



How the Other Half Lives

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Category: LGBT+

Description: My days were a whirlwind of legal battles. My nights? Let's just say they involved a different kind of exertion, thanks to the undeniably attractive maintenance man, Alex.

We had a system: a no-strings fling fueled by laughter, late-night pizza, shared novels, and heated chess matches.

Except, apparently, my system was flawed. Because while Alex saw casual, I saw forever. One slip up was all it took for the whole case to unravel and now I was back-tracking fast.

But maybe all Alex needed was a shove in the right direction? Battles in court, I could do; for matters of the heart, the jury was still out.

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“You need to tell me more about this mystery man of yours, Vance. If you expect the family to meet him, we’re going to need a little more than just it’s a ‘guy I’ve been seeing.’”

I sighed and resisted the urge to run my hand through my hair. That was a nervous tic I had long since coached myself into not doing through years of hard work. It wasn’t something that ever looked good to the opposing side while defending a client during a trial, and I had already styled my hair for my dinner date and didn’t wish to have to redo it.

I sat down on the white leather sofa, my phone pinched between my shoulder and my ear so my hands were free. “I’ve told you quite a bit about him, Elain. Haven’t you been listening? I’ve talked to you nearly every day since he and I met.”

“I guess I just didn’t realize how serious it was,” she said.

“So you weren’t listening?” I was pretty sure I had talked about Alex ad nauseam to my sister. Our close friendship surpassed that of any others I had. She was my confidant and critic—when I needed it.

“I was, but I thought he was just a hookup! What changed? Is he a plumber or something? I can’t recall what his profession is.”

It was true, my relationship with Alex had started as just a hookup. But it was so much more now.

“He’s one of the maintenance workers in my apartment complex. I called to get a

replacement for my sink or a part of my sink or something since it was leaking. And he was the person who showed up to do the work.”

“How’d that turn into a hookup? Sounds like the beginning of a porno Jake and I watched last week.”

I could have gone without knowing that my sister and her husband were watching porn together. Good for them, but I didn’t need to know about it. “I felt bad that he was working after hours, and I ordered food. We enjoyed it.” That first night hadn’t turned into anything more. But it had been fun. Alex had reluctantly sat down and had dinner with me. I had made it past his gruff defenses.

A few days later, when I saw him again as I was carrying a pizza, I convinced him to join me. Since he wasn’t on the clock that time, I was able to convince him to stay the night. Not that it was a hardship.

Since then, we had been pretty regularly hooking up and having dinner together at my apartment. One morning, that had been coffee together when he had arrived early and I was working from home.

It had been two months since we’d met.

Tonight, though, would be the real deal. I had convinced him to go on a date with me and actually go out to dinner. A friend of mine was having their grand opening of their new restaurant, and I had a reservation for us.

“You have reservations at Blake’s restaurant tonight?”

“Yes. Alex has no idea where we’re going. Not that he would care. He is just going to complain about the portion sizes the whole time. We’ll probably get takeout on the way home.”

I was pretty sure Alex had some concerns about some perceived economic differences between us, being that I was a lawyer and he was a handyman, but none of that bothered me. His concerns didn't make it easy for me to broach the other subject I needed to talk with him about, but we would get there.

"Listen, you and our parents get to meet him this weekend. He agreed to come over for dinner on Sunday."

"Did you tell him it was a family dinner?"

"I'll mention that tonight." I most certainly hadn't told him it was a family dinner when we talked about it the other day. I didn't want to scare him off. I hoped that tonight during our dinner at the restaurant I could bring it up and make sure he understood that I was serious about us. It was something that started as just an attraction. The sex had been fantastic, but the conversation was what had me hooked. He and I connected on a level that was out of this world. We talked for hours. We shared jokes throughout the day, even though both of us were working and should have been focused on that.

The knock at the door pulled me out of my daydreaming about my man.

"Listen, he's here. I've got to go. You'll get to meet him Sunday."

"Okay, but tell him he's in for a hell of a hazing."

I laughed. I knew she was only a little bit serious. She would behave and so would my parents. Mostly. This was the first time I was introducing them to a guy, and they weren't going to try and scare him off. They'd welcome him with open arms just as we had for my sister's husband when we'd first met him. Minor hazing just to make sure they had a sense of humor.

“Haha,” I said and hung up the phone.

I grinned as I opened the door and Alex stepped inside.

“I can’t believe I’m wearing this,” he said.

I stepped aside so he could make it through to the open area of the apartment.

He wore a pair of black pants with a white button-up and a black jacket that looked just fine on him. The suit did wonders for his broad shoulders. I wanted to slip my hands underneath the notched lapel and push it off his shoulders.

“The suit? Clearly you have one—”

He shot me a glare, but there wasn’t a lot of heat behind it. “I do own nice clothes.”

I rolled my eyes. “I know you do. And you really don’t need to be that dressed up.”

“You’re wearing a suit.”

“I wore this to work all day,” I said. “I told you anything was fine.”

“Really? How about if I show up in my denim jumpsuit I wear when I work on my truck.”

Talk about the start to a porno... “That sounds amazing. That’s how most of my favorite fantasies about you start.”

He laughed, the lines around his eyes crinkling. “I’ll keep that in mind for later. I’m sad that I didn’t bring it.”

“You worry too much.”

Alex stepped into the living room and gazed down at the marble chess table tucked in the corner of the room.

“This isn’t our game,” he said.

I came to his side. “No, my nephew was over on Monday and wanted to play. I have a picture of our game, and I wrote out where our pieces were.”

Chess was one of the things Alex and I had in common. Almost since the first day of him visiting we had been playing. We were equally matched, and our skills grew with each game. We’d played countless games, some of them lasting weeks.

“You’re lucky I trust you.”

I scoffed. “Like you don’t take a picture of the board before you leave.”

“That’s so I can study it in my free time.”

“And so you can be sure I don’t cheat.”

Alex eyes narrowed as he gazed at the board. It was his thinking face, and I was intensely familiar with it. He grabbed a pad of paper and scribbled out a note. “Your nephew is the black pieces, right?”

I nodded.

He tucked the piece of paper under the board on the black side so that just the corner was peeking out.

“Make sure he gets that.”

I crossed my arms. “That’s not fair. Why don’t I get advice?”

“How do you know it’s advice?” He smirked. His focus was no longer on the board and was entirely on me. A shiver went down my spine.

“I know you too well.” I knew what the heat in his eyes meant right then also. I had been anticipating it.

He tossed his jacket over the chair. “What time is the reservation?”

“Seven.”

“And the place is within walking distance, right? Why did you ask me to get here so early?”

I wagged my eyebrows, stepping in closer and pressing a kiss to his lips. He softened for me immediately. Alex was unapologetic in his grumpy ways, and I loved that about him. I doubt that he knew just how much and how deeply I felt for him. He showed me how he felt in little ways. I hoped someday those little ways would come out verbally, but until then I would make do.

“Well, I figured since our reservation was late, we could have some pre-dinner festivities.”

He looked at my hair. “We’re going to mess that up.”

“Promise?” I asked with a raised brow.

His hand slid behind me and gripped my ass. “I guarantee it,” he said.

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I'd been in Vance's apartment countless times and been in many others like it. It still never ceased to amaze me the stark difference between how he lived and how I lived. At this moment though, I didn't care that the thread count of his sheets was higher than my weekly paycheck. I just liked having him in my arms.

The friendship that had blossomed between the two of us since that first time I did work in his apartment took me by surprise. I never would have imagined I'd have so much in common with a man like him. Yet, day after day, we found more things to talk about, more jokes, more laughter, a deeper friendship than I'd ever experienced.

Plus, the sex.

In a word: mind-blowing.

Vance took his time removing his jacket, loosening his tie, and making sure that the clothes didn't wrinkle as he took them off. I probably took the same care with my clothes, but I had been aching all day to have him in my arms again. How after nearly two months or however long it had been, that I couldn't get enough of him was beyond me. I shucked off my pants and dress shirt, tossing them unceremoniously onto the chair. Why he had a chair in his room never made sense to me. I suppose when one had room for extra furniture, they might as well use it. My tiny bedroom barely fit a king-sized bed and a nightstand.

Vance grinned when he was finally naked standing before me.

"I'm surprised you don't have those things that hold your socks up. Not going to lie, that would be kind of hot to fuck you while you had those on."

He smirked. The one corner of his mouth going up to reveal the dimple on his cheek. “They are called sock garters, and I do have some. I’m not putting them on, though. And who said you were fucking me tonight?”

Another thing I loved about Vance. He was vers, like me. He gave as good as he got and didn’t seem to mind either.

I trailed my hand down his torso, and I tried to keep the shiver from my body at feeling his skin against mine again. I craved him like a drunk might crave his liquor. His chest rose and fell with each breath and his abs twitched in the spot where he was ticklish.

I pressed my lips to his neck and tasted him. No matter what fancy meal I’d be having later, I knew that nothing was going to taste as good as what I was about to devour.

“Lie face down on the bed,” I whispered into his ear. I pressed a kiss just below his ear and nipped at the skin. “I’m hungry.”

He shuddered. “Fuck, Alex. The things you say to me.”

I smacked his ass lightly. “Move. We don’t want to be late, and I want to take my time with you.”

Vance leapt forward. He lay face down like I’d told him to. His naked body on display for me. His perfect ass wiggled as if he was trying to get some friction against his hard cock. He grabbed one of his pillows and wrapped his arms around it.

I grabbed the lube and condoms from the drawer and placed them on the bed.

Next, I kneeled behind him. I gripped his ass cheeks with my hands, palming the muscular globes. I pressed a kiss to one and then the other.

Vance tilted his hips, pressing his ass into my waiting hands. I spread his cheeks and swiped at his perfect hole with my tongue.

“Fuck, Alex!” He gripped the bedspread, his whole body going taut.

I didn’t let him distract me. I buried my face between his cheeks and flicked my tongue over his hole again and again until he could barely contain his movement. I had to hold his hips with one hand and use the other to work him open. Then I delved my tongue inside.

“Fuck. You’re good at that, Alex. You’re fucking killing me. I want to come. I want come so bad it hurts. Fuck me, please.”

I hummed, letting the vibrations work over his skin. “Soon,” I said. “I haven’t finished my meal.”

With a few more swipes of my tongue, I knew his body was ready for me. Vance was writhing beneath me, his body trembling. Any more attention from my mouth and he was going to cum hands-free into the bedding. I wasn’t much better. Someday perhaps I’d see if I could make us both come hands-free just by rimming him. Tonight was not that night.

Finally, I let up.

Vance gasped for breath like he’d just run a marathon. “Fuck, you are so good at that,” he panted. “I wasn’t sure if I wanted you to stop or keep going.”

“I had trouble deciding as well,” I admitted.

I sheathed the condom over my cock. Vance flipped over. He used his legs to urge me closer.

“I want to see you,” he said.

I couldn't place the emotion that appeared in his eyes, but it almost stopped my breath. He looked at me like I was his world. Like I was far more important than I was.

It was lust. That's all it was. It had to be. I was looking at him the same way.

He spread his legs, and I settled between them. I pressed a kiss to his cheek and buried my face in his neck. I lined up my cock to his hole and his body opened for me. Vance gripped my hips, urging me deeper.

Together we rocked. I slid in and out of him easily, and he met me thrust for thrust.

“Harder,” he urged me, and I obliged.

His nails bit into my skin where he held my hips. Then his hands were roving everywhere as if he couldn't stop touching me. My ass, my shoulders, my pecs. His touch drove me wild.

Vance gripped the back of my neck and pulled me down for a kiss. His mouth crashed against mine like he was desperate for a taste of me. I could understand the feeling. It pushed me over the edge, and him too. Together we came, his come spurting between us while mine filled the condom. Our lips sealed together, capturing our groans.

Finally, he pressed his forehead to mine and put some space between our lips. Not much. I felt his breath against my mouth. His chest heaved with each breath, and he grinned up at me.

“I changed my mind about dinner,” he said. “I see now why we stay in all the time.”

I laughed, then reluctantly pulled out of him. I kissed his cheek. I never wanted to stop kissing him. It was a bad habit I'd picked up since visiting him so often. "C'mon. We still have time to fix your hair and get dressed. We're not missing dinner."

It surprised me that I didn't just take the out. I didn't want to go to dinner, but it seemed like something that was important to Vance, so I was going. As much as I did want to stay in with him, at least I wouldn't spend the evening with unreleased tension.

With any luck, we'd return home for the second act.

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I didn't really enjoy living quite this close to the downtown area, where the hubbub of the city was busy, loud, and occasionally smelly. It was very much a younger crowd type of area, but I liked that I could walk most anywhere. Even my office was a quick walk. The cold winter air was cleansing, though a bit chilly.

Perhaps it was the company that I enjoyed most.

On nights like tonight where the air was cool, and the city wasn't too busy and Alex and I could just lazily walk to our destination, I loved it. It was romantic.

He did not quite see it that way.

He had shot me a look of surprise when I laced my fingers into his, but he hadn't pulled away. He steered clear of anyone walking too close to him.

"I can't believe you walk like this every day," he grouched.

"I love it," I said.

"Do you wear shoes like this?" He looked down at the Oxfords which were nice but didn't seem to be broken in.

"You didn't buy new shoes for tonight, did you?" The thought was sort of adorable, but very out of character for Alex.

"Hell no," he said. "I was in my sister's wedding last year, and instead of renting tuxes, we all bought suits. I guess it has come in handy. Especially if you're going to

drag me to events like this. This is only the second time I've worn the shoes."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not dragging you. I asked you if you'd like to go to dinner. You said yes."

"You didn't tell me I was going to have to wear a tie," he said, though he smiled when he said it. "My response might have been different."

"I'll make it up to you," I said and leaned over to kiss his cheek. "I'll wear a tie while I feast on you later."

"I think you already have. I should pay for dinner after that orgasm."

I laughed. "This is my treat."

There was a line out the door of the restaurant. Alex's shoulders stiffened.

"You're sure we're going to be able to get in?"

"We have reservations," I said. "I promise." I pulled him in the door.

Chef Blake Edmunds had been sinfully talented with his recipes while I'd known him in college. This restaurant, with its focus on Italian fusion dishes, was a testament to that skill. Despite its popularity and large crowd, the air was quiet inside the building. The hushed tones of quiet conversation accompanied the soft clink of silverware. The ma?tre d', dressed in a deep emerald jacket and charcoal pants, smiled as we approached.

"Hello," I said to the ma?tre d'.

They smiled at me and Alex. I still had my fingers linked into his, and I couldn't help

but notice how stiff he had become. Note to self: dates in public were not his forte. That was just fine. I wasn't usually one for crowds either. Maybe I had been back in my twenties when going to the new cool hip place was the thing to do, but now, I was here for my friend, and I wanted Alex to share it with me also.

"We have reservations for Vance Edwards," I said.

The ma?tre d' smiled. "Yes, we are expecting you, Mr. Edwards. We have your table ready. You are just on time."

"Perfect."

We were led back right away to a semi-private table. Our table sat against the exposed brick wall with lush greenery adorning the shelves. Our location did have a nice view of the rest of the restaurant, and it was secluded from everywhere else.

"It pays to know people," Alex said as he sat down.

"It really does," I agreed.

The waiter came around and held a bottle of wine. "This is our Cabernet Sauvignon. It is what Chef Blake recommends with the dish tonight."

"We don't order for ourselves?" Alex asked with a raised brow.

I grinned. "Normally we would, but Blake knows what he's doing. I usually trust whatever he has in store for me. If you'd rather you can pick off the menu."

"I don't care what I get as long as it's good. I could go for a nice steak right about now."

“The recommendation from Chef Blake is the pappardelle with roasted duck with porcini mushrooms this evening.”

“Fantastic,” I said.

Alex nodded as well, looking only a little bit overwhelmed.

The waiter poured our wine and left.

“I’m not much of a wine drinker,” Alex said.

“I’ll drink yours.” He seemed kind of stiff and out of place, and I felt for him. A waiter carrying a tray of food walked past us.

“Smells good,” Alex said. “Is this going to be one of those places that has the tiny portions, though?”

I chuckled. “Probably. We can get a second dinner on the way home, or I have leftover pizza from yesterday.”

He shook his head. “You live on pizza. I’m surprised they let you in this type of place.”

“It’s its own food group. Who doesn’t live on pizza?”

“I’d like to know how you stay in shape.”

“Well, I do visit the gym three times a week.”

“I take the stairs,” Alex said, and I laughed.

“Hey, did you catch the game the other night? I wish we could have hung out for it. It was a good one,” I asked. “I watched the highlights. I didn’t dare turn it on while I was working, else I wouldn’t have gotten it done.”

His cheeks turned red. “Yeah, I watched the highlights, too. I might have stayed up reading the book you recommended. I couldn’t put that fucker down.”

I grinned. “It’s a good one. The next one in the series comes out next month. I reserved two copies for us.”

“We can’t just share one copy?” Alex smiled, and the dim light of the restaurant twinkled in his eyes.

“I didn’t want to fight over who got to read it first.”

“Good choice. What did you have to work late for?”

I bit back a groan. That had been a mess. “There was new evidence presented and so we had to prepare and redo some things. I could have had some of the paralegals do it, but when we’re in the thick of things, I don’t really like leaving all the work to them.”

“Still like getting your hands dirty?”

I nodded. I knew he understood. He was the same way in his own work.

Within a few moments, the waiter returned and set the first course of our meal in front of us. Alex seemed to wait for me to jump in, and he mimicked what I did as far as grabbing utensils to eat with. I was just about to open my mouth to ask him about dinner this Sunday so he could meet my parents, when I heard my name called.

“Vance!”

I looked up to find one of the attorneys from a different law firm approaching our table. I stood and shook his hand.

“Hey, I haven’t seen you since the Carpesi case,” I said.

“Yeah, we’ve been busy. I’m actually running different cases these days. Got out of that family law business.”

“No kidding?”

“I went where the money is slightly better.”

“Divorces?” I said, and we both laughed. I smiled at his wife. “Rebecca, you’re looking as stunning as ever.” I kissed her cheek, then gestured to Alex. “This is my boyfriend, Alex. Alex, this is Micah and Rebecca. I went to law school with Micah for a short time, and sometimes I’m lucky enough to beat him in court.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said and shook their hands. After a bit of small talk, they were on their way.

I sat back down, and Alex eyed me curiously, his brow raised in question.

“What?” I said.

“Boyfriend was a bit of stretch, don’t you think?”

“What do mean?” I said, his words not quite registering. But when they did, my stomach dropped.

“You told them I was your boyfriend. You could have just said we were friends or that I was the handyman at your apartment complex.”

I regretted every sip of wine. At the moment, my guts were churning. “Why would I introduce you as just a friend or even include your job title in an introduction anyways?”

Alex shrugged. “It just sounded weird. Boyfriend was a bit far-fetched, though. Don’t you think?” Alex picked up his fork and resumed eating the salad like he hadn’t just gutted me.

My stomach dropped out of my chest, and the small bites that I enjoyed moments ago from my dinner threatened to come back up. Alex and I had been sleeping together for eight weeks. Yeah, we never went on dates, but it was more than just hooking up. We’d never mentioned that we were exclusive. I just... He never mentioned seeing anyone else or going anywhere...

“Now the next time you see them they’re going to ask about me and you’ll have to come up with a breakup story or something.”

Fuck, I was so goddamn stupid. So stupid. Here I was thinking we were heading toward a serious relationship. I was falling for him. Had fallen for him. Hard.

I was going to introduce him to my parents. I had told my parents about him and how serious things were getting.

Sure, I knew he had a few hangups about his job and mine and the differences between them, but I assumed over time we’d get past those. I didn’t care that he was a handyman. Hell, I loved it.

“Excuse me,” I said. I stood and went to the restroom. I splashed a bit of water on my

face and resigned myself to the embarrassment that was to come.

Or maybe not.

Alex didn't need to know that I had told my family about him or that I planned on introducing him to them. He didn't need to know how far I had fallen.

Clearly, he hadn't noticed up until now. There was no reason for me to bring it up and embarrass myself further.

He was halfway finished with his meal when I returned. I rushed through mine, keeping our conversation light. All the while I just wanted to run back to my apartment and crawl in a hole.

God, I was so fucking stupid.

I had only myself to blame. Alex never indicated we were anything more than friends who hooked up. It was me who had a silly fantasy playing out in my head.

I paid for dinner and totally skipped out on dessert. I would apologize to Blake later.

Thankfully, he had been too slammed tonight to come out and chat with me, which he had told me was probably going to happen.

"Shall we?" I said after I paid.

"Yeah."

I didn't grab for his hand on the walk back, and he hadn't grabbed for mine. How much of our casual touches was just me reaching out? Had I imagined all of this?

“You all right?” he asked. “Your skin is white as a ghost.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I just feel more tired than I thought. It’s been a long week. It’s cold out.”

“You sure? We can stop somewhere and grab something if you aren’t feeling well. Do you have ginger ale at home?”

I nodded. “I’ll be fine. Just need to sleep.”

When we got back to my apartment complex, I said a quick goodbye, not bothering with a kiss. I couldn’t bear to put my mouth on his right then.

He didn’t say anything about coming up to my apartment, instead he turned toward the parking ramp.

How had I not seen this? How had I not noticed that I was in this way more than he was?

Eventually I would have to confront him, to talk about it and explain about the miscommunication. A stronger man would have done so this evening. But at that moment it was too raw, too new.

When he arrived home, he texted me asking if I was sure I was okay. I replied that I was fine and that I was going to bed.

I didn’t let him know I’d talk later. I most certainly didn’t send him a kissy-face emoji that I usually did.

And he most certainly wasn’t coming to dinner on Sunday.

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“All right, man. What’s up with you?” James asked.

I didn’t look up from where I was scrolling through my phone, looking at text messages, as if the messaging app had malfunctioned. Perhaps I had turned off notifications somehow and I had to actually click into Vance’s name to see if there were any new messages.

There were not.

Not since yesterday.

He’d been quiet since our dinner Thursday night. It wasn’t like him.

James, my friend from our childhood days, reached over and grabbed my phone. He put it facedown on the table.

“Alright, man, you’re not usually one to check your phone that often while we have lunch. Something going on. You checked your phone in the middle of our pickup game today. You kept your phone in your bag instead of in your car.”

The two of us tried to get together a few times a month for pickup games and lunch. Today was one of those days. I could always count on James’s easy friendship. I did not expect his growing interest in my love life. Or non-existent love life.

“I didn’t know you were so observant,” I said, hoping to put the kibosh on this discussion.

James wasn't going to let up, though. He leaned back, crossed his arms over his chest, and waited. He was a high school teacher, so he probably could outwait me, having dealt with emotionally charged teenagers regularly. I squirmed under his gaze.

"I've sort of been seeing someone."

His brow raised. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah, it's just casual, though." Even saying the words twisted my stomach. It hadn't felt casual for a long time. "But he hasn't texted me much the past few days."

"Much or not at all?"

"He texted me yesterday and said that he was busy with work."

"What does he do?"

"He's a lawyer." A hotshot lawyer, I assumed. He had to make tons of money to live where he did. Many of the other residents in that complex were investors, celebrities, and doctors.

James raised a brow and let out a long whistle. "Fancy. Getting to see how the other half lives."

I rolled my eyes. I saw how the other half lived every day of my life. "Yeah, I know. He's a bit out of my league."

"How'd you meet?"

This was the part that I hated. It sounded weird, cliché. "He lives in the apartment complex I work at."

“No shit? Sounds like the great start to a porn. Did you come over to fix a leaky faucet and then offer to inspect his pipes?”

My face burned. I grabbed my water glass, hoping to keep it in front of my face while I drank so he couldn't see.

“Oh shit, man. I was kidding. Is that really what happened?”

“No. Nobody offered to fix anyone's pipes. But I did go there for a leaky faucet.”

He let out a long laugh. “When was this? How come you haven't said anything?”

“Two months ago. Maybe three? I don't know.”

“And you kept seeing each other? Damn, you must like him.”

“It's...” Fuck, if I couldn't be honest with my best friend, who could I be honest with? It was about time I quit lying to myself about how I felt about Vance. I was going to come unglued if I didn't figure out what the hell had happened to make him quit talking with me like he usually did. “It was just casual, but it started to feel like maybe something more. Thursday he took me out to dinner. His friend was opening a new restaurant.” I said the name, and James's eyes went wide.

“Dude, that place has a waitlist all the way out till next year. I thought about trying to take Nancy for our anniversary. Fuck that. The prices aren't even on the menu, which damn sure means I can't afford it.”

I suspected the place was beyond expensive. I hadn't looked when the check had come, and Vance had taken care of it. “Vance is one of the partners at his law firm.”

“Oh damn. Bagged yourself a sugar daddy.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not like that. That was actually the first time we went out to dinner. Usually we just order in.” We took turns paying—I made sure of it. Sometimes I made food at my apartment and brought it to him, other times he cooked.

“Okay. So it started off casual, and now you’re thinking you want something more but he’s giving you the brush-off? That’s shitty.”

“I don’t know. We ran into a friend of his, and he called me his boyfriend. And I teased him about it, and now he’s not talking to me. Maybe he realized he’s way better than me.” Hearing the word “boyfriend” come out of Vance’s mouth had surprised me. I both felt too old to be referred to that way, but also incredibly excited to be considered his. Only, it had to be just because he didn’t want to explain who I really was to his friends. I was so far out of his league, we weren’t even playing the same sport

“Whoa. Time out. So he introduced you as his boyfriend and you indicated that maybe you didn’t have that same sentiment, and now he’s not talking to you as much. Sounds to me like you hurt his feelings. Maybe he thought you were more serious than you do and now he’s backtracking. Did you guys talk about whether or not you’re exclusive or whatever?”

My brow furrowed. “No. Like I said, it was just casual.”

“And now you miss him?”

I groaned. “Yes.” Fuck, talking about feelings was the worst. My skin felt too tight, and my chest ached the longer I went without hearing from him. If he was so busy with work, did he need anything? I could bring him dinner or a coffee, or I could just... I don’t know what.

“Well, what have you said to him in the past few days? Have you asked him what’s wrong and if there is something you might have done? Have you told him how you feel?”

“No.” I was really beginning to dislike this conversation. James approached me with logic and solutions, when all I wanted was to wallow in my self-pity at having lost something I never had.

“So you just want communication to happen organically or you think the stars are going to align and you’re just going to be able to read his mind? You want a relationship then you got to work for it, dude.”

“I don’t.” Did I? I never wanted one before, but that was before meeting Vance. Things with him were just so easy. We liked the same food, the same books, we played chess for hours on Saturday mornings.

“Then what’s the problem? Take the out and go find someone new.”

That made my stomach twist. “I mean, I do... I... “

“You have no idea what you want.”

I glared at my friend. “I want to go back to the way things were when he would text me good morning and we’d make dinner plans and we’d hang out and we’d have fun and we’d watch the game, play chess, and talk about books we liked. I want to call him as soon as I get off work to talk about our day.”

“You want to date him. Because that sounds an awful lot like having a boyfriend.”

“Yeah. I guess I want a boyfriend. I’m supposed to go over there for dinner tonight. We didn’t really confirm, but he invited me last week. Should I just go over there?”

“Why don’t you pick up your phone that you keep staring at and call him?”

“I did. Yesterday. He didn’t answer, and that’s when he said he was busy with work. Some new case or something. He usually sends me a good-morning text message every day and he hasn’t been doing that.”

“Dude did that every day and you didn’t realize you were dating?” James’s eyes twinkled with laughter, and he seemed to be barely containing it.

“Fuck off,” I said.

James let out a hearty laugh. “Hey, it’s good to know that you got these relationship snafus just like the rest of us. Seriously, man. I have noticed the past few weeks you seemed a little happier. You didn’t mention that you were seeing anyone, you’re always pretty tight-lipped about your relationships. But this Vance guy might be good for you.”

“Too good for me.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t—”

“I’m a handyman at his apartment complex. Those apartments cost more than what I make in a year, and he owns one.”

“So? Has he looked down at you at all? Is he ashamed to hang out with you? Ashamed to introduce you to his friends?”

“No,” I said. Vance would never.

“Then what are you so hung up about?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t see how it can work.”

“It has been working. You worrying about it working is what’s making it not work.

“Put yourself out of this misery and go talk to him. In person. Figure this shit out.

Then you’ll have your answer.”

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“Okay, so what’s the deal?” Elain asked the minute she walked in the door. Her husband was not far behind. He pushed a container of store-bought cookies at me.

“Really? This is your dessert you brought?” I turned my gaze to Elain, because I knew she was the one who would have waited until the last minute.

“Don’t come at me with that. Mom’s bringing cake. You know she’s going to bring cake and act like it’s a surprise for the special occasion.”

I rolled my eyes. Elain was a fantastic mother, but not a cook or baker by any means. Her husband wasn’t much better, but between the two of them they managed to keep their kids fed, so I assumed they figured out a few things in the kitchen.

“We barely had time to swing by the store. This was all they had,” he said with a shrug. “Unless you wanted a sheet cake that had ‘Happy Anniversary’ on it.”

“Who’s got the kids?” I asked. The three of us sat down in the living room.

“My parents,” he replied.

“You know, I do like to see my nieces and nephews.”

Elain waved a hand at me. “Enough of that, you can see the kids anytime. Marcus wants to come over and finish that game this week. What the heck happened with Alex?”

I groaned. We hadn’t spoken much since my disastrous date or non-date with Alex.

“Mom mentioned that your new young man couldn’t make it because he was working. But you told me he had this weekend off. If you’re going to lie to our parents, I need to know so I can hold it over your head and also not mess up your story.”

“He does have the weekend off,” I said. I ran a hand through my hair. “I misread the situation. He’s... We’re not dating.”

“So your date didn’t go well?” she asked, sadness clouding her features. She grabbed one of the throw pillows and wrapped her arms around it, leaning toward me like she was settling in for a juicy story.

Her husband sat next to her on the loveseat, his arm around her shoulders.

“Dinner started out fine. He was a bit grumbly about going out, but that’s just him. Everything was fine until we ran into a colleague of mine. I introduced Alex as my boyfriend, and he thought I was just making up a story to cover up the fact that I was out to dinner with the guy who does maintenance at my apartment.”

Elain’s eyes widened, and her husband flinched.

“What a jerk!”

“I kind of realized then that he doesn’t think we’re dating. So... we’re not.”

“Have you talked to him?” The sadness was back. I couldn’t take the pitied look she threw my way, though I appreciated the support.

I shook my head. “A few text messages. I’ve been busy with work.” Work that I made up out of nowhere. In reality, I was all caught up.

“But you usually talk to him every day.”

“Yeah, I know. And he’s getting suspicious, so probably this evening or tomorrow I’ll have to have a real conversation with him like an adult instead of a coward.” Being a grown-up sucked.

“What’s that going to look like?”

I groaned and rubbed my hands over my face. “I have no idea. Probably me telling him we can’t do this anymore. I don’t really want to admit that I thought we were dating because I’m a fucking idiot. I feel so freaking stupid. I—I really liked him.” I thought he really liked me. I was ready to pour my heart out and talk with him about the next steps in my career. I wanted his advice before I made some big decisions. Those decisions would affect my future so greatly, I wanted his input because I thought he was part of that future.

“Hey, don’t be like that.”

“It’s so humiliating.” I shook my head. My stomach twisted at the thought of me thinking I was dating a guy for two whole months, and he just thought it was hooking up.

“I’m sorry,” Elain said. “I know you really liked him.”

“I still really like him. He’s really great. We have a lot of fun just hanging out here. I was going to introduce him to Mom and Dad. Thank goodness I didn’t tell them a whole lot about him.”

“What did they say when you told them he couldn’t make it?”

“Not much. They’ll be here any minute. Can you just—”

“Of course. We won’t say a word.” Her husband mimicked zipping his lips closed.

“Thanks.”

“I’ll linger afterwards and we can talk, okay?”

“I’ll be fine. I’m just going to wallow in my self-pity for a month or so. Besides, I should call him tonight and clear the air. Then I can just lick my wounds on my own.” Even though the thought of doing that twisted my stomach even more. I was so stupid. “Maybe I’ll sell my apartment, move out of the city.”

“Now’s not the best time to make rash life-altering decisions, Vance.”

Didn’t I know it. Too bad I had a decision to make whether I liked it or not.

A few minutes later, my mom and dad arrived. Mom, of course, brought a dessert and a side dish, even though I had told her that I had plenty of food here. That was just what she did.

“It’s such a bummer that your young man can’t make it,” Mom said.

“Yeah, it’s no big deal. Work happens, right?”

“Well, maybe one of these nights we can come over or meet somewhere for dinner. If you’re serious about this guy, we’d like to meet him,” my dad said.

The two of them stood near the dining table, Dad’s arm around Mom’s shoulders. A united front, always and in all ways. Both of them were in their late sixties. Mom was a retired lawyer, though she still did consulting work and some pro-bono cases, while Dad continued to work at the high school library where he had worked for the past forty years.

“It’s not that serious,” I said, planting the seed for when I’d have to tell them that we broke up or that we never were. I did not make a habit out of lying to my parents, but there were only so many people I could tell about this whole fiasco.

A knock at the door had us all pausing.

“You expecting someone, honey?” Mom asked.

“No. Probably someone got the wrong apartment.” The oven timer beeped, and I pulled out the caprese chicken casserole I’d made. Next, I needed to work on preparing the salad.

“I’ll see what they need,” my dad said.

He opened the door, and I heard a mumbling of voices. I couldn’t tell exactly who it was, and I assumed my dad would send them off. Then the door clicked closed and footsteps sounded down the hallway.

“Wrong apartment?” I said and lifted my gaze. I nearly dropped the knife to the floor when I found Alex standing there.

“Vance, is this your young man? You said he had to work,” Mom asked.

My eyes widened, and I froze like a deer in headlights. I opened my mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

Alex looked at me and then looked back around the room at everybody there.

“I found someone to cover my shift,” he said. “I was hoping the invitation was still open to join you for Sunday dinner.” His voice took on a slightly higher pitch than normal, the only indication that he was nervous.

I had, of course, invited him to Sunday dinner last week. I hadn't mentioned that my parents were going to be here. I was supposed to tell him on Thursday and give him a chance to back out.

"Sure," I said.

"I'm so glad you could be here." Thank goodness for Elaine. She swooped in. She held out her hand to Alex. "I'm Elaine, his super-protective, overbearing older sister. Be prepared to be grilled. If you need to escape, you better do so now."

God bless Alex, he didn't miss a beat. He smiled back at her and shook her hand. "Nice to meet you. I can stay."

"I'm Charles, this is my wife Jean," my dad said. Alex shook his hand as well.

Meanwhile I stood frozen in front of a head of lettuce I needed to chop up.

"Vance hasn't told us a ton about you, so hopefully you're prepared to tell us everything." Mom's attorney voice sent chills down my spine. She used that to make sure the witness had their story straight.

"Mom," I protested.

"Jean," my dad said.

I didn't even have a chance to drag Alex off to a corner to explain that my parents thought we were together and that we had been dating for a few months. The man was going to have to fend for himself.

Before I knew it, we were all sitting down at the table, dishing up our plates.

Of course Mom wasn't going to waste a moment. I crossed my fingers and my toes hoping that Alex could just play along for the evening. It would overcomplicate things later when I had to tell my parents that we broke up, but for now I needed this just not to blow up in my face and make me feel even more like an idiot.

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I had never expected to be sitting down having dinner with Vance's family. But here I was. We had already finished the main course and now we were all just sitting back laughing, not yet ready to put away the dishes.

As was apparently customary, Vance's sister Elaine brought the dessert. From what I could gather from the conversation, Elaine always brought store-bought items for her dish-to-pass. The Sunday dinner was a weekly occurrence and they rotated, and when they had dinner at Vance's apartment Elaine's kids didn't come, allowing her and her husband to have a kid-free night.

"Vance, Marcus insists that he come over on Tuesday to finish that game," Elaine said.

"Be sure to let him know I left him a note with some advice," I said. "Can't trust this guy to tell him because it will likely give Marcus the advantage."

Elaine grinned at me. "You play chess?"

"I do. Vance and I play all the time."

"Are you any good?" Charles asked.

I shrugged. "I'd say we're evenly matched."

"He'd kick your ass, Dad. You've never been good at chess."

Charles folded his arms over his chest and put on an exaggerated grumpy face. "I let you kids win. Always have. And now it's biting me in the ass. You play poker?"

That's more my style."

"I enjoy poker," I said.

"Good. We'll invite you to the next game. Bring your own beer, though. And watch out for Elain, she's the card shark in the family."

That... That was an unexpected turn of events. I smiled brightly. "I'd like that." It was honest. True.

Was this what it was like to be welcomed into your partner's family? It was foreign to me, but not unwelcome.

"So how was it that the two of you met?" Charles asked.

I stiffened, unsure of what I was supposed to say at this point. Personal questions hadn't been broached yet. Mostly, Elain kept the conversation going throughout the meal. It seemed that they'd all been biding their time, because now they all stared at me expectantly.

I looked to Vance for any indication on what I should or shouldn't say. How much had he told his parents about me? Clearly more than I had anticipated.

"Alex is one of the maintenance guys here at the apartment complex. We met when he came over to fix the kitchen faucet."

His mom's eyes narrowed, and I braced myself for what might come. Was she concerned that I wasn't good enough for her son, since he was a hotshot lawyer and I was just a handyman?

"That sounds like the start to a bad porno," she said, and we bust out laughing.

Vance laughed nervously. “Yeah, that was what Elain said too.”

Much to my surprise, Vance’s mom raised her fist over the table, and Elain bumped knuckles with her.

“My friend James said the same thing when I told him.”

Vance’s dad just shook his head. As if sensing my discomfort, he continued on about himself and their family.

“Jean is a lawyer, retired just last year. She and I met because one of my students was on trial for whatever the hell it was.”

“Breaking and entering,” Jean supplied.

“Thank you, dear. I was there as a character witness hoping to get a better deal for him. It worked. I got the best deal of all though, didn’t I?” He raised her knuckles to his lips and kissed them. “Of course we had to wait for the trial to be over. It had never even occurred to me to ask her out, she was out of my league. But she walked right up to me once it was done and said she wanted to take me to lunch. At the time, I had no idea what the hell she wanted to do with me. I was just a high school librarian, not even a teacher, from the wrong side of the tracks, but here we are going on forty-five years.”

She slapped his arm. “Forty-eight.”

“We had Elain and Vance a little late in life.”

“Don’t let them lie to you. I was an accident, and then they thought I needed a friend,” Vance said.

Jean laughed. “We were wrong about that. Those two hated each other for the longest time.”

“Hey,” Vance said. “I had no problem with Elain. She was the mean one. She still is.”

“You never let me have any toys or space in the house. It was all ‘I was here first!’ And I’m not mean to you, now. Most of the time.”

“It wasn’t until Vance came out in high school that Elain changed her tune. She went from annoyed young sister to fierce protector overnight.”

Vance smiled at Elain, and she winked at him.

“He was scrawny. I wasn’t going to let anyone beat him up or hurt him.” She pointed her butter knife at me, the threat evident in her intense gaze.

“I get it. I also have a sister. She’s older though, but she and my best friend have always been very supportive, especially when I came out.” James’s parents, on the other hand, wanted me out of their son’s life, afraid that I’d corrupt him.

“That’s important,” Charles said. “Vance mentioned that the two of you went to Blake’s new restaurant this week. How did you like it?”

“It was great,” Vance replied. “We went on Thursday.”

“Your father and I have reservations there next week. With Suzanne and Jared.” Jean turned her pointed gaze on Vance.

He stiffened. “Why are you meeting with the governor?” he asked.

“Same reason you had a lunch meeting with her this week.” She lifted her wine glass

to her lips and took a sip.

Vance had a meeting with the governor this week?

Vance knew the governor?

“Mom, are you going to let up on that?” Elain asked. “Maybe we can talk about it at a different time?”

“No, not when his career is on the line.”

“Not tonight, Mom,” Vance said.

She looked to me, her gaze going soft. She might have been a hotshot lawyer, but she was clearly a mom who cared for her kids.

“You haven’t told Alex?”

Vance pinched the bridge of his nose. “It hasn’t come up.” He waved a hand at her, as if telling her to go ahead and tell me.

“Suzanne and I went to law school together. That’s how we know her. She has her sights set on Vance for one of the district court appointments.”

“No shit?” I said, my brow raised. “Excuse my language.”

Charles laughed. “No shit is what I said when I heard Jean was on the short list twenty years ago. She was never going to leave the courtroom, though. Not in that capacity.”

“Is that something you want?” I asked Vance.

He sighed. He rubbed the back of his neck, and I wished we were alone for this conversation. It wasn't often that I saw Vance looking unsure and vulnerable, but I wanted to listen and do what I could to alleviate his concerns.

"Be honest with yourself," his mom said in a sing-songy voice.

"Yes. Getting on the courts has always been a goal of mine. I just don't know if now is the right time."

"Now is the time that you have! And if you're serious about it, you need to let her know so that she puts your name on the very short list, instead of just the short list."

"A judge. Wow. That would be... That's a pretty great opportunity," I said.

"We'll see how it all plays out." He pushed himself up and started clearing away the plates.

"Oh, Fancy. Will you make me some of that flavored coffee you have, please?" Jean asked.

"Fancy?" I said. My mind having trouble catching up with the change in topics.

His mom threw her hands over her mouth. She looked to her son with an apology in her eyes. "It slipped out. We're probably not at the point where childhood nicknames are something you want to share with each other."

I grinned. "Your nickname is Fancy?"

Vance rolled his eyes. "It's fine, Mom. Elain couldn't quite get the V sound out when she was young. Vance somehow turned into Fancy, and it stuck. Clearly for an annoyingly long amount of time."

“Can I call you that?”

“Not if you want me to answer.”

I couldn't help but smile as Vance and his mom got up and went to the kitchen. I stayed seated along with his dad. Charles leaned over.

“Jean's mom and dad didn't like too much that she wanted to marry a man who was just a high school librarian. I wasn't even a teacher – I just worked in the library. I could tell you were nervous telling us what you did for a living. We're not uppity like that.”

“Thank you,” I said. “It... was a concern of mine. We're on quite opposite ends of the economic divide.” I didn't know what compelled me, but I couldn't hold the words back. “I don't want to hurt his career or embarrass him. Using the wrong fork, not knowing what I'm doing in a social situation. Especially if this court thing actually happens.” A judge with a handyman? No way was that going to fly in the social circles he would no doubt find himself in.

“I know my son. He'd never introduce you to us unless he was serious, and maybe I shouldn't even say that. I don't want to scare you off.” Charles smiled. “But I also know he'd never think differently about a person based on their job ever. If he's with you, it's because he likes you, not what you do for a living. He's not going to ask you to change to be different.”

I nodded. That didn't surprise me about Vance. He was exactly the sort of person who didn't care about those types of things. The hangups were mine. The keeping him at arm's length—that was me.

“I couldn't believe it a few weeks ago when he told us that he was seeing someone and it was getting serious and he wanted to introduce us to you. Last time he

introduced us to someone, Elaine scared him off.”

Elaine walked out of the kitchen just then. “I most certainly did not.”

“What did Elaine do this time?” Vance asked. He carried a tray with a carafe of coffee and various creams and sugars.

“Scared off that boyfriend of yours. Brian? Was that his name?”

“Are we talking about Brian? He wasn’t good enough for you,” Jean said. “He’s the one who graduated near the top of your class and beat you out for summa cum laude?”

“Yes, he cheated. I’ll maintain that he cheated until my dying breath,” Vance said.

“See? Not good enough for you.”

“He most certainly wasn’t, Vance. He was not a kind person. Where is he now anyways? New York?”

“California. Last I heard he was a lawyer for celebrities.”

“Good for him. You dodged a bullet with that one.”

A lawyer for celebrities who probably made millions a year and graduated top of his class wasn’t good enough for their son, but somehow, they had accepted me with open arms?

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Never before had I dreaded my family leaving my house, but now it seemed that Alex would be the last one to remain.

If we were a real couple, it would make total sense, especially since he had brought a duffel bag, signaling to my parents that he was likely staying the night. I was an adult, they knew that, and they would expect that my boyfriend would stay over on occasion.

However, after everything that transpired throughout the evening, the likelihood of him staying the night seemed to diminish. Even though my body desired it, my brain knew better than to prolong this hurt any longer.

At this point he had to think I was insane for how much I'd told my family about him and how they'd welcomed him with open arms like we were already committed to one another rather than casual acquaintances.

He had to know by now that I'd thought our relationship was more than just casual. Thankfully he had played along. It was a perfect evening, if you took away the fact that he wasn't actually my boyfriend.

Finally, the door closed, and my family was gone. It was just Alex and me standing awkwardly inside the front door.

"So, Fancy," he said with a grin. "That was fun."

The smile of his and the way he said my nickname went straight to my groin. The need for a stiff drink was strong, and it must have been written on my face.

“We’ve got some beer in the fridge still, right?” he asked, already walking over and making himself at home. He took out the regular IPA that I enjoyed, popped the top on both, and handed one to me. The whole situation felt oddly domestic. As if Sunday dinners with my family were normal and this was how we wound down after.

I retreated to the living room, and Alex followed along, sitting down next to me on the sofa.

“So, that was my family,” I remarked.

“I didn’t know they were coming over for dinner tonight.”

“I know,” I said. “I was going to tell you on Thursday.”

We were quiet then.

“I think we should talk,” he said. His arm was on the back of the couch, his hand within reach of my shoulder.

My stomach rolled. “I know.” I buried my face in my hands and leaned forward. “Gosh, I’m so dumb.” I let out a wry laugh.

His brow furrowed. “What do you mean? Why are you dumb?”

“I am going to be totally honest with you, I didn’t realize that this thing between us was casual. I mean, I should have, right? It started out that way. I just thought things had changed, and I was a few steps ahead of you, maybe a whole mile ahead of you. So it’s not a big deal. We can forget it ever happened. No biggy. I can tell my parents we broke up. It won’t be weird at all.” Which one of us was I trying to convince?

“Is that what you want?” he said.

What I wanted wasn't important. I wanted what I thought I had – a relationship with Alex.

“Not really, no. You saw how my mom is. She will hound me with questions. But that's fine. I got myself into this mess, I'll get myself out.”

He ran a hand through my hair, his fingers threading through my locks and the tips of his fingers massaging into my scalp. I closed my eyes and leaned into the touch.

“You'd never guess I was on the short list for court judge, sitting here looking like a doofus.”

“Yeah, about that. You never mentioned that you were on any sort of list for that kind of thing. You had said that you wanted that in the future. I just didn't realize it was so close.”

“I didn't either,” I said, “but an opening came up when Judge Haverson retired. I had hoped I'd be considered, but am I ready? Am I really ready?”

“Of course you are. You can do anything you put your mind to. If you're taking that kind of leap in your career, you don't want a handyman at your side. You need someone—”

“Don't do that,” I said. “That's not fair to me.”

“Not fair to you? I'm being honest.”

I pulled away from his touch, scooting further away on the couch. “If you don't want to be in a relationship with me because you thought this was just a casual hookup, that's fine. I misread the signs. I own that. But don't cheapen it and say that you're not good enough. I was more than happy—I was elated when I thought you and I

were serious. I was more than happy to introduce you as my boyfriend. I was more than willing to tell my family all about you, not some made-up version or some silly lie, just you. Because I like you. The handyman, maintenance guy, whatever title you want to go by. I don't need you to be anything but yourself, and I'm sorry if I'm come on too strong and made things awkward. You can go, and we can just forget this ever happened. What I can't do is go back to just being casual. I can't do that."

There we were. The only pieces left on the board were laid bare. Check mate.

Alex's jaw tensed and a muscle ticced.

"I don't want to go back either. It really never occurred to me that we could be anything but casual. So you might be a few steps ahead of me as far as this relationship goes, but that doesn't mean I don't want to catch up. I want to be with you. Date you. For real."

"Date?" For the first time in three days a small hint of hope flared.

"Yeah, like, I could introduce you to my friends, my family. We could go out to actual restaurants. We could even stay the night at my apartment once. Probably not, though. I don't have a nice bed like you."

"It's probably too soon for me to ask you to move in." I hadn't meant to voice that out loud. It wasn't the first time it had crossed my mind. I had assumed we were just a few weeks, maybe a few months away from that.

"Yeah, just a little bit, but maybe not that far away. I... Shit, I'm not good at this stuff, Vance. That's why I didn't think we were anything but casual and why it didn't occur to me to ask for more, but I... I like you. A lot. I was falling for you long before Thursday. Hearing you refer to me as your boyfriend was nice. Not hearing from you for two days was torture. I'm not sure I would have come here today if my

friend hadn't pointed out what an idiot I've been. But I'm glad I did. Meeting your family was awesome. I love them. It just literally never occurred to me that a relationship with you was an option."

"Of course it is," I said quietly. I faced him now.

He moved closer to me and kissed my lips. "Good." He picked up the remote and clicked on the TV. "I guess I'm staying tuned."

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Six Months Later

“See, it’s just a fifteen-minute drive.”

I grinned but didn’t quite let Vance see it. “Yes, I see that it is a very short drive to your apartment.”

“Well, it won’t be my apartment anymore. It’ll be your work, and that’s it.”

“Yes, I know.”

We hadn’t ended up moving in together. Our leases were coming to an end around the same time, and the idea of moving in together changed from moving into his apartment to “What if we got a house?” and two months ago, Vance had accepted the position as judge, and his commute would be very different as soon as he was sworn in.

This house and its location was good for him and me.

Sometimes it was as if he still felt he had to convince me, though. We’d talked about buying a house together, I had readily agreed. We filled out the paperwork together, we had signed the documents together at the closing. Yet, it was as if Vance was afraid I might change my mind and he’d wake up in his bed alone.

Quite all right, that just meant I had to work extra hard to convince him.

I had been incredibly proud of him, and while I wasn’t always comfortable with all

the lawyers and fancy dinners that we attended on occasion, I was fitting in better and better. His dad had sat me down and taught me how to use the different silverware. We'd had to search the internet and watch videos, but at least I had him there to answer questions. I still wasn't the best at it, but at least I didn't look like a jackass.

I pulled into the driveway of the house we signed paperwork on last week. We had occupancy starting today. The movers weren't bringing our things over until tomorrow, but both Vance and I couldn't wait any longer. It was a cute one-story house with a porch big enough to set out a few chairs, and it had landscaping that was pretty basic. There was a yard, and in the back, a fenced-in area with a small deck. A lot of opportunities for improvement.

"I really like it," he said.

"I do too, dear. That's why we bought it."

His cheeks pinked.

"It could have major problems that we don't know about yet. The inspection came back good, but you never know with some of these older houses." I'd been surprised when Vance had gravitated toward smaller, more basic houses as opposed to the subdivision mini-mansions. Above all else he'd wanted a quiet neighborhood. One that would be safe for children.

"Lucky for me, I have a handyman." He sent me a wink.

"My skillset does have some limitations." He wasn't wrong, though. I'd always wanted a place that I could fix up as I had time. A place that was all my own. Or rather, a place that was shared with my partner. I couldn't ask for a better one than Vance.

We held hands as we walked up the front step. Vance pushed open the door, and we stepped inside.

The place was clean, empty, just waiting for tomorrow when all of our things would arrive and we would unpack.

“Elain said they’d be over in the morning whenever we need them,” Vance said. “The movers should be here around ten, so we’ll have to be back here by then.”

“What if we don’t leave?” I asked.

He pursed his lips, his brow furrowed in concentration. One of his many looks that I loved. “We don’t have a bed.”

“I might have brought our bed over on my lunch break today. I had some help. And I stocked some basic groceries so we won’t go hungry.”

“Think we’ll work up an appetite?”

I pulled him closer to me so that our bodies were flush against one another. His cock was already hard, and mine was ready to join the game.

“Well, we don’t have a television, or our chest set, or any of the five million books that you own.”

“Shelf trophies,” he said.

“Yes, your collection of shelf trophies. You’ll have space for a ton more once I build that bookshelf for your office.”

Vance wrapped his arms around my middle and laid his head on my shoulder.

“You’re the perfect man, you know that?”

I snorted. “Hardly. But I’ll take the compliment.”

I pushed him against the wall and captured his lips with mine. The kiss began slow but picked up speed soon enough. His lips locked on mine and his tongue met mine. He took control of the kiss and flipped us around so that it was my back against the wall.

Then he was tugging at my shirt, letting up from the kiss only so long for the two of us to remove our shirts.

“Bedroom,” I said.

“Can’t wait that long,” he said. His voice was husky, and my cock hardened at the sound. He unbuckled my jeans and removed them. His followed soon after. He didn’t bother to step out of his, though. “I need you.”

I let out a low laugh. It rumbled through my chest. “I thought you might feel that way. Before I picked you up, I took the liberty of getting prepared.”

Vance stilled. His eyes met mine. He reached behind me, his fingers trailing down my back and between my ass cheeks until he felt the base of the plug. His eyes widened and his nostrils flared. He gripped it and slowly removed it from my body. He removed it one inch, then two, then slowly put it back in.

I groaned at the sensation as the toy fucked me, and I locked my gaze with Vance’s.

Finally, he pulled it out completely and hoisted me up and lined up his cock to my hole.

“You feel so much better than that toy,” I said as he entered me.

“Damn straight I do. Hold tight,” he said, and then he was fucking me in earnest. He held me against the wall as he slammed into me again and again. My cock was hard between us, but I couldn’t let go of his neck to stroke myself.

“More,” I cried.

He thrust into me as hard as he dared. My back hit the wall, thudding loudly. Thank fuck we no longer had neighbors.

He kissed my neck, nipping at the skin. It was sure to leave a mark, but that was what collars were for.

“Fuck yes!” I shouted as I came. My cum splashing between us.

Vance followed soon after, filling me completely. We had ditched condoms months ago after we were tested, and I was so thankful we had.

Our breathing evened out, and his arms shook where he held me. Slowly he slipped out of me, and I was returned to my own two feet. He held me so that I didn’t fall, my own legs not steady enough to hold me upright.

“Well, that’s one way to christen the house,” he said.

“For sure. Only six more rooms to go.”

“We didn’t need the bed here after all.”

I chuckled. “Well, my back nor yours can take sleeping on the floor, so you’ll thank me that the bed is here.”

Vance kissed my cheek. "I love you," he said.

I met his gaze, my smile spreading across my face as it always did when I took in the sight of him. "I love you," I said. "Welcome home."

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“Court is adjourned.”

The smack of the gavel brought me out of my not-safe-for-work fantasies about the man behind the stand.

If you had told me a year ago that I would be sitting in a courtroom for several hours, watching the love of my life preside over court cases for the first time, I would have told you that you were crazy.

But here I was.

The smile on my face was wide enough to fit a car through and probably obnoxious considering that some of the people in court today weren't having their best day, yet here I was so incredibly proud of Vance.

I hadn't let him know that I was going to be watching today. His swearing-in ceremony had been a few days prior, and we had had a very nice dinner with his parents to celebrate. Now here he was, his first day as a judge, looking way too sexy for a man wearing robes. I couldn't be more proud.

I left the courtroom and made my way to our home.

In the few months that we had been living there, we had turned the place into ours. I loved every minute of it. I'd never expected to enjoy having another person in my space, but here we were, so incredibly happy.

Some days I wondered if it was just a matter of time before the other shoe dropped,

before Vance realized that I was nowhere near good enough for him. But Vance never made me feel that way, and I knew how incredibly lucky I was to have him. I had been so close to losing it all because of my own stupidity, and I was never going to let that happen again.

Normally, one or both of us cooked dinner, but being that this was his first day of his new job, I decided that takeout was our best option. Perhaps a fancy dinner was in order for what I had planned, but spending time in court didn't allow for me to cook a nice dinner. So instead, I picked up the dinner I had ordered, and raced home so that I could have it ready for when he arrived.

Not only did I have dinner, but there were two other little surprises that I had for him.

My palms were sweating, and I wiped them on my jeans. Should I have dressed up for this occasion?

I had worn nicer clothes to court, but I wanted to be comfortable in my own home. Shit, maybe I should have kept my nicer clothes on. I was just about to march to the bedroom to change when the door opened.

"Alex," Vance's voice called out.

"In the kitchen," I said. Was that a tremble in my voice? I hoped not.

He stepped inside, threw his coat over the back of a barstool, and dropped his briefcase beside it. Then he smiled when he saw me.

"I saw you sneak into the courtroom."

I grinned. "You were amazing."

He chuckled. "It felt surreal. I'm sure it'll get easier, but today I was sweating. I felt

like I was up there forever.”

“Well, it didn’t look like it was your first day. You were awesome.”

“Good. It felt like it was my first day.”

I went over to him, wrapped my arms around him, and pressed a kiss to his lips. “I’m so proud of you,” I said.

He relaxed into my embrace. The day’s stress left his body and his muscles relaxed. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m pretty sure you were on the short list before we even met.”

“Perhaps, but I don’t think I would have taken the leap if it weren’t for you. Or at least I wouldn’t have been as happy about it.”

“I appreciate the sentiment.” I kissed his cheek.

“You got dinner?”

“Yeah, from Blake’s place.”

“Really? You sure the portion sizes are going to be enough for you?”

“We have leftovers from last night. And I’m sure there’s a frozen pizza I can toss in if I get that hungry.”

He laughed. “What’s this?” He gestured to the cherry-wood box on the counter.

I took a deep breath. This was the moment. “This is a surprise,” I said. “The table is set, you want to eat?”

He narrowed his eyes. “You’ve got me nervous. What is in the box?”

“Just trust me, please?”

“All right. Let me change and wash my hands, and then I’ll be right there.”

“Okay, perfect.”

While Vance was changing, I set our food out on the table, plating our dinner. I got him and I the same meals we had gotten on that fateful night almost a year ago. It seemed so long ago. Yet sometimes it felt like just yesterday.

He came in and sat across from me at our small dining table. “This looks delicious.”

“Good, I slaved over it all day.” I winked.

“How long before I get to open the present?”

I chuckled. “Impatient, are we?”

“A little. I’m intrigued.”

I took a deep breath. I didn’t bother trying to eat. It was now or never, and I might as well get this over with. “I wanted to give it to you before today, but it wasn’t ready in time. So now will have to do. I talked with your parents. I wanted to get something special to mark the occasion of you being sworn in, and this is what your mom recommended.”

“Oh boy,” he said. He pushed on the latch of the box and lifted the lid. He let out a little gasp when he saw what was inside. “Oh, Alex. I love it.”

“It’s not cheesy?”

It felt cheesy. He lifted the gavel—made out of beautiful handcrafted cherry wood, with a gold plate around the head of the gavel, engraved with “Judge Vance Edwards.”

“It’s perfect,” he said. “I love it. I love you.”

I let out a breath. “I love you, too. I’m so proud of you. Have I said that yet? I think you’re going to be so great in this role, and fuck, I’m terrible at words, but it’s just amazing, and I’m very excited to be by your side for this journey.”

“Thank you,” he said. He leaned over and kissed me.

“That’s not all,” I said. “There’s more.”

“Well, hell, Alex. I should have got something for you.”

“No, you shouldn’t have, but you know if you need ideas for our anniversary, I’ve been eyeing a new toolset.”

His eyes sparkled with unshed tears as he smiled.

“I never thought any of this would happen to me. Having a partner, a house, least of all with a judge appointed by the governor. I didn’t really put a lot of thought into what my personal life future would look like, and I just am so blessed that everything fell into place the way it did. And some days I can’t believe how close I came to ruining all of it.”

“I feel lucky too,” he said, “to be with you.” He reached out a hand and squeezed mine.

“I don’t want to make the same mistake again. I know that I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Whether it’s at this house or another one we purchase in the future,

or wherever your career takes you or me, I know that everything will be fine as long as you're by my side."

I pulled the ring out of my pocket. I hadn't bothered with a box for that one.

"Vance Edwards, will you marry me?"

"Yes."

That one word was all I needed, and it was like a dam burst. I slipped the ring onto Vance's finger and threw myself into his arms. I cupped his face and kissed him soundly. Both of us had tears streaming down our faces like a couple of saps.

"I love you," I said.

"I love you more," he said.

I held him tightly. This man was mine, and I was never letting him go.