’s thick chest hair to pinch his nipples lightly by the time he was standing.

“Sleep, then,” he said, gaze flitting from Nick’s eyes to his lips. “I’ll wake you up in a few hours so we can do it all again.”

Nick made a hungry sound as he grabbed the back of Bax’s head and brought him in for a possessive kiss. “I’ll take that,” he said.

They kissed for a few minutes, mouths hungry and hands searching. Nick couldn’t get enough of Bax’s tongue in his mouth or his hands gripping Bax’s flesh. Bax could get him worked up and desperate faster than he’d thought was possible.

“Right,” Bax gasped, rocking back. “If I don’t get you in me right now, I won’t be responsible for what I do.”

Nick laughed. “Alright, then.”

He stepped out of his trousers, which were already around his ankles, then bent to pick them up and toss them over to the chair where the rest of his clothes were. As he walked around the bed to the table where the lube was kept, he stroked himself a few times to keep the good feelings sizzling through him as they took care of practical things.

He needn’t have worried about losing his desire. As soon as Bax kicked off his

trousers, he dove onto the bed face first. He made such an appealing picture with his arms and legs spread, his gorgeous arse lifted slightly in invitation, as he peeked over his shoulder, that Nick abandoned his fledgling thoughts about foreplay entirely.

“I love how open you are with what you need,” he growled as he flicked open the bottle of lube and squirted what was probably way too much on his hand.

“Open?” Bax teased him with a grin, reaching behind him while pushing his shoulders into the pillows. “How’s this for open?”

He grabbed his arsecheeks and pulled them to reveal the tight pucker of his hole. The boldness of the move made it hard for Nick to breathe. He scrambled onto the bed between Bax’s legs, feeling like he could come at any second.

He stroked lube onto his straining erection as he found the perfect position, then wiped the excess over Bax’s hole. Bax moaned and lifted his hips higher, pulling his knees up under him so he could get closer to Nick. The move was wanton and brash, and Nick couldn’t help but push two fingers into Bax to show his approval.

“God, yes, love, yes!” Bax gasped, pushing back on Nick’s fingers. “You have no idea how horny I am right now.”

“Er, actually, I think I do,” Nick chuckled. He was mesmerized by the sight of Bax’s hole swallowing his fingers and stroked his dick with his free hand.

“Fuck me, Nick,” Bax panted. “Fuck me until we’re the same body.”

Nick caught his breath at the raw command. “Are you sure you don’t want?—”

“Fuck me!” Bax shouted.

Nick laughed at how demanding his lover could be. He liked it, though. Ultimately, they wanted the same things.

He shifted in, grabbing Bax's hips and pulling them up, then guiding his cock to where it needed to be. Bax's body put up a little resistance that had them both panting as he pushed, but as soon as Nick made it past the tight ring of muscle and sank deep inside Bax's warmth, they both groaned.

He wasn't going to last long. He wanted Bax too much and was already primed and flirting with his orgasm. He needed to give Bax what he wanted, though. Bax had been the best teacher he could have had in their time together so far and had schooled him in his favorite angle and intensity to be fucked. Nick adjusted his thrusts until he was pounding Bax's prostate.

He knew he'd done it right when Bax began to howl with pleasure, bucking back on him and reaching between his legs to stroke his cock. It was wild and carnal, and Nick felt completely taken over by instinct and the drive to come. It didn't have to be pretty or sweet, and they didn't have to be careful with each other. They were two beasts who needed to come and who trusted each other to get what they wanted.

He couldn't hold out, and within a few minutes, he let out a cry as his orgasm started to rush through him. It felt amazing to shoot off inside of Bax, knowing he was leaving a part of himself there.

"Yes, baby, yes!" Bax gasped before Nick's orgasm had completely finished, squeezing him as he came, too.

It was as perfect as things could be. Nick wasn't sure if he was supposed to or not, but he held Bax's hips tightly to him as he collapsed to the side so his flagging cock would stay buried in his lover.

He actually managed to stay there and Bax hummed and wriggled like he enjoyed it as they relaxed, panting. He was hot and sweaty, but Nick didn't care. He pulled Bax into his arms and held him there, resting a hand on his belly.

"Is this alright?" he asked when he had enough breath to speak.

"This is more than alright," Bax said. He threaded his fingers through Nick's and squeezed his arse around Nick's cock. "This is perfect."

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Rafe Hawthorne loved a good party. For the last week, everything at Hawthorne House had felt like a party.

After a few weeks of lessons about the practices of modern Paganism from Bax, the entire family had come together to put on a Beltane celebration that everyone would remember for a long time to come. There'd been great music, amazing food, and an actual maypole. Who would have thought that racing around a maypole, laughing and joking with his family as they tried to get it right, could be so much fun?

They'd also had a ritual that Rafe found surprisingly poignant and meaningful. If that was the way his family now celebrated the divine in nature and in themselves, then he was all for it. The Hawthorne family was officially the most outlandish and colorful family in Kent. Not that they hadn't been before.

A few remnants of their Beltane celebrations were still visible on the grounds when the metalwork and blacksmithing convention people had arrived on the scene to set up.

"Was there some sort of filming here?" the head of the convention asked as Rafe took her on a tour of the grounds so she could determine where the different sculptures that were entered in the competition could be placed.

Rafe laughed. "Yeah, sure, that's what was going on here."

In fact, Hawthorne House's gardens had been used for a spot of filming in April, and since he wasn't sure what his family thought of letting the whole world know how witchy they'd become, he didn't feel the need to add further explanation.

Not that his family would care what people thought of them.

“We made a bonfire after dark and everything,” he caught Nally bragging to a particularly hot blacksmith apprentice on the first day of the convention while giving the man goo-goo eyes.

“Did you all get naked and dance around it?” the burly young guy asked, looking at Nally like he was one of the ice cream cones being served from a cart a few yards away from them that he wanted to lick.

Nally laughed. “Not this time,” he said. “It was a family thing.”

“Some other time, then,” the young guy flirted back.

“Anytime,” Nally said with a blushing grin.

Rafe chuckled and moved on. He remembered being that young. He was only nine years older than Nally, and truth be told, he liked a little fun in the sack now and then. He liked it a lot.

It had been too long since he’d sought out a cuddle-buddy for the night. Setting up his hot shop again after being away from Hawthorne House for so long had taken most of his time and attention during the winter. Blowing enough glass to have on hand as examples of the techniques he would be teaching as soon as his next class started up had sucked a lot of time as well.

He was still wrapped up in his need to find a unique and creative take on the centuries-old craft. He wanted to build a reputation for excellence in the glassblowing world, but that wasn’t going to happen if all he produced was gift shop level goblets and globes.

Now that everything was ready, he had a lot more time to sample what his home

county and beyond had to offer. Judging by the quality of men roaming around Hawthorne House's grounds for the convention, he wouldn't have to look far.

A small cheer from one side, where a crowd was gathered around the modest stage that had been set up at the end of what was usually the Renaissance Faire village drew his attention. Hands in his trouser pockets, he ambled over to see what was going on.

"And finally, first place in the six-to-ten-foot sculpture category goes to...."

The man who stood on the podium giving out prizes paused for a long, reality competition show length pause. Rafe noticed Nick and Bax standing expectantly off to one side of the stage, Jordan in Bax's arms and Macy in Nick's. The two of them made such a ridiculously sweet couple that it gave Rafe a toothache.

They were happy, though. They'd been incredibly happy since everything between them had been sorted six weeks before. Even though Nick's mum continued to be a thorn in all their sides as she continued her campaign to take Nick and Raina's kids at the same time as she refused to babysit anymore.

Fortunately for Bax and Nick, the entire family was invested in raising Raina's kids now. Even him, though he still refused to change nappies.

"And the winner is...Nick Turner for his stunning unicorn sculpture!" the man on the podium declared at last.

Everyone cheered. Nick looked shocked. Bax jumped up and down, then threw his free arm around Nick to hug him. Jordan got in on the action, and within seconds they were one big, domestic hug.

Rafe laughed and shook his head. Cousin Baxter certainly had gotten his happy ending. And good for him. The whole family was so proud of the way he'd stepped

up to defend Nick and bring him over to the Hawthorne family dark side.

He chuckled at his metaphor and continued on, looking for someone who might want a little company of the horizontal kind. If worse came to worst, he could always head into London to any number of the clubs owned by The Brotherhood.

That was an appealing thought, and he was just about to turn around and head back to the house when his phone buzzed. He took it from his back pocket, then frowned as an American number flashed on the screen.

Usually he didn't take calls from unknown numbers, but the plus one had him curious, so he answered with a confused, "Hello?"

"Hello, Rafe?" a familiar, American voice asked in return.

"Yes." Rafe frowned and stepped off the path into the shade of a spreading tree. "Who is this?"

There was a long pause before the voice said, "It's Jake Mathers."

Anger, jealousy, and yes, a spike of arousal jolted through Rafe, making him frown and tense up. Jake Mathers was the bastard who had undercut him at every step of his time in residency at the Corning Museum of Glass last fall. He was a fellow glass-blower and had had the nerve to upstage him.

"Jake," he said, crossing his arms and narrowing his eyes, as if Jake was standing in front of him. "To what do I owe the pleasure of a long-distance call in the middle of a May afternoon?"

Jake blew out a breath that said he knew just how happy Rafe was to hear from him.

Then he shocked the sunshine out of Rafe by saying, "I need your help. Would you

marry me?”

I hope you've enjoyed Nick and Bax's story! And I hope you've enjoyed this little dive into Paganism. It seems only fitting that the Hawthorne family all converted to such an expressive and ancient religion.

What's up next for Rafe Hawthorne? Why would his American frienemy call him out of the blue and propose marriage? Will having Jake spend time at Hawthorne House improve Rafe's creativity and help him to find a unique twist to his glassblowing craft or will Jake be more trouble than he's worth? Find out next in Blown !