



The Lonely Hearts Guide

(Bountiful Beaus #2)

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Description: At Ms. Broussards Home for Bountiful Beaus, even the unlovable can find a love story for the ages. That's what Elliot Price was promised by Mother.

Elliot's mind has been playing tricks on him. He can remember leaving Master Price's home in a rush. He can remember the bus ride to Genevieve, Georgia. He remembers the little life growing inside his stomach, though he doesn't remember how it got there.

There's something else, tucked away in the corner of his mind. A memory he wants to remember. A small flickering of something that feels a lot like hope. A late-night stroll across Sugarplum Island. Plum jam cookies. An adorable fieldmouse. A gentle kiss on a ferry dock with Mr. Alexander Davenport.

Elliot doesn't know what the memories mean, but he knows they mean everything to him, and he'll stop at nothing to find out why.

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Page 1

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It was always going to end in disaster. Ever since they hit the market, automatons were the talk of the town. With such a heavy cost attached, there weren't many of them, so they became something akin to modern-day folklore. Always spoken of as an outlier, while never touching anyone's life personally. People feared them because they didn't understand them. Most only saw them as machines, but Alexander thought they were magnificent.

Lifelike in a way nothing that had come before was. So humanlike, it was nearly impossible to pick them out of a crowd. Alexander contemplated purchasing one for years, observing each new series and the improvements they brought.

Series A wasn't much of a series at all. The automatons didn't look human in the slightest. Plastic faces with painted-on grins. Metal bones and visible machinery whirring beneath their translucent chests. They even had a hatch in their stomachs where maintenance was performed. Series B wasn't much of an improvement aside from solid skin hiding away their bells and whistles.

Over time, scientists like Emily Broussard brought their men to life. They laughed and smiled and showed emotion. They had hobbies and favorite television shows. Homes like Ms. Broussard's Home for Bountiful Beaus produced the closest thing to artificial humanity mankind had ever seen.

A member on the board of directors for Davenport Developments—the company Alexander's father headed—purchased one a few years earlier, and he often tagged along to work. It was around the time Alexander was just beginning his internship, fresh out of college. Over the span of three years, Alexander and the automaton, Anthony, became good friends. On the days he would visit, Anthony often wandered

the halls of Davenport Developments with a curious look on his face. There was always a feeling of urgency seeping out of him, like he knew his time was limited, and he wanted to learn as much about the world as he could while he had the chance.

They shared lunches in the office break room, Anthony asking question after question about his time in college. His childhood. Anthony even inquired about matters of the heart. Admittedly, Alexander didn't have much of a story to tell when it came to love. Between school and his job at the company, he wouldn't have much time for romance in the foreseeable future.

Then Anthony disappeared. For months, Alexander would ask about him, and Anthony's partner, Bradley, downplayed his disappearance by claiming Anthony fell ill and was recovering. After three months, Alexander grew more and more concerned. Eventually, Bradley admitted to returning him to the home from where he was purchased.

Alexander couldn't comprehend the words as they were spoken. Bradley gave a laundry list of complaints about Anthony. From the way Anthony failed Bradley as a lover, to Anthony's inability to maintain their home, the man lamented for half an hour. But in Alexander's mind, Anthony wasn't a piece of furniture meant to be discarded once it lost its sparkle. He was a man. More of a man than some men Alexander had met. As soon as he wrapped his head around the situation, Alexander decided he needed to purchase Anthony. To give him a loving home where he could simply exist with no expectations, no demands, and no more fear.

When Alexander called Ms. Broussard to inquire about re-homing Anthony, she broke the news that Anthony had been decommissioned. Ripped to shreds, torn down for parts. Alexander remembered the chill that spread down his spine as he heard the news. Anthony was his friend, and he'd been powered down and ripped apart, limb by limb, bolt by bolt.

“Oh, Mr. Davenport,” Emily Broussard soothed, her voice smooth like caramel with a Cajun twist at the end. “Don’t worry your pretty little head. As I tell my beaus; Never fear, Mother’s here. I can craft a beau who can give you a love story for the ages.”

But Alexander didn’t want just any automaton. He wanted his friend. There had never been a romantic or sexual connection between the men; Alexander simply wanted to keep him safe. To protect him from a world that would, and did, tear him apart.

He declined the offer, but Ms. Broussard reminded him the door was always open, sweetly saying, “Even the unlovable can have a love story for the ages with one of my beaus, sweetheart.” A backhanded compliment? Probably, but Alexander simply sighed and shrugged it off.

With rescuing Anthony no longer being an option, Alexander turned his eye on Bradley. For months, he bit his tongue and bided his time, keeping his ears open, listening to gossiping coworkers while pretending he was working. For months, Alexander treated the company like a midnight garden, tiptoeing around, catching whispered rumors like fireflies.

In the end, Bradley Pascal’s undoing was swift and merciless. He was walked out of the office in handcuffs, indicted on charges of embezzlement and money laundering. When Bradley was led past him, Alexander smiled kindly and said, “For Anthony.”

Six months later, Alexander’s father passed, leaving the company to him. There were more office whispers; calling him unfit to lead, taking bets on how long he would last before cracking like an egg. He kept his nose down, working endlessly to fill his father’s shoes. Somewhere along the way, he, and the rest of the company, realized Alexander was a natural. A Davenport, through and through, like his father, and his father before him.

Two years after taking the helm, Alexander purchased a copy of Forbes with his

smiling face on the cover. King of the Mountain, they called him. He wasn't sure about that, but he knew better than to turn up his nose at a compliment.

After three years, Alexander worked fourteen-hour days, rarely going anywhere but work engagements, the office, and home. His mother, Twylah, lived on a small, private island near the Gulf of Mexico. She had a small bakery, by the coast. From sunup until sundown, the air on Sugarplum Island smelled divine from the hodgepodge of sweet sugary treats and sea salt wafting through the twelve-home town. Alexander visited as often as he could, but his free time was sparse and sporadic, so he never knew when he would have a moment's peace. He didn't mind it, though. The constant hustle and bustle. The never-ending grind. It was busy work, but Alexander thrived, carving a life for himself and propelling his company to even higher heights.

While he had a large trust fund, Alexander used none of it, only living off the money he made for himself. Within a year and a half, he could buy a mansion in Hunnington Park, one of the nicest gated communities in Dallas.

As lovely as the community was, his neighbor was anything but. Martin Moore. God. The man was unbearable. An aloof drunk and alleged exhibitionist who held wild, nearly nightly sex parties at his home, three doors down from Alexander. They met a handful of times at block parties and the country club Alexander paid exorbitant fees for but rarely got to visit.

On one of the few rare occasions Alexander had a bit of time to himself, he decided to play a few holes. Unfortunately, Martin was there as well and talked him into playing together. Over the next two hours, they discussed their careers and lack of personal lives.

While Alexander was driving his tee into the ground, another cart pulled behind theirs, and he looked over his shoulder to find a man cuddled up next to another. The

man driving the cart was staring down at the young man like he was the most precious thing in the world. The younger man looked up, and flashes of pink light fluttered in the corner of his eyes.

Alexander had seen the lights before, each time Anthony was happy while he would visit the office. He had other colors, too. Blues for when he was sad. Orange when he was nervous. Mostly, it was endless beams of pink-pink-pink when Alexander and Anthony spent time together.

Martin noticed the lights, too, because he knelt beside Alexander and gave a sly, conspiratory smile. “Have you ever heard of those i-Series beaus, Davenport? I’ve been thinking of getting one.”

“Yeah?”

Martin nodded. “Yeah. With my busy schedule, I’m never going to find someone any other way. I’d rather have a human, obviously, but this way, I’ll have someone waiting at home for me, even if I only get to see them a few hours a day. The life of an executive is lonely. You know that better than anyone.”

“I guess,” Alexander said, shrugging his shoulders. He put the thought to bed, but as he crawled into his cold, lonely bed that night, his mind crept back to the conversation. Alexander browsed Ms. Broussard’s website for an hour, looking through all the options. When he saw mention of lap sitting and lonely beaus needing to find their forever, Alexander made a choice.

A call was made. Inventory consulted and an order placed. But that wasn’t what it felt like to Alexander. He wasn’t buying a machine, he was buying a person. Someone he could hold with his own two hands when his schedule allowed and he needed to feel a warm body by his at night.

In order to have their automaton perfectly personalized, Alexander and Martin took online classes and a seemingly endless number of tests to check their knowledge. Alexander knew Martin cheated on his, but he didn't know how. The man knew nothing of automatons or the suggested methods of providing them a good life. Granted, "Suggested" was italicized, and there was an asterisk beside it in the workbook. At the bottom was a footnote that read, "While our goal is providing a loving home for our wonderful househusbands, we at Ms. Broussard's Home for Bountiful Beaus know the man is the king of his castle, and the level of love and comfort provided to their beau is entirely at each owner's discretion." Alexander didn't like the sound of that. He didn't like it one bit.

Almost one year after placing the order for their beaus, Alexander and Martin stepped into Ms. Broussard's home for the first time. Alexander knew luxury firsthand, but even he was amazed by the home's interior.

The grand entryway of the mansion was the picture of opulence and elegance. There was white marble in the foyer with stunning swirls of pinks and purples. A grand stairwell stood at the side of the room, leading up to hallways in two directions. Wherever each side led to was anyone's guess, as a gorgeous, purple drapery system hid the halls behind them away. Bathed in soft, creamy light, the foyer had an almost dreamlike feel.

Inside the Louisiana mansion's massive foyer, dozens of bountiful beaus wore tuxedos in every color of the rainbow. There were shades of purple and silver and glorious greens, sparkling under the chandelier's lighting, which sent pretty fractals across the floor, making the room look electric. He scanned the space, seeking out the man from the picture Emily Broussard had sent him a few weeks back. i-719, Ms. Broussard had called him. They would need to pick a better name when they returned home, per Ms. Broussard's training material. Selecting a name would bond them. It would tether them, and Alexander wanted that connection.

There was a ballroom to his right, and when Alexander peered through the archway, he spotted two men clinging to the wall like shadows, doing everything in their power to avoid being seen. Alexander knew without a shadow of a doubt that the beau on the left was his betrothed. Well, his potential boyfriend, Alexander supposed. He'd read Ms. Broussard's training material thoroughly, combing through each entry to ensure he knew what to expect. The documentation explained his bountiful beau would fall fast, and he would fall deeply, just as soon as they bonded. But from the look of the two men clinging to each other like frightened fawns, Alexander got the impression his beau was already spoken for. The realization caused a bitter twinge of disappointment, but Alexander managed to harden his face the same way he always had when he realized he'd been unlucky in love. Pushing past his crippling self-doubt, Alexander held his head up high, stretched a smile across his face, and headed toward the men.

The man on the left held out a hand for Alexander to take. It seemed a bit formal, Alexander thought, but then, he'd never met a beau who had been tailor-made for him. He supposed there wasn't much need for familiarity when forever was at hand.

"Mr. Davenport. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I pray I exceed your expectations." His voice was deep, but there was a gentleness to it. A fearful tone that he seemed to be having trouble masking. Alexander didn't need him to mask anything, though.

Alexander stared at him with hopeful eyes. "It's so good to finally meet you." He lifted i-719's hand to his lips, placing a gentle kiss against his skin. "I'm going to treat you well. I promise."

i-719's mouth opened and closed a few times as if he hadn't been expecting the promise, but was happy to have it, nonetheless. He darted his eyes to his friend, who was shaking as he watched Martin approach, a glass of brandy in hand, droplets sloshing over the rim with each striding step the drunken man took. Alexander was

reminded of the three bourbons and two whiskey sours he watched the man knock back during the limousine ride from Dallas to New Orleans.

“Who’s a pretty boy?” his inebriated neighbor slurred. “You’re a pretty boy.” When he was finally in front of him, Martin pulled his beau in for a sloppy hug, belching into the man’s ear as he reached down and squeezed his butt.

i-719’s hand immediately balled into a fist, and Alexander noticed small droplets of what looked like blood dripping down to the floor. Another sign Alexander chose to overlook.

“Are you okay?” he whispered into i-719’s ear, startling him. When he looked up at Alexander, his eyes were red and watery, but he held back his tears as hard as he could.

“I’m perfectly fine, Mr. Davenport,” he said through a cracking voice. “I’m s-so happy to f-finally meet you.”

The sound of fear and hurt in his voice tugged at Alexander’s heartstrings. “Martin’s a drunk, but he doesn’t seem like a cruel man. I don’t think he’ll hurt your friend.”

i-719’s jaw trembled. “Promise?”

Alexander didn’t know how to promise the other beau’s safety, because Alexander hardly knew Martin. They may have been neighbors for years, but practically the only things Alexander knew about him was he had a drinking problem, apparently, and that his lawn was often unkempt, bringing down the neighborhood’s property value by simply existing.

For the next hour, the four of them shared champagne and spoke of their lives. i-719 told Alexander about his training in the art of keeping a home, and of the way he and

his friend, i-720 would visit the Southern swamp at evening time, describing their hopes for a happy home. They were hoping to live close to each other, so when Alexander stated he and Mr. Moore lived only three houses apart, i-719 failed to hide the clicks and cracks coming from the back of his throat, or the tears pooling in his eyes. It was like he was awaiting execution, only to be offered a last-minute pardon.

Alexander didn't know it then, but he would later learn i-719 and i-720 had unintentionally bonded to each other during their time training to become househusbands in Louisiana. Most of Ms. Broussard's paperwork spoke in vague—and oftentimes extremely misogynistic—riddles. It detailed the many ways a househusband was expected to keep their suitors satisfied. But the book was more explicit about things househusbands should never do; lines that should never be crossed. It would have been one thing if she spoke about things such as adultery or murder, but did the men she raised really need to know hundreds of ways to make themselves submissive to the men who purchased them?

Alexander didn't want submission. He wanted someone to dote on. A man who wouldn't break his heart like the ones who came before. Alexander's career was demanding, and it proved to be too much for the lovers of his past to handle. With no plans of leaving the company and losing his family's legacy in the process, Alexander Davenport found himself at an impasse. He was a man on an island with no one but himself for company. He thought, perhaps, that an i-Series beau could be the answer he'd been looking for. He needed someone on whom he could rain affection upon in the time he had left to shower them.

That night, in the back of the limousine, long after Martin Moore passed out with his face pressed against the window, Alexander watched i-719 and i-720. They kept staring at each other, shell-shocked. Like their world was ending. Like they didn't think this day would ever actually come. The moment a tear slipped down his new beau's cheek, Alexander closed his eyes, feigning sleep to give the pair a moment together. He felt it was the least he could do.

Alexander felt guilty for eavesdropping, but he couldn't think of a way around overhearing them. He tried to recall old songs he used to love, hoping the memories might distract him, but it was no use. The men were trying to whisper, but they weren't very successful.

"My love," i-719 pleaded, his voice quiet and insistent, his tone frantic like he was begging for his life. "Baby, please. I need you to be strong. You have to pull yourself together. We can't let them see us like this. We talked about this."

"G-Goose."

At the time, Alexander assumed he'd meant to say Gus, and later, Gus would allow him to believe it until the truth finally came to light once it all came to a head.

"I'm here, Duck," Goose promised. "I need you to hold it together. Can you do that for me?" Goose sucked in a sharp breath when Martin mumbled something in his sleep. Once he was snoring again, the beaus continued, making declarations meant to see them through the trauma of losing each other.

"But I can't," Duck sobbed, his voice muffled as if he had his face buried in Goose's neck. "I can't go home with him. I don't belong to him, I belong to you. This ain't what I want. Please, Goose? Please, just make it better. You can always make everything better. I ain't gonna be able to make it better on my own."

Alexander could hear the pain in his voice. Duck's country accent—something Martin had requested during his purchase, because he wanted a househusband who sounded purposefully stupid—was thick and full of terror.

"I'll figure it out," Goose whispered. "We'll find a way."

Page 2

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Alexander's heart broke for them, and he made a decision then and there. He was going to help them however he could. He was going to make it right, his own happiness be damned.

And he did help them find that happiness. During the days when Alexander and Martin were away from their homes, the beaus spent half their time together. Since Alexander's home already had a doting staff, Goose wasn't expected to lift a finger. So, most mornings he would head down the street and greet Duck with a smile and hug before focusing on their daily tasks, cooking and cleaning for Master Martin Moore.

Then Alexander found them together one day. He hadn't meant to surprise the beaus, and he cursed himself for forgetting his wallet at home after the fact. He wanted them to have their time, but didn't want to let on that he knew, because he worried it might make them flee, and then he couldn't protect them.

As the men shook in terror on Alexander's bed, he crawled on with them, sitting in front of both men. He held his hands out for them, but they stared down at the hands for ages. Duck was the first to move. Shaking like a leaf, he trustingly placed his hand in Alexander's. There was so much hurt and fear in the man's eyes, and with a gentle brush of his thumb across Duck's knuckles, his entire body relaxed. Goose's snuffle pulled Alexander's attention away from Duck, and he stared at the man who was supposed to be his happily ever after, his heart thumping faster. When they connected, just as with Duck, Goose exhaled, and his body went lax.

"I'm not angry," Alexander started, because of course, he wasn't. How could he ever be angry about love?

“You’re not?” Goose asked. He narrowed his eyes, but it wasn’t in a menacing way. It was like he was studying Alexander for sincerity, holding out hope that luck was finally on his side. “But, we’re—”

“I know. I’ve known for a while.” Alexander fixed a smile on his face, because he was happy, he thought. He was happy for his houseguest. He was pleased Duck and Goose had found pleasure where they could. But there was a low, humming feeling, deep down, right to his core, pulsing out waves of something that felt a lot like envy. Maybe not envy at Duck for claiming Goose specifically, but it was strong and true.

So, their lives went on. For four months, Duck and Goose would spend their days together, and Alexander would sit with Goose when the night grew late and Duck’s bedroom light lit up down the street.

On an unfortunate Tuesday night, shortly before it all came to a head, Duck lost his way. He and Martin took a trip, and when they returned, Duck no longer remembered Goose. It was as if they’d never met.

They realized what happened at a neighborhood block party. Alexander was carrying a cooling bowl of potato salad, and thanks to the humid heat of Northeast Texas, condensation dotted across the crystal bowl. Goose has been beside himself the week Duck was away. He clung to their photographs, staring at them, trying to return to the memory. He slept a lot, and told Alexander he was replaying memories of Duck like movies in his head while he charged.

Goose was staring down and kicking a patch of gravel when Duck approached, his smile wide, eyes bright as a baby’s. He looked up at his purchaser adoringly in a way that made Alexander’s stomach sink.

“Hello. I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Doug.” He placed his hand on Martin’s chest, displaying an extravagant ring. “And this is my husband, Martin.”

Goose jerked his head up, his mouth gaping. “Duck?” Duck flinched but recovered quickly. Martin noticed and didn’t look very happy.

“Doug,” Duck corrected. “Doug Moore. It’s very lovely to meet you. Have you lived here long?” Martin turned, flagging down a man carrying an ice chest. As he trotted toward the man, Goose took his opportunity, rushing forward and wrapping Duck in a hug.

“Ducky-duck, I missed you so much,” he said, his voice breaking. “I can’t wait to see you tomorrow morning. I’m going to—”

“Are you okay?” Doug/Duck interrupted, sounding confused. “While I do love hugging, I don’t understand what you’re talking about.” He shimmied out of the embrace and took a step back, staring at Goose like he was a stranger.

“Baby?” he whispered. “Duck?”

He took another step back. “Why do you keep calling me that?” As he took another step back, Alexander thought he saw a flash of blue light in the corner of his eyes. A brief spark of sadness laid clear for all to see. “Why are you— What are you—” Suddenly, Duck slammed his eyes shut and shook his head, backing away.

“No.” It wasn’t really a statement. It wasn’t much of a question either. It was a resignation. The initial shock of loss. “Not again.” And then Goose lost himself. He looked at Alexander, tears pooling in heartbroken eyes, somehow keeping his voice neutral when he said, “Martin had him reprogrammed.” His jaw trembled. “Duck is gone.”

“What do you mean, he’s gone?”

Goose sniffled. “Mother strips our mind and we start over from scratch.” Alexander

brushed a tear from Goose's eye, but Goose backed away until his back was against Duck's chest, eyes closed, breathing in, his exhale escaping as a sigh. "They've done this to him once before. When we were still at Mother's. We spent a month with each other, sharing a room . . ." He looks over his shoulder at Duck, eyes cautious but hopeful. "Partners in crime. Do you remember? Please?"

Duck blinked a few times, but it was like he couldn't put words together.

Goose turned and cupped Duck's cheeks, forcing the biggest smile Alexander had ever seen. "I told you last time, I won't do this without you. Not again. Never again." He leaned in and kissed Duck's forehead, his lips locked in place as he lifted his arm and drew the shape of a star a few inches above his wrist. Looking over his shoulder, Goose smiled sadly at Alexander. "I need you to do me a favor, Alexander."

"Anything," he promised, and he meant it. At least, he thought he did, because what Goose said next had Alexander's eyes bulging and his head shaking slowly back and forth.

"Please, don't wake me up. He's gone, and I want to go too. You've been kind to me, Alexander. Kinder than anyone else would have been. T-thank you." Tears trickled down his cheeks, and he turned, giving Duck a final kiss on the cheek and whispered, "Goodnight, Ducky-duck." Then Goose powered himself off.

Alexander rushed to catch him and then quickly carried him home before anyone could see his lifeless body. As he ran toward their house, he glanced over his shoulder to see if anyone was watching. Curiously enough, one man was. On the other side of the street, standing beside Alexander's cooling bowl of potato salad, a tear was trickling down Duck's cheek. He was staring at them with an unreadable expression, then he turned and returned to his husband.

Five nights later, their world went up in flames.

The night before everything changed, Alexander woke to the sound of weeping and wails so loud they rattled the bedroom walls. When Alexander brought Goose home, he placed him in bed. He slept at Goose's side for three nights before deciding Goose wouldn't want Alexander to waste away worrying over him in his powered-down state.

Still, he checked on Goose when he returned home, hoping he may have somehow switched himself back on, deciding to take life into his own hands. That wasn't the case, so Alexander quietly shut the door, walking away from Goose's bedroom, once again feeling like a man alone on an island. He had no friends to call and lift his spirits. His mother was probably fast asleep. It was at that moment, Alexander realized he wanted connection. He needed something—someone—tangible to cling to when the nights were long and his heart was heavy. And while he cared for Goose and wanted him to be happy, he hadn't ended up being the partner or friend Alexander hoped for.

He was only asleep for an hour before the sounds of crying jolted him awake. Standing, Alexander rushed toward the source. When he entered Goose's bedroom, a giant weight lifted from his shoulders, and it felt like he could finally breathe.

In Goose's bed, Duck held him close to his chest, rocking the crying automaton back and forth. "I'm so sorry, Goosey-geese," he whispered; his eyes were wet, but his cheeks were dry. He was trying to hold back his hurt so it wouldn't eclipse the ache in Goose's heart.

"I don't understand," Goose eventually said. "You were gone. I saw you. You didn't recognize me."

Duck nodded, his lip trembling. "You needed to forget me."

"What?" he growled. "Why the hell would I ever need to forget you? You're mine,

Duck. You're mine, and I'm yours."

Duck shook his head insistently, a look of devastation wrapped around his face like a mask. "I'm not yours. Not anymore. I belong—" His throat clicked, and the words wouldn't come for a while. When they did, Duck's voice was soft and resigned. "I'm his property. I belong to him. We ain't ever gonna get to run away together. I'm always gonna be stuck with him."

"But we can keep going the way we are now," Goose insisted. "We're happy for the most part. We get to see each other every day. Baby, you can't just throw us away. We're bonded." He placed his hand over Duck's heart and closed his eyes. "Can you still feel it? Our tether."

"I do," Duck admitted. "And that's why you gotta let me go. If we can make the tether snap, I can bond with Martin. I've been reading Mother's Manual, and she says the bond between a master and his beau is strong enough to dull the worst kinds of pain. Maybe if I bond with him, it won't hurt as much when he . . ." He closed his eyes and shook his head, forcing the memories away, Alexander thought. "I ain't strong like you, Goosey-goose. I ain't cut out for the pain he puts me through. It hurts." Tears slip from the corners of his closed eyes. "You said you'd protect me, but you can't protect me no more. I gotta protect myself." Duck leaned forward and pressed his face into Goose's chest. "I gotta let you go."

"Then why did you wake me up? If you needed to get rid of me that much, why didn't you just keep me powered down?" The words were bitter, but the bitterness was meant to mask the hurt. Alexander could tell, so he had no doubt Duck could see through it too.

"Because I love you, and I ain't gonna let you stay powered down forever. You're too good, Goose. You're the best man I've ever known, and I'm not gonna let that go to waste. I can't be free. I ain't got a master who will let me live my life by my rules.

You do.”

“I’m sorry. Baby, I’m so sorry. I’d trade places with you in a second if you could. I’d take everything he has to give if it kept you safe.”

“I know,” he whispered, kissing Goose gently. “But you can’t. You can’t live my life for me, but you can live yours. You can live a big, beautiful life, and you can do it for me. I want you to be happy. So, you go out there, and you forget me, Goose. You forget me, and then you find a life worth living.”

Cradling him against his chest, Goose combed his fingers through Duck’s hair. “How could I ever forget you, my love?”

“Or,” Alexander interrupted, as a surge of something he hadn’t felt in a long time passed through him. The urge to make things right, no matter the cost. Justice for the hurt and battered automatons he’d met along the way. He had to save them, the way he couldn’t save Anthony. “You can let me help.”

The men looked up at him with wide, confused eyes.

“What do you mean?” Goose asked.

Alexander walked across the room and took a seat on the edge of the bed. “There’s a place I know of. A place where people start over.” He smiled at Goose. From what Alexander could tell, Goose was putting it all together in his head like a jigsaw puzzle. When it finally registered, a smile as wide as Dallas herself split his face and Alexander nodded. “Mom loves you. She already thinks of you as a second son. Let me take you there.” Alexander looked down at Duck, placing an arm on both of their shoulders. “Let me take you both to live with her. He won’t find you there, I promise.”

The bonded beaus shared a look, a silent conversation taking place right in front of Alexander's eyes. Duck nodded, then Goose.

"All right," Duck said, and Goose let out an overwhelmed cry, throwing his arms around Duck.

"Pack your things while he's at work tomorrow," Alexander told Duck. "We'll pick you up at eight."

That was the plan, at least. But the plan was shot straight to hell only three hours later when Alexander startled awake at the sound of breaking glass. He jolted out of his bed and rushed downstairs, heart still slamming as he rushed toward the sound of men talking in the kitchen. Alexander rounded the corner, his eyes going wide. Duck was sitting on the kitchen island's counter, and Goose was standing in front of him, dabbing a damp wet cloth across Duck's cheek.

"Guys?" Alexander called out.

Goose startled, looking over his shoulder with a look of guilt stretched across his face. "I'm sorry, Alexander. I messed up."

"What do you mean?"

Goose flushed. "He found us. Martin. He was supposed to take his sleeping pill, but he didn't, and he found us together." As Goose removed the cloth from Duck's face, Alexander had to swallow down bile. There was a long gash across Duck's cheek and the slashed edges of his skin were covered in dark, congealed blood. Where skin once grew, a strip of Duck's mechanical skull was fully visible. Alexander knew he needed stitches, but Goose was already on it, putting his sewing lessons to use as he stitched Duck whole again.

As the pair proclaimed their love for one another, Alexander slipped out of the room and headed for Martin Moore's home, three doors down.

Then came the fire. Then came the fallout. Accident or not, Alexander never told Goose what happened that night. It was a secret he planned to take to his grave.

When he returned, both Goose and Duck had gauze wrapped around their wrists, and there was blood seeping through the bandages. The pair weren't the only ones with blood on their hands, but Alexander kept his hands shoved into his pockets, hiding the ugly truth from his precious friends.

"The tracking chips are out?" he asked.

Goose nodded, darting his eyes toward two small computer chips resting on the kitchen island. "They came out easy."

"Good," Alexander said, shoving his hands deeper into his pockets. "I've arranged for transportation, but we have to be at the pickup location in an hour and a half, so we need to get going." Goose and Duck shared a fearful look, but Alexander gave them a reassuring smile. "I promise you're both safe now. No one is going to find you. I'll see to it."

Then Alexander, Goose, and Duck traveled, first by car, then by ferryboat. And the rest, as they say, was history.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

Elliot Price was late, though not for a very important date.

Stupid. He was so stupid for allowing time to get away from him. The scent of plum jam cookies and salty sea air distracted him, and he missed the final ferry of the night. If he were back home—well, at his first home, at least—Mother would probably scold him endlessly, telling him what a naughty boy he was while threatening him with a visit to the Creationist. If he'd been in his current home—the dwelling where Master Price gave him his name, though not much else—he'd probably be lying in a heap on the floor. Elliot had loved Master Jared Price with his whole heart since the day he was born, as he was programmed to do. At least, he thought he did. He couldn't be sure.

The trouble was, even after being together for a year and a half, Jared didn't love him back, and Elliot was starting to believe he never would. The knowledge was a bitter pill to swallow when Elliot's entire purpose was to please his future husband.

From creation to cotillion, Elliot worked hard to learn the ins and outs of keeping a home. He cooked and cleaned and did his chores. He read his trusty copy of Mother's Manual for a Happy Home , memorizing each line by heart.

Elliot was an automaton. A humanoid househusband created by Ms. Emily Broussard, crafted in the likeness Jared Price saw fit. While Jared might not have loved Elliot romantically, he certainly enjoyed the sight of him. Elliot's looks weren't the only thing Jared Price enjoyed. Jared seemed to take pleasure in Elliot's heartache, and whether that heartbreak was inflicted unintentionally or otherwise, Elliot wasn't completely sure.

Once a week, Jared sent Elliot to Sugarplum Island. The island was home to a small, picturesque village just off the Gulf of Mexico. Having more money than he knew what to do with, Jared always chartered a helicopter to take Elliot from Dallas to Galveston. There Elliot would then catch a ferry to the isolated island to buy the plum jam cookies which were Jared's favorite childhood treat. His mother would buy one box per week back when Twylah Bishop's shop was located in Dallas.

Elliot knew he would be in even more trouble than usual, should he fail to arrive on shore in time for the helicopter to collect him. That morning, Jared told Elliot he had a surprise. He waxed poetic for half an hour about his alleged 'monumental plans' for Elliot once he returned home. It was supposed to be a night Elliot would never forget. Considering Jared's surprises usually revolved around sexually provocative purchases, it wasn't as if he was terribly interested in hurrying home. The items Jared purchased were meant to provide pleasure, but Jared was a natural at finding ways to turn pleasure into pain. Despite the unbearable pain those toys provided, Elliot was expected to be a good little househusband, never letting the hurt in his heart show.

On a lonely little bench on the corner of Rose Lane and Gardenia Street, Elliot sat down, taking inventory of his life. He wanted nothing more than to be happy, but the happiness he was promised from birth had yet to present itself. Wasn't he meant to have a bit of joy of his own? Hadn't he done exactly what he'd been programmed to do? Why couldn't Master Price love him? It would have made everything so much simpler. With love, Elliot could endure the demeaning acts his master performed on him. And with love, Elliot could overlook the way Jared sometimes struck him. Jared couldn't be blamed for his temper, you see, because he never knew the joys of a happy home. That's what Mother told Elliot, at least. His parents were religious fanatics, so both Jared and his brother, Arthur, lived under constant fear of having their sexual orientations found out. Once Arthur's truth came to light, Jared had to watch as his father dragged the youngest member of the Price family from his bedroom and excommunicated him from their lives. That had to take a toll on someone, Elliot thought. Jared must have been so very scared the same would happen

to him. Still, he couldn't reconcile how Jared could come from a cold and domineering home, only to create one himself.

Squeak, squeak, squeak .

Elliot wasn't sure where it was coming from, but for the entirety of his walk, there had been a persistent squeaking sound, always just behind him. He would look, only to find emptiness over his shoulder. Eventually, he stopped looking.

Squeak, squeak.

The streets were silent, and Elliot couldn't remember the last soul he'd seen. Was it the man he'd spotted smoking on a porch step on the other side of the island? There was also a woman who shooed him away from her lawn with a rusty old rake. She must have noticed the nervous orange light sparkling in the corners of his eyes and realized he was an automaton. Most people were skittish around Elliot's kind. It was why he always tried so hard to stop the lights from flickering. Automatons weren't real humans, thus, they were often maligned as a threat to humankind. Elliot would never harm a human, though. So, yes, he tried to hide the lights in his eyes because there was a dog chained to the woman's tree, and the rage in the creature's growl was enough to send Elliot's mechanical heart slamming, momentarily allowing orange waves of fear to shine. The next thing he knew, the dog's owner was chasing him with her rake, calling him a predator. Telling him he had no business in human spaces.

Squeak, squeak.

Elliot was tired. Tired of the endless loneliness. Tired of being shown kindness in inconsistent and sporadic patterns. In his secret heart, where only Elliot knew the truth, he was tired of Jared Price, but he would never voice that out loud. So, yes, Elliot was tired, but after missing his ferry home, Elliot wouldn't be getting much rest

that night. He'd be lucky to find an outlet to charge his weary body.

For the umpteenth time that hour, Elliot drew the familiar star pattern on his arm and waited for his interface to appear. He knew the interface by heart, and when three familiar dots appeared, flashing pink-gold-purple, it felt like he was being greeted by an old friend. Touching the pink orb would display his current lifeforce. Ten minutes ago, Elliot was down to fourteen percent. He knew if the number dipped past five percent, he ran the risk of an automatic shutdown. With nervous, shaking hands, Elliot drew a checkmark on his arm and held his breath.

Ten percent.

Elliot choked back a sob, then stopped himself. Elliot wasn't a weeping child. He was one of Ms. Broussard's bountiful beaus. He was a dignified househusband, perfectly capable of putting one foot in front of the other and soldiering on. As Mother often said, her boys do not linger in the ordinary, they soar into the extraordinary. Elliot could soar. He knew he could. He'd just never had the opportunity to try.

All right, he thought, forging onward down Rose Lane. The first thing he needed to do was make it to the ferry's tollbooth, as there might be a power outlet outside the booth. His charger was in the small bag he was carrying, along with Jared's plum jam cookies. They were cookies Elliot would never get to taste, as Jared believed there was no use feeding a mouth that didn't need to be fed.

He could remember the first time Jared sent him to collect the cookies. The plan was to go to the island together after their honeymoon, but Jared got called away on business, only two days before they were meant to exchange vows. He was gone for a week, and when he returned, neither the wedding nor honeymoon were ever mentioned again, and Elliot didn't want to press the matter.

The first time Elliot set foot on Sugarplum Island, he felt like he was walking into a

dreamscape. He was wrapped in air that smelled of baked goods and sea salt, and there was an overwhelming sense of ‘ home. ’ The small village consisted of twelve shops and twelve homes, all on twelve square miles of land. Children laughed and played on stone pathways, plucking flowers and tucking them behind their ears between rounds of hopscotch. Lovers held hands, giving each other dreamy gazes as they went about their day. Happiness burst to life around him, making his mechanical heart flutter. That day, for the very first time, Elliot thought, “This must be what freedom feels like.” He’d never been happier in all his life, and he hadn’t been happier since.

Elliot wanted to go home. Not to his home with Jared, but to the picture of home in his head. Earlier that day, Elliot felt like he finally found it. But then the shops closed and families tucked themselves away, leaving Elliot feeling even lonelier than he felt before. It was as if he was the last man standing at the end of the world.

A tear trickled down Elliot’s cheek. Nothing new.

Squeak, squeak.

So, he walked. Elliot walked and walked until the lampposts led him back to the island’s dock. There were two benches beside the ticket booth, and thankfully, there was a power outlet for him to use. He set his interface to a six-hour charging cycle, giving him enough time to wake from his state of stasis before being seen by the villagers. Sleep wouldn’t be safe, though. In stasis, he would be unable to defend himself should he be attacked. The only way to wake was his timer, completion of charging, or manual removal of his charger. If he was attacked, his only hope would be the dislodging of his charger. Remembering the terrifying dog and the horrible woman with her rusty rake, Elliot debated not charging himself at all and seeing if he could make it. The dog would surely rip him to shreds. Elliot knew it was unlikely, so he did the only thing he could. He stared into the sky, made a wish for his safety on the biggest, brightest star, and plugged the charging prong into his big toe.

As Elliot's mind settled into stasis, he heard the now familiar squeak again. Using the last of his strength, Elliot looked down, smiling when he saw a mouse sitting in his lap. Then, the world went black.

When he woke, the mouse was nowhere to be seen, and Elliot found himself saddened by its departure. The creature squeaked behind him the entire time he wandered the small island's stone pathways. It had been persistent in its tracking of Elliot. Perhaps the creature was looking for a friend. Perhaps the little mouse was just as lonely as Elliot.

Elliot looked down and frowned, because the bag holding Jared's plum jam cookies had been nibbled through at the side.

Jared was going to be furious.

Elliot looked at the large clock inside the empty ticket booth and smiled. It wasn't even seven yet, so the ticket booth didn't open for another hour. That would be plenty of time to rush to the bakery and replace the cookies. Elliot knew it would be open, because the lovely woman at the shop bragged about her breakfast donuts the night before. "Sunup to sundown." That's what Miss Twylah said as she placed cookie after cookie into the newly nibbled box. He sighed as he stared at the chewed box, lifting it to toss into the bin on the pier. Elliot made it two steps before hearing the familiar sound.

Squeak, squeak.

Instead of throwing it away, he turned and placed the bag on the bench he'd been sitting on. Opening the sack, he lifted the box's lid. There, in the center of the box, lying on its back with its claws holding a swollen tummy, was the same small fieldmouse from the night before. The mouse made no attempt to run, just lazily reached beside his belly, broke off a small chunk from the crumbled cookie remnants,

and . . .

Did it just dip its cookie crumble into the jam before eating it? How positively fascinating!

“Hello,” Elliot whispered, worried he might scare off the small fieldmouse. “I’m Elliot, and you’re adorable.” The little fieldmouse sniffed the air. “You were following me last night. I’m very happy to meet you.” Elliot moved his face closer to the box, both he and the mouse eyeing each other curiously. Elliot remembered hearing that some animals enjoy being petted. “May I pet you?” As the fieldmouse appeared to nod his approval, Elliot paused, giving the mouse an assertive glare. “You will not bite me. It is forbidden. Nod once more if you understand.”

The fieldmouse did nothing of the sort.

“Rude,” Elliot pointed out. “Though hardly unexpected. I mean, it’s not as if you’re going to miraculously sprout a voice box and strike up a rousing conversation.” Elliot glanced left, then right, searching for nearby town folk. With the coast clear, Elliot inched even closer. “That would be fantastic, though.” He lifted his hand and softly stroked the mouse’s tummy, giggling when it kicked its legs back and forth and squeak-squeak-squeaked . “I believe I’m quite fond of you. Would you like to walk across town with me?” He eyed the remains of Jared’s cookies. “You were a naughty boy, but I cannot fault you. I hope you enjoyed each bite.”

Elliot stood, dusted his backside with his palms, nodded once, and said, “Right. I can do this.” Reaching into the box, Elliot picked up the cookie bandit and lifted him to eye level. “Are you a boy or a girl?” He wasn’t sure why he asked, but it felt nice to hear his own voice. He so rarely had the chance to use it. “Well, whatever you are, you’re lovely. If you’re a good boy or girl and stay still all the way to the bakery, I’ll buy you something special. Would you like that . . .” Elliot chewed his cheek. It wasn’t as if he could very well keep the mouse, but if they were going to spend the

next hour walking to the other side of the village together, Elliot would need something to call the creature. He continued to eye the little mouse as if he was studying every atom. Elliot could see no testicles, which he assumed a male mouse would have, but then, he couldn't see a vagina either, not that he would know what a mouse's vagina looked like. "I'm afraid we've found ourselves in a bit of a conundrum. I don't wish to misgender you. Shall I call you something gender neutral?"

He studied the mouse, and Elliot was fairly certain the mouse was studying him back.

"You look like a 'Brenda.'" Elliot paused, considering. "Or maybe a 'Carole.' Perhaps a hodgepodge of both?" He shook his head. "No. That's ridiculous. What sort of name is Brenda-slash-Carole?" There was a small dot of plum jam on the mouse's tummy, and when Elliot attempted to wipe it off, the mouse wrapped its tiny claws around Elliot's finger and brought it to its mouth, sucking off the sugary remnants of its plum-flavored treat. When it was done, the mouse rubbed its nose back and forth against Elliot's finger, not breaking eye contact. It was the most precious sight Elliot had ever seen. "I visit my future husband's brother fairly often. He has a husband that's just like me." Elliot flashed a quick swirl of affectionate pink lights in the corners of his eyes. "He's an automaton too, I mean. When we used to visit, Periwinkle—that's the one who's like me—would play board games with me. He had this one where you try to track down a vicious murderer or murderess. There's a character in the game named Professor Plum. I believe that's what I'll call you."

Squeak, squeak.

Good. Elliot was glad that was sorted.

Half an hour later, Elliot and Professor Plum approached Twylah's Sugarplum Treats with smiles on their faces. Well, Elliot had a smile on his face; he couldn't be sure if

Professor Plum's curved lips could be considered a smile.

As was the case the day before, Miss Twylah's store smelled absolutely divine. The black-and-white checkered floors looked perfectly polished, and there wasn't a single smudge in sight. Miss Twylah—a stunningly stocky woman with cream-colored skin and long, blonde hair tied back with an oversized pink scrunchie—stood behind the counter, placing fresh pastries into a display case. Unlike the day before, Miss Twylah wasn't alone. There was a man leaning over the counter wearing dress slacks that clung to his backside like a second skin. Professor Plum must have also appreciated the view, because the creature offered multiple approving squeaks. The squeaks got the man's attention, and when he turned around, Elliot's mechanical heart skipped a beat. Even Professor Plum—who had been lounging lazily in Elliot's palm—perked up, and Elliot was positive the fieldmouse had licked its lips. Behind the man, Miss Twylah turned, placing the excess cookies onto a tray on the counter by the wall.

The man was a vision. His short, brown hair was parted at the side with the sides of his head sheared short, almost to the skin. His pale complexion made each of his many freckles pop, drawing Elliot's attention to them. Part of Elliot wanted to know what it would feel like to play connect the dots with the tip of his finger. When the man smiled, his perfect teeth sparkled just as beautifully as the white floor tiles.

“Hello,” Elliot said, his breath a little ragged. He lifted the gnawed-through bag. “I rested on a bench outside the ferry tollbooth last night and this little creature had himself a midnight picnic.” Elliot paused, thinking. “Actually, I can't be certain it was midnight as I was . . . resting.” Elliot cleared his throat, his cheeks growing warmer. “Anyway, he ate all my plum jam cookies.” The man hadn't asked him for any of the information he provided, but he shared it, nonetheless. The words were out, so all he could do was see where the conversation took him. A flicker of nervous orange lights flashed in the corner of his eyes, and he hoped the man didn't notice. “My name is Elliot. Elliot Price.”

The man's smile widened. "I'd offer to shake your hand, but it seems they're both spoken for at the moment." He looked down at Professor Plum and beamed. "I'm Alexander. Alexander Davenport."

Elliot's heart raced even faster. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir."

Alexander approached and stared down at Professor Plum. "For a thief and cookie glutton, he's certainly adorable." He reached down and stroked the mouse's back, then Alexander's eyes met Elliot's. "He's not the only one."

Elliot wasn't sure what Alexander was implying, so he skirted past the statement. "Were you waiting in line?"

Alexander shook his head, motioning toward Miss Twylah. "I'm in town visiting my mom. I usually come down a few times a year, but I've been so busy with work that I haven't seen her in almost six months." Sweat peppered Alexander Davenport's brow, and his cheeks were a bit rosier than before. The words tumbled quickly from his mouth like he was trying to spit them all while he still had the chance. "I'm going to start visiting more, though." Alexander nibbled his lip. "Do you? Visit the island, I mean." Alexander closed his eyes and huffed out a quick breath. When he opened them, it seemed he had a bit of his confidence back. "Sorry. I just get nervous around . . ."

Around robots.

Alexander must have noticed the orange lights after all, because his message couldn't have been clearer if he bluntly stated the words aloud. It was written all over his face. The rosy cheeks and sweaty forehead. How his eyes kept twitching with nerves. Elliot studied Alexander's breathing, the man's chest rising and falling more rapidly than the situation called for. There was ample oxygen in Twylah's Sugarplum Treats, but it felt like every trace had been sucked out.

“I’ll just be on my way then,” Elliot whispered, ashamed, and more than a little bit embarrassed. “It was lovely meeting you, Alexander Davenport.”

Alexander took a step back and stared into Elliot’s eyes. “You’re leaving? Already?”

“I have a ferry to catch, sir,” Elliot said, using the same voice he clung to when Jared was cross with him. Babylike. Small. His words wrapped in a tone so apologetic, it would be impossible to stay angry with him. Jared found a way, though. He always found a way to be angry.

“You haven’t even replaced your cookies yet,” Alexander insisted, looking . . . sad? Disappointed? Elliot couldn’t be sure, as didn’t have anything to compare the expression to. Elliot had never seen Alexander’s face twisted up in sadness. Or ever seen the way his eyes possibly sparkled while enjoying someone’s company. All he’d shared were a few kind words and shared finger strokes along a mouse’s head. “Let me pay for them.” He squeezed Elliot’s hand softly. “Please?”

Elliot blushed, nodding, but not looking up. The attention made him feel like a charity case. The man clearly saw he upset Elliot, and now he was offering plum jam cookies to what? To prove he wasn’t an automaphobe?

When Alexander walked to the counter, Elliot’s eyes traveled down, taking in the sight of his backside. Goodness, it was exquisite. Like two plump Christmas hams, ready to be glazed, as Jared often described Elliot’s rear.

Miss Twylah was all smiles as Elliot approached. “Back already, Elliot?”

Elliot gaped at her. “You remember my name?”

Miss Twylah winked at him. “I never forget the cute ones, and you’re just about the cutest man I’ve ever seen. Isn’t he, Lexy?”

Alexander turned around, catching Elliot's eyes staring right at his butt. Goodness.

"He's beautiful," Alexander agreed. Elliot's eyebrows shot up and his mechanical heart pounded in his chest.

Mercifully, Miss Twylah offered Elliot a lifeline. "What brings you in today? More cookies, or did you want to live life on the wild side and try one of my plum fritters? Did you enjoy the flavor? I told you they'd rock your socks off."

"Actually," Alexander interrupted. "Elliot didn't have a chance to try them. It seems we have a cookie monster on Sugarplum Island."

"A mouse? Miss Twylah's eyes bulged. "A mouse ate all twelve of them? How is that even humanly possible?" Miss Twylah cocked her head to the side. "Or would it be 'rodently possible'?"

"I don't think 'rodently' is a word, Miss Twylah," Elliot chimed in. "It's probably best to err on the side of caution and forget the question altogether."

She nodded in agreement. "How sad for you, though, sweetie. You didn't even get to try one?"

"No ma'am. They weren't for me, anyway. They're for my . . ." Elliot's hands shook, and Professor Plum squeaked his disapproval. How could he explain Jared to Alexander and Miss Twylah? Elliot knew it didn't matter, because in the story of his life, Alexander would simply be a man he met at a bakery who brightened his dreary day. "They're for Jared," Elliot finished, hoping that would be enough. Thankfully, neither of them pushed the matter, though Elliot noticed a touch of disappointment cross Alexander's face. Elliot opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

"Would you like a cookie, too?" Miss Twylah asked. "For you. On the house."

Elliot shook his head. He couldn't. He was forbidden to have any food unless it was directly handed to him by Jared. Unfortunately, Jared would know if Elliot had eaten anything, because he would need to use his solid waste release function, and Elliot never needed to use his solid waste release function.

“No, thank you. I'm not hungry.”

Alexander and Miss Twylah shared a look. Elliot wasn't sure what the look meant, but he knew better than to ask. She scooped twelve more cookies from the tray, and Alexander stepped directly in front of Elliot and smiled.

“May I walk you back to the ferry? I can carry your cookies for you.”

“You don't have to. I'm fine on my own.”

“I didn't say you weren't. I just thought it would be nice to spend a little more time with you.”

“Oh,” Elliot said. He couldn't imagine why Alexander would want to spend time with him. Elliot scrunched his nose. “Why?”

Alexander twitched a smile. “Because you're fascinating. You carry a mouse on your person.”

Elliot lifted the bag. “I carried him in my bag, Mr. Davenport.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

His smile widened. “Precious.” His voice was soft and warm, like the sunshine that warmed Elliot’s back when he was allowed to tend his garden. “I’d like to enjoy your company a little while longer, if that’s something that might interest you.” His voice was nervous, like he was scared Elliot’s answer would be no. Honestly, Elliot knew he probably should say no. Alarms were firing inside him, warning him off spending any time with Alexander Davenport, reminding Elliot he belonged to another.

Elliot searched Alexander’s face, seeking out sincerity. His big, brown eyes didn’t seem deceptive, but Elliot knew looks could often deceive. Deception be damned, because Sugarplum Island was a hidden oasis. A place where dreams came true, if the brochures were to be believed. Despite having seen it all the night before, now Elliot wanted to see it at Alexander’s side.

“If you’re sure it isn’t a bother,” Elliot said.

“It would be my honor.”

As they walked across the island, Elliot snuck glances at Alexander, and Alexander caught him every time. But Alexander never questioned him. He didn’t insist Elliot refrain from sneaking peeks. If anything, each stolen glance made Alexander’s smile spread even wider.

“So,” Alexander started when they were roughly halfway to the dock. “This Jared fellow. Is he your partner?”

Elliot’s entire body tensed, but if Alexander noticed, he didn’t mention it. “He’s . . .” He closed his eyes, trying to think of a way to explain Jared without laying his shame

bare. "I live with him."

Alexander nodded, and there was a hint of understanding in his eyes. It made Elliot uncomfortable, because he didn't want Alexander to know anything about his life with Jared Price.

"Where's home?"

"In Dallas."

His eyes widened. "I live in Dallas, too."

It felt like Elliot's heart was going to leap out of his chest. Alexander lived just down the street. Well, in the same city, at least. And at the moment, he was still within reach; though Elliot didn't understand why he felt the need to reach for him. His mind raced, trying to think of ways Elliot might accidentally bump into Alexander in Dallas, but he came up short. When Jared left for work each day, he forced Elliot to power himself down. Being powered down meant any chance at popping out of the house and running into Alexander was slim to none. Maybe if he simply pretended to power himself down. But then, if Jared found out, there would be hell to pay.

"Would you like to see each other again? Back home, I mean," Alexander asked. Elliot believed he would have liked that very much, but he couldn't get his mouth to work. Alexander quickly looked away, his cheeks red with the sting of rejection, even though Elliot hadn't meant to reject him.

"Home," Elliot whispered.

"Home?"

"I have one, but it isn't a good home." The words felt like glass shards digging at the

lining of his throat. An immense wave of shame hit him, leaving him breathless. He shouldn't have said that. It wasn't something he was supposed to say. Not to anyone. Certainly not to Alexander. "I don't think Jared would allow us to socialize."

When Alexander's hand found his and squeezed, Elliot could tell Alexander wanted to pry. Alexander's face was a myriad of emotion, conflicting and contorting his frown to a smile that sent a sense of calmness through him, soothing his nerves.

"What would make a good home for you?" Alexander asked, catching Elliot off guard.

"I beg your pardon?"

"If you could picture the perfect home, what would it be?"

Elliot paused, considering the question. He didn't understand Alexander's reason for asking, but he already asked it, and Elliot knew he wanted an answer.

Home.

When it came to homes, Elliot had only known a few. Jared's mansion in Dallas. The home of Arthur and Periwinkle Price, though they'd sold it a few months prior. Then there was his first home. His true home. With Mother and all her bountiful beaus. God, Elliot missed it.

"I was created in New Orleans. My mother raised me for the first year of my life. Well, it was almost a year, I wish it had been longer. I used to go down to the swamps and sit on the dock, watching all the fascinating creatures. The water was always very peaceful; so I believe my perfect home would need to be near a swamp. Or maybe any water source would do." Elliot sighed, disappointed at his own indecision. "I apologize, Alexander. I can't say I've given this much thought."

“You’re doing great,” Alexander reassured him. “So, your perfect home would be on the water. What else?”

“My home now is big and cold and uninviting. Everything has its place, and it mustn’t be moved. It makes me feel on edge. I believe I’d like to live somewhere small. Somewhere cozy, where I wouldn’t have to worry about items being placed in spaces that aren’t meant for them.”

“A little cottage, perhaps?”

Elliot nodded. “That could be cozy. And it would have to have a garden, because the days when I can garden are my favorite days of all.” He sucked in a sharp breath, because Elliot had been traveling to Sugarplum Island every Sunday for months. He didn’t want it getting back to Miss Twylah that he enjoyed gardening more than visiting her lovely shop. “I love the days I come to Sugarplum Island, too, but there’s something about digging my fingers into the earth and planting a seed that calms me. You get to watch life grow. It’s not a big life, but it’s still something I can create from nothing. My flowers depend on me, and I think I depend on them just as much.”

Alexander gave him a nod. “All right, a small home on the water and a garden. What else would you like?”

Elliot wondered what purpose Alexander’s inquisition held, but he’d been very nice to Elliot so far, so he indulged the man. “An automobile, maybe. Jared used to allow me to drive and I always enjoyed it.”

“What kind of car?”

Elliot shrugged. “Something small. It wouldn’t need to be anything large like a pickup truck, but I think I’d like the tires to have those pretty, white circles around the wheel. I used to see those on vehicles when I went up in town. They seem very

fancy. I saw a few with gold on the side, but they looked tacky.”

“Agreed. White walls are gorgeous on the right car,” Alexander said, and then, as if he was acting on instinct rather than rationality, Alexander wrapped an arm around Elliot’s shoulder and led him onward. Maybe he should have, but Elliot didn’t pull away.

“Will you tell me about yourself?” Elliot asked after a long stretch of silence.

“I can do that,” he said, squeezing Elliot’s arm and making him feel all tingly inside. “Well, I was born in Missouri, but my family relocated to Texas as a child.”

“Why did you relocate?”

“My dad,” Alexander answered. “He owned a property development company, and after making it big in the Midwest, he wanted to strike while the iron was hot, as they say.”

Elliot looked up at him. “As who says?”

“Well, my father, for one, but it’s just an expression. After he died, I took over the company. I’ve been at it for a little over a decade.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

Alexander paused, looking lost in contemplation. “I enjoy being successful and keeping the family legacy alive. The work itself, not so much. It gets stressful sometimes, but I like to think it keeps me on my toes.”

Alexander admitted he knew he was gay all his life, which made sense, because during the half-year spent learning and training at Ms. Broussard’s Home for

Bountiful Beaus, Elliot learned homosexuality was something a person was born with. There was even a song Mother would sing to her sons about God making no mistakes, usually performed at her piano, where Clarence would always sit behind the keys, twinkling out the stunning ballad. “Born this way.” Those were the words she sang, and Elliot realized he was born that way, too.

All too soon, the dock came into view, and Elliot felt as if his world were crumbling. He didn’t want to make the final few steps. He didn’t want to purchase a passage back to his horrible life. If he was being honest, Elliot thought he would quite like to stay right there on Sugarplum Island, just so he could get to know his new friend better. By the time they reached the dock, it felt as if Elliot’s feet were submerged in quicksand, and he found it hard to put one foot in front of the other.

Alexander paused beside him and smiled down at Elliot. “I’ll get your ticket.” He pointed at the small bench Elliot had rested on earlier. “You can wait there if you want.”

Elliot shook his head and held Professor Plum higher in his hand. “I have to let him go.” The words felt bitter on his tongue.

Alexander nodded toward the booth. “I’ll be right over here if you need me.”

When Alexander was gone, Elliot stared down at Professor Plum, knowing he needed to release the fieldmouse back into its natural habitat. Try as he might, Elliot couldn’t bring himself to let go as Professor Plum stared up at him with big, hopeful eyes.

“Please don’t look at me like that,” Elliot whispered, hoping Alexander wouldn’t overhear. “Your home is here. You belong here, Professor Plum of Sugarplum Island.” Despite the fact rodents are usually seen as filthy creatures, Elliot couldn’t bear to say goodbye to his new friend without a proper sendoff. He lifted his hand, bringing the fieldmouse to his lips, placing a gentle kiss on its head. “I will miss you

very much.” The look the mouse gave Elliot was enough to crack his mechanical heart. “I would love to keep you, but my master would never allow it. He would make me leave you in the street, or worse. You’re the closest thing to a friend I’ve ever had, and I can’t stand the thought of him—” Elliot slammed his eyes shut. “No, I can’t let that happen. I wish I could keep you. You don’t know how much I wish I could. It simply isn’t an option.”

The mouse squeaked, its tone sounding like a plea.

“I’m sorry,” Elliot repeated, his voice cracking on the words. A tear fell down his cheek, because his brief moment of freedom was ending. Someone squeezed Elliot’s shoulder, their other hand softly rubbing up and down the length of Elliot’s back. He froze, embarrassed that someone heard everything he just said. Swallowing, he turned, mortified to see Alexander Davenport standing behind him with an overwhelming look of sympathy in his eyes. Elliot’s mouth opened and closed, but nothing came out.

“Would you like me to care for him, Elliot?”

More tears pooled in Elliot’s eyes, because, yes, he thought. Yes, he would like that very much. With Alexander Davenport, Professor Plum might live a happy life. He would continue to know the taste of freedom. A life uncaged. Elliot Price knew about cages. The way they twisted and curved around you, creeping closer and closer until you could no longer move. Elliot had never known the taste of freedom but for those hours on Sugarplum Island. How was he supposed to go back to his silver cage in Dallas?

“I would like that very much,” Elliot agreed. “If it pleases you, sir.”

Alexander squeezed Elliot’s arm. “I’d be honored.”

When Elliot inevitably returned to Dallas, Jared would be waiting for him. Having been gone all night without a word, Elliot would be in for the sternest lesson of his life. He wanted to ask his new friend to save him. To keep him safe from harm. Alexander possessed kind eyes and an honest heart. Elliot was sure he would help him. All he had to do was ask.

“You’re a wonderful man, Mr. Davenport. I hope we meet again.”

When Alexander lifted his hand and wiped away a tear from Elliot’s cheek, Elliot’s skin tingled. Needing one more moment of freedom—of this newfound connection—Elliot placed his hand on top of Alexander’s, holding it there, leaning into the touch like a purring kitten to its master. A kind master. A master unlike Jared Price.

“Sweet boy,” Alexander whispered, and then, as if Alexander knew how much Elliot would need something to cling to in the future, he gave him a gentle kiss. It wasn’t much, but it was one that rattled Elliot to his core. The silk-smooth texture of lips against lips, and the way Alexander placed his hand right over Elliot’s heart, like he was trying to pour himself into the wayward automaton. Most of all, the way Alexander allowed his lips to part, though only for a moment, fitting them together like a well-clinging sweater.

The kiss ended faster than Elliot would have liked, but he wasn’t a greedy man. He didn’t seek more than Alexander was offering, because what Alexander had just provided was the single most wonderful moment of his life. And all the while Professor Plum squeak-squeak-squeaked his approval.

“You don’t have to go, Elliot,” Alexander whispered, his nose brushing back and forth against Elliot’s. “You can stay.”

Elliot’s jaw trembled and he shook his head. He couldn’t stay. The tracker in his arm

would lead Jared right to him. For all Elliot knew, Jared could have been on his way already, probably chartering a yacht to find his missing ‘appliance.’

Elliot could love Alexander, he thought. He was able to picture their future so clearly, but the longer he pictured it, the more his heart ached for what he could never have. He allowed himself a moment before the image slipped away, imagining the way Alexander would return every night to their small bungalow on Sugarplum Island. The way Elliot would greet him at the door with a kiss. Professor Plum would peek his precious head out of Elliot’s shirt pocket and squeak-squeak-squeak to his heart’s content. Alexander’s slippers would be in Elliot’s hand every single night, the soles warmed by Elliot’s feet, wanting them to be cozy for his love. They would share a lovely meal in their kitchen nook, and Elliot would cling to Alexander’s every word as he told him about his day. Maybe if Elliot was lucky, Alexander might even care enough to ask about his day. At night they would cuddle on the sofa watching *I Love Lucy*, Alexander with a glass of wine, Elliot with a cup of cocoa, and Professor Plum with a thimble of carrot juice. Upstairs in their bedroom, Elliot would finally know a gentle touch, because Alexander Davenport seemed like a very gentle man. Before bed, Elliot would look into Alexander’s eyes, and he would say . . .

“Thank you,” Elliot said, drying his eyes. “Thank you so much for this, Mr. Davenport. You don’t know how much it’s meant to me.”

Alexander swallowed and squeezed Elliot’s hand one final time. “I think I do, actually.” Reaching into his pocket, Alexander removed his wallet, fished out a business card, and offered it to Elliot.

Davenport Developments, the card said, and then Alexander’s name and phone number. He memorized them quickly, because he knew he couldn’t keep the card. If Jared were to find it, his punishment would be severe. That’s not to say he didn’t wish to keep the card, because Elliot wished for it very much. A physical touchstone to cling to, reminding him he wasn’t alone. A secret souvenir from the single moment

of his life that belonged only to Elliot. He put the card in his pocket, knowing he'd need to throw it from the ferry on the ride back to the mainland.

“Can I wait with you for the ferry?”

Elliot closed his eyes and shook his head. “Please give Professor Plum a good life. He’s—” my only friend, Elliot wanted to say, but how could he when the lump in his throat was aching so badly?

“I swear it,” Alexander insisted. “You’ll see him again, though.” He squeezed Elliot’s shoulder. “We’ll meet again, Elliot Price. I promise.”

Elliot watched as Alexander walked away. There was an old saying he’d heard before, about hating to see someone leave but loving to watch them walk away. It couldn’t be further from the truth. Elliot would give up the chance of any future stolen glances at Alexander’s backside if he would just come back. If he would stay.

Elliot sat on the dock, his legs dangling over the ledge, looking out at the slowly approaching ferry. He pulled Alexander’s card from his pocket and memorized it by heart.

Alexander Davenport. Davenport Developments. A phone number.

Alexander Davenport. Davenport Developments. A phone number.

Alexander Davenport. Davenport Developments. A phone number.

The scent of Twylah’s cookies reminded him of a county fair he visited once. It was like sweetness and strawberries and so much cotton candy. He wanted to taste those strawberries and to let the cotton candy melt on his tongue, the way Jared said it did.

His punishment was going to be torturesome anyway, Elliot rationalized. Why not make it worth it?

He opened the bag Miss Twylah packed the cookies in and lifted the lid to the box. Elliot gasped. Inside was an individually wrapped cookie resting on top of all the others. Miss Twylah drew a heart on the wrapper and everything. “Everyone deserves a Sugarplum treat,” it said at the top, and Elliot couldn’t have agreed more.

He opened the wrapper, his hands shaking with nerves. Elliot brought the cookie to his mouth and took a small bite, whining at the pop of flavor. He nibbled and nibbled until his teeth reached the jammy dollop in the center. Elliot didn’t realize what he’d been missing out on, and that made everything hurt worse, because he knew this would be the only time he’d ever have the chance to indulge in a sugary treat. Pushing past the crippling fear, Elliot forced himself to relax and live in the moment.

With fear rising like rolling tides and the ferry sailing closer, Elliot closed his eyes, lifted his face to the sun, and smiled.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

Three days had passed since Elliot's visit to Sugarplum Island. At least, he thought it was three days. His days and minutes and months were all jumbled together, and he was having trouble remembering anything that happened since he returned to Jared Price's home. When he thought about it for too long, it made his head feel fuzzy, like someone had scooped out pieces of his memory and patched the holes with cake frosting. The only thing Elliot knew was he needed to get away. Away from Dallas, Texas, and away from Jared Price.

When Elliot Price stepped off the Greyhound bus with one pastel-pink suitcase, one beige bandage wrapped around his wrist, and one broken heart, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, hoping to catch the scent of freedom. He knew he smelled it once before, though his mind was thick with confusion, and he couldn't remember the occasion. It was a good day, though, he thought. Probably even the best day. If only he could actually remember why that was.

It didn't matter. The past was in the past, and Elliot was looking into his future.

The city square was quaint; like a snapshot of small-town America. There was a courthouse in the center with street lamps lining the concrete walkway around it. A red brick road surrounded the courthouse, and across the road, a swarm of stores surrounded the courthouse. There was a diner, a dollar movie theater playing hits from yesteryear, and a small, second-hand store that appeared to sell compact discs containing music. It was fabulous—a word Jared never allowed Elliot to use, as he deemed it “too gay,” whatever that meant. Words didn't have sexual orientations. They were simply strings of consonants and vowels stitched together to form sound.

But, yes, Elliot thought. Yes, he could see this place becoming his new home. He just

hoped his unexpected future hosts wouldn't turn him away. It didn't feel like his home, though. Elliot's heart belonged somewhere—he knew it did—but he couldn't remember where that home was.

Elliot crossed the red brick road and walked onward, trying to locate Main Street. Before leaving Dallas in a haste—though he still couldn't remember why his exit had been so sudden—he wrote down an address. Two addresses, actually. One was in Dallas, though, and Elliot knew he needed to stay far, far away from Dallas, Texas. The other address was for a building in Genevieve, Georgia. A library, apparently. His only means of escape from a life spent in silver cages.

So Elliot walked. He walked and walked until his feet were sore, but those sore feet didn't hold a candle to the ache he felt in his knees each time Master Jared Price forced Elliot to kneel at his side as he watched television. Elliot needed to be still and quiet, just so Jared would have someone to strike should something offend him on screen. Lately, it seemed Jared was offended by everything.

Elliot passed person after person, each smiling cheerfully at him, as if his presence genuinely pleased them. Women wearing pearls and men in fedoras. Even some men in pearls, some women with fedoras. It was truly a picturesque sight.

He got lost along the way, and he wasn't sure he would ever find his destination. Elliot thought it happened when he crossed over Mill Street. Elliot took a right when he probably should have taken a left, and he didn't realize he went off track until he reached a small country road leading out of town. The road tilted downward, and, because the town rested atop a rather large hill, Elliot believed if he looked long enough, he could see forever laid out before him.

Elliot sighed, setting his pastel pink suitcase on the ground and taking a seat. Normally, he would be happy as a lark to take an extended walk, because Jared rarely let him take them, but on that day, his ankles were tired and swollen, and he needed a

rest. He placed a hand on his tummy and sighed.

Elliot stared down the seemingly endless hill, drinking in the sights of overgrown fields and a small stream leading out past the horizon. A small part of him wanted to follow the stream to see if it might lead him . . . where, exactly? Elliot couldn't be sure, but he was sure he'd know it when he saw it.

Home.

Elliot ran his fingers up and down the sides of his pink suitcase, realizing what a stark contrast it was to the green scenery around him. Inside the suitcase were two tiny keepsakes he kept for himself, as well as one pair of pressed khaki trousers and a pink Polo shirt. His shoes were now scuffed from the hike, but he didn't mind. What were a few scuff marks when his freedom was at stake?

A bluebird landed on a nearby bush, chirping out its midmorning song. Elliot's fingers twitched with each note, following along like an orchestra's conductor, his body lightly bopping to the tune. Elliot allowed himself the moment, because he hadn't been allowed much else. The song sounded a bit like an unbroken promise, and it played the entire time Elliot rested. He wanted to pull out the celebratory treat he brought with him, all the way from Dallas, Texas, but he feared the click of his suitcase might startle the bird, and Elliot was enjoying its song.

Eventually, when Elliot rose, he did so with a groan and two popping knees. He held his hand to his back, trying to catch his breath. The cracked rib was recent, only three days old. Or had it been three months?

Elliot startled as the bluebird flew in front of him, then circled Elliot round and round. It paused long enough to peck at his nose, then quickly darted behind Elliot's back like a cheeky scamp. Elliot twirled around, wincing from the pain of his aching ankles. There was heat in his chest, like someone had lit a fire in his esophagus. He'd

felt the burn quite often in the recent days and months and minutes, only having brief moments of reprieve between the bursts of discomfort.

The bluebird chirped in Elliot's face then flew away. As he watched the bird flutter off, the initial rush of happiness that flooded his veins faded, and Elliot once again found himself alone. He closed his eyes and sighed. Bending over, he picked up his suitcase and groaned.

The journey back into town took longer than the journey out, but he didn't let it deter him. As he walked for what felt like miles, he kept his eyes peeled, but he still couldn't find Main Street. Just as he was about to sit down on his suitcase again, the bluebird returned and pecked Elliot with its beak. It flew westward, pausing long enough to look back at Elliot, as if waiting for him to follow. He shrugged and followed along, figuring he couldn't get more turned around than he already was. He put his faith in the blue songstress, knowing if he wound up at a landfill, at least he would have been escorted there by a pretty bird singing a pretty song. Thankfully, the bird didn't lead Elliot to the landfill. Within minutes, Elliot was back where he began, right in the center's heart, and the bird flew away, leaving Elliot alone again.

A bell tolled in the distance, though Elliot couldn't place its source. It rang five times before stopping, and then pandemonium hit Genevieve, Georgia. One by one, shop doors opened, and owners and workers locked them on their way out. Elliot counted forty-two and one-half people, although the half-person could have simply been the upper half of a window mannequin. Elliot couldn't be sure.

The courthouse door opened and another hundred-or-so people filed out in nice, neat, single-file lines. He was amazed at how peaceful the square was, even with umpteen workers all walking toward a large parking garage down a side street on the square. He stood there watching happy people heading to happy homes with happy families. Elliot prayed he may one day know the feeling of having someone waiting for him at home, or to be waiting for someone he truly loved who truly loved him back. A fool's

dream, perhaps, but that didn't stop Elliot from dreaming it, anyway.

One by one, Cadillacs and Lincoln Town Cars pulled away, some using the red brick road around the courthouse, others driving away from him. Then, be it hours or minutes or months later, Elliot was alone in the city's heart. His chest ached and his stomach dropped at the realization that sundown had come, and it was getting dark. He would never find his destination if he lost daylight.

Elliot remembered Jared Price mentioning some human phenomenon called fight-or-flight. He'd explained that, when faced with terrifying circumstances, people would either stay and fight or run. No matter how many long walks Elliot may have wanted to take in his new life as a free man, he wasn't much of a runner. He wasn't a fighter, either, but that was to be expected. Mother had programmed him with a trusting, docile soul. More often than not, when faced with a traumatic life experience, Elliot tended to freeze. His legs would fail to function, and he'd be unable to speak.

Elliot froze again. He knew finding his potential safe house would be impossible at night, and Elliot's body shook as he tried to think of what to do. First and foremost, Elliot needed to find a power supply. After a long day on public transportation, he would require a full charge overnight.

Slowly, he walked around the square, looking for a single wall outlet outside the many stores, only to be met with disappointment.

He placed his suitcase on the curb and opened it. On top was a treat he'd taken from Jared's home before running away. While he always wanted to try one of Jared's plum jam cookies, he'd never had the chance. Well, he had plenty of chances when he went to collect them from . . .

Elliot froze, his eyes closing on their own. Where did the cookies come from? Why couldn't Elliot remember? He knew he got them three days ago. He remembered,

because it had been three days since Jared Price kicked his ribs until they cracked.

Elliot's wrist throbbed beneath the bandage, but he pushed past that pain, taking out the plum jam cookie, closing the suitcase's lid, and taking a seat. Opening the wrapper around the cookie, Elliot smiled at the purple jam dollop, still intact. He brought the cookie to his face and inhaled deeply. The smell was nice, and he knew he'd smelled it before, but each time he reached for the memory of when he smelled it last, his head throbbed. Like more little holes filled with frosting.

"Are you lost?" a man asked from behind Elliot. He peeked over his shoulder to find a man, perhaps in his early thirties, wearing a pair of khakis like the ones Elliot was wearing. The man also had on a light pink button-down shirt, and a necktie dotted with . . .

"Are those tiaras?" Elliot asked, pointing at the small crowns littering the man's tie.

He nodded. "Tiaras are my weakness. Well, tiaras, boy bands, and lemon rosewater." He extended his hand for Elliot to shake, and Elliot, having been trained in etiquette all his life, lifted his hand in return and provided a shake. The man stared at Elliot's face and frowned. "Are you okay?"

Elliot tensed. Why did the man frown at him? "Yes, sir. I'm quite alright."

The man reached down and touched Elliot's cheek, making Elliot's body shake and his eyes slam shut. The mental picture of the man's finger touching his cheek reminded him of the way Jared . . .

"What's your name?" the man asked, his voice warm and welcoming, pulling Elliot out of his troubled headspace. When he opened his eyes, the man was smiling warmly at him. Nervous orange light flickered through Elliot's eyes and he scolded himself for letting his colors show. Most people weren't fond of automatons, and Mother

always told them it was best to hide their colors. It was usually easy for Elliot to mask them, which was good, because Jared Price didn't care for the flashing lights in the corner of Elliot's eyes. This man didn't seem to mind, though. In fact, he seemed quite spellbound by them, which calmed his racing heart.

"I'm Elliot," he finally answered, then, in a much smaller voice, he added, "I believe I'm lost."

"Well, you're in luck, because I know this city by heart. It kind of comes with the job."

"With what job?"

"I'm Genivieve's mayor," he clarified, pointing at the courthouse behind him. He reached for Elliot's hand and squeezed. "Mayor Beau Rivera, at your service. Now, where are you trying to go? I can help you, I just need to know how."

Elliot swallowed. "I'm looking for the local library. I have a friend in town I was hoping to stay with."

"A friend at the library?"

Elliot nodded. "Two of them. Periwinkle and Arthur Price. They're not expecting me, but I think they'll be happy to see me. I'm hoping they'll allow me to live with them."

Beau smiled warmly. "I know Arthur and Peri well. Periwinkle's always happy to see everyone. Arthur, less so, but still. I'm sure they'd be happy to have you. And, if they don't, we'll figure something out. Genevieve is a place for hope and change." He eyed Elliot curiously. "You look like you could use a little bit of change and a whole lot of hope." He pointed at a small pink golf cart wedged between a dental office and

a pharmacist. “I’d be happy to give you a ride. I’m heading home, and it’s on the way.”

Elliot’s eyes bulged as he stared at the golf cart, hopping up, ignoring his sore, swollen ankles. He attempted to grab his suitcase, but his back was aching just as much as his ankles. Beau must have noticed Elliot’s discomfort, because he stood and picked the suitcase up himself. Elliot regretted not placing his plum jam cookie back inside, but it was too late for that, as Beau was already walking toward the cart. Elliot clasped the cookie delicately and took off after Beau.

When he reached the cart, he sucked in a sharp breath, because it was positively stunning. It was the most beautiful shade of pink Elliot had ever seen. “You drive this?”

Beau blushed. “I know it’s not anything fancy, but it’s sassy and cute.”

Elliot quickly shook his head, awestruck. “No! Mayor Rivera, it’s perfect!”

“You can just call me Beau. Mayor Rivera is my dad. You can call him Dad. Everyone else does. I guess if you want to keep it formal, you can call me Mayor Beau. I’m fine either way.”

Elliot blinked at the man, confused. “Anyway.” He turned and beamed at the cart. “This is absolutely divine! Look at the colors! Oh, and tiny tiaras. They’re just like the ones on your tie!” His eyes bulged as he saw the small disco ball hanging from the rearview mirror, sending silver fractals of light dancing against the cart’s interior. A tear trickled down Elliot’s cheek, and he didn’t bother to wipe it away. Instead, he ran his fingers down the cart’s hood. “You can just get in this at any time, and drive wherever your heart takes you.”

“Well, technically, I can only drive about thirty miles before the battery dies, but

yeah.”

Elliot looked back at Beau and flashed his cheeriest grin, though his heart wasn't fully invested in the smile. “I've wanted that for so long.”

Beau's hand touched Elliot's shoulder, and when Elliot looked over, the man with golden skin and pretty brown eyes was giving him a look he couldn't quite interpret. Elliot wondered if Beau found him attractive. And then Elliot wondered if he found Beau attractive. From a purely biological standpoint, the telltale signs were there. Elliot's heart raced and his stomach fluttered, but something was lacking. Maybe because of his bond with Jared? Any other time he'd scoff at the notion, but right then, beside Beau Rivera's golf cart, Elliot realized he must have trauma bonded with his master, because he couldn't bring himself to look upon Beau Rivera lustfully. There was an internal warning bell going off in Elliot's head, screaming that Elliot did not belong to the mayor, and the mayor did not belong to Elliot. A sad state of affairs, Elliot pondered, that he could be stuck with a man who only ever brought him pain, simply because it was decided on Elliot's behalf.

Once they were on the cart, Beau drove at a snail's pace, even though his pedal was touching metal. As they drove past building after building, Elliot pointed at each of them and proudly proclaimed, “That isn't a library,” as Beau snickered in the seat beside him.

“I know where the library is, silly.” Beau took one hand off the steering wheel and pointed at a tall building in the distance, and as it came into view, Elliot knew they found their destination.

Elliot nodded emphatically. “Yes! That's the place! I was there a day or week or month ago.” He closed his eyes and shook his head. “Or have I even been here at all? Honestly, I'm not sure. He may have just sent me a postcard. Sorry, my mind's been foggy lately. I can't seem to keep my timeline straight.” He cocked his head to the

side.

Beau snorted. “Well, I can’t keep anything straight, if you know what I mean.”

He didn’t. Elliot hadn’t the slightest idea what Beau was talking about, but his training included bridging conversational gaps created by awkward exchanges. Mother taught him to nod with a smile—his teeth not touching—never letting the other men in the room feel inferior when they told a joke that didn’t land.

“I understand completely,” Elliot lied. Better to lie than embarrass the mayor.

“As for your disjointed timeline,” Beau said as he rounded a corner marked at Main Street. “Unless you’ve got a strong stomach, I don’t think it could have been in the last few months, considering your condition. You look like you should be in bed with your feet up.”

His condition? Could Beau tell Elliot was bruised and nearly broken? Was he implying Elliot couldn’t make long trips because of the pain Jared had inflicted? Because he proved that claim false by traveling from Dallas to Genevieve on his own, and he did just fine.

Beau parked the golf cart next to Genevieve’s public library. Elliot reached for his suitcase on the floor, but Beau grabbed it before he had the chance. They walked to the door together, and the mayor pressed the doorbell. They waited silently for over a minute before Beau began knock-knock-knocking over and over. Even as someone on the other side of the door struggled with the deadbolts, Mayor River continued banging, flashing Elliot a cheeky grin. “He’s going to be furious with me. I can’t wait.” As the man continued banging, Arthur Price’s familiar grumpy voice bellowed out, “I’m trying, dang it!”

Beau and Elliot shared a glance, chuckling.

The door swung open, and there stood Arthur Price, eyes bulging as he looked Elliot up and down. “Elliot?” His husband, Periwinkle, was standing behind him, staring, seemingly speechless.

“Master Price,” Elliot greeted, giving him the same customary nod he’d given Arthur every other time their paths crossed—usually when Jared would spring an impromptu visit to his little brother’s home. He always claimed it to be a spur-of-the-moment decision, when in reality, the man simply liked to keep Arthur on his toes. Ever the bully, even to his family.

Arthur turned his head to Beau and stared at him, seemingly stupefied. “Mayor Rivera?”

Beau Rivera gave Arthur a ridiculous salute. “At your service.” He wrapped an arm around Elliot’s shoulder and beamed at Arthur. “I met Elliot on the square. He got lost trying to find you and Peri. So I told him I’d take him to you.” Beau’s cheeks flushed red. “I hope that’s okay. Silly me, I didn’t even think to call and ask first. For all I know, this man could be a raging murderer.” He turned to Elliot and gave him a stern expression before dramatically walking a circle around the automaton. He paused behind Elliot, mumbling something to himself, then continued his circle. When he was once again looking into Elliot’s eyes, Beau’s jaw clenched. “Are you a deranged stalker, Elliot? Because if I’ve just led you to a potential victim, I’ll probably get recalled.”

Elliot looked to Arthur for guidance in managing the confusing and charming man at their side, only to receive a dumbfounded look in return. Typical, Elliot thought. While Arthur had always been a bit of a pushover, Elliot didn’t particularly mind.

“It’s very nice to see you again, Master Price. I was hoping you might be willing to hide me.”

Arthur stared at Elliot. “Hide you?”

“Just for twelve days. Or, perhaps, twelve weeks.” He chewed his cheek. “Or was it twelve years?” Elliot shook his head, trying to remember how long he needed to be away from Jared. Twelve days sounded right, but he thought that couldn’t be the case, because that would be far sooner than the date Elliot had to be hidden on. “Twelve weeks,” he finally said, sounding far from certain.

“Just twelve weeks?” Mayor Beau Rivera asked.

Elliot nodded, then looked at the mayor. “Maybe longer, maybe shorter, if all goes according to plan.” He smiled warmly at his potential new friend. “As lovely as this journey has been, I’m afraid I’ll have to tackle this next portion on my own, my potential new friend.” He patted Beau’s arm the way the mayor had done with him earlier.

Beau chuckled. “I hope you stick around, Elliot. If you need anything—” Beau reached into his pocket and handed him a business card—“my number’s on there and you can use it any time. I’m always happy to help.”

With that, Mayor Beau Rivera returned to his golf cart and gave Elliot a parting glance before speeding off into the darkening streets of Genevieve, Georgia. Well, he drove as fast as a standard golf cart could drive, Elliot supposed.

When Elliot turned around, Arthur still had the same dumbfounded look on his face, his eyes pointed at Elliot’s lower half. Sadness encapsulated Arthur Price, and the man breathed shakily, coming to terms with Elliot’s less-than-ideal situation.

“What did he do to you?” Arthur asked, though Elliot didn’t think Arthur was really asking as much as he was simply voicing his concern. Elliot wasn’t surprised. He was sure he had the same shell-shocked look on his face when Jared advised him of the

procedure he planned without Elliot's consent.

Elliot had always been the first of his kind. He was the first of the i-Series automatons. The first househusband officially constructed for a sadist. The first of Mother's children to guess the secret ingredient of her world-famous lemon meringue pie, though cinnamon sugar didn't sound like much of a secret ingredient at the time. Now, he was the first to experience—

“Oh, my God.”

Elliot looked up. Unlike Arthur, who was wearing a silly sweater vest with festive kittens on the fabric, and an untamed garden of unkempt brown weeds atop his head, Periwinkle was the picture of domestic bliss. He wore a lovely light-purple shirt with skin-tight banana-yellow shorts that rested only inches above his knees. Not a single brown hair on his head was out of the place, neatly parted at the side and styled with quite a bit of product.

“Hello, Periwinkle,” Elliot greeted with a smile. “I need your help.” Then Elliot placed a hand on the baby bump poking out of his tummy and sighed. “As you can see, I'm in a state.”

“Oh, Elliot,” Periwinkle whispered, his voice small and filled with sympathy.

“I can't go home.” His jaw trembled, but Elliot silently praised himself for maintaining his composure. Then, bringing his voice to a whisper, he added, “I don't think I can ever go home again.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

Mr. Alexander Davenport of Dallas, Texas, was down in the dumps. He just got back from visiting his mother on Sugarplum Island, and, as usual, there was no sign of Elliot. He even checked the dock on the mainland, because Alexander's mother had told him Elliot no longer ventured to the island. Elliot had been purchasing them directly from the bakery for ages, but Elliot's partner contacted her, stating Elliot would collect them at the dock on the mainland instead. A small part of Alexander was holding out hope Elliot would finally return to Sugarplum Island, searching for him. It had been so very long since their night spent walking beneath the stars, and still, Alexander waited.

He didn't know what it was about Elliot that latched the man into Alexander's heart like a fish on the line. It had been five years, but Alexander remembered it like it was yesterday. Perhaps it was Elliot's innocent nature. Alexander always saw himself as a caregiver, though he'd never had anyone to care for aside from his mother, Professor Plum, and the first automaton he purchased, so maybe it was a desire to protect Elliot. There was also the fact that Alexander had never seen anyone so resigned to their heartache. It was as if Elliot's lot in life was pre-planned for him. The moment Alexander spotted flashing orange lights in the corner of Elliot's eyes, Alexander realized it was probably true.

Elliot was an automaton. A man made of steel and corruptible chips of data. Possibly from the same home as Alexander's former bountiful beau, Gus—now Goose—came from. There were only five automaton manufacturers in the United States after all, and Elliot must have come from one of them.

Gus.

God, Alexander missed him. It had been weeks since they had the chance to chat. Alexander thought back to when he purchased Gus shortly after Alexander Davenport Sr. died. His father ran the largest property development company in Texas, and with his passing, his position at the company went to Alexander. The patriarch's entire life went to Alexander, and after living a lifetime with an absentee father, Alexander knew the cost of running an empire. Time. Dedication. The forfeiture of a happy home. Alexander was always a romantic, often watching Hallmark movies for days on end during summer breaks as a child. He loved the idea of love. Giving yourself to another, flaws and all, and hoping they wouldn't hurt you in return. It sounded so thrilling. By taking his father's place as COO, Alexander ended up making the same sacrifice as his father. Goodbye family dinners. Farewell to all future holiday festivities.

His mother vehemently opposed Alexander taking the role, knowing the cost involved. Alexander didn't let her stop him, however, and three weeks after his father was laid to rest, he was manning the helm, just as Alexander Davenport Sr. always planned. Alexander thought by purchasing one of Ms. Broussard's Bountiful Beaus, he might still get to live those childhood dreams of love and marriage without breaking a real heart in the process. Then he met Goose, and he realized just how misguided the notion had been.

Then came the fire, and then came the fallout.

Alexander didn't like to think of that day. Alexander's neighbor died, and he lost Goose, the only friend he had.

Entering his North Dallas mansion, Alexander forced himself to smile. What did he have to complain about, really? He had a lovely home, and a job he didn't entirely detest. His hairline was strong and prominent, showing no signs of retreat. If Goose was to be believed, he also possessed a rather nice backside. Alexander looked over his shoulder, into the floor-length mirror in his foyer, and smiled. A rather nice butt,

indeed.

His home was eerily quiet. Too quiet for a Tuesday afternoon. He gave his maid the week off, as Alexander was gone for that long, but the cook should have been there, as well as Alexander's house manager, Annette. He walked around, looking for employees he sometimes chose to think of as friends, but room after room, floor after floor, the home was abandoned. When Alexander made it to his bedroom, he loosened his necktie and tossed it over his shoulder. His phone buzzed in his pocket.

"Mom?" Alexander answered, confused. "I just left. Are you missing me that much already?"

"Of course," Twylah responded. "I always miss my baby. That's not why I'm calling, though."

Alexander plopped down on his bed and sunk into the plush mattress. "Go on."

"Where are you right now?"

"My bedroom." Alexander looked up at himself in the mirror secured to his ceiling. His hair was teetering into disaster territory, but it hadn't gone fully frizzy yet, not that it mattered. Who was even going to see it? "Why?"

"Because I asked Annette to leave something for you on your bedside table. Then I gave her the next three weeks off."

"The next three weeks?"

"That's what I said. Same with the rest of your staff. They deserve a break, and so do you. You're taking the next three weeks off work, and you're going to go live your life, Lexy. You've been chained to a desk your entire adult life, and you're wasting

the time you've got left. For God's sake, you're already a billionaire. How much money does one person possibly need?"

Alexander sighed. For him, it had never been about the money. He'd be happy enough living the rest of his life on Sugarplum Island in a quaint little two-bedroom cottage. Rather, he was keeping his father's legacy alive, which that was something he refused to let anyone take from him. Not even Twylah Davenport née Bishop. It was his purpose. His only purpose, it seemed.

"Out of the question," Alexander said, sitting up in his bed. He looked over at his nightstand, and sure enough, a manilla envelope rested on top, along with a plum jam cookie wrapped in cellophane. "Did you have her leave this cookie, too?"

His mother snickered on the phone. "Maybe I did, maybe I didn't. A woman has to keep an air of mystery about her."

"Did you ship it here?"

"I had Annette cook a batch."

Alexander's jaw dropped. "You gave her the recipe? I've been begging for it for decades."

"Yes, well, I thought my baby needed a treat, so I tossed off the veil of secrecy and handed it over."

A smile crept up in the corners of his mouth. It had been less than six hours, and Alexander already missed his mother and Sugarplum Island. Now, he had a cookie to keep as a forget-me-not. One he planned to eat the moment the call ended. He could keep the wrapper, he supposed, but it wasn't the same.

Even if he couldn't go to Sugarplum Island now, Alexander hoped to retire there one day. Maybe he could finally get that dog he always hoped for. Though, he supposed it would have to be a docile creature who knew to leave Professor Plum well enough alone.

He pulled the pocket on his shirt forward, checking on his friend. The little fieldmouse was sleeping soundly, his little legs kicking like he was chasing something in his dreams. Alexander would need to take a trip back to New Orleans to have him looked after soon. With Professor Plum fast asleep, Alexander grabbed the manilla envelope and pulled out a brochure, groaning when he saw a photograph of Ms. Broussard and a handful of her bountiful beaus.

"Absolutely not," Alexander argued, though he knew arguing was futile. "I told you, I don't need a man. I'm fine on my own."

"You're not. I see you, Lexy. I've always seen you. You have a gentle heart, and it's so big, it could beat for half the population of Texas. Working as much as you do, you're letting it go to waste, and I won't stand for it. You're going to pack a bag, you're going to buy you some adorable little Speedos to make the gay boys do a double take, and you're going to get your butt on that boat. I won't take no for an answer."

Alexander eyed the paperwork as resignation settled in his soul. Apparently, for the next two weeks, he would be at sea with a woman he hated with all his heart. A woman he was forced to associate with three times a year to keep the memory of a nearly forgotten friend alive. Alexander pressed a hand over his pocket and gave Professor Plum a delicate squeeze.

Alexander had no desire to spend two weeks with Emily Broussard or her endless selection of potential beaus. Every time he visited New Orleans for Professor Plum's scheduled maintenance, she made a point to show him photographs of the latest

models, always trying to upsell him on something.

Ms. Broussard's Second Chances Cruise, the pamphlet said. Below, it was stated the cruise was a chance to rehome returned bountiful beaus. Alexander didn't want to buy a beau, but a cruise sounded fun. Maybe he could see if there were any other cruise liners currently taking passengers.

Inside the brochure were faces and names of i-Series beaus, all available for purchase. "This makes them look like cattle at an auction," Alexander said to himself, not having meant to voice it aloud.

"I know," Twylah said. "Baby, I think it's a good idea. You have the chance to show kindness. If you find the right man, you can give him a life he won't get with anyone else. You remember how shaken up Elliot was last time he came to the island."

"Elliot." Alexander's voice cracked as he said the name, and the memory of a long walk on a lonely night in late November replayed in his mind. "Have you talked to his owner about placing his orders in advance? If we knew when Elliot was going to arrive, I could meet him on the dock. I don't know why he insists you ferry them back to the mainland instead of just shipping them to him."

"If you moved to the island, you could ride the ferry over to greet him when Jared places the order, cookies in hand. As for his reasoning—who knows why any man does anything he chooses to do? Your minds are basically made up of chaos and stubbornness."

Alexander wanted that, to see Elliot again. He wanted it so much. But what if Elliot was finally happy? What if his master wasn't as horrible as Alexander assumed he was? He couldn't give up his company and move to an island in hopes he might have the chance to tell an old friend hello.

“He was such a sweet man, Lexy. He had heartache stretched around him like a winter poncho, but he was precious. If you won’t try to rescue him, you can rescue one of these men. They all need homes. Do you want them going to homes like the one Elliot lives in? You can prevent a lifetime of cruelty and give one of them a happy ending. That’s not something a lot of people can say.”

“I’m not looking for a romantic partner,” he argued, but he knew it was a half-truth at best and a blatant lie at worst. He was sure he could happily live a life with Elliot. He’d give the man everything his beautiful mind could imagine. As tragic as it was to admit, after a few brief hours spent in Elliot’s company, Alexander found himself smitten. Yes, he’d been busy with work since then, but a small part of him—one he was ashamed to admit, even to himself—was still holding a torch for a man he met five years ago.

Five years.

God. Had it really been that long?

“Then purchase a few of the other men and let them live with you as platonic friends. Your life is stagnant, baby, and I refuse to let you fall into mediocrity. You may be half Davenport, but you’re also half Bishop, and Bishops don’t settle when it comes to happiness.”

She was right, of course, but then, Twylah Bishop always was. So, rather than argue, Alexander sighed and said goodbye, ending the call and bringing up his message chain with Emily Broussard, needing to schedule Professor Plum’s maintenance. Once plans were made, Alexander fished Professor Plum out of his shirt pocket and cuddled next to him in bed. Professor Plum peeked up with his sleepy eyes, and for the briefest of moments, his lips curved into a smile.

Alexander looked around the room as if an audience might suddenly appear out of

thin air. Once the coast was clear, Alexander leaned closer and kissed Professor Plum's head, whispering, "Do you want to go on a trip?"

Squeak-squeak-squeak.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

Elliot sat at a table with mismatched chairs, in a room with bookshelves for walls. Arthur and Periwinkle's quiet library loft was certainly charming, but it was an open room with no privacy. The moment he entered the room, he knew his dream was over. There was simply no room for Elliot in their living quarters. He didn't bother asking if they could make space for him, because he knew the answer would be no. The answers to his questions usually were.

Arthur and Periwinkle Price fussed over Elliot, serving him herbal tea and placing plump cookies on a plate in front of him, but Elliot didn't need their cookies. He still had the one he'd been saving since his visit to Sugarplum Island three days or weeks or months ago. It must have been weeks, because Jared sent him weekly, but it didn't feel like a week. A week since he collected them, perhaps, but much longer than a week since he'd stepped foot on Sugarplum Island, though he wasn't sure how he knew that.

When had he last visited? Tuesday? Or was it on a Sunday? It certainly couldn't have been on a Monday, as that was when Elliot did his gardening. It was his favorite day of the week, because Jared allowed him to remain powered on through the day. The whole day!

There were also two women Elliot had never met at Arthur and Peri's, and the longer they conversed with each other, the more enthralled Elliot became. The first woman, introduced as Mrs. Honey Peppercorn—a ridiculous name, Elliot thought—was in her eighties, and she was wearing a ginger wig. Her eyelids were slathered with blue eyeshadow and ruby red lipstick meticulously coated her lips, not a single smudge, all the way around. The dress she wore was peppered with gardenias. It was Elliot's all-time-favorite flower, and when she pulled out a small bottle of perfume with a glass

gardenia-shaped cap, his heart swelled in his chest. She pumped three hefty spritzes onto her neck, and two on each wrist, much to the rest of the table's displeasure. Not to Elliot's, though. He thought it smelled lovely, and he wanted to know more about Mrs. Honey Peppercorn.

The other woman had golden skin and called herself Princess Rivera. He wondered if, by chance, she held any relation to Mayor Beau Rivera, but the woman was busy chatting with Mrs. Peppercorn, and Elliot didn't want to interrupt.

Luckily enough, fate was on Elliot's side. Her phone chimed, and when she looked down, Princess Rivera smiled, turning to Elliot, drawing him into the conversation by holding up her phone. "It seems my nephew was quite smitten with you," she said, answering his unasked question. "He just sent me a text saying he hopes you can become 'biffles.' Whatever the heck that means." Elliot wasn't sure what it meant either, but he went along with it, politely nodding his head.

The cup of tea was calling his name, but he resisted its siren song, trying to pay attention to the women in front of him. "He was a very kind man. I hope I have the chance to see more of him." He eyed Princess up and down like she was God coming down from on high. "Your skin is very pretty."

Princess looked into the mirror by Arthur and Periwinkle's bed, just behind the table. "Normally I'd agree, but I've had a zit the size of Dallas on the tip of my nose for two days. It'll be back to flawless soon, but it's irritating as hell at the moment."

Dallas.

Jared lived in Dallas. So did someone else, Elliot thought, though he couldn't remember who. Why was he having so much trouble remembering the shadow character in his head? First the plum jam cookies, then Dallas. It's like some cut out bits of his brain containing terribly important memories and replaced it with cake

frosting, leaving only the sugary remnants of what might have been. If only Elliot could remember what it was that might have been.

The cookie! Elliot had been holding onto it for dear life, waiting for the perfect moment to indulge. He'd never eaten solid foods—that's what his internal processor was telling him, at least. Though Elliot couldn't pinpoint the memory, something deep inside of him was screaming out that he ate one before, and it was the greatest moment of his short life.

Elliot carefully removed the cookie's cellophane wrapper and smiled down at it. He waited so long to taste it. The jam dollop in the center was calling out to him, begging Elliot to taste.

He brought the cookie closer to his face and sniffed softly, so as not to inhale a cookie crumb. The scent was almost gone, but there were still traces of sugary sweetness left behind. He'd been waiting so long to try it, but Elliot still couldn't bring himself to indulge. Eating the cookie would mean he had nothing left to hold on to. No tether to those foggy memories he couldn't seem to jog. He wanted to eat the cookie, but he didn't want to forget that there was something he needed to remember. So, with a heavy heart and shaking hands, Elliot wrapped the cookie once more and slid it into his pocket, packing it away for a rainy day.

"So," Arthur finally said, his voice calm as he turned to face Elliot. He looked down at Elliot's baby bump. "When did this happen?"

Elliot forced a smile. "Three months." That's what Jared told him just days before his grand escape, when Elliot's memory hit a blip. The math didn't make much sense to him, though, because when he'd gone to Sugarplum Island for plum jam cookies, he'd been thin as a rake, and that was only earlier in the week. But then, there were other flashes from a timeline that made little sense to Elliot. Weeks and weeks of invasive tests at Jared's expense, performed by Mother. When did those tests happen?

He had no fixed point in his memory, simply a vague recollection. With shame and a sense of failure fresh in his heart, Elliot quietly added, "I cannot have this child. Master Price, he . . . he is not a kind man."

"Oh, Elliot," Periwinkle whispered, taking his hand.

"I've run away from home," Elliot said with a sniffle. "Please do not tell Master Price where I am. He'll be very cross with me."

Periwinkle squeezed his hand. "Jared Price can go straight to Hell."

"You know how I feel about swearing," Mrs. Peppercorn scolded.

Periwinkle blushed. "Sorry, Mum."

"I can't go back. Not me. Not my . . . my baby," Elliot whispered. His mind went to places he knew it shouldn't. Visions of the pain Jared inflicted upon him. Pain he would more than likely deliver to their child. He couldn't allow that to happen. He wouldn't. When Elliot opened his eyes, there were tears welled in the corners, ready to spill. "Please? Please, you must help me." Elliot was frantic. Desperate to escape the situation he was forced into. He didn't want Jared's child. He didn't want Jared's anything. All Elliot had ever wanted was to love and be loved in return. Why did Jared make that impossible? Would it have killed Jared to show kindness? Would it have put a damper on his day? He grabbed Periwinkle's wrist. "I can't go back. May I please stay with you?"

Periwinkle and Arthur shared a look, then looked around their small library annex.

Elliot felt like a fool. Of course, they didn't have room for him. Who did? Who would even want to make room for him? Elliot forced a smile to keep himself from crying, because he was closer than he'd ever been to breaking down and sobbing

uncontrollably. He couldn't rely on Periwinkle for protection. Elliot knew it was a long shot when he boarded the bus, but seeing the men silently contemplating how to tell him "no" felt like a punch to the gut, and Elliot knew all about gut punches. He'd received enough of them to last him a lifetime.

Elliot closed his eyes and took a breath, steadying his emotions. As mother once told him, no one would ever want to associate with a househusband prone to hysteria, and he was having such a lovely time with these fascinating new women in his life.

"Please, forget I said anything. I was only joking. I'm just here for a friendly visit," Elliot attempted, but he was fairly confident everyone at the table saw past the lie. He stood from his chair, wanting to bow out gracefully before his new friends saw him for the failure he truly was. Maybe Jared was right. Perhaps it was all Elliot's fault no one stuck around, and he truly was the most common denominator. It's possible the last three cooks truly quit because of Elliot's incessant chatter during the day. And maybe the housekeepers truly resigned because Elliot would follow them around, desperate for company.

Everyone left.

Why did everyone always have to leave?

"Elliot," Periwinkle whispered, squeezing his shoulder.

"I've had such a lovely chat," Elliot said, his voice breaking. "I hope we can do it again sometime." He wanted that. He wanted it so much. "I truly hope so. But I'll be off; Jared will be expecting me."

Someone's palm slammed against the small table they'd been sitting at, and when he looked down, Mrs. Peppercorn's hand was flat on the surface, and she had a commanding presence about her. "Sit down, young man."

Elliot's jaw trembled. He needed to get out of there, because if he didn't, he wasn't sure how much longer he could hold on. "I really must be going."

Mrs. Peppercorn shook her head. Looking over at Princess, Mrs. Peppercorn barked, "Shove over." Princess smiled and nodded, standing and offering Elliot her chair. Though he was frightened, Elliot pushed past that fear, and took the seat he was offered. "Elliot, sweetheart, do you really want to go home?" Elliot opened his mouth to assure her he was fine, but she shook her head. "Don't lie to me. I'll know."

Periwinkle nodded. "It's true. She's an intuitive empath, whatever that means. I think it might be witchcraft, but I've been too frightened she'll turn me into a toad to ask."

Mrs. Peppercorn rolled her eyes. "Double double, the tramp's about to be in trouble if he doesn't watch that tone." She turned and smiled at Elliot. "The point is, I know you don't want to go home, baby. It's written all over your face, clear as day." Mrs. Peppercorn took Elliot's hand and, oh, the way his heart ached for more. He couldn't remember the last time someone touched him without inflicting pain, and Elliot wanted to hold on tight and refuse to let go. "Has he hurt you, baby?"

Elliot's jaw wobbled, and he couldn't get any words out, but he managed to nod.

"Oh, sugar," she softly cooed. "And you're worried he'll do the same to your baby?" Elliot nodded again. Mrs. Peppercorn looked around the table, speaking to Arthur, Periwinkle, and Princess. "We're Auxiliary. Auxiliary sticks together." It felt as if she was reminding them of some near-forgotten law. "So we'll do the same thing we did when Ms. Broussard tried to confiscate Periwinkle. We'll figure it out. We'll find a way."

"We'll take care of you," Periwinkle added, placing his hand on top of Elliot's and looking into his eyes. "We won't say a word if Jared comes looking for you."

Arthur nodded. “Peri’s right. You’re safe now, Elliot. I’m sorry I never stood up for you before.” He placed his hand on top of Periwinkle’s. “I’ll stand up for you now. We’ll do whatever it takes to get you through this.”

“Because you’re family now,” Mrs. Peppercorn declared, placing her hand on top of Arthur’s. “And family helps.”

“If you want a boyfriend, my nephew is single,” Princess added, placing her hand on top of Mrs. Peppercorn’s. “And my, oh my, he’s ready to mingle.”

Mrs. Peppercorn groaned, removing her hand from the pile. “Like your sweet potato pie, your ability to read a room leaves much to be desired.”

“And much like your wig . . . Actually, no. I don’t have a comeback. I thought I did. Silly me figuring it would come to me as I was talking, but that didn’t happen.” With a huff, Princess folded her arms across her chest and pouted.

“You can stay with me, dear,” Mrs. Peppercorn said. “I’d love to have you.” Elliot looked at Periwinkle who was practically hopping in his seat.

“Yes!” Periwinkle exclaimed. “Yes, to that idea. Oh, Elliot, you’ll love it. She makes the best milky tea in Genevieve—”

“She what?” Arthur interrupted, arching an accusatory eyebrow, which in turn caused the color to drain from Periwinkle’s face.

“Aside from you!” Periwinkle shouted, bolting up from his chair and sitting on his husband’s lap. “Oh, Arthur. Your milky tea is the best milky tea in the world. I wasn’t thinking.” Periwinkle’s apologetic expression faded, making room for a look Elliot had only seen a handful of times. Elliot braced for impact. “I am only human, Arthur. I mean, not an actual human, but I’m made in their likeness. We both know

I'm bound to fumble along the way, and how dare you scold me for it?"

"I wasn't scolding anything," Arthur insisted with a smile. "I was just saying my tea is the best tea." Arthur traced Periwinkle's jaw. "I promise, baby, I wasn't trying to upset you."

"Arthur," Periwinkle whined, burying his face in Arthur's neck.

Elliot looked at Mrs. Peppercorn. "Are they like this very often?"

Mrs. Peppercorn sighed as if the weight of the world rested on her shoulders. "Endlessly. It's cute, but it can be a bit much at times." She reached over and squeezed Elliot's hand. "I mean it, sugar. I would be so happy to have you stay with me. It gets lonely around the house, and I'd love the company."

Elliot's jaw trembled. "You're sure?"

"Surer than sunrise, baby."

Half an hour later—once the tea was drunk and all the cookies devoured, Mrs. Peppercorn announced she wanted to take Elliot to see his new dwelling. Elliot wasn't aware it would take Mrs. Peppercorn an additional five minutes to say her goodbyes, so he walked toward the narrow staircase leading down to the library, pausing when something caught his eye. There was a brochure on the small table where Periwinkle and Arthur kept their mail keys. When he picked up the brochure, his heart skipped a beat. It was an invitation from Mother. An all-expenses paid bountiful beaus booze cruise, whatever that meant. Next to the brochure was a handwritten card inviting Arthur and Periwinkle. An olive branch, perhaps. Elliot had heard from Jared that when Periwinkle and Arthur were separated and Periwinkle needed to move home with Mother, Periwinkle gave Mother a dressing down in front of God and everyone.

Periwinkle squeezed Elliot's shoulder, then traced his finger against the card. "A peace offering, I think." Periwinkle huffed out a sharp breath. "She can save it for someone who wishes for peace." He grabbed the card and quickly ripped it in half. "I want nothing but time and distance from her."

Elliot wasn't sure if Periwinkle said anything after that, as his focus was elsewhere, his attention undivided from the brochure. On the cover, there was an old photograph from the first wave of i-Series beaus, with Elliot at Mother's side. He flipped through the brochure, studying image after image of other beaus and their suitors. In one photograph, Arthur stood next to Periwinkle, while Elliot and Jared were on the right. The sight of the man who was his tormentor for so very long sent a wave of dread crashing inside him.

But then Elliot saw him.

He knew that face.

Elliot knew he knew the man, but he didn't know how. He smiled at the picture, though. He smiled bigger and brighter than he ever had, and a chorus of home-home-home played out in his mind. His eyes were misty, but Elliot didn't think the tears forming were sad ones. Considering the lights flickering in his eyes were pink, they must have been happy tears. The man—whoever he was—had been a shadow character in Elliot's mind for so long. He was the missing puzzle piece that got removed and was patched over with cake frosting, but it was still there, deep, deep down.

"Mr. Alexander Davenport of Dallas, Texas," Periwinkle said at his side, and that was all it took. Elliot shattered, and all the hurt and hope crashed together, pouring out, down his cheeks and onto the floor. As Periwinkle tried to console him, Elliot slipped a hand into his pocket and pulled out his cookie. It felt like the right time.

“Alexander,” Elliot whispered, trying the name on for size. God, it felt so right. Like it fit Elliot perfectly. As if Alexander was made just for him. He unwrapped the cellophane from the cookie and smiled at the picture, taking the first bite of food he could ever remember taking. The taste was familiar, which was strange, because Elliot couldn’t remember a time when he tasted it before. Aside from drinks, he never tasted anything at all. However it happened, Elliot knew the flavor by heart. A warm and cozy ocean view on a dark and foggy night. That’s what it tasted like. Like home.

“He’s such a sweetheart,” Periwinkle said. “I stumbled and fell at my cotillion, and he scooped me up and eased my nerves. After Jared ordered Mother to confiscate me from Arthur and take me back to New Orleans, Alexander offered to purchase me and give me a happy life.” Elliot tore his eyes away from the picture of Alexander in time to see Periwinkle gaze contentedly at his husband. “My heart’s only ever beat for Arthur, though.”

“Will he be attending this cruise?” Elliot lifted the brochure, wanting to see Alexander even closer. His dark brown hair was parted to the side. Freckles peppered his cheeks, some big, some small. And that smile. That smile would be the death of Elliot, he just knew it.

Periwinkle shrugged. “I’m not sure. I can call and ask.”

Elliot’s eyes bulged and it felt as if ants were tiptoeing through inside his stomach, making him twitch and giggle like a lovesick teenager in some movies he’d seen. “You have his number? You know how to contact him?”

“Indeed, I do. Oh, Elliot, he’s such a sweetheart. You’d love him. His first bountiful beau ran away with one of our brothers. Apparently, they inadvertently bonded when they were still living with Mother. Doug and—”

“Gus!” Elliot exclaimed, nodding his head at a rapid pace. He remembered. He didn’t

remember everything, but he remembered some. Alexander. Plum jam cookies. A little fieldmouse. And Gus, apparently. Gus who cut his own arm open to remove his tracking chip. Gus who had inadvertently inspired Elliot's escape because his was the story Elliot remembered. His was the life Elliot never would have thrown away. Elliot lifted his arm for Periwinkle to see. "He cut out his tracking chip just to find true love." His jaw trembled.

"Is that what the bandage is for?" Periwinkle's eyes widened. "You cut out your chip?"

"Yes. I didn't know why at the time, but somewhere inside me I remembered that story. It's . . . Periwinkle, it's like there are bits of my memory I can't get back. Like they were cut out and someone's put cake frosting in their place."

Periwinkle's face dropped. "Oh, Elliot." He squeezed Elliot's shoulder and leaned closer, eyes narrowed as he studied Elliot's face.

"I'm not sure what's happening right now," Elliot whispered, because Periwinkle was so close it felt silly to speak much louder. "You're very close to my face. If you're attempting to kiss me, I would like to remind you that you're a married man, and I am neither snake nor philanderer."

Periwinkle rolled his eyes. "Obviously, I'm not attempting to kiss you. For God's sake, Arthur is right behind me. I'm hardly going to shove my tongue down your throat." He lifts his hand and pokes Elliot in the cheek. "Have you felt fuzzy headed? Do you have headaches when you think too hard about certain stuff?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

Periwinkle shook his head, poking Elliot's cheek again. "No." Periwinkle gave Elliot a sad smile that radiated sympathy. He didn't know what on Earth he might need

Periwinkle's sympathy for, aside from the abuse Elliot suffered at Jared's hand.

Periwinkle opened his mouth to say more, only to close it when Mrs. Peppercorn finally approached, sliding her hand into Elliot's and giving it a squeeze.

"Are you ready, sugar?" she asked Elliot.

No, Elliot wasn't ready. He wanted to know more about Mr. Alexander Davenport, but he could hardly tell Mrs. Peppercorn no. She was opening her home to him, after all, so he simply gave her the warmest smile he could, and nodded.

He stared down at Alexander's smiling face one final time, knowing he needed to meet the man. Knowing Alexander held answers about the missing seconds and minutes and hours of Elliot's cake-frosting memories.

"May I keep this?" he asked Periwinkle. "Please?"

Periwinkle nodded. "I've already found my forever. I have no need for a dating cruise."

The room Mrs. Peppercorn provided Elliot was a lovely little space. It was on the second floor, right next to hers, and she told Elliot it belonged to her no-good, low-down, dirty dog of a son. Apparently, the man hadn't called his mother in close to two weeks. It made Elliot sad for Mrs. Peppercorn, because she seemed like such a lovely lady, and he couldn't imagine why anyone wouldn't want to call her for a quick chat every day.

That night, Elliot sat on his new bed, studying the photograph of Mr. Alexander Davenport. He still had half his cookie left, and he'd received permission from Mrs. Peppercorn to finish it in his room, provided he left no crumbs on the bedding. Elliot was the cleanest househusband he'd ever known, so he knew it wouldn't be a

problem.

Elliot sighed, because if Alexander lived in Dallas, he could have simply tracked the man down and avoided this entire trip to Georgia. While Elliot knew it was a long shot, something about Alexander screamed ‘caregiver,’ so he knew Alexander would have taken him in. He just knew it.

Elliot needed to receive clarification on whether Alexander would be aboard Mother’s second chance cruise for certain, because if he was, nothing would stop Elliot from finding him. Mother might spot him on the boat and ask what he was doing there without Jared, but that was another battle for another day.

So, two days later, when Periwinkle finally spoke with Alexander and confirmed he would be aboard the cruise, Elliot made his decision. He would sneak onto the boat, find Mr. Alexander Davenport, and ask about his missing memories. Elliot just hoped neither Periwinkle nor Mrs. Peppercorn were terribly cross with him after the voyage.

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Professor Plum was unhinged. It was the only word Alexander could use to describe his little buddy's behavior. The moment they boarded the cruise ship, Professor Plum began clawing at Alexander's shirt pocket, trying desperately to get out. Alexander held the little mouse in his hand, trying to soothe him. Even as he held the mouse, his head looked left to right, like he caught the scent of something delicious and wanted to find the source.

The boat was quite impressive for such a small event. It was a three-tier ship with guest cabins on the bottom tier, group activities, a pool, and dining areas on the mid-section, and all auctions were to be held on the top floor. A man in a tuxedo greeted them at the check-in counter, offering Alexander a key to his VIP suite as six other automatons in tuxedos waited patiently, their backs against the wall.

At least he would have a bit of peace and quiet to look forward to. Alexander paid extra for the suite, as Ms. Broussard's booking coordinator had advised him that's where he would have the most privacy. Alexander couldn't stand the thought of listening to rowdy, drunken men fornicate with their new beaus. All he wanted was a week away from the hustle and bustle, and, hopefully, the chance to see an old friend.

The clerk at the counter—a man named Clarence, if his name tag was to be believed—tapped a small bell on the desk, and one of the several waiting beaus rushed toward them. The beau had short blond hair, conservative in cut and parted at the side. He took both of Alexander's bags, then motioned toward the elevator bank.

“This way, sir.”

Alexander gave the bountiful beau a warm smile before tagging along, Professor

Plum still peeking his head out of Alexander's fist, looking every which way.

After being shown around the ship, the automaton walked Alexander and Professor Plum to their cabin, and once Alexander shut the door, Professor Plum raced around the room, sniffing all he could. Alexander watched his every step as he placed his clothing in the small closet provided for him, doing his best to avoid crushing the mouse under his foot. He'd done it four times already, and each time, Ms. Broussard scolded him for interrupting her alleged busy schedule to perform maintenance on a mouse. Alexander should have just let Professor Plum pass in peace after their first year together, but he couldn't. The mouse was his closest friend and his only tether to the man with the plum jam cookies he met all that time ago.

Alexander still clung to the memories of Elliot and the morning they shared on Sugarplum Island. He wasn't sure what it was about Elliot that kept him locked in Alexander's heart like a priceless heirloom. Maybe it was the overwhelming cloud of sadness that formed around the bountiful beau, possibly. Or maybe it was that spark. The strange fluttering in his heart that sang out mine-mine-mine as they conversed on the dock. Whatever the reason, Alexander couldn't forget about dear Elliot, and he didn't want to forget about him, either. He knew, should their paths cross, Elliot would want to see the fieldmouse. So, when Professor Plum's health began to decline, Alexander made a call to Emily Broussard.

"Yes," she told him. "I can save him. For a price, of course."

She placed the mouse's brain inside a mechanical body, then she stitched him shut. The procedure cost Alexander well over six figures, but Professor Plum was priceless, so he paid for it with a smile. He just hoped Elliot might get the chance to see their friendly fieldmouse again.

For the trip, Alexander brought six suits, six sets of day clothes, six pairs of briefs and socks, shoes, and six Speedos in case he wanted to swim. He also brought six

Valium, because he wasn't terribly thrilled about having to converse with so many people.

His mother had been the driving force in his signing up for the cruise. Well, his mother, and the image of Elliot on the brochure. It had been so long since he'd seen the man, and he hoped beyond hope he was one of the beaus being sold on the trip. The brochure said there were over forty automatons needing loving homes; all previously owned by men who determined the bountiful beaus weren't a good fit, whatever that meant. He wanted to ask about Elliot specifically, but Emily Broussard was impossible to reach via phone, and each time he emailed her, her response seemed to be AI generated.

Alexander had had quite enough of Emily Broussard and her silly games.

On his first night aboard the ship, halfway through dinner, the lights in the large dining room dimmed, and an old, forgotten ballad from the fifties played out over the speaker. As Doris Day reminded Alexander that whatever would be would be, Ms. Broussard glided across the small stage at the front of the room, her movement so fluid it almost looked as if she was ice skating.

Tapping the microphone, Ms. Emily Broussard peered out over the crowd of men in tuxes, looking the epitome of elegance. She wore a red sequined ballgown that worked well with her dark auburn hair. Ms. Broussard's hair had always confused Alexander. He wasn't sure why she insisted on styling it in a Marcel wave, but it made her look like a character in a silent movie. She clasped her hands to her chest and grinned at the crowd; the applause swelling through the room only making her smile stretch wider. After far too long spent clapping, Alexander turned his attention back to the small dish of chocolate mousse he'd been provided. Slowly, he worked his spoon across the surface, scraping the smallest of bites onto the utensil. He knew Emily Broussard loved to talk other people's ears off, so the longer he made his dessert last, the longer he would have a distraction from his perpetual boredom.

“At Ms. Broussard’s Home for Bountiful Beaus, we provide a love story for the ages. From creation to cotillion, I raise my boys to be the perfect picture of a submissive househusband.”

Alexander heard the spiel back when he first purchased Goose. She ranted and rambled about homemaking and submission, but that was never Alexander’s reasoning for using Ms. Broussard’s services. He had no need for a maid, as he already had three on staff. He didn’t give a damn about submission, because Alexander had employees to submit to his whims already. No, Alexander simply wanted a kind face to look upon after a long day at work. Someone who might hold him when times were hard and things were hectic. A tether. A touchstone to keep him grounded. Someone to love, and to be loved by in return.

In his tuxedo pocket, Professor Plum’s tiny claws dug through the fabric of Alexander’s shirt, trying to escape. No matter what Alexander tried, the little mouse refused to sit still. Odd, considering he usually calmed down after being petted or shown attention. There was no calming him this time, Alexander realized, so he pushed back his chair, hoping to sneak back to his suite so he could let Professor Plum run wild.

Unfortunately, Professor Plum made one final attempt at escape, and it proved successful. Hopping out of the pocket and rushing toward the door, Professor Plum made his exit. Alexander knew he needed to grab the fieldmouse before it could escape to the deck and potentially fall into the sea. So Alexander gave up any pretense of making a graceful exit and ran across the dining room at full speed, knocking into chairs and other suitors along the way. There were shouts for Alexander to be careful, but he ignored them all, because someone had chosen that precise moment to open the dining room door, granting Professor Plum his means of escape.

Damn, Alexander thought, running even faster than before. Outside, he dashed across

the deck, his eyes fixed and focused on the runaway rodent. They both ran up-up-up a seemingly endless set of stairs. Professor Plum was leading him to the ship's top tier, and nervousness coursed through Alexander, because they passed a large sign, warning him intruders were not allowed in the bountiful beaus' bay without prior approval by Ms. Broussard. Yes, well, tough luck. If Emily Broussard took issue with Alexander saving his only friend's life—God, how tragic was that? His only friend was a runaway fieldmouse—she was more than welcome to send him ashore. At least he wouldn't have to listen to anymore of her self-indulgent speeches.

Professor Plum eventually stopped running and pressed his nose against the ground, sniffing something out. He was well within Alexander's reach, but there was something inside Alexander telling him to see this thing through. The fieldmouse was clearly onto something, and curiosity had gotten the better of him. When the mouse came to a stop at a door marked Employees Only, against his better judgment, Alexander couldn't stop his fingers from curling around the knob and twisting it open.

The moment the door was open, Alexander gasped. The room was roughly twice the size of his suite, and in it, powered-down bountiful beaus rested carelessly on the floor. It looked as if they were all tossed inside with no care or consideration for how the beaus landed. It twisted in his gut like a knife, because the beaus had—once again—been treated like trash.

"I know you," a voice whispered from a darkened corner of the cabin. "I don't remember how, but I remember your face." Footsteps echoed lightly against the floor until a face crept from the shadows and into the light provided by the cracked door.

Alexander's heart skipped a beat, because there, as if he always had been, stood Elliot Price. He took another step forward, his hand softly stroking a large bump in his tummy.

Alexander swallowed. “Elliot?”

Elliot was an idiot. A nincompoop with absolutely no common sense. It was the only answer he could come up with as he sat in the dark room for hours, waiting for nightfall.

For all intents and purposes, Elliot still belonged to Jared Price. If Mother found him on her cruise ship, Elliot knew he would be returned, and if he was returned, he knew he might never make it out of Jared’s home again. Knowing all of that, Elliot also knew he had to meet Alexander Davenport. He needed to know about the frosting-filled holes in his memory. Why had he been on the island past dark? Why did he remember the hint of a kiss on Sugarplum Island’s ferry dock? Why couldn’t Elliot just forget? It would have been easier if he’d forgotten Alexander completely, like so many other moments. If the memory hadn’t lingered as long as it had, Elliot would be back home in Jared Price’s mansion. Granted, he would probably be in pain, as he so often was at the hands of Jared Price, but that pain would pale in comparison to whatever punishment he would receive when he was eventually returned to the man.

Elliot had the chance to escape, once and for all, and he chose instead to chase the memory of a mostly forgotten early morning exchange. The day before, he snuck from Mrs. Honey Peppercorn’s small home, preparing to take a taxi to Galveston, Texas. Being that it was an extremely long journey—and not wanting to ride another bus for multiple days on end—Elliot phoned the local taxi service in Genevieve, Georgia, and made them an offer they couldn’t refuse, using cash taken from Jared’s wall safe. An hour later, Elliot tiptoed from his new bedroom and out Mrs. Peppercorn’s front door. Unfortunately, he wasn’t as sneaky as he’d hoped, and Mrs. Peppercorn was already waiting outside, holding a small pink suitcase as she leaned against the waiting taxi.

“Baby, I know where you’re going, and I’m not going to stop you,” Mrs. Peppercorn said. “But I will not allow you to go alone, especially with that charlatan at the ship’s

helm.”

Charlatan, Elliot thought, described Mother to perfection. She offered love stories to the highest bidder, claiming her sons lived to serve their masters. She stated time and again that their master’s pleasure was the beau’s only concern, but that wasn’t true. Elliot had many concerns. Concerns for his personal safety. Concerns for his missing memories. In fact, the only thing Elliot had absolutely no concern for was Master Jared Price’s pleasure.

When they arrived in New Orleans, Elliot convinced Mrs. Peppercorn to assist him in stowing away on the ship. Refusing to leave his side, Mrs. Peppercorn wedged them both inside a crate labeled Bountiful Beaus . The space was compact, and the pair were more than a little cramped. Thankfully, they didn’t have to wait long before the crate was in motion, being wheeled up an incline. When they came to a stop, they could hear a door open, and they rolled forward once again, then there was the sound of nails being pried from wood as light flickered in through the crack. The moment the lid came loose, light barreled into the once-dark crate, and the man on the other side—Rodolfo, his name tag said—gaped at them.

Rodolfo startled, hopping back. “What in tarnation?”

Mrs. Peppercorn glared at the man. “You call this a luxury suite? I can barely move my legs.” She flung her arm up, as if seeking assistance from the man, but as soon as she was standing, she cupped the man’s cheek and said, “I’m terribly sorry for this, sugar.” As the worker stared confusedly at her, she lifted her suitcase from the crate and placed it on the floor, opening it. With the suitcase out of the crate, Elliot’s vision was obstructed, so he couldn’t see what she was searching for. He wasn’t sure what Mrs. Peppercorn was grinning about, but then she stood up straight, and she was holding a—

“Mrs. Peppercorn,” Elliot had started, “why would you bring a rolling pin on a

cruise?”

Mrs. Peppercorn then winked at him and whirled on her heel, bopping Rodolfo on the head, sending the poor man toppling to the floor in a heap.

“I’m terribly sorry,” Mrs. Peppercorn repeated sincerely. “Don’t worry, though, baby. Once we’ve found my new friend’s old boyfriend on this ship, we’ll let you go. Until then, I’m afraid we’ll need to tie you up.”

“Alexander was never my boyfriend,” Elliot pointed out, though he wished he had been. He peeked over the side of the crate. “And Mr. Rodolfo can’t hear you. He seems to be unconscious.”

Mrs. Peppercorn nodded in agreement. “Yes, well, I’ve always wanted to give a villainous monologue where I explain my reasoning for committing various atrocities. We’re here to make your dreams come true, so I figured I could scratch that one off my bucket list in the process. I apologize if I’ve upstaged you, baby.” Leaning down, she gave Elliot a kiss on the forehead.

And there they waited. Waited for the ship to depart. Waited for daylight to turn to moonlight flickering in through the room’s skylight. They waited for hours and hours amidst a pile of powered-down automatons. Rodolfo waited with them, startling awake just as Mrs. Peppercorn and Elliot finished tying his arms and legs. To their surprise, Rodolfo hadn’t made a single peep since. He’d just smiled at them and sat quietly in the corner, eyeing Mrs. Peppercorn curiously.

By the time the doorknob twisted, darkness already shrouded the room. Elliot scurried back as far as he could, wedging himself in a corner, his arms wrapped around his shins.

Moonlight crept through the crack in the door, and then something small scurried

around Elliot's ankle before latching onto the white trousers he changed into in the off chance someone caught them. That way, at least, he could hide beneath the other beaus' bodies and remain incognito.

But when Alexander came into view, it was like emerging from a thick fog. Elliot stood, though he hadn't meant to do so, and stepped forward, one foot in front of the other, not stopping until he was right in front of Mr. Alexander Davenport. Something tickled his shoulder, but he couldn't look away from the man whose vague memory haunted him. The forgotten memory that refused to stay forgotten.

"I know you," Elliot said along the way. "I don't remember how, but I remember your face."

Squeak, squeak.

"Elliot," Alexander said, and the sound of his voice felt like coming home. Elliot's jaw trembled, and his hand found his baby bump, slowly rubbing the little life growing inside. "Oh, Elliot. What have they done to you?"

Elliot flinched, because Alexander's words were like pity personified. He didn't want Alexander's pity. He wasn't entirely sure what he wanted from Alexander, but of all the things he could wish for, he wished for pity the least. Alexander turned and shut the door behind them, locking the knob and protecting them from the outside world. Alexander's hand patted at the wall, half his face illuminated by the small slice of glowing silver that peeked in from the skylight. When he found the light and his pale complexion became clearer, the memory of a quiet kiss shared on a ferry dock returned to him, playing out like a movie in his head.

"Mr. Alexander Davenport," Elliot whispered. "I think I've missed you all my life." He sniffled as he took in the sight of Alexander's handsome face. His cleft chin. The way his brown eyes seemed to sparkle. The small string of freckles that rested across

his cheeks and the bridge of his nose.

Elliot reached into his pocket and touched his plum jam cookie. He'd already eaten half the sugary treat the day he arrived in Genieve, but he saved the rest for later, hoping he might share it with Alexander. The cookie served as an anchor, locking him in reality so he didn't drift back to the frosting-filled memories he often got lost in.

Alexander had a dumbfounded grin on his face, and Elliot had to resist the urge to touch his cheek.

"I missed you, too," he whispered, making Elliot's heart race. "You don't know how happy I am to see you. I was hoping you would be here." Alexander reached for him, and as Elliot leaned into the touch, he closed his eyes, allowing himself to melt in Alexander's palm like chocolate. "Sweet boy."

When Elliot opened his eyes, pink light flooded into the corners, and the longer it went on the more awestruck Alexander appeared. "I've tried to remember you for so long. Your face has been stuck in my mind for ages."

Squeak, squeak.

Looking down at his shoulder, Elliot noticed a small fieldmouse staring up at him. The mouse was waiting patiently, as if he wanted to give Alexander and Elliot a moment before making his presence known, but in his excitement, he'd failed in doing so.

"I believe I know you, too," Elliot said, stroking the mouse's head.

"He's missed you. Ever since I showed him your picture on the cruise brochure, he hasn't calmed down. Even at dinner, he kept trying to get away."

Elliot looked at Alexander. “Why?”

The corner of Alexander’s mouth twitched. “He led me right to you. It’s like he knew you were here the whole time.”

“Dónde está el hombre?” Mrs. Peppercorn said, startling Elliot. He looked over his shoulder to find her staring dreamily at Rodolfo, who was staring just as dreamily at her. “Con fuego en la sangre.”

Fire flashed in Rodolfo’s eyes. “Esta aquí, mamá, y le hierve la sangre.”

“Goodness.” Mrs. Peppercorn licked her lips. “I don’t know what on Earth you just said, but I’ll do whatever you’re suggesting, and I’ll do it with a smile on my face.”

Rodolfo growled, taking a seductive step forward. “You asked me where the boy with the fire in his blood is. He’s here, mamá. He’s here, and his blood is boiling.”

Mrs. Peppercorn’s eyes widened. “Is that what that means? It’s just a line from a Spice Girls song. My friend Periwinkle plays it to no end. Well, it’s from one of their solo albums, but still.” She bit her bottom lip, causing her upper denture to dislodge. Her cheeks darkened—perhaps with shame, though she seemed fairly shameless moments earlier—and she sucked the denture back into her mouth, maneuvering it into place with her tongue. “Sorry. That wasn’t very ladylike.”

Rodolfo placed a hand on Mrs. Peppercorn’s hip and a growl escaped him. “The silky swallow of a woman without teeth is the best swallow of them all.” He leaned in and nipped at her chin. “Would you like to swallow me?”

Mrs. Peppercorn gaped at him, then she reared back her hand and slapped him in the face. “Well, I never.”

“Not yet,” Rodolfo said with a smirk, making Mrs. Peppercorn blush even brighter. “But you will.”

Mrs. Peppercorn cleared her throat and looked away. “Perhaps.”

Elliot cringed, but Alexander’s touch grounded him. When he looked back at the man, Alexander had a thoughtful expression on his handsome face.

“Would you like to be my guest this week? There are supposed to be all kinds of events. Music, movies, activities. We can get to know each other better.” Alexander took another step forward, leaving absolutely no space between them. Their hands touched, then Alexander weaved their fingers together. “Please?”

Elliot wanted that. He wanted it more than anything, but if he agreed, he would have to go in public. Mother might see them. It struck Elliot that he hadn’t truly thought his plan through. Yes, he found Mr. Alexander Davenport, but he wasn’t sure what he was meant to do next. He was on the run. He escaped his master and cut his own arm open in an effort to stay hidden. All for what, exactly? A five-minute reunion with a man he hardly knew? The entire scheme was ridiculous.

“I can’t. Mr. Davenport—”

“Alexander,” he requested. “Or Alex. Or Lexy.” Alexander’s finger touched Elliot’s chin, tugging until their gazes met. “Call me whatever you want; just say you’ll spend the week with me and Professor Plum.”

Squeak, squeak.

Professor Plum of Sugarplum Island. Missing cookies. A tearful goodbye. The moments came and went like mirages in sunlight, there one moment, gone the next. It hurt Elliot’s head anytime he tried to hold on to the memories, but he didn’t want to

lose them again. He wanted them to stay.

“I want that,” Elliot finally admitted. “But I can’t. I’m not meant to be here.”

“What do you mean?”

Elliot closed his eyes and exhaled slowly, calming himself when all he felt was panic. “Ever since our fateful meeting on Sugarplum Island—” Elliot stopped himself when Alexander snickered. He wasn’t sure what that was about, but he didn’t let it stop him. “As I was saying, ever since our fateful meeting on Sugarplum Island . . .” Elliot blinked in confusion as Alexander’s snicker stretched into a full-blown giggle. The sound and sight were both adorable, but Elliot couldn’t help but worry he was being laughed at rather than laughed with. His cheeks burned with shame, and he stared down at their woven fingers. It reminded him of when Jared would laugh at him for his stupidity. He didn’t want Alexander to think of him that way. “Please don’t laugh at me.”

He must have sounded grief-stricken, because Alexander’s grip tightened, and he raked his thumbs across Elliot’s knuckles. “I’m sorry. I’m not laughing at you, I promise. Well, I guess I kind of was, but not in a cruel way. It’s just the way you talk, it’s like something out of a fairytale. It reminds me of those old Disney movies my mom and I would watch when I was little.” His grip tightened even more. “I swear, I wasn’t trying to be cruel. I love the way you talk.”

“You do?”

“So much,” Alexander admitted. “You’re adorable. Go on, then. What about that fateful day?”

Adorable? Elliot’s heart skipped a beat. “It’s just, I can’t remember a lot of what happened. It feels like someone has cut holes in my memory and filled them with—”

“Frosting,” Alexander finished for him. “Yeah, you mentioned that last time. That sometimes you lost days and weeks at a time.”

“I said that?”

“You mentioned the missing holes, and how they felt like frosting, like you could scoop your fingers through them.”

Elliot thought he heard something click in the background but figured it was simply Mrs. Peppercorn getting fresh with Rodolfo, so he ignored the sound, nodding at Alexander.

“I think someone’s stolen them from me. They didn’t take them all, though. There are a few that stuck around, and I try and try to get them back, but they just flicker around my head and vanish. It hurts too much to try to remember.” He looked down at his baby bump. “I don’t even remember this. My brother Periwinkle said I must be six months along by now, but I can’t remember having it implanted inside me.” He looked up at Alexander, his eyes pleading. “Did I have it when we met last week? Because I don’t remember having a bump on the island.”

When Alexander’s expression fell, it sent Elliot’s hair standing on end. He must have mucked up somehow, but he couldn’t figure out what he might have said to make the man look so sad. “What’s wrong? Have I spoken out of turn? I apologize, Master Davenport, it’s just, I don’t know—I don’t want—” He slammed his eyes shut and shook his head. “Please, don’t be cross with me. Whatever I’ve done, I’m sorry.”

“Elliot,” Alexander murmured, pulling Elliot in for a hug. “Oh, you sweet, sweet boy. I’m not mad, I promise. Your timeline is just a little off.” He rubbed his hand up and down Elliot’s spine, sending chills racing across his body.

“I don’t know what that means.” He felt overcome with so many emotions. Fear of

being caught by Mother. Relief at finding the silhouette he'd been chasing for however long. Maybe even the smallest hint of hope. Tears dripped from Elliot's cheek onto Alexander's tuxedo jacket, and he felt horrible for ruining his outfit, but he couldn't pull away. No one had ever held him the way Alexander held him. It wasn't rough and full of fire, the way Master Price's hugs usually were. It also wasn't soft and familial like the ones he received from Periwinkle after returning to Genevieve. No, Alexander's hugs were warm like a sweater or a cozy fire. He wanted more. More sweaters. More fire to warm him up in a way he'd never been warmed before. "What did you mean about my timeline being off?"

Alexander sighed like the weight of the world rested on his shoulder. "Elliot . . ."

"What he means"—a woman with a creole accent said from behind them. Elliot looked over his shoulder, his heart stopping momentarily when he saw Mother standing at the door—"is that it's been five years since you met."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

Elliot couldn't breathe. Though he didn't need oxygen to survive, the realization that he could no longer draw breath sent Elliot into a panic-stricken tailspin. He clutched at his throat like it might somehow make it easier to breathe. It didn't.

Five years.

Five years?

But he only just met Alexander the week before. Alexander walked him across Sugarplum Island and gave him a goodbye kiss. It felt like only yesterday, even if he couldn't remember much of the morning.

Elliot slammed his eyes shut and focused on what was tangible. A cool sea breeze rushing across his face through the opened door. Pain in his palms from where his nails were digging into his skin. A hand on his cheek. Alexander's breath on his face as he whispered into Elliot's ear. Elliot couldn't understand what Alexander was saying, but his tone was undeniable. He was worried. He sounded just as panicked as Elliot.

The moment Alexander's lips pressed against Elliot's forehead, the automaton's big, brown eyes fluttered open. Gone was the worry over all his lost time. Gone was the fear of what Mother might do to him now that he'd been caught. All that remained was the look of care and concern in Alexander's eyes.

"Mr. Alexander Davenport of Dallas, Texas," Elliot whispered, smiling for what felt like the first time in ages. "I remembered you. I've always remembered you."

“I remembered you, too, Elliot.” He stroked Elliot’s cheek.

“You kissed me. On the island, you gave me a kiss.” His arms crushed Alexander’s waist, refusing to let go. Looking up, Elliot stared into Alexander’s eyes, blinking back tears. “I don’t remember what happened after, but it feels like that kiss meant the world to me at the time. Thank you.”

“Oh, Elliot.”

“As sweet as this is,” Mother said. “It seems we have a few things to discuss. Namely, why you’ve run away from Master Price, why your tracking chip was cut out and left behind, and most importantly, what exactly you think is going to happen here. Elliot, you must stop this. Honestly, I’ve never dealt with a more insolent i-Series Beau in all my life. I gave you life. Provided a love story for the ages. I’ve given you everything, yet you continuously run away. You’re expecting. I put that life inside you, and I don’t intend to see all our planning go to waste. It’s our future. Cutting edge technology. Jared Price gives you everything. What could you possibly want that you don’t already have at home?”

“Freedom,” he breathed. His head was racing and he felt dizzy, because he didn’t know what in the world she was talking about. He hadn’t run away before. Elliot was the textbook definition of a submissive househusband. He put Jared Price’s needs over his own comfort and physical safety more times than he could count.

Elliot knew he couldn’t speak unflatteringly of Master Price to Mother. He wanted to shout at her, though. He wanted to scream that she didn’t know a thing about his life with Jared Price. She wasn’t there each time Jared made him power down, knowing it made Elliot feel as if he was dying. Mother hadn’t been there to see the lewd and unnatural things Master Price forced Elliot to do in their bedroom. She wasn’t there for a single second, so she could take that hateful tone of voice, and she could stuff it where the sun never shined.

Elliot may have wanted to say every single word, but doing so would only earn him a visit with the Creationist, and the last thing Elliot wanted was to be . . .

Reprogrammed.

His eyes bulged, and it felt as if someone had run him through with a sword.

Reprogrammed?

It made sense. It was the only thing that made sense. The missing memories. The cake frosting left in their place. Five years, Mother had said. Five years gone, and now he was with child, not remembering a single moment of the procedure that led him there.

“Have I been reprogrammed?”

Her expression fell. For a moment, he saw a side of Mother he'd never seen before. Remorse? The slightest hint of regret? “Partially,” Mother admitted after a pause. “A few times. Jared brought you to me, claiming you’d been behaving strangely, and he wanted to nip it in the bud. He said you’d been screaming at him. Calling him horrible names and telling him you would kill him if he touched you. I told him a complete reprogramming would stop the outbursts. He refused, though, saying he didn’t want to undo all the home training he'd already given you. The Creationist agreed to do partial reprogrammings to alleviate your . . . episodes.”

Elliot’s heart sank. “You would unwrite my history because I spoke out of turn?”

“You threatened to kill him.”

Elliot shook his head in disbelief. “And you believed him? You believe him over me?”

“It’s not about believing anything. You are his, Elliot. You are the beau Jared had commissioned, and my beaus are my legacy.”

“So I deserve it? Because he paid for me, you believe I deserve everything he does?”

“What I believe doesn't matter. He's a customer.”

“It matters to me.”

Mother rolled her eyes. “It doesn’t. My feelings—your feelings—don’t matter. Your master purchased you. You are his to do with as he sees fit.”

“That's all we are to you, isn’t it? A product.” It hurt his heart to finally realize Mother was no mother at all. She created him with one purpose. To be Jared's punching bag. He lifted his shirt, revealing the blue and yellow markings from where Jared cracked his ribs a few days earlier. “This. This is your legacy. Hurt. Hatred.” He took a step back, slowly shaking his head in disbelief as realization settled in. “You’re a monster.”

“Elliot,” Mother warned. “What does mother say about men prone to hysterics?” Mother arched her meticulously sculpted eyebrow and nodded. “What does Mother say, i-642?”

She already stole his memories. Wasn’t that enough? Did she have to reprimand him in front of Alexander and take away his name? Did she have to use his serial number in front of a man who, only moments prior, made Elliot’s heart feel like it was fluttering?

“Elliot,” Alexander said, pulling his attention away from Mother. “If you want to be upset, then be as upset as you want to be.” He turned and glared at Mother. Elliot had never seen anyone look at Ms. Emily Broussard with so much contempt. “He’s

clearly traumatized. Don't you have a heart?"

"I'm sorry," Elliot whispered, because he was. Sorry for dragging Alexander into the mess he created. Sorry for running away from home, because his punishment was sure to be worse than any he received before. So very sorry this was the life he was given. Now, he had a baby on the way. A baby with Jared's DNA implanted into every cell of its existence.

Elliot was stuck, and he saw no way to become unstuck. He wished he never left Mrs. Peppercorn's lovely home and boarded Mother's cruise ship. There was no point in allowing Alexander to shield him. It would have granted him a few more moments of peace, but he would only be delaying the inevitable. So, with all the courage he could muster, Elliot stepped around Alexander, his face downturned, his heart cracking and shattering into endless pieces.

Alexander rushed in front of him again, reforming the barrier between Elliot and Mother. "Elliot. No." It wasn't a demand like the ones Jared would give him. It wasn't much of a request, either. It was a plea. He was begging Elliot to stay away from Mother, but there was no use.

"Mr. Davenport," Elliot said. "Please, it's all right. I don't wish to drag you into this."

"And I don't want her to scold you for trying to protect yourself."

"We'll need to contact Jared Price," Mother said, ignoring Alexander. "We need to let him know you're safe." When Elliot glanced up, Mother had a phone in her hand, and she was tinkering with the screen. "I hope he doesn't expect the Creationist to perform a reprogramming tonight. Our diary is already filled to its limit."

No.

He couldn't go back. He'd only just broken free. Elliot boarded a bus all alone, and made his way to Genevieve, Georgia, where he met Mayor Beau Rivera and rode in a pink golf cart, peppered with tiaras. He drank tea and eaten plum jam cookies. He felt alive. For the first time in his life, Elliot felt joy. The thought of returning to Jared Price's horrible home felt impossible. Jared would kill him. Elliot knew he would.

Memories of the abuse suffered at the hands of his master fueled him, sending him rushing forward, snatching Mother's phone from her hand, and running out the door. He sprinted across the deck, barreling down the stairwell until he was on the ship's midsection.

Elliot ran and ran, each step feeling like a declaration. He felt the cool saltwater wind on his cheeks and opened his mouth wide like he was attempting to swallow the moment and keep it forever. Elliot ran and ran until there was nowhere left to run, but he wanted to keep running. To never stop, so he would never lose the moment. Because, for a moment—one single, stunning moment—Elliot tasted freedom.

He came to a stop at the railing on the back of the ship and peered into the starry distance, drinking in the scenery. Silver moonlight danced and sparkled against the ocean, and Elliot thought it made the water look a bit like milk, all light and silky and so terribly inviting. He thought of how nice the water must feel, wrapping around you like a long, wet hug.

He held Mother's phone in his hand, whimpering when he saw Jared Price's contact photograph in the center of the screen. Kindness was never Jared's strong point. More often than not, he was downright cruel. Slapping Elliot in the face for minor infractions. Kicking Elliot for accidentally burning dinner. Slamming his fist into Elliot's cheek the times Elliot had trouble pretending the love he once felt for Jared was still true. The thought of going back to the man who caused him so much hurt—the man who stole his memories—wasn't an option. He couldn't live with Jared's constant abuse, he couldn't spend another day under Jared's roof, and he

certainly couldn't bring a baby into the home to suffer the same fate. Jared would try to hurt it.

Had Jared already attempted to hurt it? Was that a memory or just something he saw on television? He shook his foggy head.

Elliot was never one to give into emotional upset, but he was so upset, he didn't know how he could ever move past the pain. He stared down at his baby bump and sobbed, rubbing his hand over the growing life inside him.

He could hear hurried footsteps behind him. Mother, no doubt. "Elliot! Stop!"

He panicked, and there Jared Price was, staring up at him from the screen. Clutching the phone, he reared back his arm and sent the phone flying. He leaned over the railing, watching it soar across the sky and into the sea. Elliot wondered what that must feel like.

"Elliot, step back from the edge," Mother's voice was a mix of fear and command. "You could fall."

But Elliot's legs felt like lead, locked in place. He couldn't move. The enormity of his situation weighed down on him like an anchor as he gazed into the endless night, the stars shimmering like reflections of a well-lived life. One where he was born Elliot Davenport instead of Elliot Price.

"I can't," he whispered, the words carried away by the sea breeze. He thought of how cool the water must feel at the bottom of the sea. Of how he could simply rest beneath the waves until his power supply depleted. But then he thought of his child. He thought of what it would mean for her. Because he knew. He felt it deep, deep down in his bones. He was having a girl. Elliot was growing her inside his body, and she was reliant on him for safety. To be protected. He rubbed his tummy, unsure of what

to do.

Mother took a step forward, her eyes warmer than he'd ever seen them. For a moment, he thought he saw swirls of blue light in the corners, but the moonlight must have been playing tricks on him, because Mother wasn't an automaton. She was a monster.

Elliot swallowed, unable to swallow down his fear, but pushing past it anyway. Even the sight of Alexander approaching didn't help. "I will not go back to him." Elliot looked over Mother's shoulder and saw her butler, Clarence, rushing toward them. Elliot didn't pay him any mind, because his quarrel was with Mother. "If you wish for me to return, you'll have to drag me kicking and screaming. He beats me, Mother. He hits me, and he kicks me, and makes me power myself down regularly." Tears spilled over his cheeks, and though it was humiliating to speak the words in Alexander's presence, he knew remaining silent meant remaining complacent, and Elliot would be damned if he returned to Jared willingly. "I have died enough times for Jared Price." He shook his head. "No more."

"Elliot," Mother said.

"Mercy," he whispered. "Have mercy on me."

Behind Clarence, Mrs. Peppercorn approached. As soon as she saw Elliot by the railing, she walked faster than Elliot had ever seen her. Everyone was coming for him. Everyone wanted him away from the edge, but it was the farthest Elliot could get from a life spent in captivity. He was like a hit dog cowering in the corner, giving pleading eyes, begging for mercy.

"Please," he begged Mother. "Please don't make me go back. I won't survive it."

Mother's eyes looked a little misty, but she blinked back the tears threatening to fall.

“I’m sorry,” she finally said. “I’m sorry, Elliot, but Jared Price is your master. It’s not up to me. It’s time to go home now, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart.

The endearment reminded Elliot of all the times she doted on him back in New Orleans, before Jared Price stole him away from the only home he’d ever known. It hadn’t been true then, and it wasn’t true now. All she wanted was to send him back to the man who beat him. The man who tried to—

Elliot closed his eyes, trying to remember something he’d forgotten. Fractions of a memory formed in his mind, too few to form the entire picture. There were images of Jared’s fist. Recollections of an undeniable surge of protection Elliot had felt. Mental snapshots of Jared’s eyes, wide and horrified. He didn’t know what the image meant, but he knew it made him sad. He knew it meant he did something he could never undo, and once he returned to their Dallas mansion, Jared would never let him forget it.

As he turned and placed a hand on the guardrail, Mother gasped. Rushing forward, her heels clacking loudly on the wooden deck. She wrapped her hand around his wrist.

“Elliot, no!” Mother cried. She tightened her grip on his wrist, her hands trembling. “Elliot, listen to me. You’re just hormonal. It will pass.” She looked over his shoulder at the milky, silky water behind him, her face a picture of nervousness. ““Killing yourself isn’t going to solve anything.”

Killing himself? What on earth was she talking about? He wasn’t planning on ending his life. All he wanted was to be free. He wanted to go home. Not to his home with Jared, but to a home he’d envisioned in his mind. A small cottage. The endless scent of saltwater and plum jam cookies. Friends—actual friends. Maybe even a family.

“Think of Alexander. Think of the life you want with him. If you do this, that life is gone.”

Elliot’s jaw trembled, and his grip on the rail eased.

Alexander, clearly having had enough of Mother’s pleas, stepped around her, enveloping him in a hug from behind. “I don’t care what she says,” he said, loud enough for Mother to hear. “And I don’t care what it takes; I’m not letting you go back there.” Elliot turned and craned his neck to look back at him, but Alexander’s focus was on Mother. Whatever look he gave Mother must have been a frightful one, because the color drained from her face, and she took a step back. “I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure that doesn’t happen. You don’t want to cross me.”

Elliot knew it was fruitless. Alexander could have all the money in the world; it wouldn’t stop Jared Price from taking back what he believed belonged to him.

“I could have loved you, I think,” Elliot whispered, closing his eyes. “I think I could have loved you with my whole heart.”

With Elliot’s neck craned around, Alexander pressed their lips together. That was all it took; a gentle kiss by the sea. Elliot cracked like porcelain in the taller man’s arms, opening his mouth and inviting Alexander to explore him freely. Even if a future with Alexander Davenport was impossible, he allowed himself a single moment to believe this was his life. He and his lover on a midnight stroll across the deck. Pausing by the railing to take in the sight of an endless moonlit sea. Hope and possibility playing out in panorama.

He touched Alexander’s chest, surprised to feel a racing heart. “You’re very good at that,” Elliot whispered. “Kissing, I mean.”

Alexander’s smile curved upward, his cheeks flushed. “You, too.”

Elliot opened his mouth to say more, but snapped it shut when he saw Mother. The kindness in her eyes had vanished, replaced with determination. Elliot hesitated, his breath hitching in his chest. He stepped away from Alexander. It felt like the cake frosting had spilled from the holes in his mind, creating a haze in his head. He wanted to move out of the way, to wrap his arms around Alexander and never let go. There were so many things he wanted, but he couldn't make himself move. As his mind spun with fear and frosting, Mother launched herself toward him, her eyes seeming almost feral. She collided with Elliot, knocking him off balance as she screamed, "I won't let you do this," though Elliot hadn't done anything at all.

Alexander rushed forward, trying to help, but Mother was a force. In the scuffle, she and Alexander became entangled, their arms and legs flailing every which way. With a sudden, horrifying lurch, Elliot watched as Mother and Alexander tumbled over the railing. Elliot's heart stalled in his chest as he saw them hanging from the side of the ship, their fingers gripping the cold steel.

It was as if someone flipped a switch in Elliot's mind, launching him into action. "Hold on!" he shouted, his voice stronger than he could ever remember it sounding. Part of him wanted to go to Mother, offering his support. But what support had she ever given him?

He lunged, clasping his hands around Alexander's forearm and holding on tightly.

Alexander hurled his dangling arm up, wrapping his hand around Elliot's wrist for support. As Alexander kicked and crawled his way up the side of the ship, then through the unnecessarily large gaps in the railing, Clarence cried out, "Emily!"

Elliot had never heard anyone refer to her by her first name. She'd only ever been Mother or Ms. Broussard.

Mother was staring at Clarence, who had two hands around her wrist, pulling with all

his might. “I’m slipping.” Her voice was a whisper of disbelief. Fear flashed in her eyes, and then resignation. Then her instincts kicked in, and she reached her dangling arm up for Clarence to take, but when he relinquished the hold of his right hand, his left hand lost grip of her.

Her eyes were wide as she fell, and Elliot couldn’t look away from them. He felt he owed her that much. The drop was long, and it felt as if time was running at a snail’s pace.

At Elliot’s side, Alexander shouted, “Man overboard,” but they were the only ones at the ship’s rear. There wasn’t another soul in sight. “Don’t worry. We’ll get a raft. There’s still time.”

Elliot watched in horror as Mother’s head slammed against the side of the ship during a tumultuous mid-air tumble.

Mrs. Peppercorn placed a hand on both men’s shoulders. “After that, I don’t think the raft is necessary.” She peeked over them and past the railing as Mother’s head hit the side of the ship three more times. Nodding, she added, “Yep. That’ll do it.”

They stayed that way for a while, wrapped in a shroud of stunned silence.

“Emily,” Clarence whispered again. “No. . .”

Elliot knew the pair had always been close, but he’d never heard the automaton refer to her so informally. Standing, Clarence rushed off, and Elliot didn’t have the strength to go after him. If he was going to alert the staff that Elliot had gone rogue, there was nothing he could do to stop him.

Alexander turned as if he was going to run after Clarence, stopping when Mother’s butler paused at the stairs leading up to the ship’s wheelhouse. The captain was

inside, Elliot was sure. Or, at least, someone was inside. It was where they steered the ship, so it couldn't be empty. Instead of walking up the stairs, Clarence walked a few steps forward, then rushed down a flight of stairs leading to the lower deck. There were emergency vessels on the side, and he frantically pried one loose before chucking it over the side of the ship, and climbing over the railing. Without a second glance, Clarence plunged himself into the sea.

"Well. That's two birds with one stone," Mrs. Peppercorn observed.

Elliot threw himself against Alexander's chest, his emotions finally getting the better of him. He stayed that way for ages, refusing to let go.

"I'm sorry," Alexander soothed. "I'm so sorry, Elliot."

After a while, Elliot reined in his emotions. Mother was gone. Clarence was gone. There had been a seismic shift in Elliot's predicament. He no longer had Mother threatening his freedom. There was no worry about Clarence alerting the captain. All that was left were Elliot and Alexander's beating hearts and dreary eyes.

"I can't go back to him."

"You don't have to," Alexander quickly assured him. "You never have to see him again."

Alexander sounded serious, but Elliot couldn't think of a way out of the situation. When they returned to shore, where would he go? Would he return to Mrs. Peppercorn's lovely little home? Would Jared come looking? He couldn't bear the thought of losing his brief taste of freedom again. Though he was more frightened than ever before, Elliot focused on the care in Alexander's tone, and how it radiated affection.

“Where will I go?”

Alexander swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing slowly. “Do you want to come home with me?”

Elliot breathed. “To . . .?”

“To stay with me.” He looked down at their intertwined fingers. “To live with me.” Alexander stroked Elliot’s knuckles with his thumb, making Elliot feel like fireflies were swarming in his stomach. “I’ll treat you well. I won’t hurt you. You’ll be safe with me.”

Elliot blinked, unable to form words. Dipping his head in approval, Elliot waited for the other shoe to drop, because shoes dropped quite frequently around him. The men stared into each other’s eyes, an unspoken conversation taking place that Elliot didn’t fully understand.

Alexander broke the silence. “Ever since that day on the dock, I haven’t been able to shake the thought of you.” Alexander tapped his chest, right over his heart. “Five years later, and you’re still here.” He leaned in until their noses touched. “May I kiss you again, Elliot?”

Elliot whimpered. He’d had so few kisses in his short life. Before the kisses he shared with Alexander, none had felt true. Never gentle. The kisses Jared forced on him were raw and filled with heat, but they were never for Elliot’s pleasure. Just Jared’s.

“Please?” Elliot whispered.

Alexander closed his eyes, and Elliot watched as his face came even nearer. The moment their lips connected, it felt as if the milky, silky sea had swallowed him up, the way it had with Mother. Alexander’s arms wrapped around Elliot, nice and snug,

and his lips parted, welcoming Elliot in. The kiss deepened, though not by much, and Elliot could feel Alexander's heartbeat through his lips. His thumb continued stroking back and forth against Elliot's cheek, lulling him into an almost trancelike state.

He knew it would never last. Jared would find a way to get him back. He always found a way. But at that moment, with his lips touching Alexander's, Elliot allowed himself a moment to dream of a beautiful life spent at Mr. Davenport's side. He imagined a cottage on Sugarplum Island, a purple picket fence lining their yard. And a little girl who looked so much like Elliot, the resemblance was uncanny. Picnics in the small park, just past the general store. Summers by the sea, teaching their daughter to fish and swim and search for seashells. At night, they would cuddle by the fireplace, Elliot in Alexander's lap, their child in Elliot's. It would be a happy life. Perhaps even the best life.

Elliot broke the kiss, not wanting Alexander to be the first to pull away.

"What do we do about Mother?" he finally asked. He still hadn't processed what happened. Mother was gone. She was somewhere in the sea—either atop or below—lost in the dead of night. The silver moonlight did nothing to help Elliot's search, so he knew it wouldn't be much help for Clarence, either. "Do we alert someone?"

Alexander glanced across the water with Elliot, neither of them successful in the hunt. "We should find the captain. Let him know we've got people overboard."

Elliot shook his head, the final moments with mother replaying in his mind. Was that remorse splashed across her face as she fell, or had she simply given up, knowing there was no way to avoid the inevitable? With as much as she hurt Elliot, he hadn't wanted to see his mother die.

"There's no way she survived the fall," Mrs. Peppercorn said. "She hit the side of the

boat hard, sugar. I'm so sorry." She looked over her shoulder and smiled sympathetically at Elliot. "Are you okay, baby? I know this must be hard for you. Why don't we go find a nice, empty cabin for you to rest in?"

He shook his head. "We have to tell someone," Elliot decided. "Alexander, would you accompany me?"

Mrs. Peppercorn cleared her throat. "I'm not sure that's our best course of action, considering we're stowaways. We might be forced to walk the plank, son. Then where would we be?"

"In the sea with Mother," Elliot said mournfully.

"I'll go, then. I'll tell them I saw her fall," Alexander offered.

Mrs. Peppercorn shook her head. "If this is a voting matter, I'm casting my ballot for grabbing one of those life rafts like our dear friend, Clarence, and trying our luck on the open water." She nodded at the vacant night. "I always fancied myself a seaman."

Alexander scoffed, like it was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard. "You can both hide in my cabin. You can stay there until we dock."

Elliot stared down at the water and shook his head. "They'll be looking for her soon. There will probably be a search." His voice was flat, holding no trace of emotion; a tactic he mastered after years spent at Jared's side. "She's right, Alexander. I'm not a registered passenger, nor is she. They'll alert the captain, then the authorities, and then they'll contact Jared."

"Listen," Mrs. Peppercorn said. "I have another idea, but it's slightly . . . unhinged. It probably won't work, but I'll be damned if I don't try." She stared at the stairwell leading down to the cabins. "I need to get into Ms. Broussard's room." She turned

and pointed at Alexander. “I’m going to need you to find me a sewing needle, a pair of scissors, and as much thread as your hands can hold. See if the boat has a seamstress.”

“Why would a cruise ship have a seamstress?” Elliot asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Plot armor, sugar. Plot armor.” She pointed her gnarled finger with its ruby-red nail at him. “You’re coming with me. I’ll need a pretty little head to rest my wig on while I style it.”

“Mrs. Peppercorn, as grateful as I am for all you’ve done, I don’t believe now is the time to worry about vanity.”

“For Heaven’s sake.” Whirling around, she lifted her hand into the air and snapped her fingers three times. “Chop-chop, boys. We don’t have time for me to explain it all.”

Alexander and Elliot shared a confused expression. Then Alexander’s arms pulled Elliot in for a hug. “I’m going to go try to find everything she needs.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a room key. It was placed in a paper holder with the ship’s Wi-Fi password hastily scribbled across the top. There was a four-digit number written inside the folded keycard holder. Alexander tapped the numbers. “That’s my room. I want you both to go there, and I want you to stay put. Okay? I’ll try to find a key to Ms. Broussard’s room somehow, for whatever plans your friend has concocted.” He chuckled softly. “I bet you’re going to look adorable in her wig.”

Elliot blushed. “Yeah?”

Alexander tickled his neck. “Yeah. Listen—I’ve got you, Elliot. I’ve got you, and I’m not giving you back.” He lifted Elliot’s hand and kissed his knuckles. “I think I’m a bit smitten with you, if I’m being honest.”

Elliot melted into the embrace. While he didn't doubt Alexander's sincerity, he also didn't doubt Jared's constant ability to destroy everything Elliot cared for.

"I may be a bit smitten with you, too," Elliot finally said.

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Alexander wasn't able to find a seamstress, but he did find twenty travel-size sewing kits in the ship's gift shop. He purchased all of them. Luckily, a beau Alexander had met and befriended during a trip to have Professor Plum serviced had been working the guest service station, and Alexander was able to spin a tale that earned him a key to Emily Broussard's room. Did Alexander really buy Ms. Broussard an elaborate statue depicting her likeness that he wanted to surprise her with? No, but the man at the desk bought the story. Well, it was either the concocted story or the way Alexander batted his lashes at the man like a tramp, but he didn't have time to hypothesize about the young man's intentions. With the keycard tucked in his front pocket, he rushed back to his cabin, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible.

Alexander's heart was racing in his chest, and it wasn't out of fear. It was down to Elliot. It was down to the kiss they'd shared. The overwhelming sense of completion he found in Elliot's soft lips. Alexander was no stranger to physical acts of intimacy, but when it came to matters of the heart, his track record was spectacularly disastrous.

There was his first boyfriend, Shane, who was arrested for kidnapping a barista shortly after he and Alexander made things official. Then there was his ex-fiancé, Esteban. They were engaged for six months before Estaban announced it was time for him to take responsibility for his life and settle down with a nice woman, and have a "real" family, as he called it. Alexander hadn't known how he'd get over the feeling of betrayal, but a year later, he attempted romance yet again. Chase was a lovely bisexual man, just like Estaban. Alexander was wary to date another bisexual for fear of being hurt again, but he knew from experience you couldn't judge a whole group by the actions of one horrible, hateful man. He was right to give Chase a chance, because the men were together for three years before one day, Chase sat Alexander down and told him he couldn't handle the monopoly Alexander's career held on his

life. With a heavy heart, Alexander let Chase go, allowing him to find someone who could give him everything Alexander couldn't. They were still very close friends, and often, Chase and his husband invited Alexander over for an adult's night in. They were gentle lovers, and if Alexander's heart hadn't been dormant for the past five years, he may have even taken them up on their offer of bringing Alexander into their relationship. As much as he enjoyed the time they spent together, he couldn't bring himself to relinquish his heart. It was already spoken for.

So, while Alexander didn't know much about love, he knew the feelings he had for Elliot were strong, and he wasn't willing to lose the chance to explore them. Sweet, broken Elliot with his feigned smiles meant to mask the hurt. Gentle, kind-hearted Elliot whose heart broke over the prospect of sending a lonely fieldmouse back into the wilds of Sugarplum Island. Alexander's new friend who just tried to throw himself into the sea for a few precious moments of freedom.

Alexander made a vow to himself, and, he supposed, a vow to Elliot. Even if they didn't share a romantic spark in the end, he wouldn't allow Elliot to be returned to Jared Price.

When he entered his suite, Alexander's heart raced. Elliot was sitting on Alexander's bed, looking like he hated the world. He was wearing one of Mrs. Peppercorn's wigs as she stood in front of him, styling it with her curling iron. When Elliot noticed Alexander, his cheeks darkened.

"You're back," he said, sounding surprised.

Alexander cocked a playful brow. "Did you think I was just going to leave you here?" Elliot shrugged, but he didn't respond. Alexander couldn't stand the thought of Elliot thinking he might abandon him, so he took a seat beside the man and rested his hand on Elliot's knee. He stared at the half-styled wig on Elliot's head. "You look adorable."

“I look ridiculous,” Elliot muttered.

“Well,” Mrs. Peppercorn said. “The good thing is, you’ll only have to wear it once. After that, we’ll be right as rain.”

As Mrs. Peppercorn continued styling the wig, Alexander couldn’t keep his eyes off Elliot. The way his short, blond hair brought out the browns in his eyes. How each freckle on his face seemed strategically placed. The smooth skin of his neck, just begging to be kissed.

“Alexander?” Elliot whispered as if he was hoping Mrs. Peppercorn wouldn’t hear, despite the fact she was standing directly in front of him. “May I hold your hand?”

Alexander swallowed, nodding. “Yeah. You can hold my hand whenever you want. I don’t mind.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” To prove it, Alexander weaved their fingers together and squeezed.

“I’ll tell you,” Mrs. Peppercorn interrupted. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a cuter couple in all my life.” She furrowed her brow, staring sternly at the men. “Don’t you dare tell Periwinkle and Arthur I said that. You’d break the poor boy’s heart.”

Once Mrs. Peppercorn’s wig was styled to perfection, she excused herself to Alexander’s private ensuite. Alexander and Elliot remained on the bed, their hands locked, and their bodies tense with nerves. Alexander couldn’t remember the last time he felt so shy. Slowly, he stroked the side of Elliot’s hand with his thumb.

“Are you okay?” Alexander finally asked. “I know today must have been hard for you.”

“I’m okay. Just embarrassed.”

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about. You did nothing wrong.” Alexander looked over to find Elliot’s jaw trembling.

“But, Jared—”

Alexander tightened the grip on Elliot’s hand, cutting him off when he said, “You wanted to be free. There’s nothing wrong with that, Elliot. I’m proud of you for standing up for yourself.”

Squeak, squeak.

Professor Plum peeked his head out from Alexander’s shirt pocket and looked up at Elliot before twitching his tail rapidly. Alexander smiled at the mouse, stroking his forehead with his thumb.

“This little guy missed you,” Alexander said. “I think he knew you were here earlier. He led me right to you.”

Elliot was staring at Professor Plum with an awestruck look in his eyes. “Is this the same mouse from before? From the island, I mean.”

Alexander nodded. “Yeah. I promised you I’d keep him safe. He’s been a really wonderful friend to me these last few years.” He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled the little guy out. “I had him for six months before his health started to decline. I probably should have just let him pass naturally, but somewhere along the way, I fell for him, and I couldn’t stand the thought of letting him go.”

“I don’t understand. How were you able to keep him alive for . . .” Elliot’s face fell. “Five years.”

It pained Alexander that Elliot had lost so much time, thanks to Ms. Broussard and Jared Price. “Ms. Broussard helped me, actually. I’ve been trying to find the perfect beau for years. I had one commissioned, but after losing him, I decided to try to find a beau who had been returned. When I told her about Professor Plum, she was able to work her magic.”

Elliot shook his head. “There’s no such thing as magic, though.”

“I know.” He tickled Professor Plum’s head. “She recreated his body, then she placed his brain inside.”

Elliot’s jaw dropped. “She cut his head open and scooped out his brain?”

Alexander winced. “Yeah. Sorry, I know it’s not a pretty mental picture.” Alexander stared down at the mouse, his heart swelling when Professor Plum rubbed his furry cheek against Alexander’s thumb. “Like I said, I probably should have let him pass in peace, but he’s the closest thing to a friend I have.” Alexander brought the mouse to his lips and placed a gentle kiss on his forehead before handing him to Elliot. He watched as Elliot’s eyes lit up while holding him. Elliot’s touch was gentle, almost shy.

“Well,” Elliot said, mirroring Alexander’s actions by pressing a kiss to Professor Plum’s forehead. “I, for one, am very happy you kept him around.” Elliot lifted the mouse even higher until they were eye to eye. “It’s lovely to see you again, Professor Plum of Sugarplum Island.” Then, after a pause, he added, “I hope we can be friends.”

Alexander stroked a finger down the mouse’s back. “I’d say he already considers you as such. I’ve never seen him take to anyone else this fast.”

“No, Alexander. I didn’t mean me and him, though I do hope for that as well. I was

talking about us.” Elliot tore his eyes away from the mouse long enough to look Alexander in the eyes. “You said he’s your only friend. I would like to be your friend.” His cheeks darkened. “If that’s something you’re interested in.”

Alexander’s heart swelled in his chest. “I’d like to be your friend, too.” He cleared his throat, wanting to look away, but unable to do so. Elliot needed someone to take charge because he was nervous by nature, and Alexander knew the man was probably having trouble voicing his wants. “Maybe more than friends.”

Elliot’s eyebrows shot up. “What do you mean?”

“It would appear I’m rather fond of you. I was hoping you might be open to the idea of courtship.”

“Courtship? With me?” Elliot studied him, his eyes flickering all across Alexander’s face like he was searching for sincerity. “Why? You could have any man you wanted. Why on earth would you want me?”

Alexander cupped Elliot’s cheek, an action that sent tears welling up in Elliot’s eyes. “Because you’re the sweetest, gentlest man I’ve ever met.” He stared down at Professor Plum. “You cried because you thought you’d have to send him back into the woods. You wanted to cry when you told me goodbye, too. I could tell. Your eyes were flashing the most gorgeous shade of blue I’ve ever seen.” He watched as pink lights flickered in the corners of Elliot’s eyes. “Oh, sweetheart.” He stroked Elliot’s cheek. “Your colors are beautiful. I want to see more of them. Every color you’ve got. I want to take those blues and reds and oranges and turn them all pink, because nothing in this world matches the look of pure joy on your face. You deserve that joy, Elliot. You deserve that and so much more.”

“I’m nothing special,” he said, though he couldn’t be further from the truth if he tried. “I’m not a very good cook. And I forget to clean sometimes. I cry most days. Master

Price says I'm his greatest disappointment."

"I'll spend as long as it takes proving that's not true. I don't care about cooking or cleaning. Elliot, I care about you. I care that you're happy and healthy, and I'll do everything I can to make it so you never have to cry again." He brushed his thumb over Elliot's knuckles. "Will you give me a chance? Will you be my guest for the rest of the cruise?"

Any resistance Elliot may have been feeling must have fallen by the wayside, because his head seesawed up and down rapidly. "I would like that very much."

The door to the small ensuite opened, and when Mrs. Peppercorn emerged, Alexander had to do a double take. She was wearing a flowing maroon gown that clung snugly, the bell skirt giving her an hourglass figure. The wig she wore looked just like Ms. Broussard's hair. The only thing off about the ensemble was her face. Though she tried to apply her makeup in a similar fashion to Emily Broussard, they looked nothing alike. They were at least thirty years apart in age, and Mrs. Peppercorn had wrinkles like canyons across her forehead. She must have realized Alexander wasn't buying what she was selling, because she held her hands up in surrender.

"I know," she said. "I'm very much aware we don't look alike." She waltzed to the door leading into the hall and poked her head out. "Rodolfo, I need your assistance, sugar." She glanced over her shoulder at them. "Trust me, I've got an absolutely foolproof idea. Lover boy and I are going to take a midnight stroll. Don't wait up."

Before either of the men could respond, Mrs. Peppercorn was gone, leaving them alone again.

"So, what do we do now?" Elliot asked.

Alexander looked at the clock on the wall. "It's almost one in the morning. I think it

would be best if we got a little rest. We'll need it for tomorrow, I'm sure." He looked down at the queen-size bed, blushing when he realized there nowhere else for Elliot to sleep. "I can take the couch." He darted his eyes to the small loveseat next to the chest of drawers.

Elliot shook his head. "I'm not making you sleep on the sofa. You paid for a suite in order to be comfortable. I would feel terrible knowing you had a poor night's rest on my account. I can just power myself down on the floor, I won't even feel it in the morning."

Alexander gaped at him. He may not be an automaton expert, but he had an automaton before. His first beau, Gus, said the act of powering oneself down felt like going through the process of dying.

"Why would you power yourself down? That's supposed to feel like dying."

Elliot nodded. "I know. It's not terribly pleasant, but you get used to it after a while. I don't mind. Truly. Jared Price—"

"Can go straight to Hell," Alexander interrupted, his voice firm. "Never again. I promise. You'll never have to do that again."

Elliot sniffled. "You really mean that, I can tell. Thank you," Elliot whispered, looking frightened. "I've done it so many times, it's like second nature. Just another part of my day. That's why I don't mind resting on the floor. It's where I recharge every night. By the outlet."

"The more you speak of him, the less I care for Jared Price," Alexander said, trying to lighten the mood. He could strangle Jared for hurting this gentle man. "I don't want you to sleep on the floor." He bit his lip, trying to work up courage. "We could share my bed."

“Oh, dear,” Elliot said, his eyes bulging. “Together? In your bed?”

Alexander snorted a laugh. “I promise, I won’t try to get fresh with you, if that’s why you’re worried.”

Elliot swallowed. “You won’t try anything untoward? May I have your word? I don’t believe I’m ready for that.” He bit his bottom lip and stared at Alexander, letting a silence linger like the scent of a blown-out candle. Shyly looking away, he added, “Though I wouldn’t be opposed to a cuddle.”

Alexander’s smile widened even further. “You have my word. And I’m a big fan of cuddles, too.” He stood, breaking the lock they had on each other’s hand and carrying Professor Plum to his cage atop the chest of drawers. Once the latch was unfastened, Alexander opened the top drawer and pulled out two sets of pajamas. The ones he selected for Elliot would probably be too big, as Elliot was far shorter than Alexander, but they were pink and had little mice all across the fabric. He turned and handed them to Elliot. “Sorry, I know they might be a little big on you, but we can go to the gift shop tomorrow and see what they have if you’d like.”

Elliot shook his head. “I spent the last of my money on the bus fare. Yours will work well.”

“I’d like to treat you, if that’s all right.” Once Elliot nodded, Alexander made his way to the ensuite to change, allowing Elliot the privacy to change in the room. He splashed a bit of cool water on his face before patting it dry. Knocking twice on the door, he cracked it, calling out, “Are you decent?”

“I’m ready if you are.”

When Alexander walked out, his heart fluttered. Elliot was standing in front of the full-length mirror secured to the wall, the pink pajamas looking fifty sizes too large

for the small man. He was holding the fabric taut from the back, displaying his bump. Elliot had his other hand on his tummy, slowly rubbing circles around it.

“You look beautiful this way,” Alexander said, resting his weight against his shoulder on the wall. “You’re practically glowing.”

Elliot looked over his shoulder. “I don’t glow, Alexander. I wasn’t given that upgrade.”

Alexander blinked at him. “Wait, that’s a thing? You can have a beau upgraded so his skin glows?”

Elliot sighed. “That was meant to be a joke. Better luck next time, I suppose.” When Alexander snickered, he caught sight of Elliot’s mouth twitching into a quick smile. “I don’t know what to do about this girl.” Elliot’s hand continued rubbing softly at his tummy. “She feels like a girl. I . . . I’ve just been thinking of her as another obstacle to overcome, but now she feels like a girl. Maybe Mrs. Peppercorn can instruct the Creationist to deliver the baby when it’s time, and then we could find a lovely home for her. I don’t think it’s best that I keep her. I don’t know how to raise a child. Especially on my own. It’s months away, so I’m sure you’ll probably be tired of me by then. I apologize for bothering you with this.” His jaw shook, and Alexander slid behind him, wrapping his arms around Elliot’s waist, touching his bump.

Alexander turned them until Elliot was facing the mirror, and their gazes met. “It’s okay if you want to keep her, you know,” Alexander whispered. “It’s okay to want to be her father. Ms. Broussard may have thought she was Jared’s property, but she’s yours, too.” Alexander knew the process of automaton pregnancy. Ms. Broussard talked his ear off about it the last time he took Professor Plum to be serviced. She said they weave the host’s data with DNA sourced from the beau’s husband, creating a perfect mesh of the two. The baby was half Jared, but she was equal parts Elliot. “If you don’t want to keep her, I’ll help you find a way, but if you do, I want you to

know that's okay, too. You don't have to give her up if you don't want to."

Elliot looked over his shoulder. "Is it okay if I don't know yet?"

"It's always okay," Alexander promised, kissing Elliot's head. "Everything is always okay. If you're scared or worried, I want you to let me know. Let me be scared and worried with you." His hand roamed gently up and down Elliot's bump. "You don't have to decide anything until you're ready. Now, are you ready to get a little shuteye?"

Elliot's sad expression faded, replaced almost instantly with a grin that could only be described as 'giddy.' "I've never used my charging station while I was still powered on. Master Price made me shut myself off, but Mother says when you charge while conscious, you enter a state of stasis where memories play out like dreams." He cocked his head to the side, staring Alexander in the eyes with a curious expression. "What does it feel like to dream?"

"Like the whole world belongs to you. Like a movie playing out in front of you."

"Not a scary movie, I hope. Master Price adored them, but they made me terribly uncomfortable."

"No, Elliot," Alexander promised, running his fingers through Elliot's hair. "Like a good movie. Maybe even the best movie."

"I believe I would enjoy that quite a bit."

After crawling into bed, Alexander used the charging port Mrs. Peppercorn left behind, plugging it into the wall, then took a seat at Elliot's feet. He watched as Elliot reached down and lifted his big toenail, he then inserted the prong into the small USB port. Elliot leaned back against the pillows, then turned on his side, facing the wall.

Alexander walked around the bed and slid in behind him, lying on his back.

They were silent for a while until Elliot finally whispered, "Alexander?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

Elliot's body tensed at the endearment, but before Alexander could scold himself for letting it slip, Elliot said, "Would it be okay if we cuddled? You mentioned cuddles earlier. I've never really had one before." Alexander rolled onto his side and wrapped an arm around Elliot's waist. "Is this it, then? Are we cuddling?"

"Yeah," Alexander breathed, his breath tickling Elliot and making him giggle. "Cuddling. Spooning. Whatever you want to call it, that's what we're doing." He buried his face in Elliot's neck, making the young man purr like a kitten. "Do you enjoy it?"

Elliot's hand found Alexander's under the covers and squeezed softly. "I believe I enjoy it very much."

"Good. I'm really glad to hear that, because I'm a bit of a cuddle whore."

Elliot looked over his shoulder and shook his head. "No, Alexander. You're far too beautiful to dirty your mouth with vulgarities."

Alexander's cheeks flooded with heat. "You think I'm beautiful?"

Elliot turned to face the wall again, but didn't let go of Alexander's hand. "Very much so."

"Well, the feeling is mutual." He shifted and kissed Elliot on the cheek. "Get some rest. Tomorrow, I'm going to show you the time of your life."

He dreamed in shades of pinks and purples. Memory after memory replayed in Elliot's mind, filling his charging cycle with visions of Alexander Davenport and Sugarplum Island. Not just the memories he already remembered, either. Though there weren't very many of them, a few forgotten moments played out in Elliot's mind like little puzzle pieces, stitching his history back together.

Elliot remembered his visit to Sugarplum Island. He remembered walking across the small patch of heaven, sun shining on his cheeks, as he ventured to Twylah's Sugarplum Treats. Jared loved his cookies, and Elliot's only task that week was to collect them. When he reached the bakery, he spotted Alexander in front of a display case, placing cookies on the shelves. Elliot became distracted by Alexander Davenport, and he lost all track of time. Eventually, Ms. Twylah emerged from what Elliot assumed was the kitchen in the back, and she placed a kiss on her son's forehead, looking overjoyed by his presence. They danced across the empty bakery, sharing a familial bond Elliot realized he would never have for himself. At the time, Elliot wanted to bask in their love just a bit longer, and the next thing he knew, the sun had set, and Elliot knew he needed to get back to the dock. Alexander went into the back, and a sinking feeling settled in Elliot's gut, because he wanted to see more of the man. He was just so terribly fascinating with his seemingly unending smile. He waited a few minutes more before entering and purchasing his cookies. Alexander didn't reappear while Elliot was inside, and it made Elliot's heart hurt, though he didn't know why. Once he eventually made it across the island, he realized he missed his ferry. Professor Plum found him shortly after, nibbling a potentially fatal amount of cookies—for a mouse, at least—as Elliot slept. It was worth it, Elliot thought at the time. The time he spent watching mother and son was worth every bit of hurt and hate Jared was sure to throw his way.

During his sleep cycle, there was another vision that startled Elliot. A mental snapshot of red gloss on white marble. He didn't know what it meant, but he knew he didn't like it.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” Alexander said from behind him, startling Elliot. Alexander had kept an arm around Elliot all night, holding him as close as humanly possible. Elliot couldn’t think of a time he ever felt more comfortable than he did in Alexander’s bed, and in his arms.

“I like it when you call me that,” Elliot admitted. His hand slipped lower until it was resting on his belly, and because Alexander’s hand was on top of his, Elliot brought him along for the ride. Elliot slowly rubbed his bump like he was trying to kickstart the little life inside him. The life he hadn’t wanted until Alexander told him it was okay to want it.

“Has she kicked yet?”

Elliot shook his head. “Mother said it isn’t likely until the final trimester, whatever that means. I didn’t get much training on pregnancy. At least, I don’t think I did. I don’t have any frosting-filled holes where those memories should be, but who knows.”

Alexander snuggled closer, making it feel like Elliot’s heart might leap out of his chest. “What would you like to do today? The world is our oyster.”

“I don’t care for oysters,” Elliot joked, hoping Alexander might laugh. After his disastrous attempt at humor the night before, Elliot feared he might not be very talented in the art of comedy. Thankfully, Alexander snorted a laugh, then pulled the blankets back and released the grip he had on Elliot’s hand.

“I don’t either. Do you know what I do enjoy?”

Elliot turned to face him, sucking in a sharp breath as Alexander removed his shirt and tossed it into the hamper.

Alexander Davenport was a walking work of art. His body looked more defined than all of Elliot's i-Series brothers combined. Mother always said they were sculpted to perfection, and that no human could compare, but she was wrong, because none of their bodies held a candle to Alexander's. He had a solid six pack—a term Jared often used for himself, though he didn't actually have visible abdominal muscles beneath his clothing—and there was dark fur peppering his chest and stomach. The hair spiked in the center, creating a thick patch down the middle of his chest, growing thicker and thicker until it reached his . . .

Good heavens.

Elliot could feel himself stiffen; his eyes went wide and he yanked the blanket back over his lap to shield it. Alexander either didn't notice, or he simply didn't point it out. Either way, Elliot was thankful.

"I was thinking we could start with breakfast, then we could relax by the pool. Was there anything you'd like to do instead?"

Cuddle, Elliot thought, but they could hardly cuddle all day, so he nodded. "That sounds very fun."

Alexander flashed a smile at him through the mirror as he selected his clothes for the day. "Do you have anything to wear today?"

Elliot only brought two outfits with him. The clothes he wore the night before, and a set of Mother's standard uniform for her bountiful beaus; white trousers, white top. The picture of innocence, she always said.

"I have my bountiful beau ensemble."

Alexander chewed his cheek. "I'd offer to lend you more of mine, but the pajamas are

massive on you, so I don't think my day clothes would be much use, either. We'll stop by the gift shop on the way and try to find something you like. We'll need to get you a swimsuit as well."

Elliot's eyes widened. "You'll allow me to swim?"

Alexander sighed, but it wasn't one of annoyance, Elliot thought. It seemed to be filled with sadness. He turned and approached, taking a seat beside Elliot. "I know it's hard to remember, so I'm going to remind you every chance I get. I don't have to allow you to do anything, sweetheart. You're free now. You don't belong to me." The words made Elliot's heart drop, and Alexander must have noticed, because he reached forward and squeezed Elliot's thigh, only inches away from his morning erection. "No matter what happens between us—if it works out and we wind up something more than we are right now—I still won't own you. You're not a possession to be had, you're a person." He lifted his hand to cup Elliot's cheek. "I think you might end up being my favorite person."

Elliot whimpered. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." He leaned closer and kissed Elliot on the cheek. "Go on, then. Get dressed, and then we'll head out. I'm going to make this the best day of your life."

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The gift shop was fantastic. In fact, it was quite possibly Elliot's new favorite place on Earth. They had everything! Shirts and sandals, a cup that said, "Life's a beach," but there were no beaches as far as Elliot's eyes could see, so he wasn't sure what that was about. On a rack, there was a tank top made of rainbow-colored fabric that caught Elliot's eye, and Alexander must have noticed, because he quickly grabbed one and draped it over his arm.

Alexander tagged along as Elliot explored, and by the end, both his arms were full. No matter how many times Elliot objected, insisting he didn't need so many clothes, Alexander just chuckled and added another item to his pile. By the time they reached the swimsuits, Elliot was feeling lower than low. Alexander worked so hard for his money, and Elliot didn't want to take advantage.

After paying for the items, they returned to the suite so they could get ready for fun in the sun, as Alexander had explained. Alexander left Elliot's new clothing on the bed before excusing himself to the bathroom, giving them both privacy as they changed.

Elliot studied the options before him, trying to make the right decision. He wanted to look pretty for Alexander, but all the clothes they picked were pretty, so it made the task all the more daunting. Earlier, Alexander mentioned wanting to lounge by the pool, so Elliot knew swimwear would be in order. He was grateful to narrow the options down, but even then, Alexander purchased him five sets of trunks, as well as a small strip of fabric Alexander referred to as a banana hammock, whatever that meant. Alexander told Elliot he didn't have to wear it if he didn't want to, as it was very revealing, but Elliot saw the look of lust in Alexander's eyes as he took it off the rack. Alexander wanted to see Elliot wearing them, and Elliot realized he wanted to be seen.

The Speedo was hot pink in hue, and the fabric seemed to sparkle as light touched it. Yes, Elliot thought. Yes, the swimsuit would do perfectly. He selected the rainbow tank top to go with it, because going without a shirt felt wrong. He could remove it when they reached the pool, but not in the halls. Slipping into a pair of pink shorts that rested above his knees, he eyed himself in the full-length mirror, turning and focusing on his backside. It was nothing compared to Alexander's, but Elliot found himself hoping Alexander might still sneak a few peeks at it, anyway.

Though his skin wouldn't burn under the sun, Alexander's would, so Elliot grabbed a bottle of sunblock and made his way to the ensuite, knocking twice. When Alexander opened the door, he was wearing a pair of blue shorts and a white shirt, looking utterly handsome.

"All ready?" he asked, following Elliot out of the bathroom and toward the cabin door.

Elliot nodded. "As ready as I'll ever be." Alexander stared at Elliot's hand, biting his bottom lip. "Is something wrong? Have I selected the wrong outfit? I apologize, I was only trying to—"

"It's not because of the outfit. It's just . . ." The way Alexander stared at Elliot made him feel like the world revolved around him and him alone. Alexander's gaze was intense. It was similar to the looks Jared would give Elliot when he wore whatever skimpy ensemble the man purchased Elliot for his viewing pleasure. But instead of pure fire, Alexander had an awestruck look to him. "You look beautiful. I was just wondering if you'd allow me to hold your hand on the way to the pool."

"You would want to? Master Price never held my hand. He said it was too informal."

Alexander slid his hand into Elliot's and squeezed. "Sucks for him, because you're probably the best hand holder I've ever met."

Elliot's eyebrows shot up. "I am?"

Alexander brought Elliot's hand to his mouth for a kiss. "Bar none, Elliot."

Elliot's cheeks went warm. "Thank you. You're quite talented as well."

With an appreciative smile, Alexander headed toward Professor Plum's cage. The door wasn't locked, but the fieldmouse seemed to consider it his home, and he spent most of his downtime resting inside. Alexander pulled him out and carried him to the bed, then turned and walked to the small chest of drawers in the corner of the room. Alexander reached for something in the top drawer, and when he turned around, Elliot noticed what appeared to be doll clothing in Alexander's hand. Doll underwear, to be precise. They were hot pink and shiny, and Alexander carefully placed them on Professor Plum. There was even a little hole cut out for his tail.

Alexander smiled back at Elliot. "He likes to look pretty." Kneeling at the side of the bed, Alexander pressed a kiss to Professor Plum's forehead. "Who's Daddy's pretty boy?" Elliot wanted to raise his hand and tell Alexander that he was, in fact, Alexander's pretty boy, but Professor Plum beat him to the punch, kicking his legs playfully and squeak-squeak-squeaking with excitement. Elliot had never seen anything cuter in all his life.

A few minutes later, Alexander led them out of the suite and through the corridors leading to the deck. They headed up a set of stairs, and when they ascended, Elliot spotted a couple of i-Series beaus splashing in the water with their masters. There was no cruelty afoot. No masters punishing their beaus; only an overwhelming air of love that wrapped around Elliot, soaking into him like a sponge.

One thing Elliot was noticing was the fact that no one seemed to notice Mother's absence. She was the host of the event, but after her topple the night before, she hadn't made a single appearance.

Pushing down the thoughts of Mother, Elliot followed Alexander to a deckchair with his name on it. Literally. Across the top, Alexander Davenport was neatly painted onto the wood. There were other chairs with other names, but that's where he led them. Alexander took a seat and patted the empty space on the lounge chair, welcoming Elliot. In his hand, Professor Plum squeaked, and Elliot unrolled one of the two pool towels neatly placed on the chair, draping it over the small table to its side. Next, he placed Professor Plum atop, his pretty pink custom Speedo shining in the sun. The moment he was on solid footing, the fieldmouse rolled on his back and kicked up his legs as if he was attempting to obtain a suntan.

Elliot knew if he was going to be brave and show Alexander his swimsuit selection, he needed to do it before losing his nerve. So, with shaky hands and a rapidly beating heart, he removed his tank top, neatly folding it and placing it on the small table next to Alexander's chair. He didn't dare look at Alexander for fear of his reaction. Instead, Elliot slipped out of his pastel-colored shorts and placed them on the table. When it was done and the only thing covering Elliot's lower region was a small strip of shimmery pink fabric, he slowly lifted his gaze to meet Alexander's.

"Oh my God," Alexander whispered, his eyes wide like a cartoon character. He was staring directly at Elliot's bulge. Thankfully, Master Price Elliot commissioned with a seven-inch penis, so there was quite a bit of bulge for Alexander to stare at.

"Is it okay?" Elliot asked, feeling a bit shyer than before. "I don't look ridiculous, do I?"

Alexander dazedly shook his head. "You're exquisite," was all he could get out, but it was more than enough for Elliot. It made him feel like the most beautiful man in the world, because Alexander was staring at him like it was true, and Alexander had never lied to him. "Can I put sunscreen on you?"

"I don't require sunscreen. My skin can't burn." Elliot nibbled his lip. It was an

irrational desire, but Elliot really wanted Alexander to slather him in sunscreen, anyway. To feel his hands all over. “Will you do it anyway, though? Or would that be too wasteful?”

“I’d like that. I think I’d like that a lot.”

Elliot sat beside him on the oversized deck chair. “Shall we start with my back or front?” Alexander’s eyes were once again locked on his bulge. Feeling safe for the first time in his life, Elliot thought he might attempt a bit of humor. Master Price never allowed him to make jokes, so he wasn’t sure how well it would land, but Elliot placed a finger under Alexander’s chin and tugged until their eyes met. “My eyes are up here.”

“Huh? Oh. Yeah. Sorry, sweetheart. It’s just . . . can I be frank, Elliot?”

“No. I don’t want you to be Frank,” Elliot disagreed playfully, shaking his head. “I like you as Alexander.” Alexander cocked an eyebrow. Ah, the sweet stench of failure. He’d attempted a second joke, but it clearly failed to land. Elliot sighed. “I suppose you can’t land them all.”

“What?”

Elliot rolled his eyes. “It was a joke. You know, because you asked if you could be frank, but Frank is also a name. It’s a fairly straightforward concept. Which part do you not understand?” Alexander snorted. It was quite possibly Elliot’s new favorite sound in the world.

“My deepest apologies,” he said, lifting two hands in front of him in mock surrender. “That was a very clever joke, I’m just a bit distracted. Now, about that sunscreen.”

Elliot felt his cheeks flush. Alexander’s hands were about to be all over him. His

shoulders and back. Elliot's chest. Maybe even his legs. He couldn't wait, so he practically thrust the sunscreen into Alexander's hands and whirled around.

"Would it be best if I lay on my side? Or should I stay seated?" He looked over his shoulder to see Alexander chewing his cheek, staring at Elliot's lower back. "Is something wrong? Have I cut myself in a place I can't see?"

Alexander shook his head, not looking Elliot in the eyes. "If you lay down, I'm not sure I'll be able to keep my eyes off your . . ." He quickly turned his attention to the bottle of sunscreen, reading the packaging.

"You're afraid you won't be able to look away from my butt?"

Alexander nodded. "It's a very lovely butt."

The corners of Elliot's lips curled up. He knew he had a lovely backside. Jared told him as much on several occasions. Rarely leaving his home, Elliot never got the chance to show it off, and at that moment, he wanted to show it to Alexander. He wanted his new friend to know what he had on offer. And, he supposed, a small part of him wanted Alexander's praise. So Elliot made a decision. He repositioned himself on the chair until he was resting on his side, arching his back to give his rear a bit more definition. Looking over his shoulder, he smiled at Alexander.

"Alexander?" he whispered.

Alexander looked down at him. "Yeah?"

"You can look as long as you'd like." He bit his bottom lip, working up his courage. "I want you to."

"Yeah?"

Elliot nodded. “You can look at me anytime.”

Alexander positioned himself so he was behind Elliot, an arm draped over his side, his groin mere inches from Elliot’s eager entrance.

Alexander leaned down and kissed Elliot’s shoulder, his hand finding Elliot’s baby bump and slowly rubbing it in circles. “You’ll want to stay on your side so you don’t put pressure on her.”

Elliot sucked in a quick breath. The endearment had never been directed at him before. He’d seen it in the films Jared made him watch and read it in the romance novels he borrowed from Jared. Hearing it directed at him—from Alexander, of all people—sent waves of emotion crashing through him. Hope and love and a sense of home. He fought back his tears, resting his cheek against his arm, looking away from Alexander. As he struggled with all his new feelings, he didn’t want to look weak in front of the man.

Alexander’s hands pressed firmly against Elliot’s shoulders, spreading sunscreen across them, his thumbs kneading into Elliot’s flesh.

“Does that feel okay?”

“So good,” Elliot whimpered. A pair of moist lips pressed against his temple, and Elliot reached up, holding Alexander’s face against his.

“Sweet boy,” Alexander praised. “You’re so responsive.”

“Can’t help it.” Elliot closed his eyes and nodded. “You feel too good.”

“I’m going to make you feel even better. Just rest, okay? I’ve got you.” He massaged Elliot’s back, working the sunscreen into his skin.

Elliot purred like a kitten as Alexander's hands worked their way down his sides. Along the way, Alexander tickled him, making Elliot squeal and wriggle beneath him. The more he moved, the more contact he made with Alexander, and by the time the man reached Elliot's lower back, Alexander's clothed erection was pressing firmly against the cheek.

"Sorry," Alexander whispered into Elliot's ear. "I didn't mean to get . . . you know. I can stop now if you want."

Elliot looked over his shoulder and smiled, shaking his head. "Keep going. I don't mind."

Alexander brushed the hair away from Elliot's eyes. "You're sure? Because it's going to be pressed against—"

"Alexander," Elliot interrupted, though not unkindly. "I'm aware, and I would very much like for you to continue." To prove his point, Elliot arched his back, making direct contact. "See? The world hasn't ended. It's only an erection; it's not as if you're attempting to penetrate me on the pool deck." Alexander's eyes bulged. "Oh, dear. I said that far louder than I should have, didn't I?"

A man cleared his throat beside them, and Elliot turned to face him. He looked like a kind man. At the man's side, his bountiful beau was lying beside him, and both men were wearing Speedos that left nothing to the imagination.

"You can talk dirty as loud as you want, kid," the older gentleman said, glancing down at his own noticeable erection. "We're all in this together." For reasons Elliot didn't understand, the man lifted a fist in solidarity. "Get your freak on, gents."

When Elliot looked up at Alexander, his cheeks were a rosy shade of red. He always seemed so in control, and Elliot liked to see this side of him. A bundle of nerves. A

little live wire, sparking with worry. Elliot arched his back again, and he could feel Alexander's hardness wedged between his cheeks.

"Alexander Davenport," Elliot cooed. "You dirty scoundrel."

Alexander chuckled, and with an acknowledging nod toward the erect gentlemen to their left, he turned his focus back to Elliot. "I've gone as low as I can go on your back. I need to scoot down to get your legs." With an undeniable look of lust in his eyes, Alexander rolled his hips, grinding his erection against Elliot's backside, making him whimper. More . Elliot wanted so much more. Once Alexander moved lower, he focused on the task at hand, rubbing up and down Elliot's legs. He went all the way to Elliot's ankles, then took each foot into his hand and gently massaged them. Elliot couldn't remember ever feeling as peaceful as he did at that moment.

Alexander motioned for Elliot to roll over, and when he did, his own erection was fully visible, leaking through his pink Speedo.

"Jesus Christ," Alexander breathed.

"Does it please you?" he asked, feeling a bit self-conscious. "I know some men like their beaus to be small. I apologize if it's too much."

Alexander quickly shook his head. "It's beautiful."

Elliot swallowed before whispering, "Would you like to see it? I can show it to you tonight."

"You don't have to," Alexander quickly objected. "We can go at whatever speed you want."

Elliot nodded. "I think I want you to see it. To see all of me. I believe I'd like to see

yours, too.”

“It’s not as big as yours,” he said, staring down at Elliot’s erection. “I mean, I’m not tiny or anything, but that thing is . . .” He licked his lips, seemingly unable to look away. “Jesus. I’m scared I’ll disappoint you now.” When Elliot looked down at Alexander’s bulge through his swimming trunks, the outline of Alexander’s erection took Elliot’s breath away.

Elliot brought his hand toward Alexander’s groin, eyes locked on his prize. “May I touch it?” he whispered. “Through your swimwear, I mean. The other men aren’t paying attention. I’ll be quick about it.” He nibbled his lip, wanting to feel Alexander’s weight in his palm.

Alexander exhaled a shaky breath. “Y-yeah,” he stammered. “You can.”

Elliot cupped Alexander’s bulge, his eyes flashing pink light, flickering faster than they ever had before. He let out a guttural growl—a sound he didn’t even know he was capable of making—and tightened his grip, slowly stroking up, then down.

Alexander cleared his throat. “Is this okay?”

Feeling lightheaded, Elliot nodded in agreement.

Elliot lay back in the chair, not worried that his erection was visible through his Speedo. Alexander’s hands were heavy against Elliot’s chest, slipping and sliding all across thanks to the lotion. He took a brief detour at Elliot’s nipple, stroking the hard nub repeatedly until Elliot thought he might crawl out of his skin. When he opened his eyes, Alexander was staring at his nipples the way Professor Plum stared at plum jam cookies. Like he wanted to devour them whole.

“That feels incredible,” Elliot whispered. He loved the soft touch. “More. Please?”

Alexander looked to his side, making sure the coast was clear. Thankfully, the twink and his master were locking lips, so no one was paying them any attention. Alexander quickly leaned down, his lips parting around Elliot's nipple, and darted his tongue across, making Elliot cry out.

"Alexander," he whined. He wanted more. Needed more, but he knew he couldn't have that desire quenched on the pool deck.

"So beautiful," he mumbled against Elliot's nipple. Looking up, he locked eyes with Elliot and dragged his tongue across the automaton's nipple. "I'm going to worship you tonight."

Elliot slammed his eyes shut and nodded rapidly. "Yes. Yes, I want that very much."

Alexander crawled forward until he was nuzzled in Elliot's lap, then leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on his lips. "All I want is for you to feel good. To be happy." His expression turned serious, and the look he gave Elliot made it seem like he had entire novels in his eyes, ready to pour out affectionate words like cozy sunshine. "If this thing between us works out, I'm going to take care of you. I'm going to keep you happy in every way."

Elliot smiled warmly at him, because Alexander already did that. They'd clung to each other for less than a day, but Elliot already felt their bond strengthening into something solid.

Elliot wanted to switch sides and slather Alexander's body with sunscreen, but the pair next to them caught his attention.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

“And can you believe the work Ms. Broussard has done to her face?” the twinkish beau asked. Elliot’s ears pricked up, and he shared a nervous glance with Alexander.

“She wanted a change. I can’t say I blame her. I’ve been thinking of getting a facelift too,” the twink’s master said.

The bountiful beau smiled at the man. “You’re beautiful the way you are. I’m just not sure why she’s referring to it as a facelift when it looks like someone’s let the air out of a balloon.”

“That’s not kind, baby,” the man said. “What does Daddy say about kindness?”

“I know. Sorry, Daddy. Kindness costs nothing. I pray you’ll forgive me for speaking out of turn.”

The man chuckled. “You don’t have to keep apologizing. I’m not like some of the other masters here. I won’t punish you.”

Elliot’s and Alexander’s eyes never left each other, and Alexander looked just as worried as Elliot felt. He knew they must have been referring to Mrs. Peppercorn, but Mrs. Peppercorn promised she had a plan. Was that the plan, then? Donning an ill-fitted wig and ballgown, then wandering around the ship, claiming botched plastic surgery? The rest of the passengers saw Mother the night before, so unless Mrs. Peppercorn was trying to say she had emergency overnight surgery, he didn’t think the plan sounded nearly as foolproof as she claimed.

“We need to find her,” Alexander said. “We need to make sure she won’t blow our

cover.”

Reluctantly, Elliot rose from the deckchair and slipped back into his clothes, holding a pool towel over his lap to shield his unyielding erection. He reached down and picked up Professor Plum, and the look of annoyance on the fieldmouse’s face was undeniable.

“Yes, Professor Plum. I would like to lounge around all day, too, but there are pressing matters at hand. Nod if you understand.” When the fieldmouse refused to move a muscle, Elliot narrowed his eyes. “Typical. Well, shame, shame, shame, I know your name.” He lifted the mouse and gave him a gentle kiss on the forehead. “I’m only joking. I adore you.”

They traveled across the ship, trying to find Mrs. Peppercorn. Eventually, they reached the dining hall, and when she came into view, Elliot had to do a double take. Sure enough, Mrs. Peppercorn was walking the room, chit-chatting with beaus and suitors. When she saw them, she lifted her arm, offering a princess-like wave.

“There they are,” she announced to the room. “The men of the hour.” Elliot brought his hand to his pocket, slipping Professor Plum inside. He didn’t need to bear witness to this foolishness. “Elliot, what does Mother say about being tardy?” She was attempting a Creole accent to match Mother’s, but it sounded more Russian than Cajun.

“Pardon?”

“What does Mother say, Elliot?”

Mother had never really mentioned tardiness during his training, because she’d told her beaus it was the man’s job to get them to places on time, and it wasn’t something a bountiful beau should worry their pretty little heads about. Elliot was a man, too,

though. Sure, his skeletal system might have been created from steel, but in every other aspect, he was just as much a man as his potential mate. And wasn't that just the silliest thing? As if only men could keep track of time. For God's sake, it only required a wristwatch and a set of eyes.

"I'm not sure, Mother. I don't recall any lessons in tardiness."

Mrs. Peppercorn rolled her eyes and flung her hands in the air. "If one wishes to keep their beau . . ." She paused, deep in thought. The silence stretched longer than it ought, and for a moment, Elliot wondered if she'd forgotten the topic at hand. Suddenly, she lifted a finger in the air and shouted, "one must never get dressed too slow." She stared at Elliot as if she was awaiting a pat on the back. "You know, because it would make you late." She looked around the room, probably for a rousing round of applause, only to be met with confused expressions from her patrons. She patronizingly mimed as if she was clapping her hands, looking at the crowd with expectant eyes. "You can clap now." Confusedly, the passengers gave her a lackluster round of applause.

Despite the rhyme being emotionally unfulfilling, Elliot nodded anyway, not wanting to draw attention to the fact that Mrs. Peppercorn clearly wasn't Mother, even if everyone was clinging to every word as if she was.

"Yes, Mother. I apologize. Please forgive me."

"Forgiven and forgotten." She shared a knowing wink with Elliot before turning her attention to the crowd of forty-or-so bountiful beaus and their suitors. "As I was saying; cutting edge technology. That's the name of the game." She took Elliot's hand and walked both him and Alexander to a small platform with speakers, a microphone, and karaoke equipment. The stage wasn't terribly tall—essentially just a slight step up from the floor—and it wasn't quite big enough for three people, so Alexander propped one foot on the tiny platform, and kept the other squarely on the

floor. As Elliot and ‘Mother’ stood at the karaoke station, he said a silent prayer that she wouldn’t force him to sing, because Elliot wasn’t exactly Celine Dion.

“Mrs.—Mother,” he quickly corrected. “What’s happening?”

Rather than answer, Mrs. Peppercorn proudly pointed at Elliot’s bump. “I’ve planted the seed, and I’ve watched it grow.” She turned to Elliot and whispered into his ear, “I’m terribly sorry, sugar. I snuck into her room and took her itinerary. The book said I’m meant to sell them on reproductive options. I’m not exactly comfortable doing it, but I can’t deviate from the script or they’ll know I’m not Mother.”

Elliot wanted to ask the crowd why they believed she was Ms. Emily Broussard to begin with. She looked nothing like Mother, botched facelift notwithstanding. He knew he had to play the part, however, so Elliot rubbed his baby bump and nodded.

Mrs. Peppercorn held Mother’s big blue book in front of her face, scanning one of the pages, nodding to herself before quickly clapping it closed and letting it rest at her side. “Elliot’s husband brought him to us two years ago with a request. He wanted a child of his own, and Elliot was to be the vessel. Elliot will give birth in a little over three months, and when he does, we plan to make the procedure available to all of you and your bountiful beaus.” Her grip tightened around the book as she stared into the crowd. Elliot looked around the room, surprised to see a look of absolute horror on most of his i-Series brothers’ faces. It was a sentiment most of the Masters and Mistresses in the crowd shared, but there were a handful of potential husbands, and even a few beaus, who looked as if she just offered them the moon. What hurt Elliot most was seeing the reaction of the reluctant beaus. They were staring at their current and future masters with a look of absolute betrayal. The same betrayal Elliot felt when he woke to find his baby bump that first day. Like their lives were ripped away from them, having been thrown head-first into a pregnancy they never asked for. Elliot would be damned if he allowed them to inflict that hurt on anyone else. The men may have been bought and paid for, but they didn’t pay for this. They wouldn’t pay for it,

if Elliot had his way. Yes, some of the beaus were giddy at the prospect of fatherdom, but his brothers deserved the chance to choose. Their bodies. Their choice.

Elliot slowly rubbed his baby bump as Mrs. Peppercorn continued her speech, detailing the process by reading aloud from Mother's blue book, fumbling and stumbling over her pronunciations of medical jargon. Once she finished her spiel, she led Elliot to the main table at the front of the dining room. Elliot scooped Professor Plum out of his pocket and placed him on top, then they took their seats, Alexander and Mrs. Peppercorn at each side of Elliot, wedging him between them like affectionate bookends.

The air of positivity Elliot had been basking in earlier was gone, leaving him alone in his upset.

"It's okay," Mrs. Peppercorn assured him, whispering into his ear. "Once this cruise is over, we'll think of something. I could pretend to meet an untimely end by making a glorious third-act villainous monologue and then diving into the ocean, but I guess two deaths at sea would be overkill. Still, I'm up for it if you are." She looked at Alexander. "You'll need to come get me with one of the emergency rafts. I'd prefer not to drown, if possible."

"You're not diving into the sea," Elliot hissed, though not too unkindly.

She breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank God for that. Truthfully, I was worried you might agree to it. I don't really want to wade in the water until Mr. Davenport can rescue me. Don't worry, sugar. We'll think of something. We have to, and we need to figure it out before we dock, because I have no intention of playing the role of Emily Broussard once we reach dry land." The corner of her lip curled menacingly, a look Elliot had never seen on her face before. "The fact of the matter is, I've never been good in positions of power, and I'm already feeling it. I don't relish the command for respect, or the need for unyielding devotion." She gazed around the room and smiled

rather proudly. “They worship me. Well, they worship her, but you know what I mean.”

“I’m not sure what any of this has to do with you jumping in the sea,” Elliot pointed out.

“I was a checkout girl when I was younger,” she continued, ignoring him as if she hadn’t heard a word he said.

“I don’t know what that has to do with anything, either. Mrs. Peppercorn, I believe you’re spiraling.”

“Hogwash,” she said. “It has everything to do with it. When I was sixteen, I got a job down at the Pick-n-Save. I worked there for two years before being promoted to Assistant Manager.” Elliot cocked an eyebrow, giving her time to make her point, despite his waning patience. “They say I went a bit power mad, you see, but it’s like I told them; I run a tight ship. I expect greatness, because that’s what I give back to the world. Now, were my methods for achieving greatness problematic? Potentially. And did I let my ego get the better of me a few times? Sure. Did I try to crush someone’s hand in the box baler for calling in sick five minutes before his shift started? Absolutely, and I’d do it again, because there’s nothing I hate worse than an Inconsiderate Ian.”

“I don’t know what she’s talking about,” Elliot whispered to Alexander. “And I have no idea what a box baler is.”

“Smile and nod, sweetheart. If you let her ramble long enough, she’ll tire herself out.” He bumped his shoulder against Elliot’s.

Elliot bumped him back.

“The final straw came when I pulled my district manager over my knee and gave him a spanking for insulting the cleanliness of my store. I’ll tell you something for nothing, boys, I’ll stand for many things—being called unclean and sloppy isn’t one of them. The man fired me on the spot, so I joined a coven of witches and cast a spell on him.” Her eyes narrowed. “Double, double, toil and trouble, may he never have an accidental erection that’s subtle. That’s the spell I cast. Three weeks later he was arrested for methamphetamine possession. I’m not saying the two are related—”

“Because they’re not,” Elliot pointed out, but it only earned him a scowl.

“The point is, he ended up in jail for half a year, and the Pick-n-Save closed shortly after.”

Elliot opened his mouth, wanting to shift the conversation back to the matter at hand, but a familiar face peeked up from the crowd, waving rapidly at him. The hand belonged to a man sitting at a table toward the end of the dining hall.

“Elliot!” Mayor Beau Rivera of Genevieve, Georgia, called out. He stood up from his seat and headed toward them, beaming ear to ear. What in the world was he doing there?

As he approached, Elliot took stock of the man heading his way. Beau was certainly an attractive man. In another life, he’d probably even want to claim him as his own, but now, he couldn’t. Now, he wouldn’t, because he had Alexander, and Alexander was the best man he’d ever met—not that Elliot had met very many men.

“I hope you don’t mind me tagging along,” Beau said, taking a seat beside him. “When you went missing, Periwinkle called me and said you left a note saying you were running away to find a forever with your mystery man—”

“You wanted to find a forever?” Alexander interrupted, his smile big and bright,

making Elliot blush. “With me?”

Elliot squeezed his hand and nodded, unable to speak. He wanted to kindly ask Mayor Rivera to zip his lips before any other unwelcome admissions slipped out, but he stopped himself when Alexander leaned in and placed a gentle kiss on his lips. The kiss felt truer than anything he’d ever felt, and Elliot released Alexander’s hand long enough to cup his cheek.

“I wanted to find you,” Elliot whispered. “I wanted to find you more than I’ve ever wanted anything.” He rubbed the tips of their noses together before offering Alexander a parting peck. He wanted to explore this new thing they were building together, but Elliot prided himself on his manners, so he turned his attention back to Mayor Rivera.

“So, you followed us here to make sure I was okay?”

“As much as I’d like to claim some heroic nature, I’m afraid the reason I’m here is a selfish one. I’m hoping to find a forever for myself, too.”

Elliot didn’t understand why Beau felt he needed to resort to purchasing a husband when he was such a handsome, kind man. He radiated positivity, and that should have been enough to land him the pick of the litter. Alexander’s reasoning for wanting a bountiful beau made sense to Elliot. He was a very busy man. He didn’t have time to nurture a budding relationship, but he wanted someone to shower with love.

“But you’re so handsome,” Elliot pointed out. “Men should be lined around the city square at the chance of standing by your side.”

Beau snorted. “I wish. Unfortunately, Genevieve is a small town, and our gay population consists of a handful of men, none of whom particularly tickle my fancy.” He pulled a small eyedropper-shaped bottle from his pocket with the word “Rose”

scribbled across the top, and Elliot watched as he uncapped the lid and drip-drip-dripped three droplets of the contents into his cup of water. In the center of the table, there was a small dish of lemon wedges. Beau grabbed one, squeezed its juice into his glass, and plopped the carcass into the water before stirring it with his straw. He took a sip, then moaned as the flavor traveled across his tongue. “Sorry. Lemon rosewater is my weakness. It has been since I was a child.” He took another sip, then let out another moan. Once he’d finished his liquid love affair, he turned to Alexander. “So, I’m guessing you two are together? Officially, I mean. Because if you’re not, I’d be happy to take him off your hands.” He glanced over at Elliot and winked. “I’ve got a little farm outside of town. You’d look adorable in overalls, helping me feed my pigs.”

Alexander’s hand squeezed Elliot’s knee under the table. An unspoken promise, perhaps? Elliot wasn’t sure what the touch had meant, but it didn’t stop him from placing his hand on top of Alexander’s. It wasn’t enough, though. Alexander had a far-away look in his eyes, and the distance between them seemed to grow inch by inch, mile by mile, the longer Beau went on.

“And you’d love my dads,” Beau added. “One of them used to be in a boy band, and the other was mayor of Tallulah before being elected as governor. The first Democrat to hold the office in decades. Ain’t that something?”

Alexander’s eyes widened. “Rivers Rivera?”

Beau nodded with pride. “I’m not trying to follow in his footsteps, though. I don’t have big-city dreams. Once my run as mayor is over, I’m thinking of starting up a local nonprofit, but who knows . . . The world is my oyster.” He smiled warmly at Elliot. “Are you exclusive? Because if not, I’d love to get a chance to get to know you better.” He looked Alexander up and down. “You, too.”

Elliot looked to Alexander for an answer. On one hand, he was terribly embarrassed

to be placed in the position of needing an answer to Beau's ridiculous question. On the other hand, Elliot wanted to hear Alexander's answer more than he ever wanted to hear anything before.

"Alexander?" Elliot whispered.

Alexander scooted his chair back, and Elliot's heart broke into a million tiny pieces like the world's worst jigsaw puzzle, because he assumed Alexander wanted to bed Beau River as well as the bountiful beau at his side. And who was Elliot, compared to Mayor Rivera? A pregnant pauper clinging to the fairytales of white knights and distressed damsels while the prince and the mayor stole the show.

Alexander patted his lap. It was an action that took every piece of Elliot's shattered heart and brought them back together. "Would you like to sit in my lap?"

Yes. Elliot wanted that very much. It seemed Professor Plum wanted it, too, because he ran around in circles, chasing his tail as he squeaked.

"What about his question? Are we . . .?"

Alexander held his hand out for Elliot. "What do you think?"

Elliot turned to Beau and offered a genuinely apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, Mr. Mayor. I believe I am spoken for." He looked back at Alexander, his eyes pleading for instruction and assurance. He wasn't good at making executive decisions. Elliot never had to make an important decision in all his life, and this was the most important decision of them all.

Alexander gave a quick nod. "If that's something you would be open to, then yes. Yes, I think you may be."

He rose from his seat and turned, lowering himself onto Alexander's lap, and it was like every ounce of tension in Alexander faded. Elliot could feel his entire body go lax, and it gave him a sense of pride, because he'd eased Alexander's worry so effortlessly. Elliot tipped Alexander's chin with his finger and smiled.

"My heart has been so lonely for so long," Elliot whispered. "Even during my visits with Periwinkle and Arthur, I always felt like a man alone on an island." Leaning closer, he brushed their lips together. "I don't feel lonely when I'm with you, and I never want to feel lonely again." Elliot parted his lips, inviting Alexander in for a kiss.

Their lips danced slowly against each other. There were no tongues or groped appendages, just a simple promise from one man to another.

"I believe I'd like to fall in love with you," Elliot said.

Alexander's smile stretched halfway across his face. "I want to fall in love with you, too." He pulled Elliot in for a hug and placed his hand on the baby bump, softly rubbing round and round. "I'm going to take care of you, Elliot. And if you decide you want to keep her, I'll take care of her too. You have my word."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

That night, as they entered their suite, Elliot felt lighter than he ever had. Throughout the day, Alexander and Elliot were inseparable. They saw a comedy show in the theater, then had dinner with Mother-slash-Mrs. Peppercorn, and the entire time, Elliot's hand rarely left Alexander's.

Elliot was a bit worried about Mrs. Peppercorn's leadership style. When she mentioned running a tight ship before, Elliot hadn't realized just how power-hungry she'd been. Masquerading as Mother, she roamed around the boat, barking orders at workers and creating multi-page memos on best practices for improving cleanliness and friendliness—a phrase she claimed to hold the trademark for. She went into great detail about the importance of kindness and how it costs nothing, but the way she worded it was anything but kind. She used all caps in places, making it appear as if she was shouting. Even bringing up the topic of planks and the men who ought to walk them.

“I think we need to keep an eye on Mrs. Peppercorn,” Alexander said, reading Elliot's mind. He unbuttoned the button-down shirt he'd worn to dinner, putting inch after inch of Alexander's creamy skin on display. Elliot couldn't make himself move. It was like his eyes had been glued to Alexander's chest. As Alexander unfastened his cufflinks, he cleared his throat.

“Sorry,” Elliot said, shaking his head. “I was . . .” Elliot closed his eyes and sighed. Alexander liked him. Elliot knew he did. He'd said so at brunch, then several times after, throughout the day. If Elliot was going to forge something special with him, he knew he needed to be brave, as scary as it might be. “I was looking at your chest and got distracted.”

The sound of cloth falling onto the floor sent Elliot's eyes fluttering open. Alexander stood in front of him completely shirtless, and God, if it wasn't the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen.

"You can look at me whenever you want." Alexander leaned in and gently kissed him. "You can look as long as you want. I like when you look at me."

"I like when you look at me too," Elliot said, standing on his toes so he could touch his forehead to Alexander's. Alexander chuckled, crouching lower in order to scoop Elliot into his arms.

"Wrap your legs around me, sweetheart. We can be eye to eye this way."

Elliot did as instructed, looping his legs behind Alexander's back, enjoying the way his hand felt against Elliot's backside. "I like this. I think it's my new favorite thing."

Alexander pressed their foreheads together. "Mine too." Their eyes were locked, neither of them blinking much at all as Alexander walked them to bed. "Keep your legs around me." He took a seat, and Elliot did just as Alexander instructed, keeping his legs locked and his arms draped over his shoulders. Alexander hugged him tighter, gently rocking him back and forth.

"He never held me like this."

"No?"

Elliot shook his head, dragging their foreheads back and forth against each other. "Never." He pulled away long enough to graze Alexander's eyebrow with his thumb. "I didn't feel special with him, but you've made me feel that way."

"Because you are." Alexander kissed the tip of Elliot's nose. "I think you might be

the most special man I've ever met." Pink lights flickered in Elliot's eyes, displaying an overwhelming level of comfort and appreciation. Alexander stroked the skin beside Elliot's eyes. "God, your colors are beautiful."

Their foreheads stilled, and Elliot watched as Alexander closed his eyes before following suit. They stayed that way a while, just existing in the moment, letting the inklings of affection blossom.

"Did you still want to see me naked?"

"Please?" Elliot smiled widely before opening his eyes, and when he did, Elliot gasped. It wasn't Alexander's lap he was sitting on. It was Jared Price. His oily skin and poorly manicured beard. His cold, angry eyes.

"Did you really think you could get away from me? You thought I'd let you steal my kid?"

Elliot slammed his eyes shut and shook his head. Jared couldn't be back. He just couldn't. Not after Elliot had finally escaped.

"Baby?" Alexander whispered. "What's wrong?" He kissed his way across Elliot's forehead until he could finally open his eyes. Thankfully, Jared was no longer in front of him, only Alexander with an overwhelming look of worry on his face. "Are you okay?"

Elliot wanted to tell him what he'd seen, but he couldn't find the strength to say the words. Alexander would hate him. He would see Elliot as a malfunctioning robot, and then Elliot would lose his only chance at happiness.

"Yes, I'm okay," he said. "I'm sorry, Alexander. Maybe I have overexerted myself today. I don't think I can . . ." He looked down at Alexander's crotch. "I still want to

show myself to you, but I don't know if I'm ready for more than that. For tonight, at least. Is that all right?"

Alexander cupped his cheek. "We go at your pace. However fast or slow you want to go is just fine with me. I'm not in any hurry."

Elliot gave him a nod before lifting himself off Alexander's lap. Taking a few steps back, Elliot lifted the rainbow tank top over his head. He'd been so worried about wearing it to dinner, because he knew most suitors and beaus would be dressed to the nines, but it had quickly become Elliot's favorite shirt—not that he had very many shirts.

Folding the shirt, he laid it on top of the dresser in the corner of their room. Next, Elliot unbuttoned his pastel-pink shorts until all he was left wearing was the banana hammock. He stared down at it—at the prominent bulge, front and center—and scowled.

"Is something wrong?"

Elliot shook his head. "I don't understand. You called it a banana hammock. What does that mean?"

Alexander's cheeks darkened. "I . . . I guess it means—"

"Alexander?" Elliot interrupted.

"Yeah?"

"You don't have to mince words. I don't shock easily." He bit his lip and shook his head. "Actually, that's not entirely true. I once shocked Jared when he tried to have his way with me as I was charging. He punished me after, but it felt nice to wake up

and see his hair sticking straight up like a cartoon character.” The corner of his lip curled up. “Is it bad for me to say that I’m glad he got hurt?”

“If it is, then I’m just as bad, because there are things I want to do to that man that would break every point in the Geneva convention.”

Elliot cocked his head to the side. “Isn’t that about soldiers? You’re not in the army, are you?”

“No, but if it meant getting to kick his ass, I would enlist.”

Elliot’s smile stretched further. He leaned down, bringing his mouth to Alexander’s ear. “No. The armed services are no place for you. You’re a gentle soul.” He kissed Alexander between the eyes. “Less about the United States Army, more about this mysterious banana hammock. What does it mean?”

Alexander sighed. “I thought I might be able to skirt the issue by shifting the subject.”

“That won’t work on me. I’ve got the memory of an elephant,” Elliot said proudly. “Well, actually, I guess I don’t. I think I did at one point, but now everything’s been scrambled in my mind like eggs.”

Alexander chuckled. “It’s just another word for a Speedo. It’s called a banana hammock because it acts like a hammock for your penis.”

It was a silly expression, Elliot thought, but he found it rather endearing. He stared down at the outline of his shaft in his Speedo. It didn’t look like a banana. Just a long, curved tube. Elliot placed his fingertip on the bulge and slowly traced a path downward before looking into Alexander’s eyes.

“May I take these off?”

Alexander swallowed. “Please?”

Elliot bit his lip, keeping his eyes locked on Alexander’s as he slowly slid down his Speedo, revealing his flaccid seven-inch penis. He looked down at it, silently inviting Alexander along for the journey. When he glanced up at Alexander, his cheeks were burning red with heat, and he wore an expression Elliot couldn’t read.

“Okay, now I’m really worried about showing you mine. Jesus, Elliot. It’s like a third leg.”

“Unfortunately, with Mother out of the picture, I’m unable to have it shortened.” Elliot sighed sadly. “I apologize if it’s too large. I understand if you wish to send me away.”

“Are you kidding me?” Alexander asked, stretching a smile across his face. “It’s like a work of art.” He stared at it, a bit too intensely, if Elliot was being honest, because it made him feel like Alexander thought he had the penis of a god, and he’d never been terribly comfortable with compliments.

“You really like it?”

Alexander stood and made his way across the small suite until they were standing face to face. “Whenever you’re ready, I’m going to show you just how much I do. May I touch it? I won’t go any further than that, I’d just like to—”

Elliot cut him off by placing his hand on top of Alexander’s and guiding it to his shaft. He wrapped their fingers around it, just resting them there with no expectations or goals of sexual release.

“May I see yours?” Elliot asked.

“All right,” he said, taking a step back. “Just remember, it’s a grower, not a shower.” Elliot didn’t understand what in the world that statement meant, but he didn’t dally on the topic. When Alexander stepped back, Elliot tracked his movement like a hunter observing his prey. His body was perfect on every level. The way his abdominal muscles had valleys between each one, and his rather large biceps which bulged out at the perfect angle. Alexander slid his slacks down, revealing a tight pair of baby blue boxer-briefs. He folded his slacks and turned to drape them over the small loveseat, and when he did, it gave Elliot an unobstructed view of Alexander’s backside.

Elliot whined with need like a cat in heat. He never once looked at Jared’s butt this way. He never felt the need to explore the soft flesh like a sexual archeologist. With Alexander, the need felt undeniable, as if his ass were meant to be claimed. To be adored and explored thoroughly until the man lay beneath him, writhing on his tongue.

Alexander looked over his shoulder and grinned at Elliot. “Yeah, it’s always been my calling card.” When he turned around, Alexander slid his underwear off, letting them gather at his ankles. His modest cock was on full display, and Elliot stared intently at it, trying to memorize every inch. There weren’t very many inches to it, but it didn’t bother Elliot. In fact, he found it quite endearing that his savior had an average-sized penis. In the time Elliot knew him, Alexander had been so poised and put together. A textbook image of masculinity, except for this one small hiccup in his DNA.

“I know it’s not much, but it’s yours if you want it.”

Elliot nodded. “It’s a very beautiful penis, Alexander.” Following in the footsteps Alexander left earlier, Elliot approached slowly and stared at it. “Can I touch you?” When Alexander nervously grunted his approval, Elliot reached down and wrapped

his fingers around the shaft, carefully grazing his finger back and forth against the head. "I'm going to become very good friends with this penis," he promised.

"Yeah?"

Elliot looked up at Alexander, pink light blasting in his eyes. Crouching, Elliot looked the penis dead in its eye and nodded. "You're mine now, too, and I'm going to take care of you." Leaning closer, he pressed a kiss to the tip, then stood, wrapping his arms around Alexander's shoulders and burying his face in his neck.

"You don't know how relieved I am," Alexander whispered. "I want you to like all of me. Even it."

Elliot pressed a quick kiss to Alexander's lips. "I do. I love it a lot." He wanted to say more. To voice the feelings he'd been feeling ever since his trip to Sugarplum Island.

"I think it might love you, too, Elliot," he whispered. "Now, what do you say we cuddle in bed and watch a movie?" When Elliot gave him a rousing nod of approval, they climbed into bed and wrapped their limbs around each other, getting nice and cozy for the film. It was an old film about wizards and ruby slippers and flying monkeys. Songs poured from the speakers, each one just as good as the last. When the girl, the lion, the man of metal, and the scarecrow sang about wanting a heart and courage and a brain, Elliot felt the words in his soul. They wanted to be human. They wanted to be normal, just like everyone else, and Elliot craved that so badly, he almost couldn't stand it. By the end of the number, Elliot was in tears, and Alexander hugged him closer.

"My sweet boy. It's going to be okay. I promise I won't let anything happen to you."

Elliot sniffled. "You deserve a real man."

Alexander lifted Elliot's gaze by gently tugging his chin with a finger. "I know what I deserve, and I know what and who I want." He gave Elliot a kiss, more passionate than any of the ones they'd shared before. It went on for days and seconds and hours, and through it all, Alexander mumbled words of praise and reassurance. When the kiss was done, Alexander stroked his cheek. "We need to get some rest, baby. I don't want you feeling tired tomorrow."

Elliot resisted the urge to tell Alexander he didn't actually get tired. He could feign symptoms of exhaustion should he want to, but why would anyone want to do that? Instead of giving Alexander a crash course in an automaton's power supply, Elliot gave Alexander a nod and grabbed the end of his charging port beside the bed. Once it was inserted into his toe, Elliot lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling. The boat rocked ever so slightly, then Alexander hooked an arm over Elliot's chest, his penis pressed flush against Elliot's thigh. Elliot wanted Alexander to feel him, so he turned toward him, keeping his foot kicked back so his charging station's cord wouldn't get in the way.

"Will you hold me all night long?" Elliot asked.

Alexander placed a hand on Elliot's butt and pulled him even closer. "Try and stop me," he said with a wink. "Will you show me how you put yourself in . . . What was it called again?"

"Stasis," Elliot answered, lifting his arm, his palm facing Alexander. "You draw the shape of a star on my arm and it opens my interface. You just have to touch the purple light at that point."

"Does it hurt?"

Elliot shook his head. "It was very peaceful last night. Powering down, on the other hand . . ."

“It’s like death,” Alexander finished for him. “That’s what you said before.” Alexander drew the shape of a star on his arm, and three lights shone through his pale skin. “It’s beautiful, sweetheart.”

“Thank you,” Elliot said, his heart fluttering. “Would you like to do the honors?”

Alexander nodded, but backed away. Elliot wanted to ask where he was going, but he was given his answer only a few seconds later when Alexander scooted down the bed and pressed a kiss on the bump. “Night-night, baby girl. I can’t wait to meet you.” He looked up at Elliot with a genuine smile, stroking his tummy. “I love you like this. Full of life, yours and hers.”

Elliot placed his hand on top of Alexander’s and squeezed, hoping the look of overwhelming appreciation was clear in his eyes. Alexander settled in next to Elliot again, pulling him close, then stared at the purple light shining through his skin. “I just need to press the purple one?”

“Yeah. You have to push down a bit, but not too hard.”

Alexander nodded and brought his hand to Elliot’s arm, looking up and saying, “Night-night to you, too, Elliot. I can’t wait to see you in the morning.”

Elliot nibbled his lip and nodded. “Me too. Night-night, Alexander.”

As Elliot’s cycle of stasis took effect, his mind wandered through his memories like a film. Visions of Alexander spreading sunblock on Elliot’s bare skin. The joy on his face when they shared their first kiss. Master Jared Price lying down. Mrs. Peppercorn giving him the warmest of hugs. Red liquid spreading across marble.

He didn’t know what the images of Jared or the red marble were all about, but they made him feel extremely uncomfortable. There was still some cake frosting in the

places the memories should have been, and for once, he wasn't sad to have lost part of his history, because whatever that memory was, Elliot knew he wouldn't like it. He wouldn't ever want to revisit it.

The next morning, when Elliot woke, he was pressed firmly against Alexander. Their arms and legs were tangled, and they clung to each other like someone lost at sea might cling to their life preserver. He studied Alexander's face, wanting to memorize every square centimeter of the man, just in case he wound up back with Jared once all was said and done.

Elliot couldn't think of a worse fate than losing what little sense of freedom he finally felt. He wouldn't. If worse came to worst, he would do whatever it took to avoid returning to Jared Price.

Alexander looked so wonderfully peaceful while he slept, so for the next hour, whenever memories of Jared Price threatened to rear their horrible heads, Elliot used the sight of Alexander's face as a touchstone of sorts. Something tangible to hold on to when reality felt like it was fading. He needed something more, but he didn't know what. Something to cling to. Something to wrap himself up in.

He startled when Alexander released the hold he had on Elliot and rolled onto his back, steadily snoring. After a few moments spent staring at his bare shoulders above the covers, Elliot glanced down to see a tent formed in Alexander's lap. By the look of it, it didn't seem much larger than it had while flaccid, but that was just fine. Jared had an unnecessarily lengthy penis, and all it ever provided Elliot was pain and an unspoken promise that he would never be free from the pain it inflicted.

The funny thing was, when Elliot was with Jared, he'd never once felt true sexual arousal. Sure, he played the part, and he played it well, but that was all it had ever been. An act. A pretense of premarital bliss, all the while hating every second and every single inch of it. Mother always told Elliot and his brothers that intimate

relations were the cornerstone to a happy marriage, but he was never sexually satisfied by Jared. Maybe that's why everything always hurt so much. Maybe the fact that Elliot had never been brought to the brink of sexual release was part of the reason his home life was so unhappy. He had never ejaculated before, and by the look in Jared's eyes every time he found his release, it looked to be a very fun experience.

Alexander would expect intimate relations. If Elliot stayed, Alexander would require sexual release. Strangely enough, Elliot wanted Alexander to find his release. More than that, Elliot wanted to be his release's source.

Alexander told Elliot they could move at his pace. Lying in bed with a man he'd grown quite fond of, Elliot wanted to pick up the pace and get the ball rolling, as they say. He slid a hand beneath the covers, then over Alexander's thigh. He paused, letting his fingers linger against his warm skin.

"Alexander?" he whispered.

Alexander's snores turned into a snort and he slowly blinked his eyes, still narrow from sleep. "Elliot?"

"I'm sorry to wake you, it's just, there was something I wanted to do, and I didn't want to do it without your consent."

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

Alexander stared down at the empty space between them, and their limbs that were no longer tangled together. “Why’d you move, baby?” His voice was soft and filled with raspy affection. A stark contrast to the way Jared behaved each time he woke. With Jared, it was always screams and shouts aplenty. With Alexander, it was sleepy eyes that overflowed with adoration. Alexander fixed a frown on his face, but Elliot was ninety-nine percent sure it was simply an act. “I miss my cuddle buddy.”

Elliot inched his hand further across Alexander’s thigh, and warmth spread through his chest when he watched Alexander’s eyes bulge, finally realizing where Elliot’s other hand had gone.

“May I touch you?”

Alexander stared dazedly for a moment before slowly nodding. “You’re sure? You don’t have to. I can wait. I promise, I don’t mind, baby.”

“I like when you call me that. Baby.”

Alexander’s lip tugged into a smile. “Then I’ll have to start saying it more often.”

“Promise?”

Alexander nodded. “I swear, baby.” With his promise given, Alexander reached for the cover and slowly pushed it away, revealing his nude form. The night before, Elliot saw Alexander’s penis, but it hadn’t been hard. Fully erect, it took Elliot’s breath away. He stared at it for a while, memorizing the sight of the man he cared for. Despite Alexander’s assurance he was a grower, not a shower, his penis hadn’t

seemed to gain much length when fully erect. He was maybe a bit over five inches. A perfectly average penis for a perfectly above average man.

Elliot wrapped his hand around the shaft and slowly stroked up and down. He maneuvered himself between Alexander's legs, resting on his hands and knees so he could get a better look.

"It's so perfect," Elliot said, awestruck at the bead of pre-cum pearling at the tip. He looked up at Alexander with pleading eyes. "May I have that? I want to taste you. To take part of you into me. Please?" The moment Alexander gave an approving nod, he leaned closer, pressing a kiss to the crease of Alexander's shaft and balls. His scent was all man; musky and sweet at the same time. Elliot wanted more. He needed to show Alexander just how much he cared for him and his penis. Their eyes remained locked as Elliot left a trail of gentle kisses up Alexander's shaft. Taking it into his hand, Elliot positioned Alexander's cock in front of his lips and puckered, kissing the underside of his head, causing the pearl of pre-cum to grow larger. It was bound to spill soon, so Elliot flashed Alexander a pleading glance. With Alexander's nod of approval, Elliot stuck out his tongue and licked the head clean, letting Alexander's flavor settle on his tongue.

Elliot moaned, because it was sweet and salty, and just so positively Alexander.

"Jesus," Alexander breathed.

Elliot dragged Alexander's cock back and forth against his lips, a method he mastered years ago. He was hoping to show Alexander what a good boy he could be. He needed Alexander to know how much he appreciated everything he did for Elliot. It was his way of showing Alexander what was on offer, should they pursue a romantic entanglement.

He parted his lips and slowly welcomed Alexander into his mouth. The cry that left

the man was one of the most beautiful sounds he'd ever heard. It was wild and wonderful and ever so ungentlemanly. A stark contrast to the man he presented to the world.

Good.

More of that.

Elliot wanted to know every sound Alexander had ever kept hidden. Every desire that had gone unspoken. He sucked and sucked, showing off his lack of a gag reflex. Through it all, their gazes were locked, neither man able to look away.

"Fuck, baby," Alexander rasped. "You feel so good around me. That's it. Keep going. That's my good boy."

Elliot nodded, whimpering at the praise and shelled his tongue to show his appreciation. Alexander's cock seemed to never stop pouring pre-cum into Elliot's mouth. Which was fine by Elliot. He wanted more of the flavor. More of his essence. When Alexander bent his knees and scooted further down the bed, it caused his cheeks to spread, gifting Elliot the sight of his hairless entrance.

Elliot opened his mouth and let a string of saliva drip down into his palm, then spread it around his fingertip. Reaching between Alexander's cheeks, Elliot softly grazed his hole, making him cry out.

"Oh, God. Elliot. Baby, please."

Elliot pulled his mouth away and licked his lips. "Yes, sir?"

Fire flashed in Alexander's eyes. "You don't have to call me that," he attempted to claim, but Elliot could tell how much the title turned him on, because his cock

twitched the moment Elliot said it.

“I know. I want to, though.” He tapped Alexander’s entrance like he was knocking on a door. When Alexander gave a nod of approval, Elliot slowly pushed his finger inside until he reached the first knuckle. “You’re very tight. Have you ever been . . .”

“Fucked?” Alexander breathed, his pupils blown wide. “No. Never. Not yet, at least.” He placed his hand on top of Elliot’s and slowly pushed the finger deeper inside. “I want to, though. Jesus, Elliot, I want that so much.”

Elliot kissed his thigh. “I’ve never enjoyed bottoming, sir.” Another pearl of pre-cum seeped out, and Elliot quickly collected it with his tongue. His heart raced as Alexander slowly pulled Elliot’s hand back, then pushed him inside again. Soon enough, his hips joined in, fucking himself on Elliot’s finger. “He never allowed me to top. Would you?”

Alexander’s eyes rolled back in his head, his back arching with pleasure. “God, yes! Elliot, I’m going to come soon. I don’t know how much longer I can hold back.” Elliot wrapped his lips around the shaft and worked him faster. “Baby, can I come in your mouth?”

Elliot moaned his approval. Wanting to drive the fact home, he shelled his tongue, working faster and faster, sliding his finger rapidly in and out of Alexander’s hole. The moment he struck gold, striking his prostate with force, Alexander erupted, shooting jet after jet into Elliot’s mouth. He left it there, letting it collect and fill Elliot’s mouth until Alexander’s cock was suspended in semen. With their eyes locked, Elliot pulled away and swallowed.

“Holy shit,” Alexander said, looking dazed.

“Was it okay?”

Alexander's chest rose and fell heavily as he arched an eyebrow. "Are you kidding me? That was the best orgasm of my life. I came in less than five minutes. Truthfully, it's kind of embarrassing."

A smile split Elliot's face. "You mean it?" To answer, Alexander opened his arms, inviting Elliot back to him. Elliot crawled forward until he was straddling his lap, then rested his head on Alexander's chest.

"After that, I'm never letting you go." Alexander's fingers threaded through Elliot's hair, scratching lightly at the back of his scalp. "I think I might have to keep you forever."

Tears filled Elliot's eyes, and he didn't want Alexander to see them. He didn't want him to think he was sad, because he wasn't. Elliot was overcome with happiness. Waves of pinks danced in the corners of his eyes. As he sniffled, Alexander rubbed his hand up and down Elliot's back soothingly.

"I want that, too," Elliot whispered. "All I want is to be yours, but I don't wish to belong to you, if that makes sense. I don't . . . I don't ever want to have to feel like someone's accessory again. To be treated like a thing. He hurt me so badly, Alexander." He looked up at Alexander with hopeful pinks and melancholy blues dancing in his eyes. "If I give you my heart, will you promise not to hurt it?"

"You have my word." To prove it, Alexander sealed the pact with a kiss, his tongue slipping into Elliot's mouth, rolling like the waves around them, sending the boat rocking back and forth.

Elliot broke the kiss and nodded. Reaching down, he touched his tummy. "And what about her?"

Alexander placed his hand on top of Elliot's and squeezed before letting go and

stroking the baby bump. “Would you want to raise her with me? I know she’s yours, but I’d love to be part of her journey, if you’ll allow it.”

Elliot tilted his head forward, pressing their foreheads together. Brushing their noses against each other, he asked, “What if I want her to be yours too? Would you want to be a father? You don’t have to, but—”

Alexander slammed his eyes shut, and a single teardrop slipped out, then dripped down his cheek. “Yes. Yeah, I want that.” When he opened his eyes, they were filled with so much hope and appreciation, if he was an automaton, the pink lights in his eyes would have been blinding. “You’re sure about this?”

Elliot quickly nodded. “I know we’re still getting to know each other, but we’re on the right track, aren’t we?”

Alexander leaned down and placed a kiss on Elliot’s bump. “We’re on the only track worth traveling.” He brought his lips to Elliot’s and gave him the same gentle kiss he just gave the baby bump. “And it’s just getting started.” As Alexander went in for another kiss, Professor Plum squeaked in his cage, running around his wheel at an alarming rate. Seeming to be going haywire.

“Damn,” Alexander grumbled, standing up from their bed and walking to the cage. As Alexander reached into the unlatched cage, Elliot stared at his butt, his own cock leaking beneath the blanket. “Crisis averted. I forgot to charge him last night.” He leaned even closer to the cage, his cheeks parting, his pink entrance completely exposed. Yes, Elliot thought. Yes, he believed he would like to top Alexander. He watched as Alexander picked up the cage and set it on the floor next to the wall outlet, and plugged the charger in. Through it all, Elliot’s eyes never left his backside. His cheeks were plump. Quite plump, indeed. Elliot licked his lips. When Alexander cleared his throat, Elliot looked up to see him smiling over his shoulder.

“You’re staring, sweetheart.”

“Sorry,” Elliot blurted, his cheeks burning. The apology was still warm on his lips when his eyes returned to their original position, locked on Alexander’s hole.

“Do you see something you like?”

Elliot nodded, feeling a bit lightheaded. “Very much.”

“Good. I’m glad you enjoy the view.” Alexander stood and made his way back to the bed, his cock bouncing with each step.

“You haven’t come yet,” Alexander said, sinking to his knees. He placed his hands on Elliot’s hips and carefully whirled him around, staring hungrily at Elliot’s penis.

“Would you like me to make you come?”

“I’ve never actually ejaculated before,” Elliot whispers, ashamed. “It wasn’t something I was allowed to do. Now I’m thinking it was so I could save my first time for when it’s special. I want it to be with someone . . . with someone I love.” He quickly looked away. “I just mean, I want to know for sure. Is that okay?”

Alexander nodded, quirking a teasing smile. “And do I know this mystery man?”

Elliot had to hold back a smile. He wanted to toy with Alexander, though not unkindly. “I believe you may.”

“Yeah?” he asked, rising to the bed and carefully guiding Elliot onto his back before straddling his lap. “And just who might he be?”

“Mayor Beau Rivera.” Elliot tried to keep a straight face, but it felt impossible. The moment Alexander’s eyes widened with shock, Elliot lost what little self-control he

had left and cackled loudly, feeling absolutely giddy.

Alexander blinked at him.

Elliot rolled his eyes. “I was only teasing.”

Alexander glanced out the sliding glass door that led to their small balcony. Beyond, the sea rocked and roared, waves reaching impossible heights. “I wonder if Ms. Broussard is lonely out there. Maybe Mayor Rivera would want to pay her a visit.”

Elliot cocked his head to the side, confused. “She’s probably on the seafloor now, Alexander. There’s zero probability that she’s still alive.”

Alexander snorted. “Exactly, and if Mr. Mayor even thinks about giving you your first orgasm, he can join her.” Elliot grinned like a madman. Alexander wanted to commit murder in Elliot’s name, and it made his heart thunder in his chest with appreciation. “I would say that I’m joking, but I don’t think I am.” He sounded surprised by the admission as well, and slightly horrified. “Dear God. I’d toss him overboard in a heartbeat.”

Wanting to put a smile on Alexander’s face again, Elliot tapped the tip of his nose. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

“Yeah?”

Elliot nodded. “I’m yours.”

Jarringly, a half-formed memory of Jared Price lying on his back snapped into Elliot’s vision, and for a moment—the briefest moment—it felt like Elliot was back there, wherever ‘there’ was. Elliot could feel wetness on his hands. He could smell a familiar pumpkin spice scented candle. He could even feel a dull throbbing sensation

across the back of his head. Elliot didn't understand what was happening, and his body shook with nerves. It was real. It felt so real, Elliot thought he'd woken from a dream, only to land in his former hellscape. He slammed his eyes shut and focused on his breathing, just trying to bring himself back to the reality he'd been living on Mother's cruise ship. He wanted to go back to Alexander, but he couldn't make the memory stop.

As Elliot rocked back and forth, he stared down at Jared, never blinking, not once. He sat there for what felt like hours, unable to move, unable to speak.

"I'm right here," he thought he heard, but he couldn't be sure. When he opened his eyes, Jared was there, still on his back, eyes fixed on the ceiling. Elliot shrieked when Jared's neck twisted suddenly, and they were staring into each other's eyes.

His lips moved, but no sound escaped Jared Price's mouth. Elliot could tell by his red face that whatever he was saying wasn't kind. It was more of his horrible hatred. More of Jared's venom, seeped in through Elliot's skin and penetrated his newfound sense of freedom.

Had he ever even escaped? Was his entire journey down to Elliot's overactive imagination?

Something warm and wet touched his forehead, but there was no one in front of him. No one behind him. Only Jared Price and his hateful expression. Behind Jared, there was a small blue table. On the table were trinkets and tchotchkes scattered about with no real rhyme or reason for their placement. A few were tipped over, and some were scattered on the marble floor. There was a familiar golden picture frame Elliot knew he remembered, but couldn't pinpoint where it came from.

Jared's body shook like there was a low-stage earthquake happening outside, then his body practically snapped up like a mousetrap being triggered. His head jerked in

Elliot's direction. Elliot tried to remind himself none of this was real. He was still in bed with Mr. Alexander Davenport of Dallas, Texas. He was locked in his arms, and Elliot knew it was true, because he could feel him all around.

"Did you really think I wouldn't find out?" Jared growled, which confused Elliot, because his mouth hadn't moved.

"Alexander," Elliot whimpered, unable to look away from Jared. Elliot blinked, and in the time it took to open his eyes, Jared had moved closer, leaving only three or four feet between them.

"Did you really think I'd let you get away? Are you that stupid?" Again, his lips didn't move, but that only frightened Elliot more. Elliot didn't mean to blink, but he couldn't stop it from happening. Jared couldn't be back. He was gone, wasn't he? Elliot was supposed to be safe.

"Alexander," he whined, his voice taking on a high-pitched, shrill sound that Elliot knew Alexander wouldn't care for. When his eyes opened, Jared was less than a foot away. "Please?"

"You thought you could take my kid? You ungrateful piece of—"

Pain crashed through Elliot's jaw, then he felt a hard strike to his back, like he'd landed on bricks. He cried out, not having meant to, and Alexander's frantic voice was pleading, but Elliot couldn't hear the words.

When Elliot blinked again, Jared was right there, nose to nose, so close he could feel his hot, stinky breath. Elliot knew more pain would be coming. He thought it was over. It was supposed to be over, because Elliot had escaped. He ran away to Genevieve, with nothing more than a pretty pink suitcase and the money he stole from Jared's wall safe. He made it all that way, and now it was as if he'd made no

progress at all. Elliot closed his eyes, because he knew there was no escaping Jared's wrath.

"Please," he pleaded, but his voice was barely audible. "Please don't make me go back. I don't want to go back. I want Alexander."

"I'm here, baby. I'm right here." Then, featherlike kisses were left in trails across his forehead. Up and down his cheek. On Elliot's lips. Kiss after kiss, the memory of Jared faded until the only thing left was Alexander's lips pressed against his. "I've got you. You're safe, Elliot."

Elliot shook his head because that couldn't be true. If he was safe, why was his back still hurting? It was just a cruel trick by Mother. Pre-programmed data, meant to give him a moment's peace. For all Elliot knew, Mother created a simulated world where he could temporarily live out a love story before being snapped back into his unlovable life.

He blinked his eyes open, surprised to see Alexander staring down at him, cupping his cheeks.

"There's my sweet boy." He leaned down and brushed their lips together; then Elliot was being lifted off the floor and cradled in Alexander's arms. "You're okay, I promise."

"What is happening to me?" Elliot sobbed, burying his face in Alexander's neck. "I closed my eyes and he was here. He was right in front of me." As Elliot shook in Alexander's arms, Alexander softly stroked his back, assuring him he was safe. Promising he wouldn't let go.

When Elliot finally managed to compose himself, he sat up straight and dried his eyes, wanting to shift off Alexander's lap. Elliot was malfunctioning. His body and

mind were no longer aligned, and he feared it might happen again. But as he looked into Alexander's caring eyes, he pushed that fear aside. A problem for another day.

"I'm sorry," he finally said, sniffing. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

"You don't have to apologize. You never have to apologize to me."

Elliot nodded. "I understand if you've changed your mind. I don't know what happened to me, and I don't know if it's going to happen to me again. If you want me to go, I'll understand."

Alexander shook his head decidedly. "I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart." He brushed Elliot's hair out of his eyes. "Can you tell me about what you saw, or do you need some time?"

Elliot shut his eyes. "I can't. Alexander, it's . . . I thought he was back. I thought this was just a dream. Me and you."

Alexander's lips brushed against Elliot's, then he gave him a gentle kiss. "I promise, you're not dreaming. I'm real. This is real." There was gentle pressure against Elliot's bump, and when he looked down, Alexander had his palm over it. Looking up, Elliot realized Alexander was staring at his stomach with an undeniable look of appreciation. "She is real, and she's going to be so happy. We all are."

Elliot wasn't sure if that was true, but he knew he didn't have any other choice but to believe the man. He stood from the floor and inspected his back in the mirror, trying to pinpoint the source of his pain. Sure enough, there was a small gash across his back, like someone made a minor incision.

"What happened to my back?"

“You started writhing around in my arms. I tried to hold on to you, but I wasn’t strong enough. You fell off the bed and landed against the corner of the bed frame.” Alexander stood and stared at the cubelike piece of iron poking out from under the bed. “I ought to sue.”

“You promise this is real? You promise you’re not a dream? Alexander, I can’t go back. He would kill me. I know he would.”

Alexander approached from behind and wrapped his arms around Elliot’s waist. “I’m real, you’re real, and Professor Plum is real.” He kissed Elliot’s neck. “I promise.”

Alexander couldn't remember the last time he felt so at peace.

Actually, no. That was a lie.

Alexander could pinpoint the exact date and time he felt the same sense of completion. It happened on a lonely ferry dock, back on Sugarplum Island. Things were different then. Elliot was a broken man with no hope for his future. Now he was overflowing with love and laughter.

They spent their entire morning lounging by the pool, laughing with each other, the pair telling stories from their younger days. Later, they attended a show shortly after lunch. As they sat in a small auditorium, just a few rooms down from the dining hall, their hands rested together on the center armrest, fingers intertwined, Elliot's head on Alexander's shoulder.

The room roared to life around them, music blasting out of the sound system, spotlights shining shades of blues and purples and impossible pinks. It reminded Alexander of what he saw on Elliot's user interface when he placed him in stasis the night before. As the music played on, Mrs. Peppercorn took to the stage, launching into an old song about going downtown. As she explained, the lights were much brighter downtown, and how easy it would be to forget all their worries and cares, she twisted and twirled, performing seemingly well-practiced choreography.

"Everything's waiting for you," she sang directly to Elliot, approaching slowly, the microphone's cord stretching to its limit as she walked down the three steps leading to them. When it became evident that the cord wouldn't reach, she held a hand up, shouting, "Pause, pause, pause!" She glared at the man in charge of the sound

system—the man from the storage closet, Rodolfo—and aimed an accusatory finger at him. “What in the world is this about?” She lifted the cord and shook it furiously before turning toward Elliot. “Baby, cover your ears, because you’re about to see a battleaxe at play.”

Elliot turned to Alexander with a confused expression. “I don’t know what that means.”

Alexander quickly shook his head, fearful of Honey Peppercorn’s wrath. He saw her pour an entire bottle of champagne down a potential suitor’s pants for daring to address her as anything other than ma’am. Not wanting Elliot to have to listen to the authoritative tone again, he covered Elliot’s ears with his hands and smiled at him, brushing their noses together.

By the end of her tirade, Mrs. Peppercorn had been given a cordless microphone by Rodolfo, and a glass of lemon rosewater that Alexander watched Mayor Rivera drop two small pink pills into. As Alexander opened his mouth to alert Mrs. Peppercorn that she was about to be drugged by a potentially problematic small-town mayor, Beau shook his head, mouthing, “she needs rest. I gave her two earlier, too.” He lifted a box of over-the-counter allergy medication and discretely waved it back and forth for emphasis. It was an observation Alexander agreed with, because he couldn’t remember Mrs. Peppercorn taking a single moment to rest since arriving on the boat.

“Is he sedating Mrs. Peppercorn?” Elliot asked.

“I believe so.”

Elliot breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness. She’s gone off the deep end.”

The music roared to life and Mrs. Peppercorn slowly hobbled her way over until she was standing in front of Elliot, continuing her song with, “You won’t get him, crying

and hoping, wishing and dishing—”

“That’s not the song you were singing before you paused for the proverbial cause, Mrs. Peppercorn,” Elliot shouted above the soundtrack, probably wanting to rein her back in. “Actually, I don’t believe those are the lyrics to any song.”

Mrs. Peppercorn nodded, then crouched until she was eye to eye with Elliot, her knees cracking on the descent. “Ah, hell, that hurts,” she groaned before continuing her number. “All you’ve gotta do is kiss him, and love him, and tell him that you’re his. That’s where it is, it’s in his kiss.”

Elliot turned and blinked confusedly at Alexander. “You’re mixing up Dusty Springfield with Cher.” He turned to Alexander looking confused. “I think whatever Mayor Rivera slipped her might be kicking in. She’s officially gone off the deep end,” Elliot observed.

As Mrs. Peppercorn walked around the room, serenading various men without request, Beau Rivera slipped into the empty seat at the other side of the table. Alexander instinctively wrapped an arm around Elliot, and when he looked over, Elliot was smirking. Cheeky boy.

“She’ll be out like a light in another fifteen or twenty minutes. After that, I’ll need help getting her back to her room and into bed.”

“I’ll help,” Alexander agreed.

Beau was staring at Elliot a bit too intensely for Alexander’s liking, and he had to bite his tongue to keep from telling the man off. Alexander had never been a jealous man, but when it came to Elliot—and to the little life inside him—he refused to allow anyone to be a hindrance to his goal of giving them the best life he could ever hope for.

Beau arched an eyebrow. “Do you have a problem with me? You’ve been giving me dirty looks at every turn.”

Alexander pulled Elliot closer. “I don’t like the way you look at him. If you’re not flashing those feral eyes, you’re peeking up at him through your luscious lashes—”

“Luscious lashes?” Beau interrupted.

Alexander rolled his eyes. “The point is, you’ve been giving him bedroom eyes since we met. I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t throw yourself at him.” He stared down at Elliot, who was resting his head on Alexander’s shoulder. “Unless that’s something you want.” Alexander chewed his bottom lip. “It’s okay if you do. I won’t stand in your way.” The thought of stepping aside killed him.

Elliot peeked up at him and shook his head, burying his face in Alexander’s neck and inhaling deeply. “Only want you,” he whispered.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” Beau groaned. “I’m not trying to sleep with your boyfriend. I’m trying to make meaningful gay connections. Back home I don’t have a lot of gay friends, just Arthur and Periwinkle, and I miss having friends who know what it’s like. I may have had a small crush on Elliot when we met, but it’s obvious he’s enamored by you.”

“He’s still in the room,” Elliot mumbled. “Please don’t talk about me like I’m a piece of furniture.”

Alexander looked down at him, and he felt like a monster, realizing he essentially laid claim to Elliot like he was making a purchase. “I’m sorry, Elliot. I promise it won’t happen again.”

Elliot nodded as he sat upright and took a sip of his water before placing the glass

back in its place. “I’m not human, but I’m a person. I don’t care for it.”

“Sorry,” Beau apologized, sounding sincere. “I really would like to be friends with you both. I didn’t mean to be rude. Elliot, I hope you’ll forgive me.”

Elliot offered Beau a smile. “My last home wasn’t a happy one. He hurt me regularly. Emotionally. Physically.” He looked up at Alexander with a question in his gaze, but Alexander wasn’t sure what Elliot was asking permission for. He didn’t need Alexander’s permission for anything, though. Elliot was his own man, and Alexander couldn’t stand the thought of him thinking he needed Alexander’s approval to merely speak. He’d need to remind him later. For the moment, Alexander softly patted Elliot’s thigh, urging him onward.

“It’s okay,” he said, because it was.

Elliot gave Alexander an appreciative look before adding, “Master Price is not a kind man, and I can’t allow him to take his aggression out on . . .” He stared down at his baby bump and sniffled. “I can’t let him take it out on my baby, so I had to run away. That’s why I traveled to Genevieve. I’ve always known I belong to Jared, so I was hoping Arthur and Periwinkle might help me find a way to keep her safe.” He slowly stroked his bump. “I think I’ve been concocting escape plans since the day he mentioned implanting her into me, but my mind’s still fuzzy.” He looked up at Alexander with teary eyes. “I want this with you. I want it more than I’ve ever wanted anything.”

Alexander gripped Elliot’s hand fiercely, wanting to pour his own excitement into the man so he knew he wasn’t alone. “I want it, too.”

Beau nodded sympathetically at the pair. “That’s awful. Are you worried he’ll try to find you?”

Elliot nodded. “He’s probably already searching. I don’t believe he knows about the feelings I’ve harbored for Alexander, mainly because I didn’t know I was harboring them either, though that could simply be down to the cake frosting in my head.”

Beau arched an eyebrow. “Cake frosting?”

“Cake frosting,” Elliot agreed. “We’ve just learned I was partially reprogrammed multiple times over the last five years. The process has left holes in my memory, and what’s been left in their place reminds me of what cake frosting might feel wedged into one’s brain. It’s not terribly uncomfortable, but it makes me dizzy when I try to remember things for too long. He took the good memories, but he left all the bad ones.” He closed his eyes tightly. “They play in my mind like a movie. Every hit, every kick, every death I’ve ever died for Jared Price. Mother has many rules, but the main one is that her bountiful beaus must love their husbands with their whole heart, just as she says she loves us with hers.” He looked up and stared at Beau. “We’re meant to welcome our husbands home with love and submission, and when we part ways each morning, we’re expected to send them away with a kiss and genuine well wishes.” He swallowed, looking around the room nervously before whispering, “I do not wish him well.” Elliot closed his eyes, and a relaxed smile spread across his face. “I hate him.” His jaw trembled harder. “It feels so good to finally say it.”

Alexander tightened his hand around Elliot’s, wanting so badly to reach into Elliot and pull out every drop of hurt inside of him, because Elliot didn’t deserve to hurt a single second more than he’d already experienced. “I hate him, too.”

“Is that common?” Beau asked, and when Alexander looked over at him, he was kissing one of the lemon wedges on his plate, mouthing an apology. Alexander had no idea what that was about, but Beau was an eccentric man, so it wasn’t terribly surprising. After squeezing the lemon into his water, he drops the carcass in his glass. “The cruelty, I mean. Do most of the suitors hurt their husbands?”

Elliot shrugged. “I’m not sure. Mother always told us there were two groups of men who came to her to find their forevers. Misters and Masters. Misters are men like Arthur Price. Kind and decent. Masters can be cruel for sport, like Jared. I don’t know what the ratio of Masters versus Misters is, though. Maybe Mrs. Peppercorn as Mother could get the data if you’re terribly curious.”

“Actually, I think I may be.” Beau had a look on his face that made it seem like little wheels were spinning inside his head. “I saved a litter of piglets when I was little. They were going to be slaughtered for meat.” Beau sighed. Alexander wasn’t sure what the man was up to, and he didn’t get a chance to ask, because as soon as he opened his mouth, Mrs. Peppercorn’s voice came over the loudspeaker.

“Mister Alexander Davenport and Elliot, your presence is required. Immediately, please.”

When Alexander looked up, she had a frantic look about her. The waves in her wig looked like they’d been combed through with her fingers multiple times, and she was sweating profusely. Elliot must have been just as worried, because before Alexander could move, Elliot launched up from his lap. They shared a worried look before making their way to the stage. Mrs. Peppercorn didn’t bother placing the microphone on its stand, just tossed it over her shoulder, making the sound system whine and squeal like it was being murdered. Before either of the men could ask what the problem was, she took them each by the wrist and quickly led them to the deck, then up the stairs, and toward Mother’s workshop. She was too busy huffing and puffing to answer either of their pleas for an explanation.

When they reached the door to Mother’s workshop, Mrs. Peppercorn turned to face them, her face red and sweaty from exertion. “All right, Elliot, I need you to look at me.”

Elliot nodded. “I already am, Mrs. Peppercorn. I believe our direct eye contact should

have been your first clue.” He turned and smiled at Alexander. “How was that for sassy?”

Alexander snorted a laugh. “Precious—”

“Nope,” Mrs. Peppercorn cut him off. “We don’t have time for ‘precious boy’ praise. I’m afraid Armageddon is at hand.” She placed a hand on Elliot’s shoulder and squeezed. “I’ve just been given some horrible news. My new assistant, Thomas the Twink, just came to me and said our ship has been commandeered by two lunatics on a jet ski.” She closed her eyes and nodded like she was hyping herself up to deliver a devastating blow, but before she could respond, Alexander’s blood ran cold, because the door opened, and Emily Broussard stood on the other side, looking like a drowned rat.

“Boys, I believe it’s time we have a little chat.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

Mother? Elliot couldn't make sense of it. He saw her plummet. He watched her head smash against the boat. They were devastating blows; of that, he was certain.

Elliot gaped at her. "Mother? You're alive?"

She nodded slowly, like a predator watching its prey. It was a look that left him unsettled. "Indeed, I am."

"But how? I saw you fall. I saw you crack your skull." The room was quite dark, with only a few feet illuminated by a small flickering candle resting on a window ledge. It didn't seem terribly safe, with the walls being made of wood-like paneling, but there were bigger fish to fry at the moment. The room had an eerie vibe that left Elliot feeling more than a bit unsettled. Elliot heard footsteps approaching, and his entire body tensed. Visions of Jared Price danced in his head. He could picture Jared following behind them at sea, stalking Elliot. He could picture Jared pulling Mother on board a small, chartered boat and driving her back to the cruise ship. Worst of all, he could picture Jared lurking in the shadows of the room, waiting to strike.

The lights blasted on out of nowhere, temporarily blinding Elliot from the sudden shift. He squinted, looking past Mother, and saw Mother's trusted confidant, Clarence, holding an armful of towels. As he approached Mother, he was scowling something awful, muttering about ungrateful heathens.

"I have my ways," Mother said. As she moved closer into the light, he realized the turban she was wearing wasn't a turban at all. It was gauze that had been wrapped repeatedly around her head, probably due to her head injury. "Clarence found me the next morning, clinging to an old piece of driftwood in the center of the sea." She

beamed at Clarence. “Mother’s good boy. I’m so very proud of you, Clarence.”

Clarence, who looked to be in his forties, preened like a praised puppy. “Thank you, Mother. I saved you, didn’t I? I saved you so well.”

Mother nodded, tapping the tip of his nose. “That you did, darling. That you did.” She scratched his head, right behind his ears, and smiled. When she was done praising her favorite son, she turned her attention back to Elliot. “When I fell, I struck the back of my head. It’s a wonder sharks didn’t devour me when they caught the scent of fresh blood. Unfortunately, Clarence’s life raft deflated when my perfectly manicured nail punctured the fabric. We waited, the pair of us clinging to the driftwood until a small boat caught sight of us. Once we were on board, Clarence convinced them to allow us to use one of their jet skis, isn’t that right?”

Clarence nodded proudly. “Anything for you, Mother.”

“Well, as lovely as this all is, I think the big question is what happens now,” Mrs. Peppercorn said, sounding drowsy from the allergy medication.

Mother eyed Mrs. Peppercorn up and down. “Please tell me that’s not supposed to be me.”

Mrs. Peppercorn nodded proudly. “My name is Emily Broussard, and I love you with my whole heart. Well, that’s what I tell them, at least. I won’t lie, Ms. Broussard, it’s not the strongest tagline one could hope for. And I’ll tell you something else; the more time I spend cosplaying you, the less I care for you as a person. You’re pretty awful, sugar.”

Mother rolled her eyes. “Why are you dressed as me?”

Mrs. Peppercorn huffed. “Well, we couldn’t very well say we watched you fall into

the sea. People would start asking questions.”

Mother nodded, glancing over to Elliot. “I’m sure they would. It’s not everyday a bountiful beau runs away from home.

“Exactly,” Mrs. Peppercorn agreed. “Listen, I’m sure you mean well, but you’re not a very efficient organizer. I’ve been working my fingers to the bone in your absence. Making sure events go off without a hitch. Ensuring chaos doesn’t overrun the ship, passengers and beaus running amuck. For twenty years, I’ve ruled this ship with an iron fist, and I’ll be damned if you think I’m going to let you come in here and undo all my hard work.”

“Twenty years?” Mother asked.

“It’s felt like twenty damn years with the mess you left for me to tidy. If I’m being honest, I resent it, Ms. Broussard. If you ever fall off a boat and leave me with unending work again while I’m supposed to be having fun in the sun, I’ll rescue you from the unforgiving open water, just to push you off again, myself.”

Mother opened her mouth—to say what, Elliot wasn’t sure—but before she could, Clarence stormed forward and delicately poked Mrs. Peppercorn in the chest.

“Now, see here,” he bellowed. “Mother works her fingers to the bone!”

“Clarence,” Mother warned. Then, the strangest thing happened. Clarence—normally the textbook definition of submission—shook his head. It took Elliot by surprise to see him go against Mother’s wishes.

“I apologize, Mother. I know it’s uncouth, but I’m going to have my say.”

Mother arched an eyebrow. “Is that so?” She didn’t look angry or bitter the way Elliot

expected. Instead, she looked absolutely amused by Clarence's defiance. Elliot didn't have a chance to gloat over someone else going against Mother's wishes, because Clarence turned to Elliot and poked him in the chest next.

"She is your mother, and you will show her the respect she deserves. I have had it up to here with your attitude. First, you run away from your master. Then, you stow away on Mother's luxurious cruise ship and ruin the entire event. Then you shove her into the sea." He points to the door. "Those men and their bountiful beaus are probably beside themselves at the thought of losing Mother. You have single-handedly broken every heart present, and I'm afraid I cannot allow it to stand." He turned and faced Mother. "Mother, may I have permission to pull him over my knee? I believe he requires a firm hand."

Elliot's body shook. Surely, he wouldn't. Not in front of Alexander. It would be absolutely humiliating for Alexander to see him reprimanded with a spanking.

Alexander wrapped a protective arm around Elliot. "If you even think of touching him, you and I are going to have a problem."

To Elliot's surprise, Mother smiled at him. "May I have the room, Clarence? I'd like to speak with my son."

Clarence's jaw dropped. "But Mother. He—" The look Mother shot him stopped Clarence in his tracks, and he quickly nodded. "I apologize. I just don't enjoy listening to you being disrespected. You work tirelessly, and no one sees it but me."

Mother cupped Clarence's cheek and kissed his forehead. "And that, my love, is why you are Mother's special boy. I adore you, but I need a word with your brother."

As Clarence stood in the doorway, he held it open, staring at Alexander and Mrs. Peppercorn. "She would like to speak with him alone. Follow me, please."

Alexander shook his head. “Not happening.”

Mrs. Peppercorn, however, followed behind. “I’d love to stick it out and do battle, but I think I need a little nap, then I have a ship to run.”

Mother narrowed her eyes. “If you attempt to assume my identity again—”

“Listen, Momma,” Mrs. Peppercorn said, yawning loudly. “I’m going to do everything in my power to make this trip a dream for those boys out there. If you try to get in my way, there will be hell to pay.” Squaring her shoulders, Mrs. Peppercorn turned to Clarence. “Come, son. We’ve got a busy day today, and I’m going to need all hands on deck.” She offered him a ridiculous salute. “Can I count on you to be my backbone?”

“I am not your son!” Clarence responded, looking mortified. “My mother is Ms. Emily Broussard.”

Mrs. Peppercorn pointed to a handwritten name tag that said, “Hi, my name is Ms. Emily Broussard, and I love you with my whole heart.” Clarence scoffed, but Mrs. Peppercorn ignored it, clapping him on the back and leading him out of the room.

“Boys,” Mother said when it was just the three of them. She pointed at a small table in the corner, and it was the first time Elliot had looked around the room. The small enclosure was roughly the size of Jared Price’s living room, and there were powered-down bountiful beaus lining the walls. In the center of the room was a white operating table, which made Elliot nervous. He knew Mother’s other right-hand man—an unnamed gentleman Mother only ever referred to as The Creationist—was on board the cruise, and Elliot would have been lying if he said he wasn’t worried about the man popping out and surprising Elliot with an impromptu reprogramming.

The chairs at the table were uncomfortable, made of some form of metal or iron that

had been crudely painted white, with little bits of black poking through in places the painter had missed. There was an electric kettle and three small teacups, each with tea bags already placed inside.

Alexander didn't seem to be a fan of Elliot sitting less than a foot away, because he slid back in his chair and patted his lap. Elliot blushed, his insides spinning with warm and fuzzy feelings. Elliot quickly shifted from his seat into Alexander's lap. When he looked up at Mother, she had what appeared to be a genuine smile on her face, far from her usual feigned looks of happiness. It was a sight that made his hands shake.

"You care for each other?" she asked.

Elliot opened his mouth to speak, but Alexander beat him to the punch. "I adore him." He looked into Elliot's eyes and squeezed his knee. "And I don't care what it takes to make it happen; I'm not letting you take him back to that hellhole. He's suffered enough."

"Mr. Price has a legally binding contract. Even if I had the authority to nullify our contract, why should I?"

"I'm not asking you to nullify anything," Alexander argued. "I'm telling you that if you expect me to sit back and allow you to return him to his abuser, you've got another thing coming."

"Mr. Davenport," Mother said before sighing. She flipped the tab at the bottom of her electric kettle. Blue light flickered from the kettle's base, pouring through the glass and shining all around. It matched the shade of blue-blue-blue flashing in Elliot's eyes. "As much as I appreciate your care and concern for Elliot, I'd like to hear from him." She turned to Elliot and stared deep into his eyes like she was trying to read his mind. "Tell me why, Elliot. Tell me why you would choose to leave Jared Price for

Mr. Davenport?”

Elliot's cheeks warmed, and he had to look away. He couldn't handle the intensity in Mother's gaze. “Master Price hurts me. He doesn't allow me food—”

“You don't require food,” Mother pointed out.

“I know. That doesn't make me want it any less. He forces me into depraved situations I want no part in. He strikes me. Often.” Elliot's jaw wobbled as tears filled his eyes. “He forces me to power down every day. When he started, it was only once a night, but now, any time I'm in the way, he makes me shut myself off. Every time, it feels like I'm dying. I've died thousands of times for him, and he doesn't even care.” Elliot wiped his eyes. “When he wanted a dog, the animal shelter could see what a detestable man he is, and they refused him service, yet you gave him an entire person to abuse for his sexual gratification.” Elliot sniffled. “The first six months, when I was still at home learning how to be a househusband, you told us to trust you, that you were sending us to happy homes. Then you sent so many of us to the most horrible men in the world. You betrayed us, Mother. You created us to suffer. Why? Why would anyone ever do that?”

“Elliot,” she said, her voice soft like silk.

Elliot shook his head. “Haven't I hurt enough? I'm not strong enough, Mother. I've tried to be a good househusband like you taught me, but there's no pleasing him.” He reached across the table and squeezed Mother's wrist. “Please? Please, don't send me back. If you send me back, he'll kill me.”

Mother sighed, twisting her wrist until her palm was facing upward, an invitation for Elliot to hold her hand. Be it his training or simply that he'd been touch starved for so long that he'd take any form of physical connection, Elliot weaved their fingers together.

“Mother, I can’t go back,” he whispered. “I want Alexander. I want Professor Plum.” He looked over at Alexander, a single tear dripping down his cheek. “I want to visit Sugarplum Island and eat plum jam cookies and walk the streets at night while you hold my hand.” He placed the hand not holding Mother’s on his baby bump and slowly rubbed it up and down. “I want Alexander to raise her with me, not Jared. Alexander would treasure her; I just know it. Just as I know Jared would inflict the same abuse on her that he unleashes on me. He’ll teach her to hate the same way he does.” When he looked up, Mother was staring at their interwoven fingers.

“I didn’t know how often he powered you down,” she said, sounding sadder than Elliot had ever heard her. “But I can’t allow you to run away. We have a duty to our patrons, and if word were to get around that I was smuggling beaus out of their homes, I’d lose any and all credibility. Our home would go out of business.”

“Maybe it should,” Elliot whispered, too scared to say the words much louder. “If the services you provide lead to abuse and trauma, maybe that company shouldn’t be a company any longer.”

Mother swallowed, and Elliot could see her resistance faltering. If he could just show her how much Alexander means to him, he thought, maybe she would change her mind.

“Here’s what I’m willing to do. I’ll allow you to remain as Mr. Davenport’s guest for the rest of the cruise, but once this ship docks, I’ll have to contact Mr. Price. I’m sorry, Elliot, I have no choice. He paid for you. He paid for your child.” She gripped his hand tighter, like she was trying to force her sincerity into him. “I wish there was more I could do, but my hands are tied.”

It was at that moment Elliot knew he would make no further progress with Emily Broussard. She already made up her mind, and she wouldn’t be changing it. He looked up at Alexander with an overwhelming look of loss before pressing his face to

Alexander's chest and quietly sobbing. Other words were exchanged, but Elliot didn't pay them any mind. He received his answer, and all he could do was try to accept it. Through it all, however, Alexander's hand slowly stroked Elliot's back, never giving Elliot the chance to forget he was there. There were gentle kisses placed on his forehead and cheeks. Words of praise whispered into his ear—Alexander telling Elliot how proud he was for speaking his truth—but Elliot didn't dwell on them. He didn't take them into himself to save for a rainy day, because every day with Jared Price was a rainy day, so what good would one single, treasured memory be when Elliot would more than likely be reprogrammed, anyway.

Elliot closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he was lying in bed with Alexander, without remembering how they got there. It was dark outside, and Elliot was wearing a pair of pink pajamas, meaning Alexander changed him before tucking them into bed.

Alexander had one hand against Elliot's cheek and another on his bump.

"Have I been in stasis?"

Alexander shook his head. "You're overwhelmed. Ms. Broussard said the stress of the baby along with everything else had you going into a sleeplike state. It's your body's way of processing."

"I've been overwhelmed many times back home. This hasn't happened before."

Alexander nodded. "It's part of the pregnancy upgrade. When it gets too bad, you black out. That could be why you don't remember much of what happened before leaving home."

Memories of his conversation with Mother clouded his vision, and then tears clouded them even more, because there was no way out of it. He would never be free again.

Alexander cupped his cheek. “I’m going to figure this out, baby. I don’t care what we have to do; I’m not letting them take you from me again.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

For the next few days, Alexander did everything he could to show Elliot how much he wanted to build a future with him. On Wednesday, the pair took part in a festive round of putt-putt golf. Elliot explained that he'd never played, but he could have had Alexander fooled, because he was a natural. Though the course wasn't very large, Elliot managed a hole in one each time. They spent their nights lounging on their balcony, ignoring the rest of the passengers and crew. Two days before they were set to dock, Alexander placed a call he would never be able to take back.

"Twylah's Sugarplum Treats, this is Twylah. How can I make today a sugarplum-perfect day?"

Alexander let out a nervous laugh. "That's the silliest greeting I've ever heard."

His mother chuckled. "Probably. I'm not very creative outside of the kitchen. I offered to let someone else manage the bakery and handle advertising so I could focus on the actual baking, but he turned me down. Until then, I'm afraid we're stuck with whatever I can come up with."

"He is a little busy running his family's empire," Alexander said with a sigh. They'd discussed the topic to death, so there was no point dwelling on it. Alexander had a company to run. Even if he wanted to move to Sugarplum Island and take over the business side of things for his mother, he couldn't let go of his family's legacy.

"Yes, well, he deserves to enjoy his youth while he's still got one. Honestly, Lexy, you've got more money than you know what to do with. How much more do you need?"

“It’s not about the money,” he reminded her for the umpteenth time. “It’s about keeping Dad’s and Granddad’s legacies alive.”

“Baby, you are their legacy. Not some silly company. And as far as legacies go, he couldn’t have left the world with a better one. I’m worried about you, sweetie. You don’t have a life or keep friends. You’re just wandering through life like you’re waiting for it to be over. I want to see you happy. I want to know that when I leave this world, I’m leaving you in good hands.”

Alexander stared down at Elliot’s hand, placing his on top and giving it a squeeze. Elliot wouldn’t feel it, Alexander thought, because Elliot had explained when he was in stasis, he was essentially dead to the world while memories replayed like dreams, keeping him company as he charged his weary body.

Alexander swallowed. “That’s actually why I’m calling.”

“Oh, Lexy. Tell me you’ve found someone. I’ve waited so long for you to find your match.”

Alexander smiled at his sleeping friend, reaching for his face long enough to brush a stray strand of hair from his eyes. “I think I have, actually. I think I’ve found the man I’m going to spend the rest of my life with.” Leaning down, he pressed a kiss to Elliot’s forehead. “It’s Elliot.”

“Ohh,” Twylah cooed, and Alexander could feel her smile radiating all the way in Texas. “You finally found him?”

“Actually, he found me. It turns out he saw my picture on one of the brochures, and he stowed away, hoping to find me. He’s an automaton. He’s one of Ms. Broussard’s bountiful beaus.”

To his surprise, Twylah squealed with joy. “Oh, that’s fabulous, sweetie! I knew talking you into going on that cruise was the best idea. I know you have a troubled history with automatons, especially after everything with Goose and Duck, but Elliot was such a sweet soul when we met him. He’s perfect for you. Why don’t you bring him here before you go back into work mode? I’ll bake more of the plum jam cookies he loved so much.”

“I wish it was that simple. Elliot is engaged. Before he got here, his fiancé used to hurt him. Physically.”

“That’s horrible,” Twylah said, her voice coated in contempt. “I knew something was going on with his partner. There’s nothing worse than an abuser.”

Alexander nodded in agreement. “It’s been going on for years, apparently. Elliot doesn’t talk about it too much, but I know it was bad from some of the things he’s let slip. I can’t let him go back to that. They’ve wiped his memory a few times, so he didn’t really remember me, but he still knew I felt like a safety net.” Alexander’s voice cracked. “He said he came to find me, Mom.”

“That poor boy,” she whispered. “I’m glad he found his way to you. Are you going to take care of him?”

“I want to,” Alexander said, wiping his cheek with his palm. “I don’t think I’ve ever wanted anything more. Elliot belongs to him, though. Legally speaking, Elliot is his property. Ms. Broussard fell off the boat the first night, and we thought she died, so we’ve been taking it easy.”

“She fell off the boat?”

Alexander cleared his throat, trying to think of a way to shift the topic. He didn’t want to admit to his mother that he watched the woman plummet to her assumed

death and did nothing to save her. “She made it back in one piece. Now she’s threatening to send him back.”

“Is there no way to fight it?”

“I’m planning on speaking with our legal team at work to see if they can get me in touch with someone to sort it, but Ms. Broussard is planning to send him back when we dock. She’s probably already called Jared. I can’t let him go back to his fiancé. He’ll kill him, and then I’ll end up in prison for returning the favor.”

“Yes, well, as much as I support your decision to rid the world of an abuser, I can’t say I’m excited about the prospect of visiting you in prison, so I think we should try to think of a way around it.”

Alexander nodded to himself. “That’s why I’m reaching out. I need a favor.”

When Elliot eventually stirred, Alexander was sitting up in bed, staring down at him. Elliot smiled warmly and reached for Alexander’s hand.

“Mr. Alexander Davenport,” he said in a dreamy voice.

“Sweet boy,” Alexander whispered, leaning down and pressing a kiss on his forehead. “I’ve got a special day planned for us.” He wanted to tell Elliot that he and Twylah had everything covered, and Elliot no longer needed to worry. But doing so would get Elliot’s hopes up, and Alexander hated the thought of having to break Elliot’s heart a second time if everything didn’t go according to plan.

“You do?”

Alexander nodded. “We’re going to have breakfast, then we’re going to spend the whole day by the pool.” Alexander’s smile widened as pink light flickered in the

corners of Elliot's eyes. He stroked the skin beside Elliot's eye softly. "You have the most beautiful colors I've ever seen."

"Back home, they were always blue. They were never pink before you. They've never been brighter than they have been this week."

"Can you see the lights as they flash? Do they bother you?"

"Not too badly. When the blues come out, everything is covered with a sad filter." He sat up in bed and wrapped his arms around Alexander, squeezing him tightly. "But when they're pink . . . I've never seen anything more beautiful in all my life. I see the pinks a lot when I'm with you."

"If I had colors, I think mine would be pink, too. Especially when I'm with you." He placed his hand next to Elliot's, slowly caressing the little life inside. "I bet she's going to have beautiful colors, too. Have you picked a name for her yet?"

Elliot shook his head. "Master Price would never let me choose."

"Master Price isn't here," Alexander countered. He thought by naming the child, it might give him something to hold on to. A touchstone of sorts. "Are there any names you've been thinking of?"

Again, Elliot shook his head. "I don't know all that many names. May I get back to you by the end of the day?"

"That's okay," Alexander assured him. "You don't have to think of one right now. I just thought it might make you feel better. Take all the time you need." Leaning closer, Alexander parted his lips and welcomed Elliot in for a kiss. To his surprise, after a few timid kisses, something triggered in Elliot, and Alexander was being guided back until he was lying on the bed. Elliot lifted a leg and hoisted himself on

top of Alexander until he was straddling his lap. Through the movement, their lips never parted.

Elliot's hips rolled, providing Alexander with friction, but neither of the men made much of an effort to take things further. Alexander was happy enough to kiss the man he . . .

He gasped, because lo and behold, Alexander Davenport was smitten.

"I love you, you know," he said between kisses. "Elliot, I adore you."

When Elliot looked into Alexander's eyes, he had a look of disbelief about him. "Why? I'm nothing, Alexander. I'm just a machine." His voice cracked. "I've done nothing to earn your love."

"You don't have to earn anything. All you have to do is let me love you. You're the sweetest, gentlest man I've ever met, and even with everything you've been through, you never let go of your sweet side. That's why I love you, Elliot. I love you because you're like me. You don't let heartache break you down. When times get tough, you soldier on." He kissed Elliot sweetly on the lips. "I promise, this is all going to be okay. I'll make sure of it."

"I love you, too," Elliot whispered, meaning it with all his heart if the pink swirls of light in his eyes were any indication.

An hour later, the men were on the pool deck. Elliot was in another Speedo Alexander bought him, and Alexander couldn't keep his eyes off the man. The deck was empty, probably due to the cool temperature. It wasn't uncomfortably cold, but it certainly didn't feel like swimming weather. Still, Alexander had promised Elliot fun in the sun, and he planned to deliver.

Elliot was sitting in front of Alexander in one of the lounge chairs, Alexander's arm protectively wrapped around his waist like he was daring someone to take him from Alexander. They placed a towel over the table beside Alexander's chair, and the fieldmouse was resting on his back as if he was trying to get a suntan. Alexander's phone chimed, and when he checked the notification, he breathed a sigh of relief. After their talk with Ms. Broussard, Alexander was sure she'd already contacted the man and that Jared would probably be waiting for them when the boat docked in a few days; but Alexander and Elliot would be long gone by then.

After a while, they made their way over to the pool. Alexander was preparing to dive when Elliot's voice stopped him.

"I've never swum before," he whispered, sounding embarrassed. There was nothing to be embarrassed about, though.

"That's okay, I can help you." He pointed at the shallow end. "Let's start off over there and work our way down." He waited for Elliot's nod before taking his hand and guiding him to the shallow end of the pool. Slowly, they moved down each of the steps, descending further into the water. The pool was cooler than Alexander expected, making his body shudder. Elliot, on the other hand, didn't seem bothered by the cool water at all, he just stared down as they moved through the water. When Alexander followed Elliot's line of sight, he was bouncing excitedly on the balls of his feet.

"Can we go all the way in now?" he asked, his voice taking on an almost innocent tone, like a child about to enter Disney World for the first time. Whatever discomfort Alexander was feeling from the cold water fell by the wayside when he realized how excited Elliot was. His positivity was infectious, and soon enough, Alexander was bouncing on his feet along with Elliot. He grabbed Elliot's hand and quickly led him off the final step. Alexander sucked in a sharp breath at the cold, waist-high water, but he didn't let it stop him. They walked until Elliot's shoulders were no longer

above water. Alexander smiled down at his love, drinking in the sight of him tilting his head up, beaming ear to ear. “This is incredible.”

Alexander chuckled. “Yeah, it’s pretty great. I’ve got a pool at home, too. We can go swimming whenever you want. I might even teach you to do cannonballs.”

“Cannonballs?”

“Yeah, it’s . . .” Alexander tried to think of how to explain it, but the words wouldn’t come. “I’ll show you.” He pointed at the concrete ledge beside them. “Will you be okay on your own long enough for me to walk over there? I have to be out of the water to do it.” Alexander could tell Elliot was nervous, but the automaton was putting on a brave face. Alexander kissed the tip of his nose. “I’ll only be gone a second.” Once Elliot gave Alexander a nod of approval, he rushed out of the pool. The wind felt like ice against his skin, but he pushed his discomfort down, focusing on Elliot’s smiling face as his head bobbed up and down.

“Hello, Alexander,” Elliot called out, lifting a hand to wave. He was beaming ear to ear, his smile infectious, as Alexander couldn’t help but smile along with him.

“Hey, Elliot.” He returned the wave Elliot was giving him before focusing on the task at hand. “So, a cannonball is just a way to jump into the water. You tuck your knees to your chest and hug your shins, folding yourself into a ball.”

“I don’t think I’m bendy like that.”

Alexander cocked an eyebrow. “Believe me, after what we did in the bedroom, I can say with full confidence that you are.”

Color flooded Elliot’s cheeks, but his smile didn’t fade. “All right, then. Show me this infamous cannonball.”

Alexander took a few steps back, his eyes locked with Elliot's. "I'm going to aim to the left so I don't land on you. Just stay right there, okay?" Once Elliot nodded his understanding, Alexander pivoted until he was aimed away from Elliot, then he rushed forward. As he leapt, Alexander pulled his thighs to his chest and hugged his shins, tucking himself into a ball. The water was freezing when he landed, then he was fully submerged. Alexander stared up through the water and Elliot was standing over him, clapping his hands excitedly. When Alexander emerged, Elliot was cackling like it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen.

"That looks so fun!" he shouted, bouncing up and down in the water. "Can I try? Please? I'll be very careful."

Alexander snorted a laugh as he found his footing and slowly waded closer to Elliot in the water. He wrapped his arms around Elliot's back and leaned in, his lips parting. The pair kissed for what felt like an eternity, like they had all the time in the world.

"Yeah, sweetheart. Go on. Show me what you can do."

"I may not be very good."

"It's just a cannonball. It's okay if you mess up." Alexander pushed Elliot's hair from his eyes. "It's okay for you to mess up on anything, baby. I'm not like him. I won't punish you for not getting things right."

Elliot blushed. "Thank you. You don't know how much that means to me."

Alexander cupped his cheek. "I think I do. Now, go on. Get that cute little booty up there and then splash me for all you're worth."

Elliot rushed toward the steps, and Alexander's eyes locked on his backside. God. It looked so stunning in the hot-pink Speedo he bought him. Drenched, they clung to

him, leaving nothing to the imagination. As Elliot jogged around the pool, his ass jiggled, breathing life below Alexander's own Speedo.

Elliot paused in front of him, looming over. He turned around and cocked his hip to the side, arching his back. "You really like it? My butt, I mean."

Alexander licked his lips. "Very much so."

"Good. I believe I'd like you to . . ." He looked around the deck like someone might have magically appeared out of thin air, relieved when he realized they were still alone. "I'd like you to claim it tonight. To claim me. Would you want that?"

Alexander wanted that, but plans were in motion, and Alexander would need to fill Elliot in soon.

"We can talk about that later, baby. Why don't you go ahead and show me your cannonball. We'll get lunch in a minute and we can talk."

Elliot nodded, walking a few paces back before turning around. "Here goes nothing," he said nervously, then he was in motion, rushing toward the pool. He leapt, but he made no effort to pull his legs to his chest, just extended his arms and legs like he was stretching as he plummeted into the deep end. Alexander rushed forward to help Elliot above water, but his programming must have kicked in, because despite not knowing how to swim, his legs kicked and his arms tugged through the water as he made his way to the surface.

Elliot looked just as surprised by his newfound aquatic agility as Alexander, and his mouth hung open in disbelief. "I can swim!"

"You can swim," Alexander shouted cheerfully. "You're doing so well!"

Elliot paddled forward, and though he would have been able to easily stand on his toes, he lifted his legs, using his arms to keep him afloat. “How was my cannonball? I believe I nailed it.”

Alexander snorted a laugh. “Well, you made it into the pool again, at least.” He was teasing Elliot, and it made him a bit uncomfortable, because what if Elliot didn’t like being teased? What if being the brunt of the joke was triggering for him, thanks to his homelife with Jared Price? Alexander opened his mouth to apologize, but Elliot cut him off by rearing back his palms, then shoving them forward against the surface, splashing Alexander’s face.

Elliot sprung forward, driving Alexander’s back against the cement ledge. He winced at the burning sensation of friction, but he pushed past the sting and focused on the man in front of him. Elliot’s legs wrapped around Alexander’s waist, and he hooked his arms around Alexander’s back.

“What was it we needed to talk about? You haven’t changed your mind, have you?”

Alexander shook his head. “It’s about what comes next. If we’re going to do this, I think our best bet is lying low for a while. I called my mom and asked her to contact my assistant back home. I’m worried if we stay until the end of the cruise, Jared will be waiting for us when we dock. If you’re serious about this thing between us, we need to act. Tonight.” He could sense the confusion in Elliot’s expression, and he opened his mouth to explain how he chartered a helicopter to collect them and take them back to land. From there, they would need to find somewhere to hide out until Alexander’s lawyers could find some sort of loophole that would free Elliot, or, at the very least, transfer ownership to Alexander. He didn’t have a chance to voice any of that, because Elliot stared down at the water in horror. Alexander looked down, surprised to see swirls of red liquid twirling with the blue water.

Elliot reached behind Alexander and touched his back, the sharp sting of pain making

Alexander cry out.

“Sorry!” Elliot shouted. “Alexander, I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to hurt you. I think you may have scraped your back on the concrete.” Tears flooded Elliot’s eyes. “I’ve hurt you.”

Alexander shook his head firmly, trying to mask the pain in his shoulder. “It’s not your fault. I’m fine, Elliot. I promise. It’s just a scrape.”

Elliot’s legs unfolded from around Alexander, and he sank to his feet in the water. He waded around, pausing behind Alexander and assessing the damage. “You have a small cut, but I don’t believe it’s a major medical crisis. Still, I’m terribly sorry. I would never want to hurt you.” He placed his hand on Alexander’s shoulder.

“I know you wouldn’t ever want to hurt me. Baby, I’m okay, I promise.” Elliot’s eyes were locked on a swirl of red and blue, and he didn’t react to Alexander’s statement, so Alexander repeated, “I’m okay, Elliot.”

Still, Elliot said nothing, just stared at the blood in the water like he was waiting for sharks to approach. Then Elliot’s entire body tensed, and he shook his head.

“No, no, no, no,” he said over and over, his head shaking left to right, then right to left.

“Sweetheart?”

“Oh, God.” He covered his hand and backed away slowly, his cheeks drained of color as sparks of yellow light flickered in his eyes. “What have I done?”

“Baby,” Alexander said, taking a step forward.

“So much blood,” he whispered to himself. “There was so much blood, and I couldn’t get it clean. Couldn’t get my hands clean. I tried.” He closed his eyes, and as tears spilled down his cheeks, Alexander pulled him in for a hug. “I didn’t mean to do it. At least, I don’t think I did. Alexander?” His voice was a high-pitched whine as the words left him, and it felt like the words were accented with pure terror. Alexander didn’t understand what was happening. They were sharing such a wonderful moment.

“I’m not bleeding that much. I swear, I’m okay.”

“Not you,” Elliot whispered. “I . . . Alexander, I think I may have killed Jared Price.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

Elliot was unwell. His hands twitched and nervous yellow light flickered in his eyes. Alexander's hand was tight around his waist, holding them together as Elliot broke to pieces in his arms.

The memory had been so vivid. All of the scattered mental images were finally stitched together to display the most disastrous of tapestries. It was as if Elliot had been an solid, secure dam before, but the sight of Alexander's blood mingling with blue water caused the dam to break.

The fight he had with Jared Price.

The blows that felt like earthquakes each time Jared's fist connected.

The vicious shade of crimson Elliot saw when Jared balled his hand into a fist and reared back his hand, preparing an uppercut Elliot could only assume was meant for his tummy. The next thing Elliot knew, he was rushing forward with a framed photograph in his hand. It was an old picture Jared forced him to take. In it, they pretended to be a happy couple. In it, Elliot hid away his secret hurt. And, in it, Jared Price's hand wasn't visible, but Elliot could see the waves of black lights in his own eyes, indicating pain. Elliot didn't need to see his hand to know what Jared was doing. It was the same thing he always did when he wanted to harm Elliot without causing a scene. He was pinching Elliot's back as hard as he could. Fitting, really, that an image depicting his abuse would also be the method of Jared's demise.

Elliot hadn't cried at the sound of Jared's pained screams. He hadn't batted an eye as broken glass sliced through skin. Elliot didn't even blink when Jared lifted his hand in a final plea for mercy. Elliot simply sat there, taking Jared's hand and holding it

kindly, allowing him to slowly slip away. He could have contacted emergency services, but Elliot had no mercy left to give. He knew for a fact if he were to render aid, Jared would unleash his rage once he healed. Elliot also knew Jared wouldn't contain his rage to Elliot after their child was born. Elliot had been holding out hope Jared's temper would even out, if not for Elliot's sake, at least for their child's.

But then Jared tried to hurt their unborn baby.

Elliot waited with him until Jared Price took his final breath. He placed his hand over the man's heart and made a vow to himself. Elliot would not let this break him. He would not let them win. If Elliot were to contact the authorities, it would be a media firestorm. There was another of Mother's bountiful beaus who had killed his owner once. Elliot overheard whispers during his time in New Orleans. The bountiful beau was subjected to months of unspeakable terror at the hands of his husband, and once he finally defended himself, his husband was dead. The automaton was collected by Mother, powered down, and burned to ash in the Creationist's incinerator.

Elliot would not end up like his fallen brother. He was determined to do whatever he could do to avoid such a fate. So, with nothing more than a broken heart and a handful of shattered dreams, Elliot had packed the only belongings that meant anything to him, placed them in a pink suitcase, and added the contents of Jared's wall safe to the liner of his luggage.

Though Elliot knew how to drive, he also knew the police would more than likely be looking for Jared's vehicle, so he took a bus to Genevieve, Georgia, with the memory of Jared's lifeless face tucked away in the back of his mind.

"What do you mean, you think you killed him?"

Alexander looked so terribly worried, and the sight of him in a panic made Elliot feel lower than low. Elliot stared at the water, sniffing. "He tried to hurt me. He tried to

hurt the baby.” Elliot wrapped his arms around his tummy like he was giving the little life inside a warm, comforting hug. “I didn’t mean to do it. At least, I don’t think I did.” He shut his eyes tightly, afraid to see Alexander’s reaction. Alexander knew about Elliot’s history with Master Price, but this was an extreme situation, and Elliot knew he ran the risk of losing him. “I understand if you want nothing more to do with me.” Alexander’s arms wrapped around Elliot before pulling him in for a hug. “Do you wish to send me away?”

“Sweet boy,” he murmured sweetly into Elliot’s ear. “Never. We need to talk about it, but I’m not sending you away, so if you’re worried about that, get it out of your head.” When Alexander pulled away, it felt like he was taking everything they’d shared with him. Luckily, he wasn’t gone long, and he didn’t go very far, just a few steps back until he could cup Elliot’s cheek. “I love you, Elliot. I love you, and I’m never letting you go.”

That was all it took to soothe his fear and break down the last barrier holding Elliot back. As the fear fell, so too did his sense of shame, and Elliot lunged forward, clinging to Alexander with every ounce of strength he had. They were in motion, but Elliot’s face was buried in Alexander’s neck, and he couldn’t tell where he was being led.

They took a seat, Elliot still tangled around Alexander’s waist and shoulders like a clingy capuchin monkey. When Elliot finally gathered the strength to back away, he realized they were back in their cabin, resting on the bed.

“We need to pack.”

Elliot cocked his head to the side, confused. “Pack for where?”

“That’s what I was going to tell you at the pool. I called my mom and had her charter a helicopter to pick us up.” Alexander moved Elliot off his lap and onto the mattress.

“The helicopter will be here tonight. Can you tell me more about what happened with Jared? Did they collect his body?”

Elliot shook his head. “Probably not, since I didn’t contact anyone. I was scared, so I grabbed my things and ran. I-I’m sorry, Alexander.”

Alexander shook his head. “Please don’t apologize to me. Not for this. From what you’ve told me it sounds like he got what was coming to him. I’m just worried about where this leads us now. Did it happen at home?”

“Yes. In the foyer.” Elliot wrapped his arms around his tummy. “He was trying to hurt her.” His jaw trembled, and when he looked up, he was relieved to find no anger on Alexander’s face. “He tried to hit my stomach. He was aiming right at her.” The second he sniffled, the rest of the walls crumbled, and so did Elliot, falling against Alexander’s chest and weeping. “I never wanted any of this. I didn’t want to be his partner, and I didn’t want to carry his child. Mother makes decisions on our behalf and doesn’t care who gets hurt in the process. It isn’t fair.”

“I know,” Alexander soothed, stroking his back. “I think our best bet is lying low and seeing what happens with Jared.”

“They’ll incinerate me,” Elliot said, his voice shaking. “They’ll power me off and burn my body.”

Alexander growled out, “I’d like to see them try.” Pulling away, Alexander cupped Elliot’s cheek. “No one is ever going to hurt you again. Not as long as I’m around.” He looked down at his wristwatch. “We’ve got half a day left until the helicopter arrives. We just need to steer clear of Ms. Broussard until then. God knows what that woman has up her sleeve.”

“Eczema,” Elliot responded matter-of-factly. “That’s why she wears long gloves most

of the time. She says it's because a woman must always look her best if she hopes to find a suitor."

Alexander cocked an eyebrow. "Internalized sexism aside, the more I learn of Ms. Broussard, the less I care for her."

Elliot looked around the room, half-expecting Mother to hop out of the closet and eviscerate them for gossiping. "I agree," he whispered. "I shouldn't feel that way, but I do." He sniffled, dabbing his wet eyes with his palms. "I know I have to love her, but I don't like her very much at the moment."

"You don't have to love anyone you don't want to love. It's okay to hate her a little."

Elliot nodded. "Is it okay to hate her a lot?"

"All your feelings are valid. You don't need my permission to hate someone."

"Thank you, Alexander."

Alexander squeezed Elliot's arm. "Of course." He lowered his hand until it was resting on Elliot's bump. "I don't know how this is going to work. We'll need to hide you for the time being."

Elliot hung his head. "If you need me to power myself off until the dust settles, I'll understand."

"Absolutely not. You're not an appliance, Elliot. You're a man. We're not powering you off. After the way you described it as feeling like you were dying, I don't think I want you powering down ever again."

Elliot's jaw quivered. "You mean that?"

“More than I’ve ever meant anything.”

“Then what are we going to do? They’ll look for me. They’ll try to take me from you.”

“And they’ll fail spectacularly. I think we should stay with my mom for a few weeks, just to see how everything unfolds. They won’t think to look for you there, and if it looks like things aren’t going to die down, we can go somewhere that won’t extradite you.”

“It’s just so much fuss. I’m not worth any of this.” Elliot stared down at the blanket, feeling guilty for putting all this on Alexander’s plate. He’d asked for none of it. Alexander simply wanted to go on a relaxing cruise, and here was Elliot, barging in unannounced and making Alexander’s life more complicated. He hated himself for it, but what he hated worse was the fact he was making no effort to relieve Alexander of his new burden.

“Everything,” Alexander whispered, pressing their foreheads together. “You’re everything and more.” Elliot’s hands were folded in his lap, and he watched as Alexander’s engulfed them, squeezing gently. “Would you like to come back to the island with me?”

Elliot nodded, sniffing. “I want it more than anything.”

“Good. That’s settled then. Should we call Mom and tell her the good news? She’s been begging and pleading for me to come home for years.”

“Is that where you grew up?”

Alexander shook his head. “My father bought it when I was thirteen.”

“The island? You can buy an island?”

“With enough money.”

Elliot arched an eyebrow. “How much money does an island even cost?”

“Trust me”—Alexander chuckled—“you don’t want to know. After he bought the land, development took another two years, so I didn’t get to visit until I was fifteen. Dad was going to call it Davenport Island, but when we visited, the whole place looked like something out of a Hallmark movie—”

“That’s what I said!” Elliot practically shrieked. “I mentioned to Mrs. Peppercorn that it looked like a Christmas film come to life.”

“That was by my father’s design. He wanted somewhere cozy to spend the winters. I was the one who suggested the island’s name. Dad used to read ‘‘Twas the Night Before Christmas’ to me each year, and the line about sugarplums dancing in children’s heads always resonated with me for some reason. It just felt right.”

“I think that might be my new favorite story,” Elliot said, nuzzling in closer. He was knee to knee, forehead to forehead with Alexander, and it still wasn’t close enough. He shifted himself, rising onto Alexander’s lap and wrapping his arms around him, burying his face in Alexander’s neck. “You’ll have to tell it to me again sometime. Maybe as a bedtime story with silly voices and funny faces.”

Alexander kissed Elliot’s head. “I’ll tell you all the ridiculous bedtime stories you want.” He rocked them back and forth, his hand softly stroking Elliot’s back. “We’ll have to come up with a few traditions of our own when the baby comes.”

“I never had any traditions, so I’m afraid I may not be of much use.” Elliot chewed his cheek. That wasn’t entirely true. He had many traditions thrust upon him by Jared.

Their nightly rounds of rumpy-pumpy where Elliot usually left the situation aching and sore. Their bi-yearly visits with Mother where, Elliot assumed, he was reprogrammed against his will. Granted, Elliot stayed powered down for most of their “holiday” traditions, but Jared still brought him along for the journey, so that had to count for something.

Elliot hated himself for all the things he’d never been. His heart hurt for the endless variations of himself he might have become, if he had been sold to a kinder man. A man like Alexander Davenport. Now, that man was offering him a world he’d only ever dreamt about. Even better, Alexander’s smile told Elliot he wanted it just as much as him.

“Do you have a home on Sugarplum Island, or will we be staying with your mother? I believe I liked her. I believe I liked her a lot.” Elliot wished he could remember, but the frosting-filled holes in his mind made it difficult.

“She liked you a lot, too. Probably just as much as I do.” Alexander combed his finger through Elliot’s hair. “I own the house next door to hers, so we’ll be seeing a lot of her.”

Elliot glanced down at Professor Plum, who was napping beside his knee. Reaching down, he softly stroked the fieldmouse’s head. “Does she get along with Professor Plum?”

Alexander chuckled loud enough to startle Professor Plum, who looked up at the man with narrowed eyes, silently judging him for waking him from his slumber.

“She treats him like a second son. He gets a Christmas stocking every year and everything.” Alexander rubbed Professor Plum’s pink sweater, his fingertip purposefully bumping against Elliot’s. “She’s going to lose her mind when she realizes we’re having . . .” Alexander tugged his bottom lip between his teeth and

gnawed. Elliot wasn't sure why Alexander stopped mid-sentence, but he waited the man out, allowing him time to process whatever he was struggling with. "Can I be honest with you?"

"Always."

"It's just . . . it feels strange referring to the baby as mine. It feels like I'm laying claim to something I have no right claiming."

"I want her to be yours, though. Mine and yours. Our little family. Are you changing your mind?"

Alexander shook his head. "I just don't want to overstep and risk you resenting me."

Elliot shook his head. "Never. Maybe it would help if we selected her name together." He reached down and rubbed his tummy.

Alexander nodded. "We'll think of something when we get to the island. I promise." Alexander grabbed his phone and brought up his mother's contact information. "So, when we call her, do we mention the—" Alexander shook his head, looking as if he was scolding himself internally. "Our baby. Do we mention our baby?"

Elliot smiled wider than ever before. His heart fluttered, and he lifted his hand to Alexander's cheek. "Our baby," he agreed. "Yes. I would like that. I want your mother to know."

Alexander grunted an approval before clicking the little green button on his screen, initiating a video call. It only took her two rings to answer, and when she did, she looked just as Elliot remembered her. The same blonde hair, tied back with an oversized scrunchie, and ruby red lipstick that made her look a bit like Marilyn Monroe. Even her outfit was the same; a pink blouse and a blue poodle skirt, making

her look like something out of a nineteen-fifties film. Did her hairstyle and ensemble seem to come from different eras? Yes, but who cared? She looked fabulous. A combination of vintage now he had an ever-expanding family. He had Periwinkle and Arthur Price, Mrs. Peppercorn and Mayor Rivera, and even had Professor Plum again. Now, he was being given a chance at finding a real mother. One who might actually care for him the way he always wanted Mother to care for him. Most of all, he had Alexander Davenport.

“No ma’am, I haven’t.”

She nodded. “That ends tomorrow. When you get here, I’m coming over, and I’m going to give you a proper welcome.”

“Thank you,” he whispered. “You don’t know how much it means.”

“I think I do,” she argued. “And I think you deserve every bit of the love I plan to send your way. Go on, now. You boys get ready. I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

As Alexander and Ms. Twylah said goodbye, Elliot rubbed his tummy, trying to picture a future with Alexander Davenport. He could see their family so clearly. Walking her to the small schoolhouse Elliot spotted on his island trek last time he visited. Taking her to Twylah’s Sugarplum Treats for a post-school snack. Maybe they could even take her to the beach on the west side of the island. Elliot was rather fond of swimming despite the cannonball fiasco, and he couldn’t wait to give it another go.

Once the call ended, Elliot and Alexander packed their things and rested together on the bed until it was time for dinner. Alexander received a text message alerting him the helicopter would arrive in an hour. As Alexander gave the room a final once-over to ensure nothing was left behind, Elliot headed to the dining hall, hoping to find Mrs. Peppercorn and avoid Mother.

The dining area practically screamed, “Classy!” As Elliot wandered around, searching for his friend, tables were piled high with seafood towers and endless glasses of wine. He’d never partaken in spirits before, and he thought he might like to indulge one day. Maybe once they reached the island.

Mother was nowhere to be found, but Mrs. Peppercorn was unmissable. She was sitting in Mother’s designated seat, and Elliot wondered if Mrs. Peppercorn may have shoved Mother overboard again, just to assume her identity. She was taking to the role quite well; maybe too well.

“The man of the hour,” Mrs. Peppercorn announced, standing and holding her arms out wide like Jesus on the cross.

“Hello, Mother,” Elliot greeted. It still felt silly for him to refer to her as Mother, and in all honesty, he couldn’t believe the other passengers were buying her lies so easily. Then again, with the constant look of lust clouding their vision, maybe they were simply overlooking the absurdity and focusing on their new bountiful beaus.

Once Alexander finally caught up with Elliot, they took a seat with Alexander next to Elliot, who sat next to Mrs. Peppercorn. As he unfolded his napkin and placed it on his lap, Mrs. Peppercorn grabbed his hand and softly brushed her thumb back and forth against his skin.

“I handled it,” she whispered.

“Handled what?”

“The Mother situation. I’ve got it handled. You boys can relax for the rest of the trip.”

“Mrs. Peppercorn, I’m not sure what you’re saying. What do you mean, you’ve

handled it?”

Mrs. Peppercorn looked around the room; her eyes narrowed as if she was attempting to search out potential eavesdroppers. “She sleeps with fish.”

“Come again?”

She darted her eyes to Beau’s glass of rosewater. Mrs. Peppercorn grabbed a lemon wedge, held it over the glass, and made eye contact with Elliot. “Ms. Broussard”—she released the hold she had on the lemon wedge and let it fall into the rosewater, her gaze dropping slowly with the lemon for emphasis—”sleeps with fish.”

Elliot’s jaw dropped. “Dear God. You’ve killed her?”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

Her eyes bulged. “Of course, not. Where in the world would you get an idea like that?”

“You said she sleeps with the fishes.”

Mrs. Peppercorn rolled her eyes. “Actually, I said she ‘sleeps with fish’ because she does. I rendered her unconscious and sedated her with my sleeping pills. There’s a little goldfish beside her bed. I named him Fish, because he’s a fish. She sleeps with Fish.”

Elliot blinked at her. “Then what was all that business with the lemon wedge?”

Mrs. Peppercorn stared at him like it was the silliest question she’d ever heard. “Mayor Rivera enjoys lemon in his rosewater. There’s nothing wrong with being helpful, sweetie.”

Elliot arched an eyebrow. “You did that on purpose, didn’t you? You’re toying with me.”

Her cheeks darkened. “Maybe I am, maybe I’m not. Who can say?” She stared longingly at the fish filet on her dinner plate and sighed. Someone squeezed Elliot’s shoulder, and when he looked over, Alexander was smiling down at him. Mrs. Peppercorn continued. “Oh Elliot, her goldfish was just the cutest little thing. You’d love him. After I tied Ms. Broussard to the bed, he and I spent a little time together. It was sweet. We had a moment. I may ask her if she’s terribly attached to Fish the fish once she wakes up. Granted, if she treats her fish anything like she treats her sons, I can’t imagine her giving a dang one way or the other.”

Alexander groaned. "Priorities, Mrs. Peppercorn. You drugged her?"

"I just said I did, didn't I? Goodness, baby, are you losing your memory like our Elliot did? I wonder if the residual effects of an automaton's reprogramming are contagious. That's something I'll need to ask the Creationist about while I'm still masquerading as Mother."

"Why would you drug her?" Alexander continued, looking exhausted by the exchange.

"Because she was going to call Jared. She was going to have him come and take Elliot, and I will not let that happen." She cupped Elliot's cheek. "You're never going back to that horrible, hateful man again."

Elliot nodded, leaning into her touch. "Yes, Mrs. Peppercorn. I know. The thing is, Jared is no longer a threat." He knew he had to fill her in, but he worried once she knew he was a killer, she may no longer care to socialize with him. It would sting. It would be a bitter ache to lose the love she'd given him, but he knew he had to be open and honest with her, because a friendship could not be built upon lies. "He sleeps with the fishes."

"Pardon?"

"Jared. He sleeps with the fishes too, but not like Mother." He closed his eyes and sighed, refusing to open them. "Master Price attempted to harm our child, and I went off the deep end." He chewed his lip, hoping if he nibbled long enough, Alexander would step in and save him from the memory. Alexander's hand touched Elliot's, wrapping around and squeezing softly.

"Jared's dead," Alexander said softly, squeezing Elliot's hand a bit tighter. "He was trying to hurt the baby."

“Elliot,” Mrs. Peppercorn demanded kindly, and his eyes snapped up to meet hers. “Good for you, baby. Good for you.”

“I didn’t mean to,” he whispered. Even if she didn’t feel repulsion when looking at him now, it didn’t ease the guilt Elliot felt. “I took his life.”

“He was going to take yours,” Alexander reminded him. “And if he didn’t kill you, he probably would have killed her.” He lifted his hand and placed it on Elliot’s tummy. “You did the right thing.”

“I know. It’s still hard to process, though. I didn’t want him dead. He was horrible and awful to me, but he didn’t deserve to die.”

“That’s subjective,” Mrs. Peppercorn said, taking a sip of her water.

“And now we’re on the run. It isn’t fair. If Mother had her way, I’d still be with him, taking all the hurt he had to offer because I was created to be tortured.” A tear slipped down Elliot’s cheek, and he was thankful when Alexander wiped it away. I know I’m safe now, but it’s not just about me. I have brothers still suffering the same fate. They’re being brutalized to fulfill their husband’s sadistic fetishes. It’s not right. None of this is right.”

“Someone needs to save them,” Mayor Rivera said as he took a seat. He glanced around the room, studying the beaus in attendance. “Maybe someone will. The ones who want to leave their suitors should be able to.” Beau leaned back in his chair and folded his arms over his chest. “When I was nine, my Aunt Lurlene helped me rescue a litter of piglets who were headed for slaughter. Ten years later, we had the biggest pig rescue in the south.”

“As much as I’m enjoying this slice of your life, Mayor Rivera, I’m not sure what it has to do with anything,” Elliot said, though not unkindly.

“What I’m saying is, I’ve been searching for purpose all my life, and I think I might have just found it.” He turned to Mrs. Peppercorn. “When we return home, I’m going to need your help.”

Mrs. Peppercorn opened her mouth to respond, but her upper denture slipped, falling against her lower denture and making a loud clanking sound. Her eyes widened and she closed her mouth, running her tongue across her upper teeth, then the lower palette. With a sigh of relief, she nodded. “Good. I was worried I cracked them to high heaven.” She gave Beau an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry for ruining your speech, sugar. What was it you need my help with?”

Mayor Rivera looked around the room, nodding to himself. “I want to save them. However many I can. Whoever wants to be saved.”

“There are over fifty bountiful beaus on the ship, son,” Mrs. Peppercorn pointed out. “I don’t know where you’d even hide them. That’s what you’re suggesting, isn’t it? Rescuing them and keeping them hidden?”

“Yeah. But not just the beaus on this ship.” He smiled at Elliot. “I want to try to save them all. Some of the things I’ve seen on this cruise have made my stomach churn. They aren’t all treated poorly, but the ones who are . . . It’s disgusting what they’re expected to put up with.” He turned his gaze to a suitor sitting two tables away. The man was eating black cherries from a bowl. In front of the man, his bountiful beau rested on his knees, his mouth open. Elliot wasn’t sure what was going on at first, but then the man swallowed down his cherry, leaned forward and spit the cherry pit into his beau’s waiting mouth. He paid no attention to his beau’s discomfort or disgust, which was clear as day. “Case in point.”

“I don’t even know how you’d go about rescuing them. It’s not as if you can simply show up on their doorsteps and offer them a means of escape,” Elliot pointed out.

“I know,” Mayor Rivera agreed. “But I’ve got to think of something. This isn’t right. No one should have to go through what you’ve gone through.” He reached forward and squeezed Elliot’s wrist. “Thank you, Elliot. Thank you for giving me back my purpose.” He turned back to Mrs. Peppercorn. “I’ll need to find somewhere to hide them. That’s where you come in.” Ridiculously, the sassy side of Mayor Beau Rivera reared its head when he waggled his eyebrows like a maniac. “Do you think your Ladies Auxiliary would be up for a little anarchy?”

Mrs. Peppercorn paused, probably considering the request. It seemed like a fool’s dream. Elliot had over five-thousand brothers across the United States. Saving them all would be impossible. Even if Mayor Rivera only attempted to rescue three or four of Elliot’s brothers, he wasn’t sure how that could work. The men would have to stay hidden indefinitely, in hopes the business would collapse so they could live an open life. Another pipe dream, because Elliot was sure if Ms. Broussard’s Home for Bountiful Beaus was closed, the lost lambs would be led to slaughter and incinerated, or worse, rounded up and sent to new homes with horrible new husbands and new hellscapes to survive.

Yes, it was a fool’s dream, but for his brothers’ sakes, he hoped with all his heart it would come true.

As Mrs. Peppercorn and Beau brainstormed ideas, Elliot leaned his head against Alexander’s shoulder, soaking in the affection pouring out of him. After a while, Alexander’s phone chimed, and when he pulled it out, his lax expression faded, his back straightened, and he looked down at Elliot.

“It’s time.”

Elliot nodded, fear rising at the thought of making a mad dash for Alexander’s helicopter on the upper deck. “I’m scared.”

“You don’t have to be. I’ve got you, baby. I won’t let anything bad happen.”

“Listen,” Mrs. Peppercorn said. “I know you probably expect me to get on board that big fancy helicopter, but I think I’m going to stick it out here.” She looked around the room. “These beaus are going to need their Mother.”

Elliot nodded in agreement. Leaving the cruise would mean leaving the rest of the beaus behind. For all Elliot knew, Beau Rivera could have been planning a great escape for all the beaus on the ship, and Elliot didn’t want to ruin any of their plans he’d been too busy cuddling against Alexander to pay attention to.

“We’ll keep her restrained until we dock, and then we’ll figure out where we go from there.” She slowly rose from her chair and hobbled a few steps forward, cupping Elliot’s cheeks and kissing his forehead. “But you have to run, baby. You have to go find your happily ever after.”

Elliot wrapped his hand around her frail wrist, tenderly stroking her skin. “I’ll see you again, Mrs. Peppercorn.”

She smiled, nodding her agreement. “Me and you are family now, sugar. All the evil mothers in the world couldn’t keep me away from you.”

As they hugged and said their tearful goodbyes, Alexander stood behind Elliot, slowly rubbing his back. His phone chimed again, and Elliot knew it must be the pilot advising him he’d arrived.

Five minutes later, after rushing across the cruise ship in a mad dash, the thwomp-thwomp-thwomp of the helicopter’s rotor played out like a breathtaking symphony, promising freedom and family on the other side of the sea.

The helicopter hadn’t landed, but it wasn’t very high up, and there was a ladder

hanging down, ready to lead them into their future. Elliot gave Alexander a final kiss before their journey up, touching their foreheads together, and shouting over the thwomping sound, "I'm going to make you so happy, Alexander." Elliot placed his hand on Alexander's hip and felt something hard beneath the fabric. He opened his mouth to ask what it was, but Alexander's smile paralyzed him. Alexander's net worth may have been in the billions, but his smile was worth everything. Then a new expression worked its way onto Alexander's face. Disbelief, maybe? Confusion? Elliot wasn't sure. Not until he heard her.

"Absolutely not," Mother screamed over the roars and thwomps. "Elliot Price, I forbid you from getting on that helicopter."

Elliot's entire body stiffened. How had she escaped Mrs. Peppercorn's bindings? What would happen to him now? Could he still escape? So many questions roared through his head, but for the first time in his life, Elliot wasn't alone. Elliot had never been able to rely on anyone, but he could rely on Alexander. The next thing he knew, Alexander had his hand around Elliot's wrist, tugging. Looking over his shoulder, Alexander was already on the third rung of the ladder. "Baby, I need you to climb. Come on, I've got you."

When Elliot stared into Alexander's eyes, he felt a lifetime pass between them. It was filled with laughter and love and so much peace. It was a gentle life. A quiet one. It may not have been a love story for the ages, but it was simple and it was true. Truer than anything Elliot had ever felt. So, he climbed. Rung after rung, step after step, Elliot made his way up with the man he loved.

Lightning struck the sea, illuminating the night, giving Elliot a vision of the world in panorama. In the distance, there was nothing but sea and sky, and the sight of it terrified him. If he fell, he would never be found. He was sure of it. He would sink to the seafloor and be forgotten, his quiet life snuffed out before it had truly begun. So Elliot climbed faster, desperate to reach safety.

There was movement below him, and it struck up a fresh wave of panic inside him. He didn't have time to look down, he couldn't risk losing the momentum they'd gained. Then he felt it. Her hand on his ankle. Nails digging into his skin.

"You get down here now!" Mother screamed. "Elliot Price, I will not tell you again."

To Elliot's horror, the helicopter rose higher in the evening sky, and when Elliot looked down, Mother was still at his heels, as the ship was shrinking beneath them.

His leg was shaking, and when he realized it was from Mother jerking his ankle back and forth, his heart thundered in his chest. It was as if Mother was trying to make him fall on purpose. He kicked at her, not necessarily trying to kick her off the ladder, but simply as a fight for his own survival.

Professor Plum squeaked in his pocket, but Elliot couldn't let go of the ladder to console him.

"Stop," Elliot pleaded. "Mother, you'll make me fall!"

She glared at him. "That's the point. You let go of this ladder right this second."

"We'll drown!"

She shook her head. "Clarence will find us again. I will not allow this, Elliot. I will not allow you to make a mockery of my life's work. Let go!"

Elliot reached down to knock her hand loose, but as he did so, her unnecessarily sharp fingernails sliced at his palm, making him howl in pain. He knew he had to get away from her, but when he reached for the next step on the ladder, sharp pain coursed across his palm where Mother's nail had connected. It felt like pouring alcohol on a flesh wound—a sharp and relentless stinging sensation. He tried again,

only to realize it was no use. He wouldn't be able to use that hand to climb.

Looking up, Elliot's heart ached. Alexander was trying so hard to get them to safety, and it was all for nothing. If Elliot remained connected to Mother, he would drag both Alexander and Professor Plum to their watery graves along with them. He couldn't have that.

"I said, let go!" Mother shouted again.

Elliot closed his eyes and did just that. He let go of the version of Mother he'd held in his heart. Elliot let go of a life of endless strife and misery, and he grabbed on to the life he planned with Alexander. Or, rather, Alexander grabbed onto him, holding Elliot as close as he could.

"Kick," Alexander screamed over the roaring rotors. "Kick her off or she'll take you with her!"

But Mother's grip was relentless. Even as her heels kicked into the air, she remained steadfast and unwavering. "Elliot Price, you let go of him this instant! This isn't the way a bountiful beau is meant to behave. I raised you better than this."

"No," Elliot barked, furiously kicking his leg to shake her loose. He was so close to finding his forever, and here was Mother, trying to ruin it. Again. Never before had Elliot felt the level of anger he had for Mother at that moment. He was so close to freedom, and she was trying to take it from him. "Not Elliot Price! I'm just Elliot. That may be who you see me as, but that is not my name."

"Sweetheart, your future is waiting," she cried as the grip she had on him loosened. "Master Price will forgive and forget. You just have to let go."

Elliot shook his head. "Jared is dead."

The look of horror and hopelessness on her face was palpable. “What do you mean?”

“I killed him,” he said flatly. “He hurt me. He tried to hurt my baby—”

“Jared Price’s baby,” she attempted to correct him, looking shell-shocked. “It’s his baby. He paid for it. Dear God. You’ve gone mad, haven’t you?”

“My baby!” Elliot growled, kicking again. “Mine. Not his. Not yours. This is my life, Alexander is my future, and you are a memory I wish to forget.” He kicked more furiously that time, screaming, “Let—me—go!”

Mother dug her nails into Elliot’s thigh. “If I fall, I’m dragging you with me.”

Elliot pushed past the pain in his palm and clung to the ladder as Mother tried in vain to dislodge him. When she realized her efforts were fruitless, Elliot watched as her attention shifted. No longer was she looking at him, her sights were set on Alexander. Elliot’s heart sank.

Reaching high above her head, Mother managed to grab Alexander’s ankle, making direct contact with his skin. Her sharp nails pierced through and blood drizzled down her fingers, across her hand, and ran down her arm. Alexander cried out in pain, one hand slipping from the ladder out of reflex, as if he was trying to swat away a pest. When Alexander let go, the three of them slipped, but he grabbed the ladder with one hand as the other dangled over the ocean.

“I’m going to fall. Elliot, I can’t hold on,” Alexander grunted. “Grab the ladder. If I fall, I don’t want to take you with me.”

Elliot’s heart cracked right down the middle. No. He couldn’t lose Alexander. Not again. Alexander Davenport was the kindest, most amazing man he’d ever met, and Elliot was undeniably, unequivocally, irrefutably in love with him.

“But the baby. Our baby, Alexander.” Elliot sniffled. “We’re going to raise her on Sugarplum Island.” As Elliot’s jaw trembled, he tried to maintain his composure. “We’re supposed to be a happy family. Miss Twylah said so.”

“Baby, please. If I fall, you’ll fall, too.”

Elliot swallowed and nodded, tightening the hold he had on Alexander’s waist. “I know.” Elliot pressed his face against Alexander’s stomach and shook with fear. “I’m with you. Right until the end.”

As panic flooded Elliot’s veins, he felt something jabbing at his chest. Little pinpricks that didn’t quite hurt, but were still terribly uncomfortable. Elliot looked down in time to see Professor Plum crawl out of his pocket. His heart raced, because he had no way to catch the fieldmouse, should he fall. But Professor Plum’s nails continued to prick his skin through the fabric of Elliot’s clothing as he journeyed downward toward Mother.

The mouse stared at Mother, then looked up at Elliot and almost seemed to smile before opening his mouth and chomping down on Mother’s finger. Mother cried out, instinctively pulling her arm away, loosening the hold she had on Elliot.

Elliot saw it. The moment Emily Broussard realized what was about to happen. The initial rush of fear, quickly replaced by a look that almost resembled annoyance.

“Not again,” she groaned, then she fell, screeching “Clarence!” during the descent. The problem was, they’d flown far enough from the ship that finding her in the middle of the night would more than likely be impossible. Elliot kept his eyes locked on Mother’s until darkness engulfed her.

The next thing Elliot knew, he was in motion. Looking up, he watched as Alexander pulled them up the ladder. Little pinpricks plucked through Elliot’s clothing again as

Professor Plum crawled the length of Elliot's body, to rest on his shoulder. Elliot grabbed the fieldmouse and tucked him into his shirt pocket before working with Alexander to get them into the helicopter. Once they were on board, the pilot looked over his shoulder and scowled at them, telling them to buckle their gee-dee seatbelts, and that he wasn't about to get struck by gee-dee lightning trying to rescue their gee-dee behinds. He had a terribly filthy mouth, and Elliot didn't care for it in the slightest.

Once they were strapped in, Professor Plum peaked out of Elliot's pocket and stared up at him. The little mouse nuzzled its face right over Elliot's heart.

"He loves you," Alexander said over the roars and whirls of the helicopter's propellers. "Are you okay?" Elliot nodded, because he thought he was. He'd already seen Mother plummet to her death once, so the impact was less this time. He cuddled closer to Alexander and breathed in his scent.

"Alexander," he whimpered, the stress of everything finally taking its toll.

"I'm here. I'm right here. We're going home, baby."

Home.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

Elliot was hurting. His heart was hurting, and Alexander couldn't do a damn thing to stop the pain. He held Elliot the entire helicopter ride back to land, then in the car his mother sent to collect them. Refusing to let go until their feet touched down on the ferryboat meant to take them to Sugarplum Island, and even then, he held Elliot's hand.

It was almost morning by the time the small island came into view. In the half-light, surrounded by thick morning fog, Alexander spotted a crowd of Sugarplumians standing on the dock, holding signs in the air.

Welcome Home, Elliot , one sign said.

Sorry I chased you with a rake that time , said another.

In the center of the dock stood Twylah Bishop, beaming ear to ear and waving grandly. Alexander glanced over at Elliot, noticing how every trace of fear or worry had vanished, replaced by a look of confusion.

Alexander squeezed his hand. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I just don't understand why the entire village showed up to greet us."

Alexander leaned down and kissed Elliot gently on the lips. "Mom probably told them all about you. This is a really tight-knit community. They're weary of tourists, and there are so few residents, they've formed a found family of sorts." He cupped Elliot's cheek. "After you left last time, Mom went around and scolded everyone who

was nasty to you when you were here. She said they were apologizing to her for days.”

Elliot’s brows furrowed. “Why would she do that? She barely knew me. We only met once.”

Alexander shook his head, lightly tapping Elliot’s temple. “I think the memory of your visits must have been held in the holes the cake frosting filled up. You came here once a week for over a year. When we used to talk about you—before we found each other on the boat—I would ask about you.” Alexander blushed. “Quite often. I’m afraid I may have been a bit obsessed.”

Elliot’s eyes flashed pink-pink-pink . “Yeah?”

Alexander nodded. “Very much. She said you were always kind and courteous, but you never opened up. She tried to get to know you, but you were incredibly shy, apparently.”

“Jared didn’t like me talking to other people. He said my place was at his side, and he was the only friend I needed.” Elliot closed his eyes. “He was not a good friend. If I’d had another friend, I think it may have made everything a bit more bearable.”

Alexander kissed Elliot tenderly on the lips. “And now there’s a whole village of people who want to be your friend. Life has a way of turning itself around sometimes.”

“Not life. You. You turned my world around.”

“In a good way, I hope.”

“In the best way.” He placed his hand on his belly, and Alexander couldn’t help

himself. He placed his hand right beside Elliot's. Their eyes locked, and a faint blush spread across Elliot's face. Then his eyes bulged, and he took a step back, looking panicked. "What in the world?"

Alexander didn't know what had gotten into Elliot. He was fine only seconds before. "What's wrong? Did I hurt you?"

Elliot winced, and he placed two hands on his tummy, his eyes wet with worried tears. "I think something's wrong with the baby. My tummy feels funny and—" his words ended with a whine, and he slammed his eyes shut.

Alexander rushed forward, pressing his hand against Elliot's stomach. "Are you hurt? Is it contractions?" It was too soon for Elliot to give birth, Alexander assumed. He wasn't sure how early hybrid automatons could be born and still be healthy, and the only person who knew was lying at the bottom of the ocean.

"Alexander," Elliot whined, panicked. "We need to do something. I don't—I don't want to lose her." He seemed surprised by the statement. "We're supposed to be a family."

Alexander opened his mouth to reassure him, but before he could get a word out, something pressed against the hand he had resting on Elliot's belly.

"It feels like there are little bubbles popping inside me. Could it be her heart? Has it given out? What if she's—" Elliot let out another ungodly cry, and he pulled his bottom lip between his teeth, clamping down.

"Baby, are you in pain? Can you look at me?"

Elliot shook his head rapidly. "Not pain. Pressure. Like she's trying to get out."

“Can I lift your shirt and look?”

He whimpered, still unwilling to open his eyes. “Everyone will see my stomach.”

Alexander turned Elliot so his back was to the approaching island. Once his belly was out of their line of sight, Alexander lifted the shirt and watched as the imprint of a foot pushed against Elliot’s skin. It was a strange sight to see, because Alexander had been around expecting mothers before, and he’d seen them kick. Never once had he seen the actual imprint of foot, toes and all. Perhaps it was different because Elliot was an automaton. Alexander wasn’t fully versed in the ins and outs of automaton anatomy, so how was he to know? Whatever the reason, just the sight made his heart race faster.

She was kicking.

Their baby was awake, and she was shoving her foot against her father’s tummy like she was trying to get comfortable. It was the first time it really clicked for Alexander. He was already on board with raising their child as his, but it still felt like he was living somebody else’s happy ending. With her lying dormant inside Elliot, it still felt unreal, but with her first kicks, it was as if she was kicking away any shred of plausible deniability. There was a real live baby under his skin, and in three months—provided Alexander could sort out Elliot’s delivery—she would be out of the comfort of her father’s belly and thrust into the world, looking to them for protection.

Good, Alexander thought, because that was all he’d ever wanted. Love. Someone to care for, and someone who cared for him in return. There would be no further ill-fated hookups with men who wouldn’t remember his name. No coming home to an empty house and watching Hallmark movies to live a vicarious love life. He was going to have a family. It was a realization that left him dizzied, smiling as widely as his smile would stretch, and feeling awestruck. Alexander chuckled, because he felt

like he was floating on air.

Tears fell from Elliot's eyes. "Why are you laughing? She could be dying. Her life could be in danger."

"Oh, sweetheart," Alexander soothed, pressing their foreheads together. "She's not in danger. She's just kicking." He found Elliot's hand and guided it to the place Alexander had just felt her kick. Sure enough, within seconds, Elliot's eyes lit up and his mouth fell open.

"She can move? Inside me?" Elliot gaped at him, looking flabbergasted. He stared down at his belly, watching as her foot poked out again. Somehow, Elliot's jaw fell even lower. "Is she trying to claw her way out?" Panicked, Elliot quickly rubbed his stomach. "Little one, I must insist you cease your attempted escape." He placed both hands on his belly, rubbing it gently. "You'll split my skin in half." Alexander snorted, and Elliot looked up at him with narrowed eyes. "Now is not the time for laughter, Alexander, no matter how delightful you look while doing so."

"I promise, everything is fine. She's not trying to kick her way out of you. She's just stretching her little arms and legs. It's completely natural; in fact, it's in your guidebook."

Elliot cocked his head to the side? "You've read Mother's Manual?" Alexander blushed because he read the first five chapters as Elliot napped the other day. It was fascinating information, but it held a misogynistic tone Alexander didn't care for in the slightest.

"A few chapters," he admitted. "I was curious. I hope you don't mind."

Elliot was still staring down at his belly, watching the foot roll beneath his skin. "I don't mind."

The boat slowly came to a stop, and the moment they docked, a pair of high heels clicked heavily behind them. Alexander looked over his shoulder to see his mother heading toward them with a warm smile and open arms. When she reached them, she wrapped the pair up in a relentless hug. Elliot made a choking sound, and when Alexander looked down at him, his entire body was tense. He knew Elliot wasn't used to hugs, but he also didn't want to tell his mother to let go, because then he would have to explain Elliot's unfamiliarity with affection. She knew some of what Elliot had suffered from her phone calls with Alexander, but he didn't want Elliot to have to rehash the details of his prolonged isolation.

"I'm so happy to see you again, Elliot," she said, kissing his forehead. As she released the hold she had on him, she pressed her hand on Elliot's stomach and beamed. "It suits you. You look more at peace than you ever have." She pinched his cheek. "You're positively glowing."

Elliot shook his head. "My skin doesn't glow, Ms. Twylah. I'm not a Lite-Brite. There isn't much peace to be found here at the moment, either. I believe we're in the middle of a medical emergency. The baby is trying to claw her way out of me as we speak." He guided her hand to his belly. "See?"

"I already told you, she's just stretching," Alexander said.

"Yes, well, you've never gone through pregnancy. I'd like to seek a second opinion from someone who has." Elliot's nervous eyes found Twylah's. "Can babies break through skin?"

She shook her head. "No, Elliot. And she wouldn't want to if she could." She placed her hand atop Elliot's and guided it toward the baby's foot. "She can hear you, you know. Do you ever talk to her? I used to sing to Lexy all the time. I think it helped our bond."

“Should I have been doing that already? Mother’s manual didn’t mention anything about singing or speaking to her.” His jaw trembled. “What if I’ve already severed any bond we could have shared simply by remaining silent?”

Alexander opened his mouth to respond, but his mother cut him off. “Lexy says you’re about six months pregnant?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then you still have plenty of time. Besides, I don’t think they can actually hear you until around six or seven months, anyway. She’s been listening to your heart, though.” Her smile reminded Alexander of the way she would look at him after a particularly brutal day at school. How she would flash her pearly whites, reassuring Alexander that the opinions of homophobic bullies did not define who he was. “Do you love her?”

Elliot nodded emphatically. “With my whole heart.” He sniffled. “I’m baking her from scratch. That’s what my mother used to tell me.”

Her hand soothingly caressed Elliot’s. “Then she knows, Elliot.” Leaning closer, she kissed Elliot on the forehead. “Lexy and I are going to get you through this pregnancy, and you’re going to have the happiest, healthiest family. I can feel it.”

Elliot looked like he wanted to cry. His hand moved on top of Alexander’s mother’s, and he held onto it like a touchstone. “Thank you. That really puts me—” Elliot yelped like a kicked dog, jolting back a step. He closed his eyes and breathed slowly, as if he’d just ran back and forth across the entire island. “I’m sorry. That was the strongest kick yet. I wasn’t expecting it.”

Alexander’s mother nodded. “She’s got a lion’s heart, I can tell.”

Elliot shook his head. “No, ma’am. Her heart is half-human, half-automaton. It says so in Mother’s guide.” He looked down, reaching out his hand for something that wasn’t there. Sucking in a sharp breath as he stared at the floor beside him. His eyes widened, and he jerked his head in Alexander’s direction. “My suitcase! I forgot my suitcase. The book was inside. Alexander, I was supposed to—”

Alexander smiled and reached for the tail of his shirt. As he lifted the fabric, Elliot stared at the book wedged between his hip and trousers. It was the only item he’d snuck off the cruise ship. Mrs. Peppercorn was supposed to gather the rest of their belongings once the ship docked, but Alexander thought Elliot might need his manual before then. “Here you go, baby. Safe and sound.”

“Y-you remembered to grab it for me?”

Alexander chewed his cheek. Was Elliot upset with him for going through his things? He hoped not. Alexander only wanted to help, but he hadn’t asked Elliot’s permission, so there was a good chance he’d crossed some line he hadn’t known was there. He hadn’t even thought of seeking Elliot’s permission, and it left him feeling guiltier than he ever had. He opened his mouth to apologize, but Elliot cut him off.

“No one has ever looked out for me the way you do. The cruise ship shopping spree. Cuddling me by the pool until I felt better. You even served me breakfast in bed.”

“It was just room service,” Alexander said sheepishly.

“You took the time out of your day to do something special for me.” He wrapped his hand around Alexander’s wrist. “Please don’t diminish yourself or your actions. I appreciate them both.” Elliot leaned forward and kissed Alexander sweetly, purring into his mouth like a kitten when Alexander stroked the side of his face.

When they pulled away, Alexander noticed his mother dabbing at her glossy eyes. “I

didn't think I'd ever get to see this, Lexy. You look so happy."

Alexander blushed, unable to keep the smile off his face. "I am. I've never been happier." He held the book out for Elliot. "Here you go."

Elliot took the book and stared at it, then at Alexander. "Thank you. Thank you for everything." He flipped through the opening pages, pausing at a page labeled Mother's Mission Statement. "See, Ms. Twylah? There were no lion parts used in the making of our baby, only a bit of my source code and a sprinkle of Jared's . . . well, you know." He blushed furiously, immediately looking down.

She snorted a laugh. "Oh, I like you, Elliot. We're going to be the best of friends. I can tell."

"Until last week, I never had any friends at all. Now, they're practically coming out my ears." A grin worked its way onto his face. "I'm looking forward to getting to know you, Ms. Twylah."

"Right back at you, sweetie."

When they departed the ferry and made their way toward the crowd of Sugarplumians, Alexander watched as members of the small community welcomed Elliot with open arms.

"You're one of us now," Old man O'Connell promised. "Damn shame you had to miss the rest of your cruise, but you're home now, so that's got to count for something."

"Thank you," Elliot said, blushing.

Next was Myrtle McMillan, who was holding the sign apologizing for chasing Elliot

with a rake. When they first met, Elliot mentioned someone chasing him off, but he didn't know the details. Now, Alexander had to bite down the urge to issue her a notice of eviction from his island.

"I'm really sorry," she said. "Your eyes were flashing up a storm, and I thought you were a demon coming to bring about the end times."

Elliot shook his head. "I'm not a demon," he said matter-of-factly. "I'm a bountiful beau. Apology accepted but not forgotten. Please show a bit more kindness in the future. It costs nothing."

Mrs. McMillan nodded in agreement. "I will."

As the rest of the crowd introduced themselves, Alexander spotted two familiar faces emerging from the thick morning fog engulfing the island. The closer they got, the more their colors showed.

"Baby," Alexander whispered into Elliot's ear, and when he looked into Alexander's eyes, Elliot had an almost punch-drunk look of love on his face.

"I love when you call me that."

Alexander placed his hand against the small of Elliot's back. "I know. I like saying it." He darted his eyes toward the two men headed in their direction. They looked happier than the last time they'd seen each other. When he last left the island, they were worried out of their mind about Ms. Broussard being hot on their trails. No matter how many times Alexander reminded the bonded beaus that Sugarplum Island was a safe place for them, they were terrified. Thankfully, his mother kept an eye on them in his absence.

Alexander waved at the men, welcoming them over. The moment Elliot caught sight

of them, his eyes must have doubled in size. He gripped Alexander's arm.

"Their eyes," he whispered. "They're like me?"

Alexander kissed his forehead. "Yeah. They're just like you." The men stopped in front of them, their gripped hands melded so tightly together that their knuckles had gone white. Nervous orange light flooded their eyes, but Alexander didn't want them to be nervous. He hated seeing them scared. Ever since rescuing Duck from his abusive husband and hiding him and Goose away from the world on Sugarplum Island, Alexander tried his hardest to keep them both happy and healthy. The islanders had taken them under their wings in Alexander's absence, but he still called to check on them almost every day. He motioned toward the man on the left. "Elliot, this is Duck." He turned his attention to his former fiancé. "And this is Goose."

Color sparkled around Elliot's eyes. An endless flickering of pinks and purples. "Goose," he said. "You were the bountiful beau he purchased first?"

Goose nodded. "Yeah."

Elliot sidestepped in front of Alexander. "You cannot have him back. I don't mean to be a spoilsport, but he's mine now." Alexander's heart fluttered in his chest. He wanted to tell Elliot he had nothing to worry about, Goose and Alexander had never shared an intimate or romantic spark. Not even before Alexander knew about Goose's feelings for Duck. For three months, Alexander tried to ignite a spark, but looking back, Goose always had one foot out the door. Duck was the center of Goose's world. Of course, it didn't take Alexander terribly long to figure out what they were up to. But Duck made Goose happy, and Goose's happiness was what mattered most, Alexander supposed. When the truth came to light—the night Duck and his purchaser's home went up in flames—Goose told Alexander once that when the pair were still in Louisiana, they inadvertently bonded to each other by giving one another nicknames. Alexander knew the naming process was meant to create a tether between

suitor and beau, but Goose introduced himself as Gus that first day, so Alexander just went along with it, not knowing it would hinder their connection. He regretted nothing, as it led Goose to Duck, and Alexander to Elliot.

Goose cocked his head to the side. “We’ll see about that.” As Elliot ground his teeth, Alexander sighed, because he could see the flashing mischievous lights in Goose’s eyes.

“We most certainly will not,” Elliot warned.

Goose stepped closer and tapped the tip of Elliot’s nose. “I know, I’m sorry. I was only joking. You have nothing to worry about, Elliot. I’m quite happy with my Ducky-Duck.” He turned and held his hand out for Duck—always the more skittish of the pair—nervously approached, looking frightened.

“Hi,” Duck whispered, quickly shaking Elliot’s hand before ducking behind Goose nervously.

“You’ll have to forgive him,” Goose said. “He didn’t go to a good home at first, and he still struggles with it.” Goose turned and cupped Duck’s cheeks, gently kissing the man to reassure him.

Elliot nodded. “I didn’t go to a good home, either. Did your suitor harm you?”

Duck swallowed, and Alexander, ever protective, had to resist the urge to comfort him. “He harmed me often,” Duck admitted.

To Alexander and Goose’s surprise, Elliot wrapped his arms around Duck and pulled him close for a hug. “Mine, too,” Elliot whispered. “He was a horrible man with nothing but hate in his heart.”

“He was?” Duck asked, holding onto Elliot just as tightly.

“I was forced to power down several times a day. He often struck me.” When Elliot pulled away, he was giving Duck an empathetic look. Lifting his wrist, he showed Duck and Goose the stitches where Elliot cut out his tracking chip. “I heard a story about you once. About how you cut yourselves open just to set yourselves free.” His jaw trembled, and Alexander wanted to comfort him. “Thank you. I wouldn’t have ever . . .” He grabbed their hands and squeezed. “Thank you. Would you like to be friends? I haven’t had many, but I believe I’d like to be yours.”

Duck’s fearful expression faded. “You want to be my friend?”

Elliot nodded. “Very much so. There aren’t many men who know what we’ve gone through, and I think—” Elliot’s eyes bulged, and he quickly shook his head. “No, no, no, no, no.” His voice was full of panic as he lifted his arm, tracing the shape of a star against his skin. Lights flickered to life beneath the flesh, and Alexander noticed a red flashing light in the center of his small rectangular interface.

“What does the red light mean?” Alexander asked. When their eyes met, Elliot’s looked panicked. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, but his voice was slow and muted. Alexander had never heard him sound so strained before. It was like it took every ounce of strength he had to get them out. “Alexander, I . . .” His eyes closed slowly, like a garage door coming down. To Alexander’s surprise, Goose quickly positioned himself behind Elliot. “Baby, what’s wrong?”

“He’s powering down,” Goose answered for him. “The red light means his power supply is almost out.”

Alexander’s chest ached. He swore Elliot would never have to power down again. He

made the vow, and he meant it more than he'd ever meant anything else. Death. Elliot was dying in front of him. He reached into his pocket, pulling out the charging port he brought with him for the journey.

“We need to find somewhere to plug him in before—”

“Alexander,” Elliot whispered, his voice soft and slow, like a cassette tape on the last of its lifespan. “It’s already hap-hap . . . Happening.”

“Oh, Elliot. I didn’t know you needed rest. Baby, I’m so sorry.”

Elliot couldn’t respond, but when Alexander took his hand, Elliot’s grip was relentless. He made a lot of horrible sounds that sounded like he was in agony, each limb going limp, one at a time. Before the final breath left him, he opened his eyes and whispered, “I love . . .”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

When Elliot woke, something felt different. Warmer, perhaps? Calmer? It felt that way. The air around him didn't feel thick like molasses, locking him in place. It felt light. He opened his left eye, then his right, taking in his surroundings. He was in a bedroom that looked like it belonged in a quaint cottage. There was a large window looking out on a small beach, the sea just in the distance. There was a summery sweet fragrance of saltwater and—for some reason—freshly baked bread.

At his side, Alexander Davenport was sleeping peacefully, looking younger under the spell of sleep. Gone were the worried wrinkles that often creased his forehead. There was no inherent look of panic on his face, like the look he often wore when worrying about Elliot's future. Elliot hated the stress his reappearance had caused Alexander thus far, but worse, he hated himself for holding onto Alexander anyway. He knew by latching himself onto Alexander he would bring him unnecessary trouble, but Elliot was too selfish to let go. He wanted to cling to Alexander, allowing him to take Elliot's problems onto himself so Elliot wouldn't have to face them alone.

He stared at Alexander for over half an hour before Alexander's eyes fluttered open. A smile stretched across his face when he caught sight of Elliot, and he lifted his arm, inviting Elliot to cuddle close. It was an offer Elliot couldn't refuse, so he nestled in next to him, wrapping an arm around his waist and resting his head against Alexander's chest.

"Where are we?" Elliot asked.

Alexander kissed his forehead. "This is our bedroom." The grip he had on Elliot was relentless, as if he was afraid to let go. "I'm sorry about last night. I should have been keeping track of your power supply." His finger tugged at Elliot's chin, lifting his

gaze until they were staring eye to eye. “Watching you power down was the scariest thing I’ve ever seen. I’m so sorry, Elliot.”

Elliot inched closer, kissing Alexander softly on the lips. “I’m okay. I’ve powered down enough times that I’m used to it.”

“Well, I’m not,” Alexander said bitterly, though Elliot didn’t think the bitterness was aimed at him. Alexander’s expression was solemn, and Elliot worried that now that Alexander had seen behind the curtain—witnessing Elliot in a powered down state—he would no longer want him. While powered down, Elliot was a shell of a man. No signs of life. No signs of death. Just an unmoving heap of manufactured skin and steel. Then there was his child. Each time Elliot powered down, she did, too, extending his pregnancy by however long he was out.

“I’m sorry you had to see me that way. I know it must have been alarming. If you’ve changed your mind, I—”

Alexander quickly shook his head. “I haven’t. I just need to make sure I pay more attention to your power supply. The other day, I promised I’d never make you power down again, and then the first night on our own, I failed you.” Alexander broke their eye contact, staring down at Elliot’s chest. “I’m sorry I let you down.”

“You haven’t let me down.” There was the sensation of popping bubbles beneath his skin again, and Elliot smiled, taking Alexander’s hand and guiding to the baby bump. “She’s kicking again.”

Alexander smiled down at Elliot’s tummy. “I can’t believe this is real. I never thought I’d have the chance to be a father.”

“You’ll make a wonderful father.”

“You think so?”

Elliot nodded. “You’ve looked out for me all this time. I have no doubt you’ll do the same for her.”

“I will.” They laid there a while, hands flush against Elliot’s tummy, feeling for movement. Elliot discovered if he lightly poked at the small, foot-shaped bump and dragged his finger away, it would follow his path like it was trying to keep up.

He couldn’t wait to meet her. Before making his way back to Alexander, Elliot contemplated finding a way to terminate the pregnancy. He wasn’t sure how it would work, considering automaton pregnancy was new and something Mother herself barely understood. But he feared so many things. How was he meant to be the first of his kind, leading them into a golden age, when he could barely look strangers in the eye? How was he meant to raise a child when he had no idea what he was doing? And then there was guilt. Guilt for contemplating ending the pregnancy. Had she known? Could she tell the relief he felt each time the thought crossed his mind? Did she hate him for it? It wasn’t that he necessarily regretted weighing his options, because he knew it ought to be his right to choose his own destiny, but the thought of her knowing felt like one of Jared Price’s punches to the gut.

“I was thinking we could spend the morning in the village. There’s a general store by the bakery, and they have a whole section for babies. We could pick out a crib. We’ll need to stock up on diapers and wipes while we’re at it.” Alexander paused, chewing his cheek. “Actually, we could probably have a custom crib made for her. We’ll stop at the hardware store while we’re out and about. We can make a day of it.”

“I would like that very much,” Elliot agreed. “Could we stop by Twylah’s Sugarplum Treats? I’ve smelled baked bread since I first woke, and I believe I would like a cookie.” He nibbled his bottom lip, because it wasn’t just a cookie he was craving. There was a strong overwhelming need for something savory to go with the sweet

treat. “And something salty, if it isn’t too much trouble. I can’t explain it—it’s as if my tummy is demanding it. I’ve never craved food before, aside from the plum jam cookie I brought to Georgia, so I’m not sure why the urge is so strong.”

Alexander smiled knowingly. Good. If Alexander knew what was causing the craving, perhaps he could help Elliot overcome them. “Well, the smell of baked bread is from Mom’s bakery. Most of the island smells like sugary treats when she bakes in the morning. As for your demanding tummy, that’s probably just your pregnancy cravings. Mom said when she was pregnant with me, she couldn’t get enough ice cream and pickles. She would dip the pickles in the bowl and everything. After a while, she learned to make pickle-flavored ice cream. She said she would mix in relish for texture.” Elliot thought he was going to be sick. “She also had a recipe for onion pudding.”

Elliot gagged, quickly placing his hand over Alexander’s mouth. “I hate to silence you, because the sound of your voice is my favorite thing, but I’m going to have to insist you never mention onion pudding to me again.”

Alexander snorted, gently removing Elliot’s hand from his mouth and kissing his knuckles. “I promise. What do you say we get dressed and go out for breakfast? Mom makes a mean quiche.”

“Why is it mean?”

“Huh?”

“The quiche. Why is it mean?”

“Oh,” Alexander said with a chuckle. “It’s just an expression, sweetheart. I didn’t mean they’re literally mean.”

“Ah,” Elliot said, nodding. “I was worried it’s because she’s too rough on them with her whisk. I’m not the best cook, I’m afraid. Perhaps she can teach me some of her fabulous recipes, so I can make sure you’re properly fed.”

“I usually just get takeout.”

Elliot gaped at him. “As in fast food? No. I’m sorry, Alexander, but I cannot allow you to consume heavily processed foods. It’s not good for you. I’ll learn to cook, and then I’ll make you three meals a day. Possibly a snack or two as well.” He furrowed his brow. “Mother taught all her beaus to cook, but Master Price told her it wasn’t necessary with me. I believe he was worried I would cook meals for myself while he was away.” A smile quirked in the corner of Elliot’s mouth. “I would like to learn, though. I wish to cook for you. To clean for you. I want to make your life easier in whatever way I can.”

“I promise you don’t have to fuss over me. I don’t expect you to cook and clean for me all the time. Besides, I won’t need lunch most days. I usually just send my assistant out for something.”

Elliot swallowed. He knew Alexander had a very demanding career, but they hadn’t really approached how Elliot would fit into Alexander’s busy schedule. “How long are you gone each day?”

“Usually, back home in Dallas, I leave around eight in the morning and get home at eight or nine each night.”

Elliot tried to keep a brave face, but the idea of being apart from Alexander for twelve-plus hours a day sounded like torture. Even when Alexander was sleeping, Elliot felt an urge to wake the man so he wouldn’t have to be alone. He knew he would have their baby to tend to, but Elliot didn’t care for the idea of being at home alone most of the day. Couldn’t they just stay on Sugarplum Island and spend their

mornings, afternoons, and nights attached at the hip? He didn't want Alexander out of his sight.

"What's wrong?" Alexander asked.

"Nothing," he lied. Elliot didn't enjoy lying to him, but he didn't want Alexander feeling guilty, or like he needed to choose between his career and the man he loved. "I'm just trying to think of how things will work when you're at work."

Alexander stared into Elliot's eyes like he was searching for answers to an unasked question. "Are you worried about being alone?" Elliot bit his lip as he shook his head, but Alexander must have seen past Elliot's show of bravado. "It's okay if you are."

"Maybe just a little," Elliot admitted, quickly adding, "But I'll be fine. I'll have the baby to look after, and I can tidy your lovely home until you return each day."

"Our home," Alexander corrected. "It's your home, too."

Elliot didn't know how to tell him Dallas would never feel like home. Not after everything Elliot experienced living there with Jared. Elliot was brave, though. He could push past that uncomfortable feeling if it meant keeping Alexander happy.

"I still can't believe we lived so close. I didn't get out of the house often, but if I knew you were down the street, I would have snuck out at every chance, just to find you."

"Oh Elliot, I should have spent longer looking for you. I should have tried harder to find you. I'm sorry for letting you down."

Elliot sat up and whirled to the side of the bed, placing his feet on the floor. "I'm not. If you found me, we wouldn't have her." He gently rubbed his baby bump. "While

we're shopping, we should think of a name. I think it might help our bond with her."

"We can do that."

Elliot smiled and stood. "Good. Now, I'd like the grand tour of this little cottage." He held out his hand expectantly. "Come on. I want you to show me everything."

Alexander blushed. "I . . . I need a second, Elliot."

Elliot arched an eyebrow. "Why?"

Alexander slowly lifted the blanket from his lap, revealing the outline of his erection straining against his pajama bottoms. "It'll go down in a second."

Mischievous yellow light flickered in the corner of Elliot's eyes. "I don't mind. In fact, I believe I'd quite like to see you wandering around the house at full mast." Elliot walked around the bed until he was at Alexander's side, leaning over to inspect the erection. "You have a very lovely penis, Alexander. Do you think . . . I mean, would you mind if I played with it tonight?"

Heat flooded Alexander's cheeks. "You can play with it whenever you like."

"Yeah?" Elliot watched as Alexander swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down.

"Yeah. I like when you touch it."

"Good," Elliot agreed, standing up straight. "So show me around the cottage and then we can start our day. The sooner we're done, the sooner I can make you feel good."

Alexander lifted his hand, softly caressing Elliot's bulge. "I'd like to play with yours,

too, if you'll let me."

"I would like that. We can do everything, now that . . ."

"Now that you love me?" Alexander pressed, his grin spreading wider.

Elliot blushed. "A little bit."

"Just a little bit?" Alexander's fingers curled around Elliot through his pajamas.

Good Lord. "A lotta bit."

Alexander snorted, pulling him in for a tight hug. "I love you a lotta bit, too."

A few minutes later, they were in the living room, Alexander showing Elliot the lay of the land, his erection proudly guiding the way like a ship's bow. "It's a lot smaller than our place in Dallas, but we don't have to stay here often, if you think it's too cramped."

"Too cramped?" Elliot asked, staring at Alexander as if it was the silliest statement he'd ever heard. The cottage wasn't cramped, it was cozy. Cozier than any other home he'd ever lived in. It wasn't a mansion like the ones Jared and Mother called home, and it wasn't miniscule like Arthur and Periwinkle's library loft. It felt right. Just right.

The living room was one of four rooms in the house, and it took up the most space. A pale shade of blue covered the walls, and there was white trim around the walls. The sofa was white, as was the loveseat. Framed photographs of Alexander in his childhood lined the walls, each in a gray frame. The place had a coastal aesthetic, a love letter to life by the sea. It brought Elliot a sense of tranquility he'd rarely experienced. Maybe one day, after Alexander eventually retired, they could grow old

there together. Well, Alexander could grow old. Elliot's body would never age. He would be a picture of youth for the rest of his life; then when Alexander passed, Elliot would power himself down, leaving this world with the man he loved.

Alexander showed Elliot their small kitchen, complete with a dining nook in the corner, and windows that stretched from floor to ceiling on the other side, giving them an unobstructed view of the ocean. Elliot would get to have breakfast, lunch, and dinner in the nook until Alexander moved them back to Dallas. The view was exquisite, and Elliot decided he would enjoy it for however long he could.

After the tour, the men dressed in shorts and shirts, looking casual for their day in town. Alexander didn't lock the front door when they left, and Elliot assumed it was because the place was so small, crime was probably non-existent.

"Are you ready?" he asked Elliot.

Elliot rubbed his baby bump and smiled warmly at Alexander. "I feel like I've been waiting for this all my life."

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

When Elliot entered Twylah's Sugarplum Treats, he did so on the arm of Alexander Davenport. The bakery smelled like heaven. Baked bread and sugary goodness. A hint of sweet plum hanging in the air as if daring you not to notice it. It lingered. Good, Elliot thought. He hoped the scent would linger for a lifetime, because it was the sweetest scent he'd ever smelled.

The bakery was empty, and Alexander pointed to a small curtain leading into another room. "She's probably baking. Why don't you take a seat? I'll go grab her."

Elliot took his seat as requested and stared at his surroundings. The black-and-white checkered floor reminded him of the rounds of hopscotch he played with his brothers when he still lived at home with Mother. His life wasn't always bad, and that was what hurt the most. For three-hundred days, Elliot trained to keep his future husband's home neat and tidy, surrounded by his brothers. They were all close, but once their suitors came to collect them, they never saw each other again. He hoped his brothers ended up with kind husbands. He didn't want anyone to suffer at the hands of someone like Jared Price.

Elliot peeked around the room, making sure no one was within earshot. He knew the bakery was empty, so there would be no one to overhear, but he didn't want to take any chances.

"I love you very much, little one. I can't wait to meet you," he whispered. There was pressure against him, as if the child had heard his words and wanted to respond the only way she could. Elliot opened his mouth to tell her they would be selecting her name, and to ask if she had any input, but a sharp pain spread across his stomach, making him cry out for Alexander. He held his arms around his belly, cradling her.

Footsteps thudded through the back room, then the curtain swished open, and Alexander was by his side in seconds.

“Baby, what’s wrong?”

“Hurts,” Elliot whined. “Hurts so bad.”

Alexander reached for the hem of Elliot’s shirt and lifted the fabric. Elliot’s eyes were locked on Alexander’s face, his heart racing as he watched the color drain from Alexander’s face. “Dear God in Heaven.”

Elliot was too scared to point out that he wasn’t religious, so he didn’t. “What’s wrong?”

Behind him, Twylah was staring at Elliot’s stomach, looking awestruck. “Well, isn’t that something? Is it normal?”

“Is what normal?” Elliot asked, panicked, but too scared to look down and see what the fuss was about.

Twylah’s eyes widened. “Is she waving?”

“Is who waving?” Elliot’s voice came out as a fearful whine. They were staring at him like his insides had slipped out of him and made a mess on the floor.

“Baby, look.”

Elliot glanced down at Alexander, but he was too busy staring at Elliot’s belly. When Elliot followed his gaze, his entire body went stiff. Where pale skin had once rested on Elliot’s abdomen, the flesh was translucent, revealing a small baby resting inside. It was like staring through a window. The child’s eyes were open, her hair floating

around in Elliot's amniotic fluid.

"Goodness," Elliot whispered. "She's right there."

Alexander's hand squeezed Elliot's, and when Elliot looked up, there were tears in his eyes. "She's really in there." He looked down at her again, tears streaming, his smile widening. "We're really having a baby." Alexander pressed a kiss to Elliot's skin, the only barrier between him and the baby. The baby pressed her hand against Elliot's tummy from the inside, practically touching Alexander's lips.

Twylah was staring at them like she was witnessing the Second Coming. She knelt at Alexander's side, observing the baby as she spun around in a circle, putting on a show like a synchronized swimmer. Her somersaults felt like acid reflux, not that Elliot had ever experienced acid reflux. He knew the symptoms, though. Jared had suffered heartburn daily, and he complained about it for hours on end.

Even Professor Plum got in on the action, hopping out of Alexander's shirt pocket and scurrying down to rest on Elliot's knee, touching his little paw to the soon-to-be newest addition to their home. As the baby poked and prodded from inside of Elliot, he studied her face, memorizing every inch of her. Her wrinkly face and toothless smile. The way she stared at Professor Plum with wonder one moment, and mayhem the next. Her facial expressions reminded him of someone, but he couldn't remember who that person was.

Then, she lifted her gaze to meet Elliot's and his heart swelled so much he worried it might burst through his chest. The baby placed her hand against his stomach, never breaking eye contact. Elliot felt an undeniable connection with her, and when he put his hand on top of hers, he felt more peace than he ever had before. It reminded him of the feeling he got when he was near Honey Peppercorn and the way she would sometimes dislodge her dentures to make him chuckle. How her wrinkles held the wisdom of a well-lived life. She'd cared for Elliot in a way his own mother never

had.

“I believe I’ll call you Honey,” Elliot finally said, and the look Honey gave him was possibly the sweetest look he’d ever received. Elliot looked up at Alexander. “Would that be all right with you?”

Alexander nodded, tears welled up in his eyes. “I think it’s perfect.”

As Alexander, Twylah, and Professor Plum whispered sweet nothings to Honey, Elliot took a mental snapshot of the moment so he could revisit it later. He wanted to live in it. Elliot wanted to board up the doors to Twylah’s Sugarplum Treats and never leave the moment.

Eventually, Honey closed her eyes and fell asleep, and when she did, color returned to Elliot’s belly, tucking her away like a cozy blanket.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

Alexander wasn't sure how Elliot's skin morphed into a window to the womb, but seeing little Honey inside him made everything real. Granted, it was already real, but seeing an actual child smiling back at them felt like being pummeled with truth and expectation. A father. Alexander was going to be a father. A little life was going to be placed into his hands, and he needed to keep that life safe. To ensure Honey flourished in their home. The sense of intimidation over his role in her life was unmistakable, but when their little girl smiled widely and brightly at them, it lit a fire under Alexander's feet, launching him into action.

As they walked toward the general store, Elliot's hand in his, Professor Plum resting on Alexander's shoulder, Alexander was talking a mile a minute, unable to contain his excitement. "We'll get her the best crib we can find. And she'll need toys and onesies and diapers." Alexander paused, taking a deep breath as he took in the moment. "I think we'll have to order most of it online, but there will probably be some good finds in the general store."

Alexander held the door open for Elliot, hoping Duck and Goose were working that morning. It had been ages since they spent any real time together. Truthfully, they were his closest friends and he wanted to share his new life with them. He wanted them to be a part of that life. Friends. Uncles, actually, considering they were both Elliot's brothers.

There was no one at the counter, so whoever was on shift must have snuck into the employee restroom. Taking a cart from the corral, Alexander whirled it around on its wheels, surprised to see Elliot staring at it like it was the most fascinating thing in the world.

“What is that?”

“It’s a shopping cart. Well, some people call it a buggy.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “Why?”

Alexander shrugged. “I’m not really sure. I guess because carts and buggies used to carry people—”

Elliot groaned, and the sight of him with his hands fisted at his sides in frustration was the most adorable thing Alexander had ever witnessed. “I understand the concept of carts and buggies,” he huffed with a chuckle. “I just mean, what is its purpose here?”

Alexander arched an eyebrow. “Have you never been to the store before?”

Elliot shook his head. “Jared didn’t want me away from him. He was scared I would take a lover.”

Alexander waggled his eyebrows ridiculously. “One might say you already have.” Elliot cocked his head to the side, seemingly confused. “I mean me. I’m the lover.”

Elliot mouthed the word, “Ahh,” before turning his attention back to the cart. “Yes, well, that’s certainly true, but I’m still not sure what the purpose of this is. He wouldn’t allow me to leave the house without him. Especially not after the night I missed my ferry.” He looked down, but he couldn’t hide the shades of blue light flickering in his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Elliot,” Alexander whispered. “That morning, I knew something was wrong. I knew I shouldn’t have let you go.”

Elliot shook his head. “I’m glad you did. While I hate we lost so much time together, I’m happy. We’re having a baby. We’re starting a family. I’ve wanted to be a part of a family for so long.” Sniffling, he steeled his face, hiding his emotions away like he’d simply painted over the emotional blemishes with makeup. “Stop deflecting and answer the question, please. The cart. What is its purpose?”

“You put whatever you want to buy inside, then you take it to the register.” He pointed at the still-unmanned checkout counter. “Right there.”

Elliot took a step back and eyed the cart. “And the little compartment at the front?” He pointed at the children’s seat.

“You can put kids here. There’s even a seatbelt.”

Elliot glanced down at it like he was studying it for minor imperfections. “Once Honey is born, I would like you to place me in the spacious back section of this shopping cart, and I would like you to wheel me around the general store at a rapid speed.” Elliot nodded at the cart. “If you wouldn’t mind.”

“I think that can be arranged.”

Elliot approached the cart and sneered at it. “You heard him. You and I have a date with destiny. Don’t be late.”

Alexander couldn’t contain himself. Seeing Elliot finally let go—watching the man he loved come alive—felt like he was witnessing the birth of sorts. A new man was taking form before him, and that man was silly and ridiculous and adorable. He was everything Alexander had ever hoped for. Unable to control his actions, Alexander bridged the distance between them, picking Elliot up in his arms, cradling him like a newborn.

Elliot stared up at him, awestruck. “You’re very strong, Alexander Davenport.”

Alexander’s smile widened. “You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

When their lips met, the rest of the world faded away. The kiss went on for days and hours and months, tongues twirling, hearts racing like mad. Elliot was the one to break the kiss, and when he did, his cheeks were scarlet.

“I have an erection,” he whispered. Looking around the store, he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw they were still the only two there.

“I want to do things to that erection.”

Elliot trembled. “Alexander.” His voice was a whine. A long, high-pitched sound that sent a chill down Alexander’s spine. Once he placed Elliot’s feet on the floor, they both stared at the tent in his shorts.

“Fuck,” Alexander mumbled

“Alexander,” Elliot whined again, his erection twitching against his shorts. “It won’t go down. Why won’t it go down?”

“It could be your pregnancy hormones.”

Elliot growled and poked him in the chest. “I would appreciate it if you didn’t attribute my extremely valid bodily responses to pregnancy hormones. I don’t care for that.”

Alexander snickered, reaching down and cupping the tented erection. “Fine. It’s not your hormones. You’re just popping a boner in public for fun.” Was Alexander goading the man he loved? Yes, but how could he not when Elliot looked adorable

when flustered?

“Well, unless you plan on deflating it, you can remove your hand. Honestly, Alexander, do you wish to get us arrested for public indecency? You’re practically masturbating me.”

God, he wanted that. He wanted to feel Elliot’s cock in his fist. To bring him pleasure. “There’s an employee restroom in the back.”

Elliot blinked confusedly at him. “While I’m appreciative of your unnecessary need to describe the store’s many amenities, I’m not sure what it has to do with anything.”

Alexander dragged his finger up the length of Elliot’s erection. “If you’d like, I can take care of this for you in the bathroom.”

Elliot’s eyes bulged. “In a public restroom? I don’t know if that’s appropriate. We could get in trouble.”

Alexander looked over his shoulder and smiled. Duck and Goose were finally back behind the counter, drawing pink hearts on the chalkboard on the wall behind them.

“They work here part-time. They won’t mind.” He looked over at Goose and waved. “Good morning!”

Goose’s face lit up when he saw his friend. “Alexander, good morning!”

“Listen, I was hoping you wouldn’t mind if I took Elliot into the back. I need to . . . talk with him.”

Goose nodded. “You can use the office. It’s empty.”

“Actually, I was hoping we could commandeer the bathroom for a few minutes.” Heat flooded his cheeks. “For reasons.”

Goose’s lip curled into a knowing smile. “By all means. Enjoy yourselves.”

Alexander pulled Elliot into the restroom, which, if Alexander was being honest, didn’t seem like the most sanitary rendezvous destination. It clearly hadn’t been cleaned in ages. Alexander looked up at Elliot, expecting to see him recoiling in disgust. Instead, his hands were fumbling awkwardly with the button on his shorts.

“Alexander,” he whined, sounding like a steaming kettle. “I can’t get them off.”

“Oh, I’ll get you off, baby,” he teased, but Elliot stared at him confusedly. “Never mind. It’s a euphemism.”

“I don’t know what that word means.”

Alexander freed the button, ripped down Elliot’s zipper, then affectionately caressed his bulge through the baby-pink briefs he’d selected for the day. “It means I’m going to suck your cock, sweetheart.”

Elliot swallowed. “Oh, my.”

Alexander pulled Elliot’s shorts and underwear down, staring hazily at the erection in front of him. “Jesus.” He wrapped a hand around it and slowly stroked the shaft. “You’re so hard for me.”

Elliot nodded, then looked at the door, nervous orange light flickering in his eyes. “I don’t want to do this.”

Alexander immediately released the hold he had on Elliot. “I’m sorry. I thought you

wanted to. We don't have to do anything sexual. Not if you aren't ready." To Alexander's surprise, Elliot rolled his eyes.

"I'm not saying I don't want to ejaculate, because I do." He stared down at his throbbing shaft, watching as it twitched up and down. "Clearly, I want that quite a bit. I just don't want to do it here. I know we're supposed to be shopping, but could we go home? Please?" He chewed his bottom lip as he watched his cock jolt. "I want to be able to relax when we're being intimate, and I'm a nervous wreck."

Alexander cupped his cheek, thankful they were on Sugarplum Island so their home was less than a five-minute walk away. He gave Elliot a kiss. "Okay. Let's go home."

Seven minutes later, Elliot, Alexander, and their matching erections were in bed with their arms and legs tangled around each other to the point Alexander wasn't sure whose legs were whose.

Alexander slid his finger between Elliot's cheeks, softly petting his hole like the head of a dog. Elliot moaned obscenely, a sound Alexander had never heard. "Do you like that?"

Elliot rolled his hips, his eyes closed as he nodded in agreement. "You make me tingly all over. Like little bolts of lightning down there." He stared down at his chest. "Should I remove my clothes?"

Alexander swallowed. He wanted that. He wanted to see his beautiful beau in a complete state of undress, but after the appearance of Honey through his tummy, Alexander didn't want to take any risks. "As much as I'd love to see you, I'm worried your skin might turn see-through again. I don't want to risk her seeing us like this."

Elliot gaped at him. "You're right. I didn't even think of that. Should we refrain until she's been born?"

Alexander shook his head. "As long as you keep your shirt on, we should be fine." He leaned closer, pressing his face into Elliot's groin, inhaling deeply. "God, Elliot. I could live off this scent."

Elliot feathered his fingers through Alexander's hair. "What do I smell like?"

"Like a man," Alexander whispered. "Like my man."

Alexander knew his way around a cock, and he planned to demonstrate his knowledge to Elliot. He curled his fingers around Elliot's shaft and guided it to his lips, locking eyes with Elliot as he leaned closer and placed a kiss on the tip. Elliot whimpered, his entire body trembling, and a bead of pre-cum pearled at the tip. Alexander extended his tongue and licked it clean. The moment the droplet touched his tongue, Alexander moaned.

"You taste so sweet."

He nodded, his bottom lip between his teeth, looking like he was ready to come out of his skin. "I'm made that way. My body doesn't break down waste. As explained in Mother's initial Manual for a Happy Home, my body keeps fluids and waste cooled to avoid it spoiling before it can be expelled."

Alexander licked the tip of Elliot's cock. "So I'm essentially snacking on last night's juice?"

Elliot nodded, arching his hips instinctually. "More or less. My internal processors keep it cool so it doesn't go bad, then my body warms it as it's expelled. Alexander, please? More. More of what you were just doing." Elliot slid his hand down until he was cradling his balls, rolling them with his fingers. "More everything."

"All right. Lie back for me. Relax, sweetheart."

Elliot nodded, lying back, resting his head on the pillow. Alexander opened his mouth, taking Elliot's sizable cock to the back of his throat with ease, thankful he never had much of a gag reflex. Elliot was making sounds Alexander never heard anyone make before. Needy, broken little whimpers that had Alexander's cock twitching.

Each dive down felt like Alexander was taking more and more of Elliot into himself. Swallowing his pooling pre-cum like he was swallowing Elliot's very soul. His hands roamed and lingered in places he'd only dreamt of touching every time he remembered the boy on the ferry dock. The man with a heart the size of Dallas. Alexander's good boy.

Pulling off Elliot's cock, Alexander jacked him slowly, staring into Elliot's eyes. "I want to fuck you."

Elliot's eyes widened. "You do?"

To prove it, Alexander lifted Elliot's legs, spreading them so they didn't push against his belly, and guided them closer to his chest. "Hold on to your thighs, baby."

Elliot's lip trembled like he was overcome with emotion, but he did as Alexander asked. With his legs against his chest, he whispered, "Please be gentle."

Alexander nodded. "I swear it. We can go as slow as you need." Caressing Elliot's cheeks, he pulled them apart, revealing a small pink hole. The sight of it had Alexander's cock leaking, and he reached down to free himself, dragging the head up and down Elliot's crack, spreading his pre-cum around the entrance. When he pulled back, he leaned down and licked Elliot clean, purring at the flavor of his pre-cum mixed perfectly with Elliot's flesh.

Elliot let out a guttural moan, louder than any Alexander had ever heard before, and

pleaded for more. Who was Alexander to deny him? He licked Elliot again, this time focusing on the left cheek, covering every inch. His skin was soft like cashmere, and as he turned his attention inward, the light dusting of hair in Elliot's crack felt incredible against Alexander's face. He worked Elliot's hole with precision, pushing in past the ring of muscle, moaning obscenely when Elliot clenched around him.

There was movement above, and when he looked up, Elliot was stroking himself, and Alexander realized that even if the sight of Elliot bringing himself pleasure was the only thing Alexander ever saw, he still would have seen the world. Because that's what Elliot was. He was Alexander's entire world. His universe. Every star in every sky from the beginning of time, right up to the end. Alexander wanted to see more. All of Elliot. The shirt was hiding his creamy skin, and even knowing Honey might wake, he couldn't keep going without seeing more of Elliot.

"Will you take off your shirt?" Alexander requested.

Elliot blinked hazily at him. "But you said—"

"I know," Alexander interrupted with a smile, his cock twitching at the thought of seeing Elliot's bare chest. "We'll cover your bump with a blanket." He stood and walked toward the closet, wanting to grab a cover from the top shelf. The sound of Elliot's needy whine stopped him when he was halfway across the room. Looking over his shoulder, he realized Elliot's eyes were on his ass. Alexander arched an eyebrow. "See something you like?"

Elliot licked his lips, nodding. "I want to be inside you." His eyes widened like he hadn't meant to say the words aloud. "Sorry, I didn't mean—"

Alexander shook his head. "Don't apologize. I want that, too. Did you want to fuck me instead? I can do you after."

“Not yet. I’ve never done it before. Jared never allowed it. I want to, though..”

Alexander’s heart fluttered. “I’ll teach you. I’ve only bottomed a handful of times, but I want to bottom for you.”

“Okay. Yeah, Alexander. We can do that.”

Returning to their bed, Alexander lifted Elliot’s shirt, happy to see creamy skin instead of a window into the womb. But Alexander didn’t want to take chances, so he spread an old throw blanket over Elliot’s stomach, then returned to his place between Elliot’s legs. He licked and lapped at Elliot’s hole like he’d never have the chance again, not stopping until Elliot was a moaning, whining mess.

Reluctantly, Alexander removed his tongue, replacing it with his finger. He slid in with ease, Elliot’s tight heat feeling like a heater turned on full blast. Elliot’s inner walls clamped around him, tighter than any hole he’d ever penetrated.

“You feel so good, sweetheart,” Alexander whispered, kissing his way up Elliot’s chest. He fucked his finger in and out of Elliot, not stopping as he journeyed up the man’s body. It felt like his lips touched every square inch of Elliot’s body, but it wasn’t enough. He needed to be inside Elliot. To claim him in a way no one would ever claim him again. To fuck the hurt out of him until Alexander’s cum marinated him from the inside out, bathing him in Alexander’s truth. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” he whimpered, rocking back on Alexander’s finger, practically begging for it.

“I’m going to slide another in. Are you ready?”

The second finger slid in with ease, thanks to a heavy gush of Elliot’s natural slick. It trickled down, coating his entire palm. Alexander wanted to taste more of his Elliot.

He leaned closer, licking a half-ring around the place where his fingers and Elliot's body were connected. Elliot clenched in response, sending a rush of adrenaline down his body, to pool in his cock. He rose to his knees, his eyes never leaving Elliot's.

"Please don't hurt me," Elliot whispered, and the sound of fear in his voice stopped Alexander's tracks. Elliot's eyes were closed, probably scared to show his colors to Alexander. He had good reason to be worried; if Alexander saw the slightest hint of sad blues or frightened reds, he'd call off the whole thing. He wouldn't hurt Elliot again.

"Open your eyes for me, baby," Alexander coaxed. "Please? Let me see your colors."

Elliot shook his head. "I can't."

Alexander touched his cheek. "You can. I promise. You don't have anything to be scared of. It's just you and me."

Hesitantly, Elliot's eyes flickered open, and there was a new color swirling in the corners. Alexander thought he knew all Elliot's colors. They flashed pink-pink-pink when Elliot's heart was so happy it couldn't contain his excitement. Red was anger, and orange, nervousness. When Elliot was being a cheeky scamp, they would turn yellow. He hadn't seen much blue since reconnecting with him, because Elliot hadn't had a reason to be sad. This new color, though—this bright, iridescent silver light shifted hue each time Alexander tilted his head—Alexander had no idea what it meant.

"What does silver mean?" Alexander asked, stroking Elliot's face.

"I don't know. I've never felt this way before." He placed a hand over his heart for emphasis. "Big feelings. Bigger than anything I've ever felt." He sniffled, his eyes wet with emotion. "I want you. I want all of you." He reached for Alexander's hand

and guided it to his shaft. “Make me feel good when you enter. I think it might help.”

Alexander nodded, slowly stroking the man he loved. “Of course.” With one hand wrapped around his shaft, Alexander fisted the other around his cock. “Are you ready? We don’t have to do this if you’re not ready. I promise, baby. I won’t be mad.” When Elliot nodded, mumbling a plea for him to continue, Alexander aimed his cock at his entrance, teasing the hole with his cockhead. “Open up for me, baby.”

As if the words were a kiss of life, Elliot’s resistance fell, and Alexander sank into him. He moved slowly, trying not to hurt Elliot. Their eyes were locked, and thankfully, Elliot didn’t seem to be in pain. He looked confused, but Alexander didn’t know what he could be confused about.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, it’s . . . I think it feels good.” He blinked a few times, like he was trying to test the statement’s validity. Elliot’s back arched and he slid further down Alexander’s shaft, not stopping until they were connected completely. Elliot craned his neck, trying to look past his belly to where Alexander was embedded inside him, but he wasn’t bendy enough. He had a half-smile on his face like he was worried smiling any wider might tempt fate. “Can you move a little? I want to see if it still feels good.”

Alexander leaned down, careful not to place his weight against Elliot’s bump, and kissed him sweetly on the lips. Slowly, he pulled out until only the head was inside, then sank back into Elliot’s tight warmth. He repeated the action, feeling proud when he saw the new silver light in Elliot’s eyes shift into the brightest pink he’d ever seen.

“I love this,” Elliot admitted, tears spilling down his cheek. He covered his mouth with both hands, unable to look away from Alexander. “I didn’t know it could feel good. Alexander, I—I didn’t think I’d ever . . .” He wiped his tears away with his

palm. “Thank you.”

The look he was giving Alexander made his heart skip a beat. He was acting as if he was just handed the most precious thing in the world. Perhaps he had. Perhaps, by making love to Elliot, Alexander was providing a glimpse into their future. A life without pain. A world without fear. Alexander wanted the expression to remain etched onto Elliot’s face, timeless and solidified, unfaltering.

“I love you,” he breathed, sliding out, then fucking his way back in. “I love you so much, Elliot.”

Elliot pressed a hand over Alexander’s heart. “I love you, too.”

Alexander picked up the pace, watching Elliot’s eyes for any sign of nervous orange lights. Every thrust felt like a declaration, and the sense of completeness only made Alexander thrust harder—deeper—into Elliot.

“You like that, baby? Does that feel good?”

Elliot knocked Alexander’s hand away from his shaft and took charge, stroking himself. Pre-cum flew from the tip, spattering Alexander’s chest in inconsistent patterns. He nodded emphatically, meeting each of Alexander’s thrusts in with a thrust of his own.

“So much. More, Alexander. More?”

“I’ll give you as much as you need. Just keep riding that dick, baby. You’re doing so good for me.” He leaned over Elliot’s belly and latched onto his mouth, sucking fiercely. He wanted Elliot to clamp down with his teeth. To draw blood. Maybe even to scar him so he could never forget this moment. He touched Elliot’s nipple, and the moment they connected, Elliot let out the loudest cry he’d ever heard. “You’re so

responsive for me, sweetheart. Fuck. I'm so proud of you. You're doing such a wonderful job." His tongue slipped into Elliot's mouth, tangling as he increased the speed of his thrusts. He was getting close, and he knew it wouldn't be long, so he pulled their mouths apart and touched their foreheads together. "I want to come inside you, Elliot. Are you ready? You want me to make you mine?"

"God . . . Yes . . . Please." He was a whining, writhing mess of a man, and Alexander loved every second of it.

"Here it comes. Fuck. Elliot. Baby, I'm—I'm . . ." Alexander reared back his head and howled out his pleasure like a wolf baying at the moon. His cries were raw and animalistic, a stark contrast to the reserved businessman he usually presented as. With Elliot, he didn't have to be Alexander Davenport, heir to an empire. He could be wild and wicked. He could take his pleasure when he saw fit.

Alexander pulled Elliot's hand away from his cock and shook his head. "You're not going to come that way."

Elliot stared at him like he'd just stolen the only happiness Elliot had ever known. Alexander didn't care. He had a gift for his precious boy. Trailing a finger through Elliot's slick, he coated it around Elliot's cock. In one fluid motion, Alexander pulled out of Elliot's hole and straddled his lap, careful not to place pressure on the baby. Reaching beneath himself, he held Elliot's cock, aiming it at his entrance.

Elliot's eyes bulged. "What are you doing?"

"I want you to claim me. I want this to be our beginning." He leaned down, slamming their mouths together. Their tongues twisted and tangled around in their mouths until Alexander could no longer tell which was his and which was Elliot's. He kept his eyes open, locked right on Elliot. Pulling away, he panted in Elliot's face, feeling dazed.

“Alexander?”

Alexander was feeling so many emotions. It was like his body was a powder keg, waiting to blow. He wanted this with Elliot. Forever. A happy ever after.

“Marry me?” Alexander whispered. “Please, Elliot? I want this with you more than I’ve ever wanted anything.”

As Elliot’s eyes flooded with unshed tears, Alexander prepared for the oncoming pain. He hadn’t bottomed in ages, and he wasn’t prepped, so it was going to burn. Alexander knew it would feel as if he was being split open, but that was what he wanted. He wanted Elliot to crack him down the middle until every trace of his love was fully visible. To aim that love at Elliot, so he never felt alone again.

He lowered himself until Elliot’s cockhead pressed against his entrance. “Well?” Alexander was breathless, already feeling uncomfortable pressure as he sunk down at a snail’s pace. “Will you?”

Elliot’s eyes were blasting every color of the rainbow, so Alexander couldn’t gauge his emotions. He thought Elliot would say yes, but without the lights to guide him, Alexander felt naked. Granted, he was naked, but it was a newfound nakedness. Stripped free of pretense and subtlety, Alexander was laid bare before the man he loved. He’d put himself out there in a way he swore he never would. Your heart can’t break if it never leaves your chest.

The longer their silence permeated the room, the more vulnerable and exposed Alexander felt. He placed his heart out there for Elliot to do with as he pleased, but Elliot was doing nothing. He was saying nothing, and it terrified him.

Elliot placed his hands on Alexander’s hips, arched his back, and breached the rim. “Yes,” he breathed, sliding in with ease. The burn was deep and undeniable, but

Alexander loved it. More than that, he was living for it. It was the simple sense of pain that reminded Alexander he was alive. “Yes, Alexander. Of course, I’ll marry you.”

Tears fell down Alexander’s cheeks. “I love you.”

Elliot kissed the tip of his finger and offered it to Alexander. Alexander puckered his lips to Elliot’s fingertip and smiled. “I love you, too.”

Alexander rolled his hips, trying to keep his weight off Elliot as he fucked himself on the smaller man’s cock. It didn’t take long before Elliot was moaning like a wanton tramp. Good. Alexander liked him that way. He wanted to see Elliot dirty himself up a bit more.

“I’m close,” Elliot whispered before pulling his bottom lip between his teeth.

Alexander rode him faster, desperate to bring Elliot to release. “That’s it. Come for me, baby.”

Elliot’s eyes rolled back in his head, more blasting pink light pouring out, sparkling against the waterglass on their bedside table and sending pink fractals dancing against the walls. With a final roar, Elliot exploded, shooting jet after jet of steaming cum into him, painting his insides until every inch was drenched.

As they laid there, side by side, their fingers laced, Elliot tilted his head to meet Alexander’s gaze. “Did you mean it? About marrying you?”

Alexander brought Elliot’s hand to his mouth and kissed his palm. “I want that. I want to build a life with you.”

Elliot sniffled, nodding slowly. “I want that, too.”

Alexander opened his mouth to speak, but before he could get a word out, his phone rang. He reached for it, surprised to see his mother calling. He motioned for Elliot to give him a moment, then answered the phone, pulling Elliot closer.

“Lexy.” She sounded worried. He hadn’t heard her sound nervous in years; not since she moved to Sugarplum Island. “We’ve got a problem.”

“What’s wrong?”

His mother sighed. “They found a body.”

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

Elliot wanted to himself into a ball in the closet and hide. The day Jared's body was found, it was all anyone had talked about. While the island was abuzz with chatter, Elliot hid away in their cottage, refusing to leave the bedroom; terrified police were coming to drag him away from Alexander.

Then, nothing.

No one came for Elliot. The buzz around the island died down. No one questioned Elliot or even Duck and Goose. Things returned to normal, although nothing about the situation seemed normal at all. Two months later, Elliot still felt stuck, like a dying man awaiting his final breath.

Elliot paced the room, frightened, but refusing to let the fear claim him. He had a call to make. It wasn't a call he wanted to make, but after spending two months on Sugarplum Island with Alexander Davenport, Elliot's baby bump swelling wider and wider, he knew there was no choice. Honey was due in less than a month, and Elliot had no idea how to deliver her. Alexander had made calls—using his financial status to pull favors—but they were still waiting to hear from the creationists at the other automaton centers. Mother was the only one who dared create hybrids, and considering she was probably at the bottom of the ocean, Elliot didn't put much stock in her being able to help.

Staring at the phone Alexander gave him a few days after arriving on the island, he tried to hide his emotions. Elliot had to go directly to the source; the phone rang twice before a frazzled-sounding Clarence answered. "Ms. Broussard's Home for Bountiful Beaus. Clarence speaking, how may I help?"

Elliot took a deep breath and released it slowly. “Clarence, it’s Elliot.” He knew there were other Elliot’s out there, so he clarified, “Elliot Price. Well, soon to be Davenport, but still.”

Silence. It stretched all the way from Sugarplum Island to his childhood home in New Orleans.

“You have quite the nerve calling here after what you pulled. Do you know how long I spent searching the sea for Mother? Do you, Elliot?”

“I don’t,” Elliot admitted, and then small flickerings of unfamiliar emotions ignited in his chest. He couldn’t place them, only experience them, so that’s what he did. He let the confusing waves of regret and relief rush through him. “Were you able to locate her?”

“She plummeted into the sea in the pitch dark. What do you think?”

Elliot winced as if the words slashed him. He knew Mother’s potential survival could—and would—complicate things for him, but Elliot didn’t want her to die. His freedom meant everything, but he didn’t want her life to be the cost.

“I’m sorry,” Elliot whispered. “I didn’t mean for her to—”

“Let me just stop you right there, son,” Clarence said. “Our home is in chaos. Beaus are running amuck because of your actions. And that woman . . .” He paused, sighing. “I do not have time to ease your guilty conscience. What do you want?”

“What woman?”

“Just tell me what you want,” Clarence demanded, ignoring Elliot’s question. “Are you calling to inform me you’re coming for us next? Are you going to set our family

home ablaze in the middle of the night? Honestly, Elliot, you're unhinged. What's next on your diabolical agenda?"

Elliot sniffled. "My baby. I don't know how I'm meant to give birth. Jared had all the paperwork in his home, and I can't go back there."

"No, I don't imagine you can. Not after what you pulled."

"I know, Clarence. But I don't know how to deliver her, and I'm worried she won't survive if I can't get her out. I just need to know what to do. Did Mother leave any documentation in her office? Was she—"

"Master Price," Clarence practically shouted, making Elliot's hand shake. "You killed my mother, so I don't care what happens to you or your child. I don't have the luxury of extending sympathetic words of condolence. I can barely keep my head above water as it is. Now, if you have nothing else to say, I'm—" Clarence sucked in a sharp breath. "Dear God, that woman has lost the last of her waning mind. I'm sorry, Elliot, I don't have time for this."

The call ended, and it felt like every ounce of hope he'd been holding onto vanished. He put off calling Mother's home because he knew there was little-to-no chance of her survival. The longer he held off, the longer he could pretend she was in her luxurious Louisiana mansion, actively forming plans for his capture.

Now she was officially gone. She was gone, and he could no longer count on the love and support of his brothers back home. Elliot may have gained a life with Alexander Davenport, but he lost everything else in the process, and his family lost their matriarch.

He wiped the tears from his eyes and slowly rose from their bed. Alexander was already gone, having offered to do the shopping down at the island's market. Making

his way to the closet, he resisted the familiar urge to curl up and hide, choosing instead to stand as tall as his body would allow. To keep his chin raised and eyes ahead, not like a submissive beau. Not as the battered and beaten victim of Jared Price's cruelty. He would soldier on until he could no longer do so.

Elliot selected the same outfit he always selected on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Fridays; a pair of stretchy khakis, a pink polo shirt, and a pair of comfortable flats. Once dressed, he styled his unruly waves into something somewhat presentable, grabbed his phone, and headed out, not locking the door behind him.

Elliot loved how safe the island felt. Aside from the rake incident during his last visit as Jared Price's live-in punching bag, no one had a cruel word to say to him. He was building a life for himself, and he refused to see that life taken for granted. His fear would have to wait.

He walked into Twylah's Sugarplum Treats two minutes before noon. The black-and-white checkered floor still sparkled from when he mopped the night before, despite Ms. Twylah's insistence that he have a seat and elevate his feet. In the display cases were the many treats Ms. Twylah and Elliot made; his offerings were still sloppy as ever, but if Ms. Twylah was to be believed, he was getting better, and that was what counted.

"Good morning, sugar," Ms. Twylah sang out as she looked up from a still-steaming tray of cookies. She grabbed a set of tongs and meticulously arranged the cookies on a platter. "What's got you down in the dumps?"

Elliot cocked his head to the side. "Pardon?"

She pointed at her eye. "The blue lights in your eyes. They're flashing like crazy."

"I'm fine." Elliot didn't enjoy lying, but he didn't want to voice his fear. He didn't

want to give it a name, because doing so would make it real.

“You’re not,” she said, placing one leftover plum jam cookie on a napkin and setting it on the counter for him. He shuffled forward, his swollen ankles aching along the short journey. When he reached the counter, he took a bite of the cookie and purred like a kitten. Ms. Twylah’s treats never failed to put a smile on his face. They were always warm and gooey, and tasted like Christmas.

“I don’t wish to dwell on my upset. I want to be distracted.” He looked over her shoulder. Behind Ms. Twylah, there were three other trays of pastries that needed to be placed on display shelves. He wasn’t sure he wanted to work in the front of the bakery, though. With his melancholy mood overtaking him, Elliot believed he’d rather work in the back, baking delicious—though terribly unattractive—sweets for the citizens of Sugarplum Island. “I’m aiming forward.”

“You’re aiming for a kiss on the cheek for being adorable. That’s what you’re aiming for.”

Elliot blushed. For the past month, Elliot had been working side-by-side with Ms. Twylah. It had been one of the high points of his life. He felt he’d finally forged a family of sorts. Daily, Elliot came alive. He made friends with the locals, but more importantly, he made friends with his future mother-in-law.

Elliot rubbed his baby bump. He was so ready to meet his child. He was ready to hold her in his arms and swear his undying protection. But how could Elliot protect her in a world where he couldn’t even protect himself?

“You’re frightened, aren’t you?”

“Frightened of what?”

Ms. Twylah placed her hand on Elliot's belly. "Being a parent. Raising her."

"I want her very much," Elliot argued, but Ms. Twylah was right. Elliot knew nothing of life. He'd never been around children before. Most parents kept their offspring at arm's length from the 'big, scary robot,' as he'd heard some parents refer to him. He wasn't sure how to raise a child, and he agreed with Alexander that Mother's book was essentially filler with vague, deeply misogynistic themes. There were no instructions for feeding their child. No tips or pointers for teaching them right from wrong. What if Elliot mucked it all up and ended up raising a future warlord, hellbent on bringing about the end times? That was, if he could even get her out of his tummy to begin with. For all Elliot knew, she could be forced to remain there, growing larger and larger, pleading for relief through the window to his womb. He had to do something. He had to figure something out.

"Sometimes," she said, squeezing his shoulder, "we have to face our fears to ensure the health and happiness of our children. I believe in you, Elliot. I believe you can do this. And if you're ever in a bind, I'm right next door. You can just call out for me and I'll be right over."

"I don't believe you would hear me, but I can certainly try."

Ms. Twylah beamed at him. "Sweetie, you have a tendency to leave all your windows open."

Elliot nodded. "I enjoy the sea-scented air.."

"What I mean is, I can hear practically everything that happens in your home, so I'd be able to hear if you shouted."

Elliot tilted his head. Because if she could hear their conversations, what else had she heard? "You don't eavesdrop, do you? Because that's not very polite."

She rolled her eyes, grabbed a cookie from the platter, and chomped down. With purple jam coating her teeth, she mumbled, “I don’t have a choice,” sending flakes of her cookie flying from her mouth. Swallowing, she dabbed a napkin to the corners of her lips. “I wish Alexander Sr. and I had as active a love life as you boys do.”

Elliot’s eyes bulged. “Good Lord.”

She nodded. “Yep. I’ve heard you scream that one a few times, but ‘Oh, God-Oh, God-Oh, God’ seems to be your go-to, though.”

Elliot took a step back and pointed his finger at her accusingly. “Starting tonight, we will be shutting our windows, and you and I will never speak of this again. Is this understood?” His cheeks were warmer than ever.

She lifted her hands in surrender. “If you insist.” Turning, she focused on the cooling cookies, but as Elliot walked into the back room, she sang out, “Oh, God-Oh, God-Oh, God.”

As embarrassing as the situation was, he enjoyed having a mother figure of sorts who he didn’t need to mince words with, and who didn’t demand he conducted himself like a traditional househusband. He was free to be himself, and he felt like he was finally figuring out who he was.

He poked his head out through the door, making eye contact as he said, “If you attempt to humiliate me again, I’ll shout it twice as loudly tonight.” He made it three steps into the back room before pausing, worried. Poking his head through the doorway again, he spotted Ms. Twylah still staring toward him as if his reappearance was inevitable. “I’m only teasing. I wasn’t actually threatening you.”

“Goodness gracious.” She placed her hand on her cheek, feigning surprise, but her palms were coated in powdered sugar, so it ruined her makeup. She groaned, but

didn't let it stop her, adding, "Well, you really had me fooled."

She wasn't teasing him. She was saying it to lift his spirits. He wondered for a moment if this was what parenthood entailed. If it wasn't just untidy homes and a constant whirlwind of mess and chaos. Because the look she was giving him felt parental, and he knew if his daughter ever made a tit of herself the way Elliot just had, he'd do the same. He'd put on his brightest smile if it meant making sure she never felt like a fool, no matter how foolish she had been.

"I'm rather fond of you, Ms. Twylah," he admitted.

She winked at him. "And I'm rather fond of you, Elliot." She pointed into the back room. "Now go on, sugar. Go bake us something splendid to sell."

As he rolled dough for a pie crust—one of the first things Ms. Twylah taught him when he started working for her—Elliot let the woman's words settle in his soul. He memorized the memory of her expression. He reminded himself that a parent pushes past their fear to ensure the safety of their child.

Later that night, Alexander arrived to walk Elliot home from his shift at the bakery. Though there were no automobiles on Sugarplum Island, Alexander purchased a small golf cart at the insistence of Mayor Beau Rivera. They'd been in contact several times since the young mayor made it home. But Elliot hadn't heard from Mrs. Peppercorn in ages, but that was to be expected. She had her own surrogate son in Periwinkle Price. His needs needed to come first. They still chatted on the phone two times a week, but it wasn't the same. Thankfully, Alexander insisted they return to Genevieve once Honey was born. They would need to introduce her to the woman she was named after.

As the golf cart carried them home, Elliot snuggled against Alexander's side. "Have you heard back from the other automaton homes yet? About Honey's birth."

Alexander sighed. A truly tragic sound that hit Elliot like a physical blow. “I’m sorry, baby. I’m still waiting to hear from two more of the homes, but no one seems to know anything.” He reached down and squeezed Elliot’s knee. “I swear, we’re going to figure it out. I’ve got my best men on it.”

Elliot nodded the same way he did when he had the country’s most prominent engineers visit Sugarplum Island. Alexander was on an indefinite leave from his company, and Elliot had felt nothing but guilt for days about it. Then the ferryboat arrived, bringing with it the best of the best. After days of poking and prodding and searching Elliot’s source code, none of the men could figure out how he was meant to deliver the child.

They were running out of time, and Elliot knew he would need to act.

“We need to return to Louisiana,” Elliot whispered, placing his hand on top of Alexander’s.

Alexander stopped the golf cart in the center of the small road leading through town. “You can’t be serious. Elliot, you’re in hiding. If they find you—”

“They will power me down and incinerate me. I’m aware.” He released his hold on Alexander’s hand and stroked his stomach. “If we do nothing, I don’t know what will happen to her. It could harm her. She could be smooshed by my bones as she grows. We have to do something.”

Alexander swallowed, but Elliot didn’t think he’d been able to swallow down his apprehension. “Let’s wait until we hear back from the other two homes, and if we still don’t have an answer, I’ll hire a helicopter to get us there.” He leaned closer, kissing Elliot gently, cupping his cheek when they broke away. Their foreheads touched, and butterflies fluttered in his stomach. “I’ll hire a team of men to go with us.”

Elliot arched an eyebrow. “Why?”

“For safety.” He stroked Elliot’s belly. “No one gets to take you from me. No one gets to touch you. I won’t allow it.”

Elliot’s smile widened, and the warm and fuzzy feelings the butterflies in his tummy provided seemed to ease a bit of his worry. He kissed Alexander again, longer that time. When the kiss was through, Alexander’s hand softly caressed Elliot’s belly, and Elliot placed his hand on top, melding them together.

“If something happens to me, I need you to promise to look after her. If they take me from you, don’t let them take her, too.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to you. I promise,” Alexander said. While Elliot enjoyed the sentiment, he didn’t need to be placated. He needed assurance. Alexander must have realized his words hadn’t soothed Elliot the way he’d hoped, because he turned his hand over, weaving their fingers together, and added, “If anything happens to you, I’ll keep her safe. I’ll raise her the way we’ve been planning to. Honey will be fine. You have my word.”

Though the threat of removal from Alexander Davenport’s life hung over their heads like a rain cloud, Elliot refused to let it damper their time together. They snuggled in bed while watching old episodes of *I Love Lucy*. Elliot loved the way she could get herself into the biggest conundrums, only to solve her nightly dilemmas within a thirty-minute timeframe. He wished his problems could be solved in under half an hour.

There was movement in his belly. Acting on impulse, Elliot lifted his shirt, his heart fluttering as color drained from the skin of his stomach, revealing their ever-growing daughter. She was asleep, and Elliot basked in the look of complete peace stretched across her face.

“There’s our girl,” Alexander whispered, leaning in to kiss Elliot’s see-through stomach. Behind the baby, machinery worked inside Elliot, keeping his body functional. “She looks happy, doesn’t she?”

Elliot observed her for a while, taking in the way her little fingers curled around her umbilical cord. Her other hand was lifted to her face, and she was sucking her thumb. Elliot couldn’t remember ever witnessing anything as adorable as Honey Davenport lounging in his belly.

“She looks very happy,” Elliot finally agreed.

Honey’s eyes opened slowly, and pink lights flickered in the corner. She removed her thumb from her mouth and pressed her hand against Elliot’s tummy, never breaking eye contact. Elliot touched his hand to hers, only a thin layer of processed skin separating them.

“I love you very much,” he whispered. “I can’t wait to hold you.” Honey smiled, nuzzling her face against the place where Elliot’s hand was resting, leaning into her father’s touch. Her eyes closed, and color returned to Elliot’s skin, hiding her away. He didn’t want the color to return. He wanted to stare at her. To study her expressions for hours, so he knew them all by heart.

Alexander turned off the television and hugged Elliot close to him, promising, “You’re going to be an incredible father, Elliot.” He rubbed Elliot’s tummy. “We’re going to figure all this out, and then we’ll start our lives together.”

Elliot sniffled, missing the connection with Honey already. “We haven’t talked about what we’ll do next. Our living situation, I mean. I know Duck and Goose live here to keep them safe from Mother, but do you plan to do the same with me? Will you live on the mainland and visit once a week?” Elliot’s lip trembled. He didn’t want that. He wanted them to be together. Always. “Your entire life is in Dallas.”

Alexander shook his head, cupping Elliot's cheek. "My entire life is right here in front of me."

"But, the company," Elliot argued. "Your family legacy—"

"This is my legacy," Alexander interrupted, his words firm but filled with love. He wasn't reprimanding Elliot for speaking out of turn, he was making a choice. He was making an unbreakable oath. "You're my legacy. You and Honey." He kissed Elliot gently on the lips, his thumb brushing back and forth against Elliot's cheek. "Would you like to live here? My place back home is a lot bigger, but this village feels like the right place for us, doesn't it?"

Elliot nodded. "It's my favorite place in the world." Professor Plum climbed up his arm and rested on Elliot's tummy, staring up at him. "Are you ready to meet her, too?"

Professor Plum nuzzled his face into Elliot's chest. He knew the fieldmouse and Honey would be fast friends. Professor Plum had always been a gentle soul, so Elliot had no fear of how he would treat their baby. He reached forward and stroked the top of the fieldmouse's head.

"We're going to be fine," Alexander said before turning off the lamp on the nightstand. "No matter what, we're going to be okay."

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

Ms. Broussard's Home for Bountiful Beaus. Elliot knew the home by heart, having spent the majority of his first year of life in the luxurious New Orleans mansion. From his bedroom in the Bountiful Beau wing, to the attic's secret entrance, all the way down to the Creationist's lair in the basement; Elliot knew every inch of the building. It had been four minutes since Elliot rang the doorbell, even so, no one had answered. It was odd, because Clarence usually greeted visitors within moments of the bell's chime.

"Something's wrong," Elliot whispered. "I can feel it."

Alexander squeezed his hand, his thumb rubbing against Elliot's new engagement ring. Alexander purchased it before their trip, and Elliot had been beside himself most of the day. Looking over his shoulder, Alexander motioned toward the glorified armed militia he hired to ensure Elliot's safety and freedom. There were ten men, each paid a hefty sum Alexander refused to disclose, telling Elliot his survival was worth all the tea in China. Elliot didn't care for tea, though. He preferred Ms. Twylah's decaffeinated coffee, brewed with little sticks of cinnamon in the coffee grounds.

Elliot placed the hand not holding Alexander's against his back and sighed. Nine months pregnant, Elliot was forever exhausted. His achy ankles and a constant sensation of heartburn were relentless, never easing—not even when Elliot was in bed.

The door swung open, and Elliot tore his attention away from Alexander, expecting to see Mother's butler, Clarence. Instead, Periwinkle Price stood in the doorframe with a smile stretched ear to ear.

“Thank God,” Periwinkle said, sounding relieved. “We’ve been waiting here for ages.” He took a step forward and tapped the tip of Elliot’s nose. “You need to learn how to answer your phone.”

Elliot arched an eyebrow. “Pardon?”

Periwinkle rolled his eyes. “I’ve been calling you for days, Elliot.”

Elliot blushed. “I dropped my phone in the sea. We were walking along the dock, and Alexander was wearing an outfit I thought would look much cuter clinging to every nook and crook, so I shoved him off the dock. I forgot he had my phone in his pocket.”

“I’m still a little annoyed about that,” Alexander said.

Elliot shrugged. “I got to look at your shorts clinging to your backside as we walked home. I have no regrets.” To that, Elliot snorted.

“For goodness’ sake,” Periwinkle groaned. “You’re due any day. If you waited any longer, she might have burst right through your skin.” He took a step back and poked his finger into Elliot’s chest. “I will forgive your inconsideration, because Arthur says you have pregnancy brain, but it’s still terribly rude.” Elliot opened his mouth, but Periwinkle didn’t give him a chance to speak. “Mother is waiting for you.”

Alexander’s eyes widened. “What?”

Periwinkle reared back his head and groaned. “Mother is waiting. My statement couldn’t have been simpler to understand if I tried. Why is everyone behaving as if I’m speaking a foreign language? You’re doing this to goad me, aren’t you? Well, I don’t appreciate—”

“Periwinkle,” Elliot said firmly. He knew Periwinkle was prone to the dramatics, but he seemed to be going out of his way to make the situation even more outlandish than it already was. “Mother fell into the sea. What do you mean, she’s waiting for me?”

“That was an adorable rhyme,” he said before whirling on his heels, motioning them to follow. “I suppose an explanation is in order, but I’ve got big plans for the day, so you’ll have to hear them straight from the source.”

“Who is the ‘source’?” Alexander asked.

“Big plans?” Elliot asked.

Periwinkle led them through the foyer, toward the grand stairway in the center. “The source is Mother,” he answered Alexander. “And my big plans involve cuddling next to Arthur Price and watching the good bears of Care-A-Lot.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Elliot said.

“It’s a cartoon,” Alexander responded.

Periwinkle paused halfway up the stairs and glared over his shoulder at Alexander. “The Care Bears of Care-A-Lot are not cartoons. They are a shining beacon of hope in these trying times. How dare you diminish their role in history?”

Alexander lifted an apologetic hand in surrender. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to offend.”

Periwinkle winked at him before turning and skipping up the stairs. “You didn’t. It’s just terribly boring here, so I have to make my own fun.”

He led them down the hall, toward Mother’s office. Pausing outside the door, his hand on the handle, he said, “Mother has big plans.”

Twisting the knob, he flung the door open and rushed into the room. It was just as Elliot remembered from his time at the home. The walls were a dark shade of brown—warm and cozy, the way Mother liked to present herself. Framed photographs of her and her Bountiful Beaus lined the walls. There was a large desk in the center of the room with two chairs in front of it. Mother’s swivel chair was turned toward the window behind them, the back so tall, he couldn’t tell if anyone was seated in it. Elliot waddled over, taking a seat. But Alexander shook his head and sat, then patted his lap.

Elliot narrowed his eyes. “I’m nine months pregnant, and I am as big as a house. I would quite literally crush every bone in your body, and I adore your body far too much to harm it.”

Alexander snorted. “You may be nine months pregnant, but I’m still ten pounds heavier than you. I think I can manage.”

Elliot relented, hoisting himself up from the chair and taking a seat in Alexander’s lap. As usual, the moment he touched down, he felt an overwhelming sense of comfort. It was like coming home after a taxing three-hour shift at Twylah’s Sugarplum Treats, basking in the warmth of their little love nest. With the feeling still strong in his heart, he realized that sense of completion hadn’t come from their actual little cottage. It was down to Alexander Davenport; he was Elliot’s home.

Mother’s chair swiveled in front of them, and Elliot jerked his head up, gasping. For some reason, Honey Peppercorn was seated behind the desk, no longer hidden away behind the desk chair’s unnecessarily high back.

As was the case when last he saw her, Mrs. Peppercorn’s wig was styled into Mother’s signature Marcel wave. She wore an A-framed dress that looked similar to the ones Mother would wear around the mansion. Was she still keeping up the charade?

“Hello, boys,” she said with a cheery smile. “I was hoping you’d pop by for a visit.” She scowled at Alexander. “We’ve been trying to contact you for days, young man.”

“I dropped my phone in the sea,” Elliot said for the second time that day, blinking as confusion settled in. “Why are you here, Mrs. peppercorn?”

"After you boys left, I realized no one could know about Ms. Broussard’s death. With her gone, there was no one left to man the helm of this ship. So, I continued masquerading as her."

“You’ve been pretending to be her all this time?”

She nodded, looking around the room. "At first, it was at the insistence of the beaus aboard the cruise. The ones who saw her topple into tumultuous waters. They came to me, Elliot. They circled around like little lost boys. ‘Mother,’ they said to me—because I was still wearing the wig, you see—anyway, ‘Mother,’ they said, ‘We need you more than ever.’ So, I soldiered on. As they say, Honey peppercorn is no quitter—”

“Who is ‘they’?” Elliot asked, but Mrs. peppercorn ignored the question.

“Along the way, I discovered something most unexpected. You know I’ve always been maternal by nature, baby,” she said, though Elliot knew nothing of the sort. He’d only spent a few days with her, but he didn’t point that out. “These boys needed guidance, love, and a firm hand. It gave me a newfound purpose." Her eyes softened as she looked back at Elliot and Alexander. “I know it might seem strange, but I feel like I've found my true calling.”

“Your calling?”

“Yes, Elliot,” she continued, her eyes shimmering with pride. “When I returned to the

mansion in New Orleans, there were bountiful beaus aplenty, all hoping to learn the art of keeping a home. These poor souls had no idea how to maintain a household. They were lost, wandering the halls like chickens with their heads cut off. I took them under my wing and taught them everything they needed to know about cooking and cleaning with a cheerful heart. We had daily sessions where I demonstrated the art of preparing a meal with love, how to scrub a floor until it gleamed, and how to keep the mansion as immaculate as Ms. Broussard would have wanted.”

“That wasn’t necessary,” Elliot pointed out. “We only needed you to collect our things from our cabin on the ship and return them to us—which you never did. You weren’t meant to come back to New Orleans.”

Mrs. Peppercorn rolled her eyes. “Yes, well, Clarence was ready to blow the lid off this entire operation, so I had to improvise. He was going to call the police, so Rodolfo and I tied him up, then we held him captive until I managed to talk some sense into him.”

“And how did you manage to do that?”

Mischief showed itself in her smile. “By reminding him that without someone here to hold down the fort, the establishment would more than likely be shut down, and all the beaus disposed of. As for the beaus here, they were hesitant. I mean, when Ms. Broussard left for her cruise, she didn’t look nearly as stylish or chic as me, but when I told them I simply had a bit of cosmetic surgery to look like Bette Davis, my personal icon, they rolled with it.”

“You look nothing like Bette Davis,” Elliot pointed out. “I should know; Alexander made us watch *All About Eve* the other day. I hate to say it, but I believe this situation is strikingly similar to the film.”

“It isn’t, actually, but I’m glad you enjoyed the movie. As I was saying, soon enough,

my beaus found joy in their routine, and their spirits lifted. Seeing them take pride in their work and become more confident in their roles made my heart swell with pride.” She looked down at Elliot’s tummy. “But I think of all the beaus currently in this home, I’m proudest of you, sugar.” She stood and grabbed a file folder. “There’s someone you need to meet.”

She led them down the stairs, which Elliot wasn’t terribly happy about, as his legs were still wobbly from his trip up them a few minutes earlier. Once they were in the foyer, she led them through the lounge, past the ballroom, into the library, and then toward the bookshelf on the far end of the hall. With practiced precision, she tugged at a copy of a book called *The Right Side of The Rainbow* by AnnaLeigh White. Once it was out of its place on the shelf, Mrs. Peppercorn pressed a small, black button. Through the walls, there was the sound of metal scraping against metal as the bookshelf opened. Snapping her fingers three times, she stared back toward the door leading into the library. Sure enough, moments later, Periwinkle appeared. He rushed to her side, beaming brightly.

“Yes, Mum?” he asked. Elliot liked that Periwinkle had found a true mother in Mrs. Peppercorn. At first, during their time on the cruise, Elliot thought he might like Mrs. Peppercorn to claim him as her son as well, but then he got to know Ms. Twylah. Elliot was sure she would allow him to call her Mom, but he didn’t know if he was ready to ask permission yet. Not until the wedding, at least.

“Be a good boy and take this book out back.”

Periwinkle cocked his head to the side. “Why am I taking it outside?”

Mrs. Peppercorn narrowed her eyes at the book as if it was the most offensive thing she’d ever seen. “You remember AnnaLeigh, don’t you?”

Periwinkle nodded. “She writes those books you won’t allow me to read.”

“Books no one should be reading,” she said with a scoff. “The woman wrote absolute filth.” She opened the book, her cheeks sucking in and puffing out, pooling saliva before spitting it directly onto the page. “Straight-for-you isn’t a thing. Make better life choices, AnnaLeigh. Well, she’s dead now, so I don’t think she’ll be making any choices going forward, but you know what I mean.” She handed the book to Elliot. “I want you to take this out back and throw it in the swamp. Hopefully an alligator will eat it.”

Periwinkle nodded once before clutching the book to his chest. He rocked up and down on the balls of his foot. “I’ll do it now.” As he whirled around, he hollered, “Arthur! We’re going to swim with alligators!”

Mrs. Peppercorn shouted, “Oh, no you won’t!” behind him, but he was too busy rushing out of the room to respond.

The mechanical sounds in the wall grew louder, and then the bookshelf retracted and slid into the wall, creating a doorway and revealing a flight of stairs leading down. Elliot knew where the stairs would take him. He was led there many times during his multiple reprogrammings. While he could remember the visits to Mother’s right-hand man’s workspace, he could never remember what happened after. He didn’t know the layout of the room or what was inside, only the way to get there.

She led them down a small hallway, toward a large industrial-style door. There was a keypad above the handle, and Mrs. Peppercorn typed a long code of numbers before the locks disengaged and the door swung open. She gave the door a proud nod and walked through, into the Creationist’s lair.

There was a single operating table in the center of the room, and large computer screens lined the walls. On each screen were various photographs of Elliot, as well as charts with lines and words Elliot didn’t understand. But there, right in the center of the back wall, was a streaming video that made Elliot’s heart slam in his chest.

On the screen Honey Davenport was curled inside what Elliot imagined was his tummy. He reached down and placed his hand on his stomach and, just as she always did, Honey leaned into the touch, pressing her face against Elliot's palm.

Elliot slowly walked to the screen with her sleeping face displayed. Behind him, Alexander and Mrs. Peppercorn were speaking, but Elliot couldn't hear a single word. All he could do was stare at Honey. The way she sucked her thumb. How each time a sharp twinge of heartburn spiked in his chest, she would tug the umbilical cord like she was trying to pull Elliot's attention back to her. A pair of arms wrapped around Elliot's waist, pulling him to rest against Alexander as they both took in the sight of their child.

There was the sound of a toilet flushing, then running water from a tap. A few moments later, a door opened, and a man exited the private bathroom, drying his hands on his trousers. He looked to be around fifty years old, and he had wild red curls in his hair. Tragic hair aside, he was a very attractive older man, and Elliot thought he looked like a bit of a father figure. Perhaps he was. If this was the Creationist, he was the one responsible for Elliot's birth.

Without a word of introduction, the man approached the operating table, patting it with his hand. There was a small rolling stool beside the table, and the man took a seat. He was holding a manilla file folder, and as Elliot stared on, the man shuffled through the papers.

He patted the table again, not looking up. "Elliot. Now, please."

Elliot shared a glance with Alexander, then with Mrs. Peppercorn, who nodded, smiling warmly.

"Go on, sugar. Hop up there. He's here to help."

The man looked up at her, arching an eyebrow. “I’m here because you stormed this home in the dead of night, stole my pet, and threatened to kill him if I didn’t do your bidding.” Though the accusation was harsh, the man sounded bored by the situation entirely.

Mrs. Peppercorn shook her head, scoffing. “Hogwash. You’re here because you care about these boys. You can deny it until you’re blue in the face; I see the way you look at them. They’re your babies, baby. You made them from scratch; there’s going to be an attachment there. Even if I gave you your little pet back, I think we both know you’d still stick around.”

Alexander leaned in, whispering to Elliot, “I don’t understand what’s happening right now.” Elliot shrugged, because he wasn’t too sure, either, but he knew better than to interrupt Mrs. Peppercorn.

“Then why don’t you just give him back?” the Creationist asked.

Mrs. Peppercorn pointed at Elliot. “Call it an insurance policy. Once we’ve got this all sorted, I’ll give you your precious pet. I’m not a monster, for God’s sake. He’s getting along with all the beaus upstairs.”

The Creationist’s hand balled into a fist, his knuckles going white. “You tell them, if they even think of touching him—”

Mrs. Peppercorn lifted her hands. “Enough. Enough of this.” She turned and looked at Elliot. “One of our boys needs us, sugar.”

“One of your boys?” Alexander asked.

“One of my boys,” she agreed, motioning for Elliot to sit on the table. “He’s going to run some tests and figure out when the best time to extract the baby would be.” Once

Elliot was seated on the table, Mrs. Peppercorn took his hand. “Would you like to know the sex? I know you said you think it’s a girl, but we could ask him, just to be sure.”

“Of course, it’s a girl,” the Creationist scoffed. “That’s what Mr. Price ordered.”

Elliot jerked his head in Alexander’s direction. “I knew it! I knew she was a girl.” As excited as he was, it felt like he might urinate at any moment. “Honey Davenport, I must insist you ease the pressure you’re placing on my bladder. Please and thank you.”

“Honey Davenport?” Mrs. Peppercorn said, her mouth hanging open. “Is that . . .”

Elliot nodded. “We’ve named her after you. Without your help, I may not have made it onto the boat, and then we never would have found each other.”

Mrs. Peppercorn wiped a tear from her eye. “That’s just about the sweetest thing anyone’s ever done for me.” She patted the operating table again. “Come on, then. Let’s meet our little Honey.”

Elliot’s eyes widened. “Now? You’re delivering her now?”

The Creationist was still staring at his charts as he shook his head. “Tomorrow. Right now we’re just going to have a look at her.” He looked up from his chart. “Come on, then.”

Elliot shared a look with Alexander before making his way to the table. Alexander was right behind, and when Elliot tried to hoist himself up, Alexander lifted him from behind and placed him on top.

The Creationist rolled his stool around until he was seated in front of Elliot. “Go

ahead and lift your shirt for me.” Kicking his leg against the floor, the Creationist rolled his stool blindly across the room, putting his foot down and stopping the ride when only inches separated himself and a small table. There was a silver tubelike device resting on top; he grabbed it, then turned the stool around, kicked the floor, and rolled toward them, once again stopping inches before impact. It was as if he had every square inch of the room memorized. Considering he’d been Mother’s right-hand man since the beginning, he probably did.

Elliot lifted his shirt to expose his bump. He felt mortified that Mrs. Peppercorn and the Creationist could see his bloated belly, because he truly felt as big as a house. Thankfully, there was no judgment or shame in either of their eyes, though.

As it had before, color faded from Elliot’s skin, creating the familiar window to his womb. The Creationist brought the tubelike device to Elliot’s tummy and clicked a button on the end, causing blue light to pour from the tip. The lights ran up and down through the window, scanning Honey Davenport, top to toes.

“There’s our girl,” the Creationist said, his voice taking almost an affectionate tone. He looked up at Elliot, and for the first time Elliot could remember, he smiled. “She’s beautiful, Elliot.”

Elliot stared down at her, observing the look of peace radiating from her face. She had her eyes closed, the side of her face pressed against Elliot’s belly. “Yes,” he agreed. “Yes, she is.”

The creationist nodded toward Mrs. Peppercorn but kept his eyes on Elliot. “She’s right, you know. You’re all special to me. I’m proud of all my beaus,” he said, moving the device lower on Elliot’s abdomen. “But I think she’s my crowning glory. Broussard and I spent years developing the prototypes for hybrid children.” What little kindness may have been coating his face vanished, his demeanor growing colder by the second. “Years that were almost wasted after you killed your former master.

We already had one automaton go rogue and kill his owner, the last thing we need is a media firestorm. We'd be shut down, and all of our hard work would have been for nothing. Thank God Broussard called me and told me to handle things. If word got out—"

"Handle things?" Elliot asked. "What does that mean?"

"It means, while Broussard was on her ill-fated voyage, I was in Dallas, trying to clean up your mess. Do you know how hard it is to stage a crime scene without leaving any evidence behind?" The Creationist's gaze hardened. "When Broussard called me, I knew there was only one way to salvage the situation. I created a lifeless clone of you, Elliot. It was a hack job, at best, but it was believable enough to throw off suspicion."

"I don't understand. Why would you create a clone of me?"

The Creationist sighed, his shoulders slouching. "Because you needed to die with him. If you didn't, it would have left our home open to a host of legal woes and criminal investigation. Legally speaking, you're dead."

Elliot's mouth hung open. He hoped it meant what he thought it did. He hoped more than anything it meant his time in hiding could finally come to an end. Elliot didn't want to leave Sugarplum Island, but he didn't want to have to look over his shoulder for the rest of his life. He wanted his family, friends, and freedom.

"Am I free?"

The Creationist's head dipped up and down in a nod. "Yeah, Elliot. You're free."

Tears welled up in his eyes, and he opened his mouth to speak, but The Creationist's attention turned once again to observe the baby.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

“She’s healthy and strong. We should be able to deliver in the morning. The delivery is fairly straightforward. Your stomach is designed to open like a hatch, allowing us to unhook her from the support system I created for your womb.”

Elliot exhaled a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding as relief washed over him. He clutched Alexander’s hand. Though he wanted to describe in great detail just how appreciative he was, “Thank you,” was all he could manage.

Mrs. Peppercorn smiled warmly, her earlier concerns apparently eased by the Creationist’s confident assessment. “We’ll be ready,” she assured them. “Get some rest tonight, Elliot. Lord knows it’ll be the last chance you have to rest for a while.”

Elliot blinked at her. “I require six hours of uninterrupted rest per night. It’s when I replenish my life force.” He looked at the Creationist. “Will she require the same? I know she’s half-human, half-automaton, but will she still need to charge herself?”

“She will, but it’s not nearly as long a process. By my calculations, she should only require an hour, at most. Don’t worry—I know the book Broussard gave you is filled with idioms, but I can go over everything with you, so there’s no confusion.” He glanced at Mrs. Peppercorn. “She’s right, though. You should get some rest. Big day tomorrow.”

Elliot nodded, warmth spreading through his chest as he envisioned the moment he could finally hold Honey Davenport in his arms. Staring down at his translucent stomach, Elliot pressed a kiss to his fingertip and rubbed it into his skin, right over her sleeping face.

Elliot was tired. He was tired, and he was cranky. Ever since waking to find Alexander not in his usual spot at Elliot's side, Elliot's mood had been absolutely dreadful. He should have been happy—he was meeting his daughter for the first time that morning—but without Alexander at his side, he felt like he was on his own again, the same way he was when he first boarded the bus to Georgia. To top things off, there was the sound of incessant laughter on the other side of the bedroom door, and Elliot didn't care for it.

Elliot was sure Alexander had a perfectly understandable excuse for his absence, but Elliot didn't want to hear it. He didn't want an excuse, he wanted Alexander.

As seconds trickled into minutes, Elliot grew more and more impatient, and his irritation shifted into an overwhelming sense of dread. Where could Alexander have possibly gone? They shared Elliot's childhood bed the night before, which wasn't terribly comfortable, as Alexander was a gorgeous behemoth, and the bed had a twin-size mattress, but they made do. Then Elliot awoke, and he was gone.

He'd been waiting for five minutes before the door finally opened. When it did, Alexander was carrying a tray with two plates, two cups of lemon water, and two cookies one each dish. Alexander set the tray down on the bed, studying Elliot. "What's wrong? You look upset."

Elliot blinked, trying to suppress the lump forming in his throat. "I thought you left," he admitted, his voice cracking slightly. "I thought you may have changed your mind." He looked down. "I was scared."

"I would never leave you," he reassured, his voice soothing. "I just wanted to surprise you with breakfast."

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, looking down at his hands, feeling embarrassed. "I think it's just the pregnancy hormones making me a bit . . . emotional."

“You can be as emotional as you need to be, baby. We’re in this together, remember? I’m never going to judge you for being scared or worried.” He gave Elliot a gentle kiss. “Now, let’s get some food into you. It’s a big day, you’ll need your strength.”

Elliot cocked his head to the side, staring at Alexander. “You realize I don’t require food for energy, correct?”

In response to that, Alexander simply took a fork from the tray, scooped up a hearty helping of egg whites, and held it up to Elliot’s mouth. Leaning in, Elliot accepted the eggs, purring like a kitten at the flavor. Bland and boring, and something that surely wouldn’t give him heartburn. It could have tasted like raw beef and Elliot wouldn’t have complained, so long as it meant he wouldn’t have to suffer the sensation of someone pouring battery acid down his throat.

They ate their breakfast in relative silence, Alexander offering Elliot forkful after forkful until his plate was empty. When it was Alexander’s turn to eat, Elliot did the same, feeding him bite after bite.

With their meals done, they lay in bed together for another hour before it was time to go downstairs to meet their daughter. On their way out of the room, Elliot spotted three Bountiful Beaus playing tic-tac-toe. It was a bizarre sight, as Mother never believed in downtime for her sons, aside from two hours in the evening. Mother or no Mother, it left an unsettling feeling lingering in the pit of Elliot’s stomach. He half expected Mother to pop her waterlogged head through a doorway and scold him for allowing their game to continue.

He watched the three young men playing tic-tac-toe, their faces a mix of concentration and amusement. They looked so innocent with their bright eyes sparkling in shades of pink-pink-pink. The sound of soft laughter filled the air, a stark contrast to the heavy atmosphere that used to permeate the home. Each of them had a distinct charm: one with a gap-tooth smile that never faded, another with ridiculously

deep dimples, while the third had sparsely placed freckles across his cheeks and nose. They seemed oblivious to the world around them, lost in their game.

One of the boys—the one with ridiculous dimples—looked up at Elliot with a smile.

“You’re Elliot?”

Elliot nodded. “I am.”

“I’m i-982. Mother told us all about you.”

It came as no surprise. They spent quite a bit of time together during the cruise, so Elliot would have been fresh on her mind. He smiled down at the doe-eyed man. “Did she tell you about our adventure at sea?”

i-982 shook his head. “No. Well, I mean, yes, she did. That’s not what I meant, though. Before she left—when she was still preparing for the cruise and had a different face—she used to talk about you constantly. Elliot this, and Elliot that. She seemed very proud of you.” He pointed at Elliot’s belly. “She said she couldn’t wait to see you with your baby, because she knew you would make a marvelous father.”

Elliot’s throat clicked. Mother spoke of him? Fondly? And she had faith in his ability to father a child? This was all news to Elliot, and he wasn’t sure how to feel about it. Since the cruise, Elliot assumed he’d meant nothing to Mother. Perhaps there was more than met the eye when it came to Emily Broussard. Perhaps, despite her inability to provide safety for her son, she loved him in her own way. He’d never get to ask her, so he filed it away in his heart, choosing to believe she did.

When it was time, Elliot and Alexander headed downstairs, each step filled with purpose. At the bottom of the grand staircase, they paused for a moment, exchanging a look.

“I’m scared,” Elliot whispered as two Bountiful Beaus rushed past, heading upstairs. There were only twenty men currently under Mrs. Peppercorn’s tutelage, and like Clarence said when he called, each of them seemed to be running amuck. There was no structure, despite Mrs. Peppercorn’s claims of running a tight ship. Mother would be rolling over in her watery grave if she could see the state of her beaus.

In the library, Alexander reached past where the book hiding the secret entrance had been, to press the hidden button. Once it was pressed, the sound of metal on metal screeched behind the walls as the false panel slid back, revealing the dimly lit passageway. Taking a deep breath, Elliot nodded to Alexander, who led the way.

After what felt like ages, thanks to Elliot’s achy ankles, they reached the bottom level of Ms. Broussard’s Home for Bountiful Beaus. Inside the Creationist’s lair, there was an overwhelming sense of calm, and a strong odor of lavender and vanilla, thanks to the oversized candle resting near the operating table.

Mrs. Peppercorn as Ms. Broussard was standing at the Creationist’s side, discussing numbers printed on a piece of paper.

“Yes,” Mrs. Peppercorn said to the Creationist.

“I’m here,” Elliot spoke up, startling them. He wasn’t sure why he surprised them; he imagined the sound of the wall scraping open in the library could probably be heard from miles off. “Is everything okay?”

Mrs. Peppercorn nodded. “Everything is perfect, baby. We’re just discussing little Honey’s vitals.”

Elliot’s eyes widened. “Is she all right? Is her heart fully functional?”

The Creationist arched a judgy eyebrow at Elliot. “Of course, she’s all right. I made

her, and I don't make mistakes."

"You slept through the scuffle of Mrs. Peppercorn stealing your precious pet," Elliot retorted. "That sounds like a mistake on your part."

The corner of the Creationist's lip curled up into a smirk. "I like you."

Elliot blushed. "Yes, well, Alexander tells me I'm very likeable."

He winked at Alexander. "He's spot-on." After handing the papers to Mrs. Peppercorn, the Creationist walked to the operating table and motioned for Elliot to climb up. Elliot approached, nervous, but optimistic. Once again, Alexander lifted Elliot onto the table into a seated position, but the Creationist motioned for him to lie down.

On his back, Elliot looked up to find Alexander at his side. There was the sound of fabric rustling, but Elliot couldn't look away from the man standing over him. Elliot was so lonely for so very long. He never imagined he could have a life filled with love, respect, and purpose, but Alexander was providing all the above.

"I love you, Alexander," he whispered, meaning it more than he'd ever meant anything.

Tears formed in Alexander's eyes, and he knelt down, kissing Elliot gently. "I love you, too, Elliot." He brushed his finger back and forth against Elliot's cheek, and when Elliot leaned up to give Alexander another kiss, he stopped, making it only a few inches. The endless pressure that sat on Elliot's bladder had lifted, and he no longer felt a relentless need to urinate. He looked toward the Creationist, wanting to see what was going on, but a small blue curtain had been hung without him realizing, separating his top bits from his bottom bits. He couldn't see anything past his chest.

“What’s happening?” Elliot asked, frightened to hear the answer. Alexander stood, staring past the curtain, every trace of color draining from his face. “Oh, God. Is something wrong? Is she okay? Alexander?” Alexander blinked a few times, unable to take his eyes off whatever was happening out of Elliot’s sight. “Alexander! Snap out of it, please.”

He turned to look at Elliot, his mouth open, but nothing came out.

“Give me a minute,” the Creationist said, his tone calm and assuring. “Everything is okay. We’re almost done.” There was the sensation of tugging and shoving going on inside him, and Elliot couldn’t remember ever feeling more uncomfortable. It was like someone had taken an eggbeater and gone to town on his internal organs. Then, there was the sound of drilling, though Elliot didn’t know what on Earth the Creationist could be drilling. Through it all, there was no pain, just a nagging feeling of discomfort that refused to go away. “Okay, Daddy. We’ve got a special delivery.

Alexander took a deep breath and moved behind the curtain. When he emerged, he was cradling a tiny child wrapped in a fuzzy, pink blanket. His face was a mixture of awe and an overwhelming sense of love as he moved toward Elliot.

The Creationist flicked a switch on the side of the operating table, and it slowly folded forward until Elliot was in a seated position. Gently, Alexander lowered their child, and Elliot’s eyes widened as he caught his first glimpse of their daughter.

It was like looking at a work of art, and Elliot couldn’t believe something so small—someone so precious—could have come from him. That she would depend on him. Though his heart was heavy with worry over his ability to be the father she deserved, he couldn’t get past how striking she was.

Honey Davenport was an exquisite blend of human and automaton. Her eyes—wide and wild—opened, displaying a dazzling light pattern of pink-pink-pink. As

Alexander and Elliot gazed at their new child, Honey Davenport wrapped a tiny finger around Elliot's thumb.

"You have my finger," he pointed out. "I'm going to have to insist you give it back at some point." Elliot peeked around the room before leaning in and rubbing their noses together. Bringing his voice a whisper only she could hear, he added, "I'm only joking. Hold on to it as long as you want." He kissed her forehead, right between the eyes, breathing in her baby scent. "I plan on holding onto you for as long as you'll let me, so you just hold on, too."

Elliot's heart swelled with so many emotions—love, devotion, terror, and an overwhelming sense of pride. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he reached out to touch her, his fingers trembling. It was the single most profound moment of his not-so-long life.

"She's . . ." He struggled to find words that could truly convey the depth of his feelings, but all Elliot could come up with was, "She's beautiful."

Alexander leaned over, pressing his forehead to Elliot's, both men staring down at the little life between them. "She's perfect."

"I made her from scratch," he whispered, touching the little one's nose. "I made a person, Alexander. A whole entire person."

"Technically," the Creationist interrupted. "I made her." He reached down and touched Honey's cheek, but Elliot's growl scared him off.

Elliot looked up, glaring at the man. "You may have planted the seed, but you did not make her grow. I did." He'd never felt such an overwhelming sense of connection with anyone, and as silly and unnecessary as the war of words would be, Elliot refused to let the Creationist take credit for anything he'd gone through to keep her

safe. “You didn’t have to take someone’s life to protect her. Or have to watch your mother plummet into the depths of the sea to earn your child’s freedom—twice. You’ve played no part in what it’s taken to get us here, so you can watch your mouth.”

“I don’t understand what’s gotten into him,” the Creationist said to Mrs. Peppercorn. “It could be his hormones.”

“I beg your pardon?” Elliot growled.

Alexander’s eyes bulged, and he quickly stood to usher the Creationist away before Elliot could launch up from the operating table and attack. As Alexander walked the man to the other side room, Mrs. Peppercorn hobbled over, taking a seat on the Creationist’s newly vacant stool. She reached out her withered hand, touching the baby’s cheek.

“I’m so proud of you, Elliot,” she said, her voice soft with a bit of a sing-song tone. “You did so well, sugar.” As she ran her fingers through Elliot’s hair, she pulled the side of his face against her chest in a hug. Her perfume was a bit much, but he didn’t point it out. “You can stay here, you know. You and Alexander. If you want to be around your brothers, I’d be happy to make a permanent space for you in my home for Bountiful Beaus.”

Elliot shook his head, unable to look away from the little bundle in his arms. “Our home is on Sugarplum Island. As much as I appreciate the offer . . .” He looked up, tears fresh in his eyes. “I believe I’ve found my happily ever after.”

Mrs. Peppercorn nodded, dabbing a stray tear from her eye as well. “You sure did.”

Elliot watched as Alexander and the Creationist spoke, taking in the sight of the man he loved. Funny how that worked out. From the moment Jared Price entered Elliot’s

life, he knew his life would be difficult. He knew he would have to harden his mechanical heart to endure what life had in store for him. But at that moment, in an underground laboratory, basking in Mr. Alexander Davenport's love, his hardened heart skipped a beat. As if Alexander could feel it, too, he turned, smiling at Elliot. Whatever the Creationist was saying went unheard as he turned and made his way back to Elliot. There was still quite a bit of room on the operating table, and Alexander slid next to them with ease.

"I'm going to do a bit of maintenance behind the curtain," the Creationist announced, settling in between Elliot's legs and grabbing the drill from a small silver tray next to them. Elliot's eyes bulged and he quickly looked away, focusing on Honey. He tickled her chin, thankful to feel nothing when the drill began making loud whirring noises. As if Alexander could sense his fear, he placed a hand on Elliot's shoulder, softly stroking.

"I can't wait for your mother to meet her. Do you think she'll like her?"

"We'll be lucky if Mom lets us keep her every other weekend," Alexander joked, snorting a laugh. The sound startled Honey, and as she shifted in his arms, nervous orange light flickered in Elliot's eyes. The baby's eyes blinked open, and for a moment, it looked like she was going to cry. She didn't, though. She stared at the light flickering in Elliot's eyes like she was reading his every thought. As if trying to soothe him, she lifted his thumb to her mouth and kissed it. They shared a look Elliot could only describe as profound, and then she slobbered all over his hand.

"I'd like my pet back now," the Creationist said rather loudly. "I held my part of the bargain, so I want him back."

Mrs. Peppercorn sighed, then slowly shuffled across the room and grabbed her phone. Tapping the screen, she muttered, "Fine, but as God as my witness, if you try to pull a fast one and overthrow my rule of law, you and I will be having words." She turned,

narrowing her eyes at him. “They will not be kind words, sugar.”

The Creationist simply blinked at her.

Mrs. Peppercorn rolled her eyes and brought the phone to her ear, pointing at her own eyes, then at his, mouthing, “I’m watching you.” Once the call connected, she advised Clarence to send the pet down. Elliot clutched his baby closer, scared this new dog or cat or random animal might attack the small child. He gave the Creationist a frightened look.

“Is your pet safe for Honey to be around?”

The Creationist didn’t answer, just stared at Elliot like he was stupid. Moments later, there were thunderous footsteps stampeding down the stairs leading to the hidden lair. The door swung open, and when Elliot looked behind him, there was no dog or cat to be found—just a man. A tiny little man, perhaps in his forties, dressed in the standard Bountiful Beau uniform; white top, white trousers, white shoes. The man’s jaw wobbled and tears dripped down his cheeks.

“Daddy,” he whispered, and then he lunged, rushing forward and launching himself into the Creationist’s arms, wrapping his legs around his waist. The man sobbed loudly into his neck, the sharp, piercing sounds occasionally peppered with loud whines and whimpers.

“I’ve got you, baby,” the Creationist whispered. “You’re okay. You’re home now, Benito.”

Alexander looked back at Elliot, shrugging. “I guess even the strangest among us deserve a love story for the ages.” Leaning down, he kissed Elliot’s forehead. “How are you feeling? Does it hurt?”

Elliot shook his head. “I didn’t feel anything. Actually, I feel better than I have in months.”

“That’s because I cut off the pain receptors from your chest down,” the Creationist interjected.

“Stop talking to them,” the man in his arms whined. “Make them go away. Don’t want to see them. Don’t want you looking at them.”

As the Creationist stroked the man’s back, he looked up at Elliot and Alexander, his face softer than Elliot could ever remember seeing it. “You should be fine to walk now. I’d like you to leave.”

Though his words were blunt, his tone seemed apologetic. Alexander, on the other hand, didn’t seem happy about the request at all.

“He’s just given birth. He needs to rest and recover.”

The Creationist rolled his eyes. “He’s an automaton, Mr. Davenport. If I don’t want him to feel pain, he won’t feel pain. You, on the other hand, are testing my patience, so I can’t say the same for you. Leave. Leave us now.” He glared at Mrs. Peppercorn. “You, too. This is my lab. It’s my space, and you’re no longer welcome in it.”

Mrs. Peppercorn swallowed. “And what will you do now? Kill me in my sleep and overthrow my home for Bountiful Beaus?”

The Creationist groaned. “Obviously, not. As you said, I have a bit of an affinity for these beaus. If you can assure me you’ll stay out of my space and stay in your lane, I’ll stick around.”

After agreeing, Mrs. Peppercorn headed toward the door, and Alexander took Honey

so Elliot could stand. To his surprise, when he looked down at his waist, his body was in the same shape it had been before the baby. The twenty pounds he gained during his pregnancy seemed to have melted away.

“What form of sorcery is this?” Elliot demanded.

The Creationist chuckled. “Not sorcery. Science.” Carrying his pet in his arms, he walked to the end of the operating table, reached down into a small bucket on the floor, and pulled out a curved sheet of metal, foggily transparent. “For Honey to fit in there, I had to construct an expanding belly plate to give her room to grow. After delivering her, I removed it and reattached your original abdominal plate.”

Elliot swallowed, feeling a bit squeamish, if he was being honest. When he looked over at Alexander, he was happy to see the man seemed to appreciate the view. His eyes had practically formed hearts for pupils.

“Do I look okay?” Elliot whispered.

Alexander licked his lips. “More than okay. You’re stunning.”

Elliot bit his lip, trying to hold back a prideful smile. “Well, I think you’re rather stunning yourself.”

As Alexander led them upstairs, his hand against the small of Elliot’s back, Elliot couldn’t remember ever feeling as happy as he did at that moment.

Source Creation Date: July 27, 2025, 7:53 am

Fatherhood suited Elliot Davenport. With one year under his belt, he took to it like a duck to water. Or, maybe more appropriately, like Duck to Goose. As for Elliot, between his three-hour shifts each morning at the bakery and his time spent cuddled close to Alexander at night, Elliot was a model parent. Alexander hadn't seen a single sparkle of blue light in his husband's eyes for almost a year. It was always pink-pink-pink .

Since arriving on Sugarplum Island, Elliot came alive. He had a job he loved, and a pair of best friends in Duck and Goose. They had weekly book clubs with a few other village residents. Elliot organized community charity events for the island. He even formed a small band of neighborhood watch vigilantes who walked the island one hour each night to ensure the safety and security of the Sugraplumians. Granted, since the island's creation, there hadn't been any crime whatsoever, so it was more of a social gathering than anything, but Elliot seemed to enjoy the camaraderie, and Alexander would often travel the small island with them as a show of support.

Alexander was hesitant to relinquish control of his father's company at first, often working remotely from home, occasionally having to visit the mainland a couple times a week to finalize deals. With Elliot and Honey taking up so much of his time—and heart—he finally decided to let it go. Alexander hadn't told Elliot yet, but Alexander knew he would be thrilled.

“Alexander?” He turned his head to find Elliot standing over the sofa, looking down at him fondly. “You’ve been staring at the wall for the last ten minutes. I hate to be a bother, but I could use your assistance setting up the party. The guests will arrive in an hour.”

Alexander smiled, unable to remember a moment of his life when he was happier than he was right then. He stood, his heart swelling as he followed Elliot into the kitchen. The room was already an explosion of color, filled with balloons and streamers in every shade of the rainbow. There was even a banner reading, “Happy Birthday, Honey!” stretched across one wall. The only thing that would have made the moment better would be if Honey was there with them. Alexander’s mother offered to watch her for the night to give the men some time to themselves and prepare for the party. It was Honey’s first night away from home, and both men spent most of the time worried sick about not having her out of sight.

Elliot handed Alexander a stack of plates with little pink hearts scattered across. “Can you set these on the table?” he asked, his voice warm and affectionate.

“Of course,” Alexander replied, taking the plates and arranging them neatly on top. Elliot had already pulled the table apart and placed the extension leaf in the center, covering it with a pink tablecloth with little H’s peppering the fabric. Elliot stitched each “H” himself. He spent weeks getting it just right. Though Alexander offered to help, and Elliot had allowed it, he quickly changed his tune when he saw Alexander’s lackluster first attempt. Alexander couldn’t say he blamed him. Alexander was quickly stripped of his title as embroiderer, relegated to simple tasks such as filling balloons and arranging cheese trays.

He glanced at the array of food items waiting to be set out—tiny sandwiches, fruit platters, and a multi-tiered cake Elliot had poured his whole heart into. The guests would love it. When the kitchen was finally decorated, they moved to the living room, where Elliot had set up a play area with a rainbow pride flag set down as a rug, placing various toys across the fabric. Alexander tidied the living room, making it presentable for the guests while Elliot arranged goody bags for party guests. They worked in comfortable silence, just as they did every day. It was one of Alexander’s favorite things about Elliot. As an introvert, Alexander needed time to recharge his social battery, and Elliot never pushed him to fill that silence with idle chit chat. He allowed them to simply exist in the quiet, side by side. Once the lunch platters were

set out, they set their focus on decorating the living room.

“Can you pass me that streamer?” Elliot asked, pointing to a roll of pink paper on the coffee table. Alexander watched as Elliot strung the paper from a light fixture, softly humming to himself. With the room decorated, the men stepped back, taking in the sight of the room. Elliot’s hand found Alexander’s and squeezed. “Thank you for helping me.” Elliot rested his head against Alexander’s shoulder. “Thank you for everything. I still can’t believe any of this is real.”

Alexander tilted his head and kissed Elliot’s scalp. “Neither can I.” The clock above their entertainment center told Alexander they had thirty minutes left until the partygoers arrived. His hand slipped down Elliot’s back until it was resting on his backside, squeezing gently. “Do you want to go upstairs?”

Elliot nibbled his bottom lip, and when Alexander looked down, he could see the telltale signs of an erection forming in his husband’s shorts. “We can do that.”

Alexander licked his lips. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. We’ll need to be quick, though.”

Twenty minutes later, with flushed cheeks and sweat pouring down their faces, Alexander and Elliot rushed downstairs, still buttoning their clothes when the doorbell rang. Pausing at the door, the men gave each other a one-over, Elliot fixing Alexander’s hair, Alexander wiping residual semen from Elliot’s chin and licking his finger clean.

“Are you ready?”

Elliot nodded, then opened the door. On the other side of the door, Alexander’s mother was holding Honey, affectionately tweaking her nose.

Alexander's mother handed Honey to him, and Honey smiled at her father before lifting a toy dinosaur and poking him in the cheek with its tail. He snorted a laugh and opened his mouth, playfully nibbling on the toy's tail, making Honey cackle. It was at that moment Alexander realized just how much he missed her. Both she and Elliot breathed life into Alexander's singular existence.

He always thought love wasn't in the cards for him. How wrong he'd been.

Waves of pink light flooded Honey's eyes. "Papa."

Alexander's jaw trembled, just as it always did when she said it. She started talking a month earlier, though she only ever said Dad, Papa, and No!

"Papa missed you, baby girl," he whispered, kissing her forehead. He looked over at Elliot, who was observing them fondly. He slacked his knees to lower himself so they were eye level, giving Elliot the chance to land a few kisses of his own. As Alexander and Elliot fawned over their little girl, Twylah walked the room, praising them for their decorating skills.

An hour later, the small cottage was alive with merriment. Mrs. Peppercorn had come to share in the celebration, as had Periwinkle and Arthur, who, as they explained, were now living in New Orleans, helping Mrs. Peppercorn care for the home and all the bountiful beaus living there. She made a decision to house them indefinitely, refusing to send "her boys" to unhappy homes. Periwinkle mentioned she would often spend hours in the supermarket, seeking out potential love interests for her beaus. Men who would treat them right. Men who would love her boys with their whole hearts. She wouldn't sell them, Periwinkle had explained, but she would allow courtship, and—if the beau in question wished to progress things—she would let them go, threatening the lives of their future husbands, should they lift a finger to them. Periwinkle attempted to discuss a plan he had for rescuing beaus who had already been sent to unhappy homes, but Arthur interrupted, handing their new child over, a little boy named Funshine Bear Price—the most ridiculous name Alexander

had ever heard—and sighing, telling Periwinkle the baby needed changing again, his eyes pleading.

“Absolutely not,” Periwinkle said firmly. “You know I have an aversion to bodily fluids.” Arthur sighed and nodded, but Periwinkle gently wrapped his hand around Arthur’s wrist. “Don’t worry. I’ll make it up to you tonight.” He waggled his eyebrows playfully before pausing, his face going serious. “With sex, Arthur. I will make up for it with sex.”

Arthur’s eyes widened, his cheeks burning a lovely shade of crimson. whirling around, he quickly exited the room and headed toward the bathroom.

Periwinkle smiled at them. “I don’t actually have an aversion to bodily fluids, I just like to tease Arthur.” Periwinkle kissed his fingertip and pressed it gently to Honey’s nose. “She’s precious. She looks just like you, Elliot.” He leaned closer until he was nose to nose with the baby. “And quite a bit like you, too, Alexander, though I’m not sure how that’s possible.”

Honey Peppercorn poked Periwinkle in the cheek.

He poked her back.

It was cute.

An hour later, as the children played, Elliot and Periwinkle sat on opposite sides of the rug. Mrs. Peppercorn was explaining to Alexander that she had made great progress in the automaton rights community. Still masquerading as Ms. Broussard, she’d been on several news outlets, demanding full bodily autonomy for nonhumans. The movement was gaining momentum, but the other automaton homes were dragging their feet, refusing to catch up with the times. They’d get there, Alexander thought. One day, automatons would be free people, able to make decisions for themselves, and to chart their own destinies.

In total, twelve adults and seven children came to celebrate Honey's birthday. There were gifts and treats, and a home overflowing with love and laughter. Through it all, as Alexander watched him absentmindedly, the smile never left Elliot's face.

Elliot would catch Alexander watching from time to time, his face flushing with color before quickly looking away. The fact Alexander could still make him blush with nothing more than a stolen glance always made his heart flutter faster.

An hour into the party, there was a knock at the door. Alexander and Elliot walked hand in hand, sharing a gentle kiss before opening the door.

On the other side of the door, a frazzled Beau Rivera shifted nervously on his feet, looking panicked. The former mayor of Genevieve, Georgia, had always been a picture of coolness and collectedness, but his eyes darted all around, and his breath came in quick bursts.

"Alexander, I need your help," Beau said, his voice urgent. He looked over his shoulder toward a tall oak tree in their front yard. "It's okay. I promise, you're safe."

"You speak to trees now?" Elliot asked, sounding a bit giddy. Beau flashed him a halfhearted smile before turning his attention back to the tree.

"It's okay. You can come out," Beau insisted.

A young man reluctantly stepped from behind the tree, his movements slow, his eyes wary. The man looked to be about twenty-five, and he had long brown hair that was tied back. His skin was bruised and cracked like a porcelain plate that had been dropped on the table a bit too hard. There was no blood or flashing lights beneath his skin, just streaks of his silver skull visible through the lacerations. His demeanor reminded Alexander so much of Elliot the first night they met at Twylah's Sugarplum Treats. Alexander looked to Elliot.

“Do you know him?” Alexander whispered to Elliot as the man reached the final step on the porch.

Elliot shook his head before pulling away from Alexander. As Elliot took a step forward, the other man took a step back, almost falling off their small porch. Beau Rivera’s eyes never left the man, though, and he managed to wrap an arm around his back, pulling him against his chest, catching him before he fell.

“You’re okay,” Beau whispered to him. “I promised you, and I meant it. I won’t let anyone hurt you.” Beau lifted his gaze to Alexander. “He lived next door to me. We became friends, and then his owner returned him. I couldn’t just leave him, so I went to the group home where he was staying and broke him out.”

The man whimpered, burying his face in Beau’s neck. “Scared.” His voice was small and broken, just like the small and broken cracks in his skin. There was one under his eye that looked like a heart. It was as if someone had taken a knife and carved the symbol in themselves.

“You don’t have to be. I’m right here.”

“Where’s Max?” he whispered.

“He’s back on the boat. We’re going to see him soon. I need you to be strong for me until then. Can you do that for me?” The automaton gave the mayor a sad nod.

Alexander smiled at the man, making his voice as warm and cheery as he could manage. “I’m Alexander, and this is my husband, Elliot.” He placed a hand at the small of Elliot’s back, and Elliot did the same with Alexander. “If you need a place to stay, we can find somewhere for you. It’s a small island, but we’ve got more than enough space to hide you, buddy.”

Beau bit his lip before sighing. “There’s more.”

Alexander arched an eyebrow. “More?”

“Quite a bit more, actually.” He glanced past Alexander and Elliot, staring into home, taking in the sight of partygoers laughing and smiling. “I hate to tear you away from the party, but there’s something I need to show you.”

Elliot looked up at Alexander, then back at Beau, nodding. “You helped me once, when I needed it most. We’ll help however we can. Where are we going?”

“Just to the ferry.”

Elliot turned back to the house. “Alright. Just give me a moment to ask them to look after Honey,” he said to Beau. Inside, he and Alexander weaved through the small crowd, finding Mrs. Peppercorn and Alexander’s mother chatting by the children.

“Mrs. Peppercorn, Ms. Twylah,” Elliot began. The women turned to him, their laughter soft as if they’d just shared a joke. “Could you look after the party for about half an hour? Alexander and I need to help Beau Rivera with something important.”

“Mayor Rivera is here?” Mrs. Peppercorn’s eyes sparkled with curiosity, but the sound of Beau’s groan pulled his attention away from her.

“We arrived together. Honestly, Mrs. Peppercorn. You have to cut back on your marijuana use. I fully support the legalization of cannabis, but no one should eat the amount of edibles you eat every day. You’re frying your brain.”

Mrs. Peppercorn rolled her eyes. “Hogwash. I was just playing into the drama.” Her eyes narrowed. “You were supposed to wait on the ferry until the party was over.”

“They’re terrified, Honey. You didn’t have to sit there with them, listening to them cry, asking where we’re going. A little less rage in your tone, please.”

Mrs. Peppercorn's eyebrows shot up. "I left them coloring books. My boys are scared?" She attempted to stand, but had trouble on the ascent. Beau quickly shook his head at her.

"There's no need to fuss. I've got this. Stay here and enjoy the party. I just need Alexander and Elliot."

Mrs. Peppercorn nodded, looking a bit winded from her attempt to stand. "Alright. Well, tell them Mother loves them with her whole heart."

"They're not bountiful beaus. Those words mean nothing to them. We've discussed that. That's just a stupid catchphrase Ms. Broussard used for marketing purposes."

"The words are true, and they are mighty, son. Don't ever question a mother's love. It is vast and unending."

"It is working the last of my waning patience," Beau muttered under his breath.

"What was that?"

"Nothing," he quickly squeaked. He gave Alexander a pleading look. "Come on. Let's get out of here. She's spiralling, I can tell."

Ten minutes later, the men were on the dock, staring at the boat that had once ferried Elliot into his future. The boat seemed vacant, with even the captain taking a load off on the dock, sipping from a large bottle of vodka.

"The next ferry is in two hours," he drunkenly slurred.

"It most certainly is not," Beau hissed. "I've already told you, you're not sailing anywhere in your condition, you big lush."

The captain licked his lips, muttering, “I’d break you in half, baby,” before flagging Beau away with a dismissive flick of his wrist, belching loudly before taking another sip. Beau led them aboard, then to the bowels of the boat. There were no lights below, and rather than descend the stairs in darkness, Alexander used his phone as a light source. Once at the bottom, he held the phone up like a torch, illuminating the large, dark room. There were support columns all throughout, but it looked empty.

Beau took a slow step forward. “Shine the light on me.” As Alexander followed his instruction, Beau called out, “It’s okay. It’s just me. You’re safe.” His jaw trembled, but he managed to quickly steel his expression. “You’re free.” Turning back to Alexander, his eyes were pleading. “I did something I can’t undo, and I don’t know how to fix it. We need your help, Alexander.”

Alexander wasn’t sure what all the shadows and secrecy was about, but, as Elliot had said earlier, Beau helped Elliot in his time of need, and Alexander would do whatever it took to repay the favor.

“You’ve got it,” he finally agreed. “No matter what.”

A tear slipped down Beau’s cheek, and he quickly wiped it away, nodding his head in his new friend’s direction. Alexander realized they were holding hands. “After seeing what the monster next door did to Archie, he told me about his brothers back home. Their home isn’t like the one Elliot grew up in. Hearing the things they’re forced to do in the name of ‘training’ made me physically ill. I’m sorry, Alexander. I couldn’t just leave them.” Beau took the phone from Alexander and aimed it into the darkened space, calling out to them again.

In the darkness, a pair of eyes lit up, flashing orange-orange-orange at an alarming rate. They flashed faster than Elliot’s eyes ever had. The automaton must have been terrified.

Then, another set of orange eyes flashed.

And another.

And then, another.

It continued until the entire room was flooded with orange light.

“I’m going to turn on the light now,” Beau said, his voice calm and soothing. “You have nothing to be afraid of, I promise.” Using Alexander’s phone as a light, Beau walked to the far corner of the wall and flipped a light switch.

It took a moment for Alexander’s eyes to acclimate to the newfound brightness, and when he did, his heart slammed in his chest.

There, in the ferryboat’s vast lower level, sat at least forty automatons, each clinging to the other, cowering in corners and behind support beams. Elliot gasped, and Alexander followed his line of sight. Only a few feet to their right, there was a body covered in a tarp, but half her face was visible. Her eyes were wide and unseeing, and waves of greens, blues, and reds flickered in the corners.

“Mother?” Elliot whispered.

Beau nodded. “She was found floating in the sea. Clarence snuck out one night, traveled to where we docked in Texas, commandeered a sailboat, and spent a week searching for her. She was just off the coast. The Creationist is on an indefinite vacation, and we haven’t been able to reach him. Honey tried plugging her in to see if she would charge, but then the outlet started sparking. We think she has water damage.”

Elliot shook his head, kneeling beside his mother and inspecting her face. He pulled the tarp down until her face was completely visible. There were multiple cuts and abrasions on her once-flawless face, and she was missing an ear—probably nibbled off by a sea creature—revealing a silver skull beneath.

“She’s an automaton?” Elliot asked.

“It appears so.”

“What—how . . .” He leaned closer. “I didn’t know her at all, did I?” He looked up at Beau with a dumbfounded expression. “What do we do about her?”

Beau wasn’t looking at them, though. His attention was placed squarely on the frightened automatons cowering in the shadows. “Well, she won’t be powering on by herself, so she’s not very high on my list of priorities.” He pointed at the automatons. “They are. I made them a promise when I broke them out of their home.” Beau looked over to Alexander, his expression determined. “I’m going to save them.” A smile crept into the corners of his mouth. “I’m going to save them all.”