



Sugared (The Art of Love #6)

Author: *Merry Farmer*

Category: LGBT+

Description: The Art of Love is having the wrong numbers, but being in the right place at the right time...

Leland Page counts himself lucky to have been given the job of running Hawthorne House's increasingly busy kitchen and teaching cooking and baking courses at the arts center. He feels like he has to prove himself to Robert Hawthorne to keep his place, so when he finds his former best friend's brother in severe distress and brings him home, he isn't sure whether Ean Jones will make him or break him.

Kicked out of his parents' house for being gay, Ean knows he's in trouble. All he has to his name is a lottery ticket and hope. So when Leland comes to his rescue, he's ready and willing to do anything for his new hero. But he didn't imagine that would mean helping Leland create the most magnificent Valentine's Day feast Hawthorne House has ever seen!

Sugared is a low-angst, brother's best friend, unlikely rescue story that involves lots of cake and a hope for a better life.

This short novella originally appeared in the Candy Hearts: Volume 2 Wrong Number Valentines Day anthology.

Total Pages (Source): 6

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:01 am

ONE

The whole reason why Leland Page got into the culinary field to begin with was because he loved the fast-paced, high-pressure environment of a professional kitchen. He loved racing against the clock to create beautiful things that tasted amazing. It appealed to his sense of adventure and risk-taking, but also to his innate need to take care of people and nourish them.

The pinnacle of his career as a chef had come at an early age, when he'd worked as a sous chef at Waltz , a London restaurant owned by his friend, Walt Severance. Those had been the days. Expectations were lofty, the quality of the menus Walt put together was of the highest caliber, and the clientele was made up of some seriously big names.

And then it had all fallen apart when Walt buckled under the pressure. Leland couldn't blame him for taking a mental break out in the country. He'd met his now husband, Kit Courier, while on that break. And he'd sold Waltz for a huge sum to the restaurant's manager, Wesley, and his head chef, Pietro, and used the money to start a whole new farm-to-table venture with Kit.

Again, Leland didn't blame his friend for doing what was best for him back then, but he'd never gotten along with Pietro, and when Waltz was recalibrated and rebranded, Leland was politely let go.

Two years and four jobs later, Leland was only just finding his feet again. He'd cycled through a few of London's finest kitchens, never quite fitting in but learning so much in the process.

That learning was part of the reason why after a random conversation with a fellow member of The Brotherhood at The Chameleon Club, Leland had agreed not only to cater a benefit supper for the Hawthorne Community Arts Center back in the fall, and then their Christmas party in December, he'd taken up the offer to teach culinary classes at the arts center.

Which was where he found himself in the middle of a Tuesday in early February.

"No, no, not quite," he told the pair of teenage girls who had managed to get flour all over their school uniforms as they giggled over a stand mixer. "Wait until the egg whites have stiff peaks. Stiff peaks," he emphasized, taking the whisk beater from the mixer he'd used to demonstrate the techniques for making a genoise sponge. "And then fold the flour in carefully so that you don't beat the air out of the egg whites."

The girls giggled as if he'd said something naughty and continued to do whatever the pleased with their mixture.

"Sir! Sir! I think I've flattened my eggs," another boy in the class called out from the far end of the counter.

Sure enough, when Leland went to look, the enthusiastic young man had done more than just fold his flour into the eggs, he'd stirred the mixture into a paste.

"Never mind," Leland said, taking the boy's mixing bowl and setting it on the island in the middle of the kitchen. "There's still time for you to start over."

That was one of his mottos in life. Everyone had to start over at least once or twice in their lives. He was starting over now, not as a Michelin-starred chef, like he'd always dreamed of being, but as a culinary teacher at an eclectic arts center in the middle of Kent, working for a family that he liked quite a bit. If it meant he had to teach the occasional school group along with more advanced classes for adults in the

community, then so be it. He admired the Hawthorne family's commitment to community outreach and involvement.

More than that, he was willing to do whatever the Hawthorne family needed him to do, since they were allowing him to live in one of the family flats in the east wing of the centuries-old manor house while his housing situation was up in the air.

Hawthorne House had once been a grand, aristocratic estate, but it had been converted into a convalescent hospital during the First World War, then a boys' school after the Second World War, and once the family had taken possession of it again in the nineteen-nineties and turned it into the arts center, they'd converted what had once been dormitories into about a dozen small flats for members of the large and sprawling Hawthorne family to live in as needed.

"Mr. Page, sir!" Lucy, one of the girls who actually took the class seriously and who had expressed an interest in a culinary career called out from the other side of the kitchen. "Lottie and Alice are making a mess!"

Leland turned away from where he'd been supervising the boy whipping his egg whites again to see that not only had the two giggling girls made a mess, they'd somehow managed to spill an entire bag of confectioner's sugar on the floor.

"Sorry, sir," Lottie told him with a pinched expression. "It just fell."

Leland didn't believe that for a second, but he wasn't angry. These were just kids. He knew full well that not every kid got the support and encouragement they needed at home, so as he walked over to help clean up the mess, he smiled reassuringly.

"It's just sugar," he said, walking past where the girls were to the broom closet. "It sweeps up the same as everything else."

He handed the two girls brooms and dustpans, then stood back and trusted them to clean up. Trust was important in a kitchen. The chef de cuisine couldn't micromanage everyone under them, not if they wanted to get the job done in a timely manner.

The mess presented a problem, though. Along with teaching cooking classes, Leland was in charge of food for the new dinner and special occasion initiative that the staff of the Hawthorne Community Arts Center had undertaken. That meant planning the menus for those events and, when and where he could, coaching some of his students through creating those meals.

Valentine's Day was coming up that weekend, and already, the event was sold out. Leland's mind had been spinning for days as he ran through different menu ideas. He'd settled on the menu now, but he'd been counting on his teen class to bake the cakes and make all sorts of sugared treats for dessert.

Now, not only was he uncertain whether this particular class was up to the challenge of baking for a crowd, the way they were going through supplies, Hawthorne House would go bankrupt purchasing sugar, eggs, and flour before it was all done.

Those thoughts scrambled around in his brain searching for solutions as the class continued. He could probably count on some of these students, like Lucy, for help with desserts, but certainly not all of them.

"The best part of making cakes is eating them," the boy who struggled with his batter said with a wide grin at the end of the class, when everyone sat down to eat their treats. "Although mine's so flat compared to Lucy's."

"That's because I'm a natural chef," Lucy said, her nose in the air, as she lifted a fork full of cake to her mouth.

Leland smirked. With that attitude, Lucy would fit right into most of the kitchens

he'd worked in.

"Mr. Page, do you need help cleaning up the rest of the kitchen?" Lottie asked on behalf of her and Alice.

Leland shook his head. "Not necessary. Your bus should be here any second to take you back to school, and I have some errands to run, so I wouldn't be able to supervise you."

He definitely had errands now. The class had decimated his store of sugar, and he needed at least three dozen more eggs for the class he had to teach that afternoon. And those were only things for Hawthorne House's teaching kitchen. He needed a few things for his own fridge upstairs in his flat.

He directed the students to clean up as much as possible while they could, and when their bus arrived, he grabbed his keys and headed out to his car. The other nice thing about teaching for a living instead of working in a busy kitchen was that he had more free time to get things like errands done.

And who knew? Maybe one day soon, he'd actually have time to date again, too. It had been ages since he'd gone out with anyone and even longer since he'd stayed in with them. He felt ready to start the next, romantic chapter of his life. He couldn't say what it was, but he'd been feeling a sort of buzz in the air, like the man for him was just waiting to stumble into his life. Maybe he needed to start attending some of The Brotherhood's theme nights at The Chameleon Club to help the process along a little.

He pulled into the parking lot of his favorite local grocery store, cut his car's engine, then entered the tiny shop with a smile on his face. He didn't need to shop at the huge, overcrowded grocery chains when all he needed were basics, and he loved the idea of supporting local entrepreneurs. Javed was one of the new friends he'd made in the last few months because of it.

He found a basket and quickly gathered what he needed before approaching the front counter. Javed was busy with a young man in shabby clothing who appeared to have a lottery ticket of some sort in his slender-fingered hand.

“It’s a winner,” the young man insisted. “I know it’s a winner. I saw the numbers in the paper. I know it’s from a couple weeks ago, but there’s still time to claim the prize, right?”

“Sorry,” Javed said, looking far more anxious than Leland had ever seen him. “I’ve checked, and the numbers on that ticket don’t match any of the winning numbers for the last three months.”

“But he swore it was a winning number,” the young man said, growing more agitated by the second. “These have to be the winning numbers.”

“I’m sorry,” Javed said, spreading his hands hopelessly. He glanced to Leland as if there was something he could do.

“Please,” the young man begged him, sobbing. “You don’t understand. This has to be a winning ticket. These have to be the right numbers. I...I can’t keep living like this. I don’t have anything, no home, no job, nothing. I don’t even have another change of clothes. Someone stole my bag.”

Leland’s heart sank for the young man. His rough look suddenly made sense, although to be honest, he looked a lot better than some of the unhoused people who used to come begging at the back doors of the places he’d worked in London sometimes.

“I wish I could help you,” Javed said, taking the ticket from the man and looking at it again. “Whoever gave this to you was dishonest about what it is.”

“No,” the young man said, lowering his head and weeping. Actually weeping.

Leland’s gut hurt for him. He set his basket on the ground and reached for his wallet. He always paid for things with plastic, but he was pretty sure he had a few quid to give the young man at least.

Javed seemed to be thinking the same thing. “Would a twenty help?” he asked kindly. “Consider it my Valentine’s Day gift.”

The young man dropped his head even more, like the charity he was being offered was humiliating. Leland could only imagine how hard it must have been to be forced to accept charity from strangers just to get by.

“I’ve got more than I need,” he said, pulling a twenty from his wallet. “You’re welcome to it.”

The young man turned to face him, tears streaming down his smudged face.

Two things hit Leland at once. First, the young man was gorgeous. Even with his brown eyes red-rimmed and full of tears, he was a sight to behold. His high cheekbones, curly brown hair, and shapely lips belonged on a model. Despite what he’d said that implied he was living rough, his skin was clear. He was skinny and had a desperate edge to his appearance, but he was still one of the most beautiful men Leland had ever seen.

The second thing that smacked Leland hard was that he knew the young man, though he hadn’t seen him for years. He was Ean Jones, the little brother of his old school chum, Davie. Little Ean Jones, who had followed him and Davie around with his big, round eyes and eager-to-please smile, who had been the sweetest, kindest, loveliest young man Leland had ever known.

Whatever had happened to land Ean on the streets and whoever had let it happen, Leland definitely had something to say about it.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:01 am

TWO

Ean couldn't believe his eyes. Of all the people who could have ended up standing behind him, witnessing the most humiliating and defeated moment of his life, it had to be Leland Page.

“I—”

He tried to say something, to explain why he was standing in a tiny off-license, dressed in the only clothes he currently owned, which smelled as unwashed as he did, holding onto a useless lottery ticket and the last shreds of his dignity, but nothing would come out of his mouth.

“Hey, it's okay,” Leland said, stepping forward slightly.

Ean flinched back on instinct, but immediately felt terrible. Leland wasn't one of the nasty predators who had reached out to him with pretend care only to offer him a lousy fiver to suck his cock. And Leland didn't deserve to be sullied by touching someone who had accepted that fiver and sucked that cock so he could afford to pay for a sandwich instead of taking the risk of stealing one.

Whether Leland had intended to touch him or not, he changed his motion to picking up his basket of groceries and setting it on the counter. “Thanks, Javed,” he said to the man who had crushed his hopes of getting out of the mess he'd fallen into by refusing the lottery ticket.

Except the guy behind the counter looked sad and embarrassed instead of smug. It

wasn't his fault Ean had been duped.

He took another look at the lottery ticket that he still clutched as if it were more than a useless shred of paper. It wasn't just a symbol of the end of his hopes, it was a sign of just how low he'd fallen now. He'd accepted what he'd been promised was a winning lottery ticket to let his friend Jimmy's uncle fuck him.

Of course, neither he nor Jimmy had known that's what would happen. Jimmy had been trying to help him, but his mum said Ean couldn't stay on her couch anymore. That was when the uncle had casually mentioned he had a spare bedroom at his place, if Ean was interested. Ean had jumped at the chance to have a real bed to sleep in. He should have known it would come with strings attached.

It had been a nightmare, but at least it was over. At least that part of it was over. He'd done what he'd thought he had to do willingly, taken the lottery ticket as payment, packed his bag and left. He'd sworn to himself that as bad as things got, he would never trade sex for money again.

But he hadn't had anywhere to go. Jimmy hadn't been home when he'd dropped by, his mum had chased him away and called him names, and the nearest shelter was not only full, it was scary as hell. Ean had spent the last two weeks sleeping rough, no money for food, too afraid to beg, and resorting to earning barely enough to keep himself from passing out from hunger with his mouth.

He'd finally broken down and taken the lottery ticket to the off-license to cash in when hunger overcame his fear of people asking him how he'd ended up with something so magical. He'd been afraid someone would steal the ticket, afraid they'd say he had no right to win the lottery because of how he'd ended up with the magic numbers. Honestly, he was afraid of exactly what had just happened, too, that the ticket was a fake.

“Ean? You alright?”

Ean snapped out of the paralysis he’d been stuck in and looked up at Leland. His face was itchy with drying tears and dirt, and his stomach chose just that moment to growl.

Leland took a deep, angry breath and puffed it out through his nose. “Throw in a couple sandwiches and a bottle of water, too,” he told the man behind the counter, then stepped to the case where lunch things were on display. “Which is your favorite?”

It took Ean a second to figure out that Leland was talking to him. “Me?” he asked, his voice small and shaky.

“Yes,” Leland said. “Something tells me you need a sandwich. You probably need a lot more than that.”

Ean started trembling. It was a stupid reaction, one that would make him look weak and vulnerable.

Sudden memories of his dad yelling at him, calling him weak and prissy and a lot of other bad names rang in his head. All because he’d been caught looking at porn online. What twenty year old didn’t look on porn online? Only with him, it had been gay porn, and that had been the last straw where his dad, his entire family, was concerned.

“Ean?”

Ean blinked. “Sorry. Um, anything is fine, I’m not picky.”

Leland studied him for a few seconds with a frown, then grabbed two sandwiches and

took them to the counter, where the cashier guy was bagging his things. He handed one of the sandwiches directly to Ean.

Ean burst into tears again as he stared at the boxed sandwich. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. All food was beautiful to him now. Just the other day, he'd stood in front of the window at Kokoro Sushi looking at everything inside like he was at a museum.

"I can't pay you back," he sniffled through his tears.

"That's okay," Leland said with a smile. "We'll think of something."

Ean swallowed hard and glanced up at Leland again. He knew what that meant. He'd heard it a few too many times in the last six months of couch surfing and sleeping out.

Then again, how many times had he fantasized about Leland Page finally taking notice of him as someone other than the kid who hung around him and Davie? How many times had he wanked in the shower while trying to picture what Leland looked like naked? Leland was still so handsome and built. He radiated kindness. Ean was sure he was gross and dirty. He was so far beneath Leland's notice, but not only had Leland bought him a sandwich, once he'd paid for everything, he handed Ean one of the shopping bags and told him to follow him out to the car.

"Where are you staying?" Leland asked once they were driving down the main road.

Ean swallowed hard and fought not to cry again. "Nowhere," he forced himself to croak out.

"Nowhere?" Leland glanced at him in concern.

Ean shook his head and stared down at the sandwich that he still hadn't opened and the bottle of water in his lap.

"As in homeless?" Leland asked carefully.

Ean squeezed his eyes shut and nodded.

"How is that possible?" Leland growled. "What about your parents? What about Davie?"

Drawing in a breath, Ean forced himself to raise his head and look at Leland. "Dad kicked me out when he...when he caught me watching gay porn," he confessed honestly. "He kicked me out for being gay." That was the real reason.

"What?" Leland said, nearly shouting. "That's so wrong. And Davie?"

"Called me...the F-word and slammed the door in my face," Ean said.

Leland went very quiet. "That explains a few things," he mumbled to himself.

A few seconds later, he peeked at Ean as he made a turn then asked, "Where have you been all this time?"

"Couch surfing," Ean said. "And...just...around."

Leland nodded but didn't say anything else about it. "Eat your sandwich," he said when Ean's stomach growled again.

Ean did as he was told. He tore into the box then grabbed half of the chicken sandwich and started eating it like the whole thing would evaporate if he didn't get it down fast enough. There was something magical and wonderful about food,

especially when you hadn't eaten in a while. The flavors were like notes in a melody that formed a perfect song. He tried to savor every bite, guessing which seasonings whoever had made it had used, but he was too hungry.

"Easy there," Leland told him. "There's more where that came from."

"No, there isn't," Ean whispered.

He froze as soon as he realized he'd spoken out loud. Leland sent him a concerned look but kept driving. Ean couldn't imagine what his brother's best friend thought of him. Probably that he was disgusting and that he deserved to end up in an off-license with a lottery ticket full of the wrong numbers. He was ashamed of how he looked, how he smelled.

"You can let me off wherever," he said when he finished the rest of his sandwich and half the bottle of water. "It doesn't really matter where."

It wasn't like he had anywhere to go anyhow. He could try the shelter again, maybe find some social services program that would take him in. He'd tried to get a job after being kicked out, but most places required him to have an address and some sort of skill. He'd had a job at a supermarket when he was still living at home, but he'd been too embarrassed to go back to that after the first few nights on his own.

It was all just so stupid. He'd gotten himself into his own mess. He didn't deserve whatever help Leland wanted to give him now.

Unless Leland was helping him because he expected something in return.

"Nonsense," Leland said as they stopped at a red light. "I'm not dropping you back on the street. You're coming home with me."

There it was. Exactly as Ean expected. He took a deep breath and tried to figure out how he felt about being picked up by Leland. Not as bad as he could have felt, that much was certain. Leland wasn't dangerous. He wasn't risking his life. It wouldn't be as bad as Jimmy's uncle.

"I can't believe your parents would throw you out of the house like that," Leland went on as they continued to drive. "It's unforgivable. I'm surprised that things like that happen in this day and age in the UK. Next time I see them, I'm going to give them a piece of my mind."

He went on, but as soon as Ean's stomach had something in it, the stress and strain of the last few weeks started to melt away and he turned sleepy. He felt safe for the first time in months. Something about Leland reminded him of better days, of a time when he was loved and accepted just as he was. Leland had always been nice to him. If he was going to have to break his no sex for money rule again, at least it would be with someone he liked.

He must have dozed off, because the next thing Ean knew, Leland had pulled onto the drive for one of the huge, old estates in the area. It took Ean a second to figure out they were at Hawthorne House, but that made no sense to him. He'd taken an art class at Hawthorne House through school years ago, but he hadn't been back since.

"Here we are," Leland said once he'd pulled into a parking space in a lot at the back of the house. "Home at last."

Ean frowned as he looked through the windshield. "But it's Hawthorne House," he said.

"You know it?" Leland asked.

"From a long time ago."

Ean scrambled out of the car when he realized he was just sitting there, stinking up the inside, and grabbed the bag he'd carried earlier from the backseat. He then followed Leland into the building through a back entrance.

"I'm currently teaching culinary classes for the arts center," Leland explained as they headed down what felt like a private hallway. "They're letting me live in one of the family flats for a while, too."

"Oh yeah. I forgot the Hawthorne family still lived here." It felt like a silly thing to say, but everything had turned so surreal for Ean.

They headed up a staircase then down the hall to a door at the end. Leland took out a key to open it, then gestured for Ean to go inside with a smile. It was a nice place, too. Small but clean. It looked like it had everything anyone could ever need in a home, from a television to a nice kitchen.

"You can put the bag anywhere in here," Leland said as they walked into the kitchen. "Half of this stuff needs to go down to the big kitchen, but it'll be okay in my fridge while we get you sorted."

Ean took a quick breath, starting to tremble again as he slid his bag onto the small kitchen table. "Do you want me to take a shower first?" he asked hopefully, though he couldn't bring himself to speak louder than a whisper.

"Sorry?" Leland asked like he didn't understand.

Ean squirmed and winced. "I haven't showered for a few days. You probably want me clean when you...." He swallowed hard. "Unless you have a thing for dirty...boys. Some people do."

Leland continued to stare at him like he'd grown another head.

Then he took a sharp breath as understanding hit him.

“Ean, I didn’t bring you here to...take advantage of you,” he said in a grave voice. “I just want to help you. I mean that. And I don’t expect anything in return.”

Ean’s eyes started to sting with tears of embarrassment and relief, so he lowered his head.

“Is that what you’ve been doing?” Leland asked quietly and with far too much care.

He was so kind and genuine that Ean failed to stifle the sob that welled up in him.

“Hey, hey,” Leland said, shifting forward and pulling Ean into his arms. “It’s okay. You’re okay. I’ve got you.”

It was so wonderful that all Ean could do was wrap his arms around Leland and hug him back as he cried on Leland’s shoulder. At the same time, it sucked so hard. He was a grown man, someone who should already have been out on his own, taking care of himself and not screwing up so badly that he had to turn tricks to eat. Once Leland knew the full story, he probably wouldn’t want anything to do with him.

“Take a deep breath,” Leland told him, rubbing his back. “You’re going to be okay now. I’ve got you, and I’m not going to let things fall apart for you again.”

“But you don’t even know me,” Ean sniffled against Leland’s shoulder.

“Of course I do,” Leland laughed hugging him tighter. “You’re Ean Jones. You draw fantastic pictures and you have a beautiful laugh.”

Ean snapped his head up to gape at Leland. “You remember my pictures?”

“I sure do,” Leland said. “I was always a little jealous of your talent.”

Ean blinked in surprise. He didn’t know what to say. About anything. At all.

“I tell you what,” Leland said, letting him go. “Why don’t you shower. Not because of anything I want but because you want to. I’ll find something clean for you to wear while you’re in there. Hawthorne House has a huge room upstairs called the clothes room that’s filled with everything you could possibly ask for in every size imaginable. I have a class to teach in forty-five minutes, but you’re welcome to sit in until we have a chance to talk about what’s going on and how to fix it.”

“Okay,” Ean said, sniffing and wiping his face as his tears changed from despair to hope. It was the first real hope he’d felt in months.

“Go on, then,” Leland said with his warmest smile. “Everything you need including towels is in the bathroom already. It’s right through there.”

Ean turned to see where Leland was pointing, then nearly tripped over his own feet in his haste to reach the bathroom. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt really clean.

The shower was every bit as wonderful as he’d dreamed it would be. Ean washed his hair with the best smelling shampoo and probably used too much body wash, but he couldn’t help it. The bubbles made him laugh with pure joy as he watched them swirl away down the drain, taking the dirt and his feeling of hopelessness with them.

Once he was out of the shower, he took the liberty of using Leland’s razor to shave, even though he barely grew any facial hair at all. It just felt good to do. He didn’t want to put his filthy clothes on again, ever, but there was a bathrobe hanging from a hook behind the door, so he donned that before going in search of Leland.

Leland was waiting for him in the flat's main room with a small pile of clothes.

"I hope these will fit," he said, holding up a pair of jeans in one hand and a jumper in the other. "If not, there's a bunch more upstairs."

"I'm sure they'll be fine," Ean said, breathless with relief at the good turn his luck had taken.

"I hate to rush you, but my class starts in ten minutes," Leland went on.

Ean jumped forward to take the clothes, then retreated to the bathroom again so he could put them on. Everything fit well enough, even though Leland had forgotten to get him underwear. He'd remembered socks and even shoes, though. Within five minutes, Ean looked and felt better than he had in ages.

"I hope you don't mind sitting in on my class," Leland said as they headed downstairs. "You can even participate if you'd like."

"In a cooking class?"

The idea was thrilling. Food had become something deeply special to Ean. The idea of learning how to make it took his breath away.

"Yeah, sure," Leland smiled and ruffled his damp hair. It didn't feel like a condescending gesture, even though Ean was a good foot shorter than him. It just felt cozy and welcoming, like Leland had always been with him. "I bet you'd make a great cook."

"I don't know about that," Ean said with a bashful smile. "I'd like to try, though."

"Be my guest," Leland said as they turned a corner into a massive, industrial kitchen.

Ean smiled up at his savior. He would try anything, do anything for Leland, and he would be happy to do it. Even if Leland tried to make sure he paid for everything with his body, Ean wouldn't mind at all. Maybe it would just be for one night and everything would turn to shit again in the morning, but if one night was all they had, he intended to enjoy every second of it.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:01 am

THREE

Ean looked so much better after a shower and a change of clothes. The transformation was so marked that Leland could hardly take his eyes off him as he went to work setting up the kitchen's center island with all the ingredients that his class would use for the afternoon lesson. Ean was eager to help, though clearly anxious about something. He kept checking in with Leland every few seconds to make certain he was putting things where they needed to go.

"Everything in the kitchen is labeled," Leland called to him as he brought the bin of mackerels the class would be learning to fillet out of the fridge. "We're going to need fillet knives and non-porous cutting boards."

Ean nodded silently, then headed over to the shelf filled with plastic bins against the far wall.

Something warm and exciting pulsed through Leland as he set up for the class. He couldn't take his eyes off the young man who had all but fallen into his lap. Ean had changed a lot since the last time he'd seen him years ago. He wasn't a kid anymore, that much was certain, even if he radiated vulnerability. He was small and skinny, but his physique had filled out and his facial features had matured.

Leland almost laughed aloud at a sudden memory of an afternoon playing video games with Ean about five years ago. He'd arrived at the Jones' expecting Davie to be there, but something had come up and Davie wasn't home. Mrs. Jones had insisted he would be back soon and that Leland should wait for him. Ean had shyly volunteered to play whatever racing game he was into at the time with him, and the

rest was history.

If he was honest with himself, Leland had been attracted to Ean. He hadn't said or done anything about it back then because Ean had been about fifteen. Way too young for him to even think of making a move. He'd kept the idea of waiting until both of them were a little older then checking back to see if Ean might want to go out sometime, but when he had come out to Davie a couple years later, that had been the end of that friendship.

Leland drew in a breath as he put two and two together while still watching Ean puzzling over the bins of cutlery. Davie had turned out to be a homophobe. Ean said his parents had kicked him out for being gay. Of course Davie hadn't helped him.

The burst of protective anger that accompanied that thought coincided with the realization that Ean had been standing there, staring at the shelves too long.

"Do you need help?" he asked. The question felt far more important than asking about knives.

"Um, I...." Ean turned to him with a look of distress.

Heart pounding with protectiveness, Leland left the fish and strode across the room to the shelves.

"There they are," he said, grabbing the bin of fillet knives. "Right in front of your nose."

Ean turned bright pink. "Oh, sorry."

"Nah, no worries," Leland said, handing him the bin with a smile. "You've had a rough time of it. You're probably just tired."

“Yeah,” Ean said, lowering his head to look at the box of knives. “I’m tired.”

Something about the answer didn’t sit quite right with Leland, but there wasn’t time to question it. Students started to arrive for the class a few minutes later, and once the class got started, he was up to his ears in fish scales as he walked the class through filleting.

“Point the head of your fish toward your weaker hand,” he said from the main workspace at the front of the room while the seven students that made up the class, and Ean, circled around. “You’re going to cut vertically just behind the pectoral fin with the knife angled slightly toward the head. Keep going until you feel the backbone. Then you’ll remove the first fillet by turning the knife and sliding it gently back toward the tailfin. Work along the backbone and hold the head of the fish for stability.”

It was always interesting to see how people reacted to filleting something with an eyeball or two looking right back at you. A couple of the students winced and one made a queasy noise as Leland completed the demonstration.

Ean, on the other hand, watched the whole procedure with rapt attention. His eyes practically shone with excitement and understanding as Leland demonstrated each of the steps. When Leland finished and sent everyone to their workstations to give it a try themselves, Ean jumped to it like he was racing for the controller of a game he knew he was going to win.

It was more than just eagerness, though. Leland dutifully traveled between everyone’s workstations, watching what they were doing and giving pointers, but he kept one eye on Ean the whole time. With complete focus and a deft hand, Ean took up his knife, and with careful concentration, he filleted the mackerel with perfect precision on his first attempt.

Not everyone came anywhere close to accomplishing that.

“I’ve made a right mess of this,” Betty, one of the elderly ladies taking the class sighed, throwing up her hands. “It might be alright in a stew.”

“It’s so much harder than it looks,” Betty’s husband Arthur agreed.

“This young man has done it perfectly,” Betty said with a smile, nodding at Ean.

Ean glanced up from his work. He immediately sought out Leland, then smiled once their eyes met.

It was like Cupid’s arrow hitting Leland right in the heart. Happy Ean was the polar opposite of the distressed young man with a bum lottery ticket that he’d stumbled across in the off-license that afternoon.

“Ean, have you done this before?” Leland asked, walking over to Ean’s station. Ostensibly, he was there as a teacher taking a look at his student’s work, but really, something irresistible drew Leland to him.

Ean shook his head once Leland was standing across the counter from him. “This is my first try.”

Leland checked the mackerel, but sure enough, it was beautifully filleted. “You’re sure?” he asked, teasing a little.

Ean took him seriously and looked nervous. “I’m sure. I’m not lying, I promise.”

Leland’s heart melted for the young man. “I believe you,” he said softly. He reached out and rested his hand on the back of Ean’s for a moment.

Both of them breathed in slightly, like the touch was electric. Their eyes met, and Leland had to pull away before he did something silly. Flirting shouldn't happen over fish scales.

"Great," he said, turning to the room at large. "Once you've filleted your fish, grab a pan and take it to the stove and we'll sear it."

The class shuffled along, following instructions well, but Ean raced to take his fish to the hob like cooking was a treat and not a chore.

Leland talked his class through pan-searing the fish, then set everyone up with the ingredients and recipe for pesto that they would use as a sauce for the meal. His focus wasn't completely on the lesson anymore, though.

The more he watched Ean, the more things didn't add up in his head. Ean had confessed to sleeping rough and staying with friends, but he hadn't said anything about getting a place of his own. He hadn't mentioned a single thing about a job. Surely, at his age, he had to have some sort of employment. Barring that, he must have been eligible for a public assistance program. Young, bright men from good families didn't just end up homeless for no reason...did they?

Leland made a mental note to sit Ean down after class and talk about it. Every fiber of his being wanted to help the young man. Every fiber of his being also rebelled at the idea of sending Ean on his way again. He wanted to keep Ean right where he was, safe in his sight, instead of patting him on the head and sending him on his way.

Another piece of the puzzle started to fall into place as the majority of the class moved on to whisking up their pesto while Ean just stood at his workstation, staring at the recipe.

"Is something wrong?" Leland asked, his need to help Ean pulling at him. "Are my

instructions not clear?”

Ean glanced mournfully up at him. His eyes were glassy and red-rimmed again, which was like a punch in the gut for Leland.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Leland asked quietly, leaning toward Ean and using his body to shield him from the prying eyes of the rest of the class.

Ean swallowed, darted a shamefaced glance around, then lowered his head. “I can’t read,” he whispered.

More pieces fell into place.

“I mean, I can read,” Ean immediately corrected himself, looking up at Leland again. “A little. Sometimes.”

“Are you dyslexic?” Leland ventured a guess.

Ean nodded and lowered his head again. “Badly,” he whispered.

Yep, things were definitely making sense. Stress made things like dyslexia worse. Ean had been under more stress than Leland could even imagine for months now. Chances were he’d had trouble finding or keeping a job and definitely with filling out forms if stress was robbing him of his ability to read. And without family to help, it would have made things even harder.

Leland bristled with frustration. A lot of people had let Ean down in a lot of ways, but he definitely wasn’t going to be one of them.

“It’s okay,” he said, touching Ean’s hand again in reassurance, even though it nudged things toward a place they shouldn’t be going in a kitchen classroom. “I’ll read the

recipe out to you and you just follow what I say.”

Things went well from there. Ean truly was a natural in the kitchen. Leland’s mind immediately filled with ideas for ways to help him get a job in a kitchen somewhere and to help him take the first steps to landing on his feet. He would deal with his distaste at the idea of sending the man out alone in the world, specifically away from him, later.

The class didn’t seem to mind that he gave more of his attention to Ean than to them. In fact, several of the others helped Ean wherever they could as well. More than a few of them grinned away at the two of them as they interacted, as if they were reading more into things than was there.

Then again, would Leland really mind if something was there between him and Ean?

“You did great today,” he told Ean after the class ended and it was just the two of them cleaning up. “You’re an amazing cook.”

The class had all eaten their lesson for supper around the table at the end of the room. Leland had had a taste of Ean’s dish and had been impressed that it tasted as good as it looked.

“I like food,” Ean said, blushing sweetly as he washed dishes in the big sink. “I’ve sort of been obsessed with food lately, since I haven’t had much to?”

He stopped himself from finishing that sad statement, but it still broke Leland’s heart.

“It’s alright,” Leland said, bringing some of the pans from the hob to soak in the sink.

He started out maintaining a professional distance from Ean, but once he was standing by the man’s side, he couldn’t stop himself from drawing Ean into his arms.

Ean made a small noise of surprise and held his arms at odd angles, since his hands were wet and soapy. He was stiff for a moment, but then he relaxed into Leland's chest with a sigh.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "I don't know what I'm going to do, but you make it better."

It was the simplest and sweetest statement Leland had ever heard, and it made him hug Ean tighter.

Which was wonderful, except that was how Robbie Hawthorne and his boyfriend, Toby Tillman, who also worked as the Hawthorne Community Arts Center's business manager, found them.

"Hey, Leland, we have a few questions about the Valentine's Day supper," Robbie asked as they entered the kitchen.

Both men stopped when they saw Leland and Ean in their embrace. Leland let Ean go, but that felt wrong. Being caught hugging someone who Robbie and Toby probably thought was a student must have looked even more wrong, though.

"Hi, guys," Leland greeted them, trying to remain outwardly calm while scrambling to make things right. "This is a friend of mine, Ean Jones. If it's alright with you, he'll be staying with me for a while." He paused slightly as Robbie and Toby exchanged a look, then told Ean, "This is Robbie Hawthorne and Toby Tillman."

"Oh. Hi," Ean said, lowering his head. Leland wasn't hugging him anymore, so he hugged himself as if he were trying to hide.

Leland would have to deal with that in a minute. "I've got answers to whatever questions you might have about Valentine's Day," he said.

Toby nodded, then said, “The budget seems a little...large.”

“I told him that we can’t skimp on something like this, but you know how efficiency experts are,” Robbie added, grinning sideways at his beau.

“Hawthorne House has only just started operating at a teeny, tiny, minuscule profit,” Toby argued back. “If you want to keep things in the black, you can’t go on spending like an artist.”

“It’s absolutely worth it,” Robbie told him, his smile broadening. “Mostly it’s worth it to get a reaction out of you.”

“This is how you choose to get a reaction out of me?” Toby fired back, desire in his eyes as he squared off with Robbie. “By breaking Hawthorne House’s budget?”

Leland cleared his throat. The conversation in front of him was definitely about to head someplace he didn’t really want to witness. As soon as Robbie and Toby turned to him, he said, “I can work on the budget for the event. I was going to get the teen pastry class to help with desserts for the supper, but I’m not sure they’re really up to it.”

“I could help,” Ean offered. He had so much hope in his eyes, but that immediately dampened when Robbie and Toby looked at him. “I mean, if you want me to. I don’t know how to make desserts, but I’m sure if you tell me I could figure it out.”

“I’d be happy to have your help,” Leland said, resting a hand on Ean’s shoulder.

“Can we afford to hire someone else?” Toby asked Robbie. He lowered his voice and muttered, “I’m still on the fence about whether we can afford to hire a cooking teacher.”

Prickles broke out down Leland's back. He was almost certain Toby had only said that to tease Robbie. The Hawthorne family had been more than happy to hire him and to expand the arts center's offerings for cooking classes. But a frustrating niggles of the idea that Toby was serious and that he had to prove himself and his worth poked at Leland.

"Don't worry," he said, trying to sound as confident as possible. "I'll make certain the Valentine's Day supper is a smash hit, and I'll bring it in under budget as I do."

"I'm sure you'll do a fantastic job," Robbie said. He turned to Toby and repeated, "I'm sure he'll do a fantastic job. Now stop harassing our staff and find something more productive to do with your time."

"Is that a threat or a challenge?" Toby asked as the two of them headed out of the room.

Robbie just laughed.

As soon as they were gone, Leland breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't really need to worry about his place at Hawthorne House, but that didn't mean he wasn't highly motivated to make the Valentine's Day supper an event to remember.

"Are you sure I should be here?" Ean asked, turning back to the sink to finish with the dishes. "They seemed kind of...uptight."

"That's just how Toby is," Leland said, turning around to help him. "You're fine. I'll make sure of it."

Ean smiled at him, but he was still anxious. It made sense, really. After everything Ean had been through recently, he was bound to be on edge and insecure about housing as well as food. Leland promised himself he would do whatever needed to be

done to put him at ease.

They finished cleaning the kitchen and putting it to bed for the night, then headed back upstairs to Leland's flat. Since they'd already had dinner, they didn't have to worry about that once they settled in for the night. Ean followed Leland into his kitchen while he made tea, and once they both had a cup, they relocated to the main room and sat on the couch.

"So we should probably discuss sleeping arrangements," Leland said, reaching for the remote to turn the telly on with his free hand.

"You can fuck me if you'd like," Ean answered quickly and breathlessly. "Or I could give you a blow job. It's the least I could do after all the kindness you've shown me. I'll do it right now if you want me to."

He set his mug of tea aside and scooted closer to Leland, reaching for the fly of his jeans.

Leland was so shocked he nearly spilled his tea.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:01 am

FOUR

Happiness had become a foreign concept to Ean in the last few months. Or maybe the last few years. Everything was starting to meld together in his head, like his experiences over the last stretch of his life were like the basil, garlic, and everything else he'd blended in the food processor to make pesto. His life was pesto, but he'd never been happier.

It was that unfamiliar happiness that caused him to jump to what his scrambled but grateful brain told him he wanted. Cock. He wanted cock. Specifically, Leland's cock. Not in a selfish or horny way, although he was definitely horny, what with his stomach full, his body clean, and a warm home around him. He was just so happy that he wanted to make the man who had given him that happiness feel good.

But Leland had other ideas.

"Whoa, whoa! Hold up there," he said, dropping the remote and placing a hand on Ean's shoulder to push him back just as Ean had started to lean forward and down.

Leland could have thrown the hot tea on him and he wouldn't have felt more scalded. He pulled back, nearly falling off the couch in his efforts to cover for the horrible mistake he'd just made.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" he gasped, tears stinging in his eyes. Bloody hell, was he going to cry every time something happened to him now? "I thought you wanted it. I thought I could pay you back. It was a stupid idea. I'll just go now."

He leaped off the couch and stumbled over his feet as he launched himself toward the door.

“Ean, hold on, wait!”

Leland put his tea down, splashing it as he did, then jumped up and chased after him. He caught Ean before he made it to the door and pulled him into an embrace.

The embrace was enough to both freeze Ean in his tracks and melt his brain with confusion.

“Take it easy,” Leland said, shifting his initial tight hug into a gentler hold. He rubbed Ean’s back with one hand as he did. “Breathe, sweetie. I’ve got you.”

That did it. Ean didn’t know shit about the world or how he was supposed to function in it, but he knew he was quiet and bottomy, and probably subby while he was at it, even though he didn’t think he was particularly kinky. There was just something about having a kind, older, bigger man who he really, really liked calling him “sweetie” and holding him that made the cold, cruel, too-fast world stop for a second.

“That’s better,” Leland said, then kissed the top of Ean’s head.

Ean closed his eyes and leaned into him. It was so, so wrong to let his guard down and believe that he’d found a savior. He’d fostered hope that someone might swoop in and be able to save him before, but that definitely hadn’t happened. Leland was different, though. Leland was the real deal.

“Let’s just sit down again and drink our tea and talk about this, okay?” Leland let go and turned him gently to walk him back to the couch.

Even though he wasn’t trying to run anymore, Ean’s heart pounded hard against his

ribs. His emotions were all over the place. That old traitor, hope, pulsed loudly inside him, but he was so ashamed of his behavior. At the same time, when Leland sat again and pulled him down to sit beside him, so close their sides smushed up against each other, feelings of comfort and trust started to grow and overtake the spikier emotions.

“Alright, let’s deal with this one bit at a time,” Leland said. He leaned across Ean and reached for his mug, then handed it to him before grabbing his own. “I don’t expect anything from you and I’m definitely not making any demands. We’re just two mates sitting around, drinking tea, and working through a problem.”

“Okay,” Ean said, then hid his red face by taking a long drink from his mug. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a good cup of tea. He closed his eyes and let it wash through him, making the world better.

“Right,” Leland said after swallowing. “Now, tell me more about your parents kicking you out. You said it was because you’re gay?”

Ean nodded, his heart sinking. Leland probably hated him because he was gay, too.

Then again, that didn’t make sense. He’d been honest with Leland about his sexuality from the start and Leland hadn’t pushed him away or sneered at him. The way he’d touched his hand down in the kitchen a few times, the way he’d hugged him several times now....

“I wish I could say I was surprised,” Leland said, resting a hand on Ean’s leg, “but I should have known. When I came out to Davie, he ended our friendship then and there.”

Ean’s eyes went wide as the very thing he’d just been wondering about was proven true.

“You’re gay?” he asked.

Leland had gone to take another sip of tea and nearly choked on it. “You didn’t know?”

Ean blinked, then shook his head. Then his face pinched as he felt unbelievably stupid. “How did I not know?”

“I have no idea,” Leland laughed. “I’ve always been pretty open. But it sounds like you’ve been dealing with so much of your own stuff that you might not have thought about me at all.”

“That’s not true,” Ean said before he could stop himself. “I used to think about you all the time. I thought you were wonderful. I had such a crush on you when you came to hang out at our house. I...I even thought of you after I was kicked out, when I needed to remind myself that there are good people in the world.”

Leland looked so sad for a moment before reaching for Ean’s free hand and squeezing it.

A moment later, he let go and said, “I hope this doesn’t change things. I don’t want you to see me as threatening or like I’m after something with you. I’ve always liked you, too, and right now, I just want to help you, no strings attached.”

“No, no this is good,” Ean said. He had to take another gulp of tea to swallow the lump in his throat, but then he put his mug aside and twisted to face Leland more fully. “You understand, you know? I mean, I’m not the same as you. I’m pretty pitiful, actually. I can’t really take care of myself, I’m kind of an idiot, and I can’t read when I get stressed out.”

“Shush,” Leland stopped him, raising a hand. “I don’t want to hear that. You’ve

always been one of the kindest, sweetest people I know. Dyslexia is just a circumstance. It doesn't make you stupid. And it's not a bad thing to be the sort of person who does better in partnership with others instead of on your own."

Ean could hardly believe his ears. No one had ever said anything half so nice to him before. "I don't want to be a burden," he said quietly, lowering his eyes.

Leland surprised him by cupping the side of his face and tilting it up to look at him.

"You're not a burden," he said. "I don't see helping you as you burdening me at all. I like helping people."

"Oh," Ean said, lowering his eyes, even though he couldn't tilt his face down.

"Hey. What's that about?" Leland asked with a slight frown.

Ean wished he hadn't made a sound. He wished he could lie and pretend it was nothing, but he was just so tired and weak that he didn't have the energy to make up lies.

"You like helping people," he said. "That's great. I bet you'd help anyone who couldn't manage to keep themselves off the streets."

Leland hummed like he understood. "But I don't help everyone," he said, a small sparkle in his eyes, his cheeks flushing. "I helped you. I want to continue helping you. Because you're Ean Jones, the sweetest young man I know. So sweet you're like sugar."

Ean couldn't help but smile as he felt his face flood with heat.

"I had a crush on you back in the day, too, you know," Leland said.

Ean jerked his head up and gaped at him. “No! You couldn’t have. I was such a miserable, scrawny kid. I’m still absolute rubbish.”

“You’re definitely not,” Leland said firmly. “You’re beautiful. And you’re trying so hard.” He paused, grinned, and said, “But yes, you were too young for me back then.”

“But now?”

Ean wanted to kick himself for letting those two words out.

“Now,” Leland said, putting his mug down and moving in to clasp both sides of Ean’s face.

He leaned in until their faces were only inches apart. Ean breathed in, loving the scent of the kitchen that seemed to envelop Leland. He loved the dark depths of his eyes and the flush of his cheeks. His eyes dropped to stare at Leland’s lips. They were so soft and inviting. All he could think about was that Leland Page was going to kiss him.

Except he didn’t.

“Now,” Leland repeated, his voice rougher, sitting straight again, “I don’t want to take advantage of someone in a difficult spot who really needs my help.”

“You can take advantage of me, I don’t mind,” Ean said in a rush.

Leland laughed and leaned back, taking one of Ean’s hands. “I’ll think about it. But right now, I think it’s more important that we talk about how to get you back on your feet instead of how I can get in your pants.”

A fresh wave of heat and embarrassment swept through Ean. “Anytime you want me,

I'm yours," he said solemnly. He wanted to make sure Leland knew he wasn't joking or being flippant.

"I know," Leland answered, just as seriously. That had Ean's heart racing all over again. "And the same goes for me. Anytime you want me, I will absolutely give you what you need."

Ean smiled. He debated telling Leland that he wanted him right now in all the sexual ways.

Leland nipped that in the bud by saying, "I think it's more important to sort out your safety and security than it is for us to follow our libidos right now."

"Aw, shucks," Ean said with what he was certain was a cheesy grin. It was the first time he'd tried to make a joke in months.

Fortunately, Leland laughed. Ean loved the sound.

"Yes," Leland said, rolling his eyes comically. "We have to be grown-ups and talk about ways to fix your situation. Like finding you a place to live, for example."

Every drop of playfulness Ean had vanished. Leland wanted to get rid of him already. Of course, it was way too much to ask if he could just stay where he was, living with Leland at Hawthorne House, so that he could have someone he trusted to take care of him.

As if Leland could read his thoughts, he said, "You don't have to go anywhere for now. There's more than enough room at Hawthorne House for anyone who needs to stay here. I'm sure if I talk to Robert Hawthorne, he'd be okay with you staying with me until we can get something else sorted."

“Okay,” Ean said, managing a tentative smile.

“Besides, you’re such a natural in the kitchen and I’ve got this Valentine’s Day supper coming,” he went on. “I need someone to take over making the cakes and desserts. I bet you’re a natural at baking, sugar.”

Ean’s face flushed so hot that he thought it might burn off. That might just have been the nicest thing anyone had ever said to him. “I’ll do my best,” he said.

“I’m certain you will,” Leland said. He reached out and brushed a hand over Ean’s blazing-hot cheek. He spent a moment thinking, then nodded and said, “Tomorrow, you can sit in on all my cooking and baking classes. I’ll make sure you have all the skills you need to help with everything this weekend. Who knows? You might even pick up enough skills to get a job in a kitchen somewhere.”

“But I can’t read when I’m under a lot of stress,” Ean said, his shoulders sinking. “Aren’t kitchens stressful?”

Leland shrugged. “Depending on the job. You might not need to read, depending on what you’re doing. Most of the chefs I’ve worked with want people with talent who can listen to instructions and work hard.”

“I can do those things,” Ean said.

“Which is why I think working in a restaurant would be a perfect job for you.”

Ean continued to falter. “I don’t know how to get a job like that. I don’t have anywhere to stay in the meantime. It’s so hard to get started when you’ve got absolutely nothing at all.”

“But you don’t have nothing,” Leland said, squeezing his hand. When Ean glanced up

at him doubtfully, he said, “You have me.”

Ean’s heart nearly burst with affection and with longing. Leland was his hero in so many ways. He was so overcome with gratitude that he threw himself forward, hugging Leland hard and hiding his face against the crook of his neck.

“It’s okay, sugar,” Leland said, hugging him back and rubbing his back. “If you can’t go it alone, then I’ll stand beside you. If you’ll let me, I’ll take care of you. At least until you feel like you’re ready to take care of yourself.”

Ean nearly burst into tears again. Leland was so much more than he ever could have asked for. He might have had a losing lottery ticket, but he was starting to feel like he’d won the best prize of all.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:01 am

FIVE

Romance was definitely in the air over the next few days at Hawthorne House. Several of the art classes were busy with projects that involved hearts or flowers, and Robbie even had his children's class sculpting Cupids out of clay. Robbie also had flowers delivered for Toby on Valentine's Day itself, Rhys Hawthorne had a giant balloon bouquet sent to his beau, Early, and in the morning of Valentine's Day, Robert Hawthorne showed up in the kitchen asking if Leland could make a giant biscuit heart iced with the words "I love you, Janice" for his wife.

"I'm not sure if we have time," Leland confessed to him, glancing around the kitchen.

Everything they would need to prepare for the feast that night was already laid out on every spare bit of counter, and some of the soups and sauces and things that could be prepared in advance were already bubbling on the hob. And that was without taking the day's classes into consideration.

"I could do it," Ean offered, stepping forward and glancing between Leland and Robert with a bright, hopeful look.

Robert smiled. Leland had introduced him to Ean the day before and quietly explained his story. Robert, being the old hippie and free spirit he was, had accepted Ean into the protection of Hawthorne House immediately.

"I'm sure you'll do a bang-up job, young man," Robert said, clapping a hand on Ean's shoulder.

That decided that. Leland would have asked if Ean felt up to the task or if he minded working on something like that for free, but there wasn't time for questions. As soon as Robert left, the two of them got to work.

Leland watched Ean with a careful eye as he got out the right bowls and baking sheets for the biscuit and as he fetched basic ingredients from the pantry and fridge. I couldn't keep the smile off his face. The last few days had been filled with romance for more people than just the Hawthorne family.

Even though he reminded himself on an almost hourly basis that Ean was a vulnerable young man who didn't need his older brother's former best friend crowding in and flirting with him, Leland couldn't help but enjoy Ean's company. In a way, it was like all the years they'd spent apart had never happened and like Ean had been Leland's best friend instead of Davie.

Ean was so sweet that the decidedly American nickname "sugar" just popped out of Leland when the two of them were knocking around his flat together. And sometimes in public, which had led to a few interesting looks from some of the Hawthornes. After those first heart-stopping moments where Ean had offered sex as a thank-you for Leland's help, Ean had found other ways to be incredibly helpful and gracious.

Several times in the last few days Ean had mentioned something about finding his feet and getting out of Leland's hair, but Leland definitely wasn't in a hurry. He liked having Ean around. He liked seeing Ean's smile and hearing his off-key singing when he didn't think anyone was listening. If he was honest, he liked the moments when the two of them sat on the couch in the evening, when Ean turned sleepy and droopy and leaned against him.

When it came down to it, Leland wanted Ean.

As he zipped around the kitchen, laying out everything his morning teen class would

need to make the cakes for that night's supper and checking on the sauces between tasks, his mind kept drifting to ways that he could ask Ean whether he wanted to sleep in the bed with him going forward instead of under a blanket on the couch. He bounced back and forth between telling himself that it was just for comfort and convenience, but that didn't stop fantasies of Ean naked under him from popping into his mind at inconvenient times.

Maybe he was some sort of grim predator taking advantage of someone who depended on him, but Ean seemed just as keen as he was. And wasn't Robert Hawthorne and the rest of the family always talking about how sexuality should be freeing and enjoyable instead of something used to make you feel bad about yourself?

Leland's thoughts settled into the much more practical when he realized Ean had all the ingredients for the biscuit laid out on the workspace in front of him but was staring at the recipe card with a frown. He cursed himself for not noticing earlier, then left the stove to stride over to Ean.

"Do you want me to read the recipe for you?" he asked carefully as the noisy teen students started to arrive.

Ean glanced up at him with the sweetest look of hope. "Actually, I'm doing pretty good at making it out," he said. "I have to concentrate, but I'm not as stressed out as I was, so the letters are behaving themselves."

Leland grinned. "Good," he said. "Carry on, then."

Without thinking about it, he leaned in and kissed Ean's cheek the way he would if the two of them were dating.

As soon as the action was finished, the two of them froze and stared at each other, both of them flushing.

“Sir! Sir! Are we making heart-shaped cakes today?” one of the teenage girls called out.

The moment was shattered before Leland could make anything of it. The last thing he could do was have a much-needed relationship talk with Ean when the kitchen had just flooded with rowdy teenagers who dove right into the ingredients laid out on the countertops without being told.

“Yes, we’ll be making heart-shaped cakes today,” he said, giving his full attention to the class out of necessity. “But wait for instructions before you touch anything.”

Waiting for instructions was not something that particular class was good at. Leland spent the next hour racing from one end of the kitchen classroom to the other, attempting to keep the lid on the class. Someone must have given them loads of Valentine’s Day chocolate before they’d arrived, because they were all hyper and mischievous.

Ordinarily, he might have been amused by their high spirits, but he definitely wasn’t laughing when a carton of eggs ended up smashed on the floor, several boys’ uniforms ended up white with flour, and when one of the girls broke down in tears because she didn’t get a Valentine’s Day gift from the boy she was certain she was dating.

And that was just the teen class.

After they left, leaving half as many cakes as were needed for the supper because an entire batch had been burnt, one of the adult classes arrived. They were responsible for preparing the vegetable side dishes that would go with the main meal, but as they opened the boxes that had been delivered by the grocer in the middle of the chaotic teen class, they discovered piles of courgettes instead of the broccoli he’d ordered.

“We’ll have to pivot,” he told the half dozen mostly retired ladies who made up the class.

“Pivoting is something we’ve always been good at,” Betty said, winking at Arthur.

The two of them giggled and proceeded to be as bad as the teenagers, and much naughtier, for the rest of the class, as they put together a side dish using the courgettes.

Throughout that entire ordeal, Leland watched as Ean skillfully made a perfect, giant, heart-shaped biscuit. Ean was a sea of calm and focus in the middle of the busy kitchen, no matter what the class was getting up to. Once he finished the biscuit, he quietly took it upon himself to bake the rest of the cakes they would need for the supper without Leland telling him what to do. It was as if he just knew what his job was and he was determined to carry it out to the best of his abilities.

That skill came in even handier after lunch, when the real cooking began.

“We’ll leave the salmon until the last minute so it doesn’t dry out,” Leland instructed his afternoon adult class, the only class he trusted with the important bits of the meal, as Ean listened while decorating the biscuit. “But for now, we can start prepping the plates so they can be taken right out.”

Leland actually trusted that class to do what needed to be done, which gave him a moment to check on Ean.

What he discovered in the far corner of the room was not only a brilliantly decorated biscuit, but rows and rows of tiny heart-shaped cakes that had been iced and decorated so beautifully that Leland would have expected to see them in a high-end patisserie.

“Wow! Look at all this,” he said, smiling at Ean as much as the cakes. “Where did you learn to decorate like this?”

Ean blinked up at him. “I didn’t,” he said. “I mean, I’ve watched that baking show. I’m mostly making it up as I go along, though.”

“This is amazing,” Leland said, studying the cakes again. “Who knew you had the heart and soul of a pastry chef.”

“I’m not sure I do,” Ean said.

As he spoke, he rubbed the back of his hand over his nose, which must have been itching. He had icing on his hand, though, and the movement left a blob of pink sugar on his cheek.

“Hold on. You’ve just got some—” Leland pointed at the blob of icing, but then took it upon himself to cup the side of Ean’s face and wipe it away with his finger.

It was the best mistake he could have made. Ean froze and glanced up at him with hunger in his eyes. Leland’s heart squeezed and rioted in his chest. He couldn’t bring himself to stop touching Ean, even though he vaguely registered the buzz of other people in the kitchen behind him. Ean’s cheek was too warm under his hand, and the hope in his eyes made Leland want to fight the world just to make him happy.

There was nothing to fight in the kitchen, so he pulled his hand back and sucked the icing off his thumb. That was a whole other kind of mistake, because Ean’s gaze turned hazy and dropped to Leland’s mouth as he sucked his thumb.

The heat between the two of them was enough to make the industrial ovens in the kitchen jealous. Leland wanted Ean so badly that it short-circuited his brain.

“Yoo-hoo, Mr. Page. What should we do with the extra garlic?” someone called behind him.

Leland let out a disappointed breath. “Good job,” he told Ean, his voice rough with desire. He turned to head over to the others, but stopped long enough to say, “We should talk about this after the supper tonight.”

Ean looked suddenly worried. Leland wished he had the time to reassure him that it could be a very good talk. The only thing he was able to do with a room full of student chefs and a supper that was just over an hour away was to lean in and kiss Ean’s cheek again.

He wanted to kiss his mouth, but that would have opened a can of worms.

Everything seemed to speed up from that point. The afternoon class finished the side dishes and started in on poaching enough salmon to feed the sixty people who had signed up for the Valentine’s supper.

Except that fifteen minutes before the first course was meant to be served, Robert walked into the kitchen and said, “There seems to have been some sort of error with the bookings. We’ve got the wrong number of guests. We need supper for a hundred people tonight, not sixty.”

“Do we have enough food?” Ean asked, looking particularly anxious.

Leland winced, hoping that he could help Ean overcome his insecurity about food someday.

In the meantime, they had a supper that needed serving, and since the afternoon class had already left, it was just him and Ean who needed to figure things out.

“We can make more veggies and potatoes,” he said with a nod. “We’ll have to divide the salmon fillets a bit, but there’s enough sauce to cover up any cuts.”

“You’re a genius, Leland,” Robert said, happy and a little oblivious to the feat he’d just asked Leland and Ean to perform. “And so are you, young Ean.”

“Thank you, sir,” Ean replied, seemingly surprised that anyone would compliment him.

That was something else Leland wanted to talk to Ean about when they had time. Ean’s self-esteem needed serious work.

There wasn’t time, though. With the sounds of guests arriving and chattering away in the dining room just outside the kitchen growing, Leland and Ean went into high production mode to make certain supper for sixty people turned into enough for a hundred.

“You’re doing loaves and fishes miracles in here,” Rhys Hawthorne commented at one point, as he, Early, and a few other of the people who had been hired to wait tables for the night rushed around, gathering up plates of salad and bowls of soup to take out for the first course.

“We’ll do whatever you need us to,” Ean answered him without missing a beat as he plated up veggies for the main course.

Leland was so proud of him he could burst. More than that, thanks to Ean’s hard work and natural talent for all things culinary, the supper went off without a hitch.

“This is beautiful,” Leland overheard a middle-aged lady say as he and Ean helped the serving staff in the dining room, delivering the cakes to each table. “Are you responsible for this?” she asked Leland.

“Only partially,” Leland told her with a smile. “Ean here is our pastry chef.”

The woman beamed at Ean. “You’ve done an amazing job. I’m certain Hawthorne House is happy to have you.”

“Oh, I...I’m just learning,” Ean said, blushing bright pink to match the cakes he’d decorated.

“Just learning, you say?” one of the gentlemen seated at the table asked. “Are you one of Leland’s students?”

“Sort of?” Ean answered.

“When you’re finished your training, you and I should have a chat about employment in the kitchen at The Chameleon Club,” the gentleman said with a wink.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Ean lowered his head.

“I’m serious,” the man said. “Perfectly serious. The Chameleon Club is hiring right now, and you’re exactly the sort we would love to bring on board.”

A twist of jealousy hit Leland. He realized that the gentleman was Patrick Tate, the HR director of The Chameleon Club. He actually had the authority to hire Ean. More than that, The Chameleon Club, somewhat like Hawthorne House, was a bit like a hotel in that it had dozens of rooms and suites for members of The Brotherhood to stay in when needed. Tate could be offering Ean more than just a job. He could be offering him a place to live as well.

Just like that, everything that Leland had become so cozy with in the last few days could be taken away from him. The Chameleon Club had everything Ean needed, and it made more sense for Ean to move there than to stay with him. The Brotherhood had

been specifically designed two centuries ago to aid and assist the gay community with exactly the sort of situation Ean was in now. And what did Leland have to offer but a questionably appropriate relationship that had sprung up overnight?

He was still reeling with those thoughts when Robert stood at the head table and tapped his knife on his glass. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said. “Could I have your attention, please.”

Leland glanced to a smiling Ean, his heart feeling fragile enough to break. He’d just found Ean again and was still coming to terms with what Ean meant to him. He wasn’t ready to let that go yet, but it felt like he couldn’t stop it.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:01 am

Hawthorne House was the most magical place Ean had ever known. For the last several days, he'd felt like he was living in a dream there with Leland. He felt safe, warm, and cared for, which he hadn't even felt growing up. He'd had enough to eat every day, and no one had shouted at him or told him off for hanging around and basically taking Leland's cooking classes for free.

And now a man he'd never met before was offering him a job? A real job?

"Ladies and gentlemen, could I have your attention, please," Mr. Hawthorne called out, tapping his glass.

Ean's thoughts continued to spin as the room went quiet. A real job working in a kitchen. If it was anything like the last couple days had been, he knew he could do it. Cooking wasn't something that required a ton of reading. Not once he knew and understood the recipe. And if the people in the kitchen at The Chameleon Club were half as nice as Leland, they would help him.

Leland. All of Ean's hopes flattened when he thought about leaving Leland.

Maybe it was a good thing that Mr. Hawthorne's speech snagged his attention and cut his thoughts short.

"We're so pleased to welcome you all here to Hawthorne House for our first annual Valentine's Day supper," he was in the middle of saying. "This year has brought a lot of changes to Hawthorne House, but one of my favorites is this trend we've started of hosting delicious suppers."

A few people laughed and a few others applauded.

“Rest assured, we definitely have plans to continue this tradition,” Mr. Hawthorne went on. “We might even expand it to hosting suppers once a week, or at least once a month.”

“We haven’t talked about this yet, dear,” Mrs. Hawthorne said from where she was still seated at Mr. Hawthorne’s side.

A few more people laughed.

“Whatever the case,” Mr. Hawthorne went on, “we couldn’t do any of this without our amazing chef, Leland Page.”

He extended a hand to Leland and everybody in the room applauded for him. Ean applauded for him, too, but his anxiety was back in full force. Now that he had a job offer, maybe Leland would want to get rid of him. He didn’t have to feel responsible for him anymore. In fact, Ean didn’t want Leland to feel any sort of obligation to keep him around because he couldn’t take care of himself.

“Thank you,” Leland called out in answer to the applause. “But I couldn’t have done it without help from someone very special to me, Ean Jones. Ean and my teen class are responsible for the amazing cakes you’re enjoying.”

Ean sucked in a breath as the applause started up again. Only this time, everyone was looking at him.

Never in his life had a room full of people looked at him with smiles and appreciation, and no one had ever applauded for him. He didn’t know how to feel about it, and he definitely didn’t know how to react.

For a second, he thought he might pass out. But Leland reached for his hand and held

it tightly. That gave Ean the courage to smile and wave at the room.

“I’d also like to thank Rhys’s painting class for the colorful artwork on the walls,” Mr. Hawthorne went in.

Ean didn’t have enough working brain to pay attention to what he was saying. Not only did he need Leland to give him the strength to keep standing, the man at the table who said he would hire him pulled out a business card and handed it to him.

“Give me a call when you’re ready,” the man said.

Everything was a whirlwind from there. Mr. Hawthorne finished speaking and Leland nudged Ean into motion. They had more cakes to deliver to people, and once that was done, they returned to the kitchen to eat their own suppers before the massive clean-up began.

“Truly, you’ve done an amazing job,” Mr. Hawthorne said when he came into the kitchen half an hour later, as the clean-up hit full swing. “I don’t know if it’s Leland’s teaching prowess or your natural talent, but those cakes were amazing. The biscuit you made for Janice earlier was incredible as well. You do amazing things with sugar.”

“It’s all Ean,” Leland said, wiping his hands on a towel as he moved to stand by Ean’s side. He slipped an arm around Ean’s waist, smiled at him, then continued with, “I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

“Interesting,” Mr. Hawthorne said, rubbing his chin. “You know, if we continue to host these suppers, we might need regular help in the kitchen. It might even become a staff position.” He glanced to Leland, raising his eyebrows a bit, like he was asking an even deeper question.

All Leland said in return was, “We have a lot to talk about.”

Ean's heart plummeted again and stayed in his stomach after Mr. Hawthorne left and they continued with the washing up. If his life had taught him anything, it was that he should never trust it when things seemed to be going well. Chances were Leland's talk would involve telling him to go away because he wasn't wanted anymore.

Then again, Leland had kissed him. On the cheek, but still. He'd been flirting earlier, Ean was sure. And that was without taking the sexual tension in the air between them.

Ean dreaded it when they finished tidying up the kitchen and Leland extended a hand to take his. "Come on," he said, his expression all concern. "Let's go upstairs and talk about things."

"Okay," Ean croaked.

He cleared his throat and took Leland's hand, letting himself be led like a lost lamb. The truth was that he felt incredibly lost. He'd been lost and Leland had found him. Now he was afraid that if Leland let go, he'd be lost forever, even if Mr. Patrick Tate had offered him a job.

It almost made things worse that Leland's flat felt like home once they got upstairs. Leland directed him to sit on the couch, then made tea for them. By the time he brought it to the couch and sat with him, Ean was shaking.

"You think I should take the job at The Chameleon Club, don't you," he blurted without so much as sipping his tea. "You don't want me here anymore. You want to go back to your life."

"What? No!" Leland blinked.

He took the mug of tea out of Ean's hand as fast as he'd given it to him and put both their mugs on the coffee table. That felt like a metaphor for everything in Ean's life.

“I’m in the way,” Ean blurted, flailing a little. How could he not flail when everything he’d ever wanted and finally got was being taken away from him? “You don’t want me here. I’m just some random guy who showed up in your life a few days ago, and now you want me gone.”

“No,” Leland said, catching his hands and holding them tightly between the two of them. “Sugar, that’s not it at all.”

Tears stung at Ean’s eyes over the sweet name Leland had started calling him.

“I know that it might seem like I only brought you here because I felt sorry for you,” Leland went on. “And I definitely do feel responsible for you. But it’s so much more than that. I’ve always liked you, Ean. I’ve always wanted you. These last few days have been absolutely wonderful. I’ve enjoyed having you around so much.”

“But now you want me to go,” Ean said, fighting not to cry. Leland couldn’t possibly want someone as emotionally fragile as him. He never used to cry like this, but life had become much too much for him.

“Hey, listen,” Leland said, stopping his spiraling emotions by cradling the side of his face. “Just listen to me without jumping to conclusions, okay?”

Ean swallowed and nodded tightly. He could do this. He could sit there and listen to Leland burst the happy bubble he’d been living in for five beautiful days.

“I don’t want you to leave,” Leland said. He stopped there, pressed his lips together, and seemed to think about things before he went on. “Okay, I’m going to be really blunt, because I feel like you’re expecting me to say one thing, and if I don’t spell things out really clearly, you might misunderstand me.”

Ean wasn’t sure what that meant, but he nodded.

Leland took a deep breath, then said, “I really like you, Ean. I liked you years ago, but in these last few days, I’ve seen a whole other side of you. You’re still the same Ean I was friends with back then, but you’re so much stronger now, and you’ve been through so much.”

“I’m not strong,” Ean blurted, even though he was pretty sure he wasn’t supposed to talk. “I can’t take care of myself. I just want someone to take care of me. I want you to take care of me. Like, a lot. I’m not sure it’s right. You probably think I’m pointless and stupid.”

“Ssh.” Leland touched a finger to Ean’s lips, sending a shiver of longing through him. “I don’t think you’re stupid or weak,” he said. “If I’m totally honest, I like how you need to lean on me for support. I keep thinking that maybe it’s a bit wrong for me to like it so much, but if what I’m hearing is right, you want what I want.”

“I want to stay here, with you,” Ean whispered, afraid that everything would evaporate as soon as the words were out.

But Leland smiled and continued to caress Ean’s face. “I want you here with me, too,” he said. “I can’t tell you how jealous I felt when Tate offered you a job. If I didn’t know it before, I knew it then. I don’t want you to leave. I want you to stay with me as mine, my friend, my boyfriend, maybe other things, I don’t know.”

Ean blinked, hardly believing what he was hearing. “You...want me?”

“So much, sugar,” Leland said.

He clasped Ean’s face with both hands and leaned in to kiss his lips.

It was everything Ean had ever dreamed of in a kiss and more. Leland was powerful and demanding. He turned Ean’s bones to jelly with the strength of his want. And he was a damn good kisser, too. He knew how to use his lips and tongue and everything.

Ean had so little experience with really good kisses that he could only hover there, eyes closed, letting Leland have everything.

“I want you, too,” Ean managed to push out when they broke for air. “I want everything. I want to stay with you, and I want to go to bed with you.”

He gasped when he realized what had just come out of his mouth.

But instead of looking at him in disgust or jumping him and taking what he wanted right there on the couch, Leland smiled. He smiled with a light in his eyes that seemed to come straight from his heart.

“Honestly, I want that, too,” he said. “I’ve wanted you under me since that first night.”

“You can have me,” Ean said, scooting closer to him. “I’m a bottom. I like sucking cock. I think I’d really like it if you fucked me.”

Leland laughed, then silenced his verbal bomb with another mind-stopping kiss. It was everything Ean needed to settle his soul.

“First things first, sugar,” Leland said, breathless himself, when they broke apart. He looked deep into Ean’s eyes and said, “I don’t mind if you take a job at The Chameleon Club. I think you would do amazingly in a kitchen. But before you start panicking—” and Ean had definitely started panicking, “—I don’t want you to live there, in London. It’s an easy commute to The Chameleon Club from here by train, so I want you to stay here, with me.”

“You want me to live with you?” Ean asked, his voice rising an octave.

“Yes,” Leland said, smiling. “And even though I’m sure they’ll train you at the club, I want to keep you around for a few months first, giving you cooking lessons

myself.”

Ean’s heart felt like it would leap out of his body. “But you’re, like, a master chef.”

“Yep.” Leland grinned. “So when you do walk into that kitchen, you’ll have had the best training that money can’t buy.”

“You would do that for me?” Ean squeaked, overflowing with emotion.

“I’d like to do a lot more than that for you,” Leland said, heat in his eyes.

Ean could only sit there and gape at him, gape at the amazing good fortune he’d stumbled into. And to think, it had all happened because he’d had a lottery ticket filled with the wrong numbers.

“I love you,” he blurted. Immediately, he squeezed his eyes shut and cursed himself. “Shit. I mean, I shouldn’t say things like that. I can’t just blurt?—”

“I love you, too, sugar,” Leland said.

Ean opened his eyes, amazed at the love he saw reflected back at him. “Really?”

Leland nodded. “I think I’ve loved you for years. I’m so lucky that fate brought us back together. I don’t ever want to let you go again.”

“Okay,” Ean said, bubbling with laughter. “I won’t go, then. I’ll stay here and be your friend, boyfriend, boy, lover, whatever you want me to be.”

“Sounds like a deal,” Leland said.

Ean was certain he looked and sounded ridiculous, but Leland made him feel the exact opposite of ridiculous when he surged forward hard enough to push him to his

back. He splayed across the couch for a second, his body coming alive at the feel of Leland's weight and the hard bulge in his trousers as it pressed into his thigh. Blood immediately rushed to all the right places in him as well, and as Leland slanted his mouth over his, stealing the air from his lungs with a kiss, his cock perked up and pressed wantonly against Leland's belly.

It was glorious. Ean didn't have a ton of experience, and the experiences he'd had hadn't been that great. But Leland was so big and sure of himself that even though worry poked at the back of his brain, he could ignore it and just focus on how turned-on he was.

They lay there, kissing and touching each other, getting hotter by the second, for a few long and lazy minutes. Then Leland pulled back, panting, his chef trousers tented in front of him.

"Do you want to go to bed with me?" he asked, extending a hand to Ean. "I have lube and condoms in my bedroom."

Ean felt like he might leap out of his skin if he didn't end up naked and spread in Leland's bed within seconds. It was so considerate of him to be forthright and to make his intentions clear, too. He nodded and reached up to take Leland's hand, ready for whatever Leland wanted.

"I'll take good care of you, sugar," Leland said, pulling him up, then leading him from the main room into the bedroom.

Everything was like a dream from there. They undressed, and when Ean had all his clothes off and tossed aside a few seconds faster than Leland, he rushed to help Leland undress the rest of the way. Part of that involved sinking to his knees as he helped Leland step out of his trousers and underwear.

Words weren't going to happen with the state Ean was in, but he stayed on his knees

and glanced questioningly up at Leland as he stroked his hands across Leland's thighs.

"Only if you want to," Leland murmured, brushing his fingers through Ean's hair.

Ean definitely wanted to. He'd confessed to Leland a few days ago that he'd sucked a few cocks for money, but doing it now felt entirely different. He cupped Leland's balls for a moment and nuzzled his face into Leland's groin, breathing in the rich, salty scent of his skin. Leland's hand went tight in his hair and he made a growling sound of appreciation, and that was before Ean ran his tongue up the underside of his cock, then closed his mouth over his head.

It was so amazing and so good to give pleasure to someone he really liked that way. Leland filled his mouth and had him salivating as he licked and teased his tip, then worked to take him as deep into his throat as he could. He didn't even mind when his gag reflex kicked in a little.

Leland hissed and groaned with the pleasure Ean gave him. He widened his stance a little, kept a tight grip in Ean's hair, and made a few involuntary thrusts into Ean's throat as things grew more intense. Right or wrong, Ean loved it. He loved the feeling that Leland could do whatever he wanted to him, that he belonged to Leland.

"Okay," Leland gasped, pulling back. "Too much more of that and I'll come."

"I don't mind," Ean said. In fact, his imagination instantly gave him a sexy fantasy of Leland coming in his face.

Leland laughed gently. "I do," he said. "I want to come in a different part of you."

Ean's hole squeezed in anticipation. He scrambled up, practically throwing himself face down across Leland's bed and offering his arse.

“I’m going to unpack this later,” Leland said, climbing into the bed and pulling Ean into his arms. “But for now, I’m just going to say that’s not how I want you.”

He turned Ean until he was on his back, and once he’d slotted himself between Ean’s legs, he stroked and caressed him while spinning his head with another soul-deep kiss.

Somewhere in the back of his head, dots connected and Ean realized this was what sex was supposed to be like. He only touched that thought momentarily before throwing everything he had into kissing Leland and embracing him with his entire body. Leland was so gentle but demanding and confident in what he wanted at the same time. He kissed Ean everywhere, nibbling on his neck, licking his nipples, and finally spreading him and bending him like a pretzel to get him just the way he wanted him.

Better still, he was attentive and considerate, putting on a condom and using the lube and his fingers to get Ean ready. It was more than any of the few partners Ean had been with before had ever done, and by the time Leland pushed in, taking his time as he went deeper and stretched Ean farther, the pain was minimal and the pleasure was amazing.

Ean relaxed into it, closing his eyes for a second and losing himself in how perfect it felt to be with Leland like that. Leland was everything to him, his friend, his savior, and the best lover he’d ever had. He couldn’t help but make truly porny sounds as Leland moved faster in him, and when he started to come, he cried out Leland’s name.

It was pure heaven, especially when Leland started to come only moments after him. The two of them were wrapped up in each other, as close to being one as two people could get, and it was perfect. The moment of bliss didn’t end when their orgasms subsided, or when Leland pulled out. He quickly disposed of the condom, then snuggled under the sheets with Ean, spooning him from behind.

“I’m so glad I found you, sugar,” Leland whispered, kissing Ean’s neck.

Ean twisted until he could kiss Leland’s lips. “I love you,” he said in reply. They were the only words he could think of, but they were the only words he needed.

* * *

I hope you’ve enjoyed Leland and Ean’s sweet little Valentine’s Day love story!