



# Three Meows (Monsters For Her)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Food isn't the way to my heart. Cats are. And my handsome neighbors have three of them.

When I moved into a new flat for my studies, I didn't expect to meet my neighbors and become so fascinated with them. But when three cats—ridiculous orange, mysterious black, and dignified white—kept tangling my fate with the three men how could I resist?

Chester, an energetic student at my university, Rowan, a quiet but confident mercenary, and Elijah, a shy writer, made space for themselves in my life. But a hidden secret looms ahead Will my love for cats save the day and give me my happily ever after?

Spicy-Cozy Cat shifter Why Choose romance.

**Total Pages (Source):** 24

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

“And you have everything?” My father fussed through the phone. “Are you sure you don’t want a maid? Or a bigger place? And that car you took... you know we have better ones.”

“Yes, yes, we have been over this, dad.” I rolled my eyes, relishing in the gesture even if he couldn’t see it. “I’m perfectly fine with what I chose.”

After we said our entirely too-long goodbyes I was happy to end the call. I loved that man, but there was a reason why I chose to study several states away from him. I wanted to try life without his overbearing mother-henning presence and millionaire reputation hanging over me.

My eyes roamed over the flat with satisfaction. It wasn’t very big, but just perfect for only one person. The previously boring interior came to life with the little accents I brought with me; scattered knickknacks and decorations added color and interest. The space finally looked like it was mine.

In this city, new friends and opportunities awaited. I was ready to welcome them with open arms.

What I didn’t expect was a cat.

Or rather three cats.

And their handsome owners who just happened to be my neighbors.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

I blinked at the orange cat on my couch. It gave me a slow blink in return. Well, apparently the kitty felt safe and content... That was good.

There was only one little problem: I did not own a cat.

“What are you doing here?” I couldn’t help but ask as I approached slowly and let it smell my hand.

“Meow!” was my answer as the cat butted his head against my fingers, asking for pets.

“Oh, alright, but just for a little while,” I said in what was supposed to be a stern tone but somehow melted into a softer cadence almost instantly when I saw those big green eyes looking expectantly at me. “And then we are going to find your owner.”

The cat huffed and clambered onto my lap when I sat on the couch. It was nearly fifteen minutes later I finally got to my feet to inspect how the cat had got in. A quick check showed me I left one window partially open. As luck would have it, the window led to the balcony, which I shared with my neighbors. There was a partition separating us, but by the wall there was just enough space for the cat to squeeze through.

“I guess it’s time to meet my neighbors,” I told the cat as I picked it up and cradled it against my chest. It purred up a storm.

When I knocked on the door next to mine I didn’t expect the sight about to greet me.

There, in the doorway, stood an Adonis. A sculpted Greek god. A half-naked heart attack inducer if my wildly beating heart was anything to go by.

“Uh...” I said intelligently, staring, before the cat in my arms sank his claws into my left arm. I jumped, then looked sheepishly at the unimpressed black-haired man in front of me. “Hi! I’m your new neighbor! And I think I have your cat...”

The man nodded at me and I didn’t know if I should interpret it as a greeting or an agreement it was his cat... the tension mounted as the man didn’t say anything.

I was starting to sweat, trapped in the clutches of societal expectations of not wanting to seem rude, when I was saved when a second man appeared by the door.

“Ah, I see you have found Cheddar.” The newcomer gave me a smile. Unlike his chiseled companion (who stood there with a naked chest... wasn’t the man cold? And were those scars?) he was made out of softer curves that complimented his gentle demeanor. “Thank you. I can take him off your hands. And sorry for the trouble.”

“It was no problem,” I reassured. “I’m Lisa, by the way.”

“Elijah. And this is Rowan.”

I shook hands with both men. Cheddar chose that moment to jump down from my arms and walk into the flat himself, his tail held high. He gave me a parting meow before he disappeared into one of the rooms.

Aw, what a cutie. I was going to miss him. Shame I didn’t feel like I would have time for a pet or I would get one myself.

My gaze was a bit wistful when I said my goodbyes.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

After the first week at the University, I still couldn't believe I could finally do what I loved. Ideas multiplied in my head like bunnies and I furiously sketched and noted them into existence, with the hope of turning those concepts into animations someday. I had tried to learn as much as I could before this chance at proper education, but it was hard. Now I felt like I found my tribe; a bunch of like-minded individuals who I could both measure myself against and collaborate with.

Life was wonderful.

That's why I was humming while sitting under one of the trees near the campus, a half-filled sketchpad in my lap.

"Hey, whatcha drawing?" A grinning face peered down at me from the tree.

I jumped a little before my racing heart calmed down. Nobody told me to expect someone to be hiding high up in the tree when I chose this spot!

"Aren't you uncomfortable?" I looked up at the red-haired man.

"What? You mean this?" He asked innocently and switched to an even more convoluted position, half laying against the trunk of the tree with his feet on two separate branches, one of them higher than his head was. "It's certainly better for my spine than those torture devices our university tries to pass as chairs."

"Everything is better than those chairs. You are attending there as well?" I nodded in the direction of the towering building of the school peeking out from the cityscape in the distance.

“Yup, Chester, second year of Digital Art, at your service,” he tried to make a bow before it made him lean too much to the side and he had to catch himself to not fall out of the tree.

“Lisa, first year of Animation. At no one’s service unless they pay me.” I raised a cocky brow at him.

“I see you got the ‘you can’t eat exposure’ lecture already!” The man laughed. “Good, good, keep it up. But maybe one day we will be at each other’s service, hmm?” His eyebrow wiggle was a bit uncoordinated and made me snort. “Digital Art and Animation often work together. And I can see we already have something else in common.”

“And what’s that?”

The man stuffed his own sketching pad in his bag, then promptly jumped off the tree, landing in a Spiderman crouch next to me.

“Cats!” he said, beaming at me. “I could see you sketching furballs from up there. Wanna see mine?”

Before he even saw me nod, he was already pulling photos up on his phone.

I squinted at the orange cat playing with a feather toy in the photo, then looked at my drawings, then back at the phone... There was no way...

“His name is Cheddar!” the man said proudly. “Isn’t he the most beautiful and regal cat ever?”

“No, he’s not,” I said automatically, only to hear Chester gasp, his hand over his chest as if I shoot him through the heart. “I mean, I have met him. He is beautiful, but

I have seen him when he gets crazy zoomies or when he stares into space with his tongue sticking out. Regal is not the adjective I would use.”

“Waaait, are you the mysterious neighbor?” Chester asked. “You are the person our Cheddar is having a cuddle affair with?”

“Yes, but also please never use the words ‘cuddle affair’ ever again.”

“What, would ‘furry romance’ be better?” he teased.

“No, and you know it,” I pouted at the man.

“What would you call it, then?” Chester asked, his eyes shining mischievously.

“Unpaid catsitting, that’s what it is,” I retorted. “Now that I think of it, you should be paying me.”

“You are right,” he nodded seriously.

That threw me for a loop. Weren’t we just joking?!

“Wait, no, I didn’t mean—”

“Let me pay you in the best way there is,” he smiled widely and leaned forward, his arms caging me against the tree. I had to swallow hard when his face got so close I could feel his breath on the shell of my ear. “Free art supplies,” he whispered seductively.

And it worked. Fuck, but it worked, because those words could get any artist going.

Unexpectedly, during my break between classes I found myself tagging along with a

stranger to a nearby art supplies shop.

“Just one thing.” I waved a warning finger at Chester.

“Sure,” he agreed readily.

My eyes roamed over the various offerings. I went on a shopping spree before the academic year started, but the secret of artists was that we were always hungry for more art supplies. There was the beautiful rice paper, fluorescent inks, a calligraphy brush, and... too much really. I would feel more embarrassed getting engrossed in browsing through different paints and pencils if Chester wasn't equally enthralled by the artistic possibilities each new technique and product could bring. Even if he was focusing on digital art, it was obvious he cherished traditional art as well. In the end, I grabbed a gold pen that would serve as a highlight for my drawings. It wasn't very expensive, so I didn't feel that bad about mooching off a man I barely knew.

He paid for his own collection of paper and glittery paints, as well as my gold pen, and presented my gift with a flourish.

“That's your first daily payment settled!” Chester beamed.

First? Wait, daily?!

“No, that's...! You can't...!” I spluttered. “You can't mean to buy me art supplies every day?!”

“Fine, weekly payment then,” Chester pouted at me.

“No! That's ridiculous! Monthly, if anything!” I protested.

“Deal!”



Only when I saw him grin from ear to ear I realized I had been duped. Walked straight into that one. He used a typical negotiation technique and started with an outlandish proposition to make another option seem reasonable.

“You are a beast.” I pointed an accusing finger at Chester.

“Gentleman on the streets, beast in the sheets,” he wiggled his eyebrows as he waved the stack of paper sheets he just brought at me. I groaned at the bad pun.

I had a feeling becoming good friends with this ridiculous man was an inevitability.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

“Did you just eat a part of my essay?” I asked the orange cat, who tried to inch away with the corner of the page still between his teeth. “Oh no, you don’t!”

I caught Cheddar before he could run away and didn’t let the pitiful meowing discourage me from stomping out of my apartment and delivering my squirming package right to his owner’s door.

Elijah opened the door with a grumpy expression that matched mine, but his face brightened at seeing me.

“Lisa! Has Cheddar been causing trouble again?” the man asked, inviting me inside with a gesture.

I stepped in, closing the door behind me, and only then let Cheddar go. The cat sent me a wounded look and trotted off with his tail high in the air as if to show his dismissal of me.

“He ate my work. That I need to have finished for tomorrow,” I groaned. “I’m only halfway through and it’s so late already.”

University wasn’t only sunshine and rainbows. Sometimes it was an ass-long essay on traditional British animations that I didn’t even have time to touch with everything that was happening.

“I see. I can commiserate. My work may be fiction but I have set a certain daily wordcount to reach my goals and I’m struggling to meet it today,” he gestured at the open laptop on the table, then gave a sigh. “This is going to be a long night.”

“You write?” I perked up with interest. “What kind of fiction?”

“Crime novels. You know, so-called whodunnit. Detectives and all that. Hey Lisa, since we both will be in writing hell tonight, how about we keep together? My work often flows better when there’s even silent company in the room.”

I considered his offer.

“Throw in a never-ending supply of tea and coffee and I’m in.”

“I have a wide selection of teas and... A. Coffee. Maker.”

“Sold!” I said quickly, my eyes widening as I followed Elijah’s smug gaze to a big machine on the counter. This beast looked like something my father would have, so it had to have multiple settings! I could have an espresso. Or a latte. Maybe even a mocha!

Everything was better than the instant coffee waiting for me back at my flat.

A quick trip to my apartment and I had my own laptop and my notes at the ready.

I took possession of the couch, setting everything up for maximum efficiency, and then beelined for the most essential element.

“What kind of coffee do you want?” Elijah asked.

“A fancy one. Surprise me,” I decided.

When I got a mocha with whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles I nearly cried.

“You are an angel,” I gushed at Elijah.

The two spots of red on his cheeks looked very fetching, and I decided to endeavor to make him blush again in the future. For now, I let him hide behind the screen of his laptop.

Soon, the room filled with the sounds of furious typing as both of us got immersed in our work. It was a hundred times more pleasant to share the misery with someone than brooding at my flat all alone. Hearing the little sounds Elijah made as he moved, the hums that sometimes escaped his mouth when he was deep in thought, made me relax and the stubborn essay finally started flowing from under my fingers.

“Meow?”

I looked up at the plaintive sound.

Cheddar looked at me hopefully with his big eyes. Apparently, I was forgiven for my misbehavior. The playful tilt of the orange kitty’s head was my only warning before he launched himself at my socks.

I moved my foot away and he chased after it.

“Sorry for that rascal. I will keep him away from you,” Elijah said, embarrassed. He stood up from the table to take care of the hyperactive cat, but I waved him away.

Cheddar had caught me in a bad mood previously but now, with the essay nearly done and a good dose of caffeine in my veins, I was much more chill and the antics of the cat amused me instead of irritating me.

“You wanted to eat this?” I waved the scribbled first version of the essay the cat previously chewed on, which now has been transformed into a beautiful butterfly of a typed document on my laptop. With great prejudice I rolled the paper into a tight ball then threw it. “Catch!”

The kitty bounced after the paper ball, his feet sliding comically on the floor. He hit the wall only once before he caught his prize and reduced it to shreds.

To my surprise, after he was done with the paper ball Cheddar ran to another room and returned with a ball in his teeth. He deposited it in front of me expectantly and sat down, his tail swishing behind him in excitement.

“What are you, a dog?” I questioned but picked the ball up and threw it to the other side of the room.

“He is very intelligent... even if you can’t always tell,” Elijah snorted.

“He is just a funny little guy.” I scooped the cat in my arms and started baby-talking to him. He was just too cute! “You are a sweet little cinnamon roll and there’s not a single thought behind those big green eyes, is there?” I cooed.

The cat blinked at me consideringly, then gave me a satisfied ‘mmrph!’ and a blep.

“Okay, I take that intelligence comment back... really, Cheddar?” Elijah muttered, looking despairingly at the cat with his cute pink tongue sticking out.

I couldn’t help but giggle and cuddle the perfect example of an orange cat to myself. A small break for a petting session couldn’t hurt, right? My fingers turned Cheddar into a purring machine as I smoothed his fur, tickled under his chin, and scratched behind his ears until he finally flopped next to me, content to stay pressed to my thigh.

Before the opportunity passed I reached for my laptop and saw to finishing my essay.

“I’m done! Time to go to bed.” I stretched with a yawn half an hour later. Cheddar immediately took the opportunity of my lap being free to crawl into it.

“It looks like you are stuck now,” Elijah pointed out with a smile.

“What, are you going to offer me not only your couch but your bed now?” I asked, looking at him from under my lashes.

“I wouldn’t be so presumptuous!” Elijah spluttered. The blush was back. Score!

“I know you wouldn’t,” I said. He was too sweet to be so obnoxious. “Thank you. This really was life-saving. Or at least grade saving. Did you manage to get your work done?”

“Yes. You could say I found my muse,” Elijah said, casting me a quick look before he looked away, the blush on his cheeks intensifying.

“Tell me about your books next time?” I asked hopefully. “I’m dead on my feet now, but I would love to hear all about them.”

“I know you only want to come back for the cat,” Elijah joked, but I sensed a painful insecurity behind those words.

“Not only for the cat,” I said solemnly as I transferred Cheddar off my lap to stand up and approach Elijah. He looked at me with wide eyes. I put my hand on the table and leaned towards him. “There’s also...” I was so close it wouldn’t take much for our lips to meet. “...the coffee.” I ran a finger over Elijah’s mug. “Can I?” He nodded mutely, transfixed by my proximity.

My lips touched the rim of the mug and I took a slow sip. The latte was half cold already, but it still tasted gloriously sweet. Was that a hint of caramel? I licked my lips slowly, both for a better taste and because I enjoyed the frustrated expression on Elijah’s face. He swallowed convulsively as I reached for his hands and slid my fingers over his skin as I transferred the mug into his grip.

“Thank you for the taste. Till later!” I threw over my shoulder before I quickly scooped up my things and got back to my apartment.

I wondered about Elijah’s lips pressing against the rim of the mug, sharing an indirect kiss with me.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

A cat was stalking me.

No, really. I was sure the sleek black cat was following me every time I returned home after dark. Sometimes, I stayed out late to go to a club or a bar with my yearmates but on Thursdays it was because of the Animation Appreciation (or AA for short, yes, we loved this joke) Club where we watched and discussed various forms of bringing drawings, 3D models, photographed dolls, and so on, to life.

It was on the first Thursday when I noticed the shadowy shape stalking me and since then it has been my constant nightly companion. Catching a glimpse of yellow eyes peering at me from the darkness sent shivers down my spine, but I reminded myself firmly it was a cute kitty that was interested in me and not some sort of monster.

One evening I arrived armed.

“Here kitty, kitty. Pspops,” I tried, waving a tuna cat treat in the direction of the black shape judging me from the roof of a house. The fishy scent wafted in the direction of the cat, but it remained impassive. Damn. Impervious to pspops and to cat treats? Maybe it was, in fact, a monster. No normal cat could resist this.

My various attempts to entice the animal with toys, food, or just by sitting on a bench in a park and waiting patiently for it to come to me ended in crushing failure. Was I losing my charm? I thought of myself as a cat whisperer, but this blackie was set on proving me wrong.

It was when I resigned myself to just catching glimpses of my companion when the situation changed.



“Give me your phone,” a rough voice said behind me.

When I turned around, I caught a glimpse of a knife. The man wore a blank expression, as if this was a normal thing for him to do. To rob people. To steal their phones. To point a knife at someone.

The thing was, I had enough money to buy a new phone. I could give it to him.

But this sort of man, someone with a hand so steady on a knife, who didn't even know what kind of phone I had and if it was worth anything but knew I looked pretty...

A man like that rarely stopped at a phone.

My eyes darted around, searching for help, but there was no one there in the shadowed corner of the park. There was only the black cat watching me from a nearby tree— Wait, no, the cat wasn't there anymore.

I watched in stunned awe as a black shape launched itself at the robber.

“Get off me!” the man yelled as the cat dug furrows in his face with his claws. He had dropped the knife in his surprise and was using both hands to take hold of his vicious attacker.

He threw the cat away. It flipped in the air and landed on four paws. Seeing how the cat hissed and prepared to jump again the robber ran away with a yelp, as if the hounds of hell were nipping at his heels.

“You saved me,” I said to the cat, who was still looking in the direction of where the man disappeared, his short fur all puffed up. “Thank you.”

The cat calmed down slowly and stopped making that low rumbling, threatening noise. He looked back at me and flicked his tail as if he was magnanimously accepting my thanks. Then he slinked right next to me.

I held my breath, my hands frozen at my sides, as the cat circled around me as if inspecting me for any damage. This was the closest he ever got to me. I didn't want to jeopardize it by trying to touch him and scare him away.

Satisfied with his inspection, the black cat returned to watching me from afar. He kept watch as I made my way to a convenience store I knew would be open at this hour to call the police to report the attempted robbery and have them collect the knife from the park.

By the time I made it home, I was pretty tired. I flopped onto the couch and eyed my kitchen with a frown. I should eat something. But preparing dinner sounded like too much effort. Before I could make my decision, there was a knock on the door. Well, that got me to my feet.

I blinked in surprise when I found Rowan at my door. Wordlessly, he pushed a plastic container with cookies at me.

"For me?" I asked.

"Mn," the man made a confirming noise.

"Aw, that's so nice of you! Did you make them yourself?" Rowan nodded and cocked his head to the side.

"Do you want to come in?" I asked, holding my breath.

When the mysterious man took a step forward, I had to stop myself from pumping my

fist as I scrambled away to let him in.

First the black cat and now this? Was this the day when my milkshake brings all the loner boys to my yard? Heck yeah!

“Want some tea? Or coffee? Well, probably not coffee, it’s too late for that...”

“Coffee,” Rowan said.

Ah, so he could speak. I had been wondering if I should invest some time in learning sign language in case he was mute. Actually, it was still a good idea, so I made a mental note to study the basics anyway. It was pretty obvious speaking wasn’t Rowan’s favorite thing.

Fortunately, I could carry the conversation as we sat down with our beverages and cookies myself, with the help of Rowan’s silent input. Those eyebrows were very expressive and contained a multitude of opinions.

I learned he preferred newer whodunnit style books over classics like Agatha Christie, that my taste in hot chocolate was wrong (apparently nothing made with water qualified as hot chocolate in his opinion), that he was a night owl, and a myriad of other small facts.

In short, I was putting together who one Rowan was piece by piece, like a puzzle, and, even if I didn’t have the complete picture yet, the glimpses I could see were fascinating.

“Chester mentioned you are working nights, right?” I asked, realizing we had spent over an hour in each other’s company. “Do you have to go soon?”

He nodded reluctantly and took a big gulp out of the delicate cup I served him coffee

in before he placed it gingerly back down. The cup was empty. I guess it was time to say goodbyes for today.

“Be careful tonight,” I blurted out. He looked at me, suddenly alert. “I, ah, ran into some trouble when coming home through the park, so better avoid that area and keep your eyes open.”

“Mn,” he agreed. Then he pulled a small block of paper and a pen out of his pocket and quickly wrote something down before handing it over.

It was a phone number.

“Call. If trouble,” Rowan said, staring me down. That look was intense.

This time I was the one to nod silently.

Satisfied, the black-haired man stood up and made for the door.

He left as unceremoniously as he appeared. Really, he was like a cat, coming and going as he pleased. It was endearing.

I flattened the piece of paper on the table, a smile blooming on my face.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

By the time a month had passed, I was pretty used to both cats in my life.

Shadow diligently attended to me outside of my flat and, after the scare of the mugger, he orbited noticeably closer to me, sometimes trotting only a few feet from me, or, on one notable occasion, using my shoulders as a springboard to jump onto a roof.

Cheddar, on the other hand, got all in my business, squeezing through the gap on the balcony to jump in through the window, or meowing loudly until I opened the balcony door if the window was closed. He was as shameless as he was cute, and the challenge wasn't getting him to come close, but to leave me alone for even a minute. I had no recourse but to buy him cat toys and entertain him. He was so spoiled!

But I guess I had only myself to blame when I kept the door to the balcony open, hoping to entice him to come. I sent a glance at the neighbor's part of the balcony and froze.

There was a cat there, lying in a sunbeam.

The problem was... it wasn't Cheddar!

Did they get a new cat without telling me?! Betrayal!

"Hiii, kitty!" I said in my softest voice, half leaning over the partition separating the balcony.

The cat startled from his reverie, his ears swirling up and back as he whipped his

head around to look at me. He looked like a deer caught in the headlights as I stretched my hand towards him slowly in the hopes he would take in my smell and come closer.

The white ball of fluff settled slowly and gave my hand a sniff. When I tried to pet him and the cat didn't shy away, I mentally patted myself on the back. With a last look at the slightly open door to his flat, the Persian cat came to a decision. A second later I had a practical demonstration of how much of the cat was just fur as it squeezed through the gap to come meet me.

After that, luring him into my apartment was easy. Unlike Cheddar, whose favorite method of exploration was running around like a headless chicken, the white Pers investigated the room carefully and with grace. At some point I started narrating the exploration as I followed after the curious creature.

I opened the door to present my inner sanctum for the inspection. The cat hesitated and looked at me with his blue eyes, so I sketched a bow, inviting him inside.

“Here's the bedroom, Your Fluffiness.”

The cat walked inside and gracefully jumped onto the bed.

“May I suggest this throw? It's soft and extremely comfortable and made just for you,” I presented the fabric decorated with, yes, you guessed it, kitties, but the cat turned his nose at it. Instead, he focused his gaze on My Shame.

The problem with being an animation fanatic from my teenage years was that everyone around me had an excuse to present me with the most embarrassing gifts. My friends made it into a Tradition with a capital T to gift me animation themed merch on my birthday. And sure, the Calcifer lamp, the Shrek boots, and various princess t-shirts were cool, but there were the other gifts I had to contend with.

“Not throwing you away was a mistake,” I said to Goku, whose face was now obscured by a cat happily sitting on it, leaving the naked pecs and abs of the Dragon Ball character painfully visible.

It was surely my imagination that the cat was laughing at me, but something in the motion of the fluffy white tail was giving me sassy vibes.

“You are right. I don’t need this pillow to hug at night,” I nodded sagely while steadily creeping closer to the bed. “Because... I have you!”

The cat was too slow to escape my clutches and was left blinking at me as I lay on the bed, contentedly wrapped around my newest squeeze toy. His Fluffiness admitted defeat with grace and nuzzled at my chin, settling himself in for the long haul.

The nap we took together was just what I needed after the long day of studying and working on my personal projects. It came to an end when there was a knock on the door.

“Hey, Lisa. Have you seen Elijah?” Chester asked.

“No. But I have seen your white cat. It’s in there—” I turned to point at the bedroom only to see the white tail disappearing through the balcony door. Huh, the cat probably sensed his feeding time approaching. “Well, he went back to yours. What’s his name? Shit, is it a boy? And why were you keeping him from me?”

“Um, Marshmallow? He is a boy. And he is... uhhh... new?” The questioning answers did not inspire confidence. “Anyway, I have to go! Thanks!” Chester spooked at my narrowed glance.

I watched as the door next to mine opened and Elijah peeked outside before Chester barreled in and the door closed behind them.

“Dude, you left the door closed from the inside!” I heard Chester exclaim before I closed my door as well with a shake of my head.

The three men were weird, but, more importantly, they were entertaining.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

A few months into my brand new, hovering father free existence (sans the mandatory calls), I felt pretty good about my life. The school work was hard but interesting and I was learning as much after the lectures as I was learning during. I cultivated both friendships and industry contacts, Chester, the social butterfly that he was, helping me with both.

“A rave?” I asked, as the red-haired man told me about his group of friends, cobbled from different years and possibly even different universities, that was planning to go to a club.

“Kinda? Close enough.” He waved an uncaring hand. “There will be some electronic music, but I’m pretty sure they play pop and rock and whatever takes their fancy as well, so it’s more like a disco than a rave. But listen, listen! The important thing is there’s gonna be fluorescent paint .”

“On... walls?”

“On people!” Chester grinned wide because he knew he had me.

A few days later, it turned out that while getting all three of the cats I liked in the same place was next to impossible to do, gathering all three of my neighbors was pretty easy. Though, honestly, I expected to catch them together at their flat I frequently visited, before meeting the trio like this.

“You didn’t warn me your roommates are coming!” I dragged Chester to the side to hiss at him accusingly. “What am I supposed to do with... with all of this?”

I gestured feebly at Rowan, who wore black leather pants and a freaking mesh shirt . I could see his nipples! They were standing at attention because it was cold in the queue to the club. And don't get me started on Elijah. He wore all white . Pure white loose pants and a white vest. All that knowing his clothes were going to get dirty with the fluorescent paint. He practically made himself into a target! A walking, sexy target. Gods, I wanted to dirty him up.

Compared to the two men, Chester looked almost unremarkable in his red jeans and a t-shirt proclaiming him a Hard Twerking Citizen. But the moment he gave me his mischievous smile I found him as hard to ignore as the other two men.

“They clean up good, eh? You're welcome.” Chester winked at me, proving my theory he had something to do with the two other men looking like sin. “And as for what you are supposed to do with someone sexy... find me later and I can demonstrate.”

He skipped back to his companions, leaving me speechless.

When I finally got inside and joined the buzzing crowd waiting for the fluorescent paints to be passed around, I decided this was the worst kind of experience. Have you ever been to a restaurant where all the dishes looked amazing but you could pick only one of them? That was my current situation. The club was chock full of young, spry bodies, often dressed to entice, but my eyes inevitably slid back to the three familiar shapes.

It's not like I didn't know how attractive they were before, but now it was in my face. Sometimes literally, as Chester was challenged to put his mouth where his shirt was and started twerking. Right in front of my salad! I almost did a spit take of the fruity drink I was holding when I saw that squeezable butt being put to good use.

A second later I was distracted by an arm thrown around my shoulders and looked at

Rowan with surprise. His eyes flicked to the side, and I followed his gaze to a group of giggling girls who now were regarding me with jealousy, pouts on their pretty faces.

“Did you just use me as a shield against fangirls?” I asked disbelievingly.

Rowan shrugged, not at all apologetic for using me as a tactical diversion. I could feel the movement intimately, as he still didn’t take his arm away. There were muscles under that arm. They shifted enticingly. It was driving me mad. I couldn’t just stand there, so I grabbed at the mesh shirt and pulled mister dark, tall, and handsome to the dance floor.

“Payment for my protection,” I said gruffly.

“Mafia?” Rowan asked amusedly, as short worded as usual.

“What, you don’t think I would make a good mafioso?” I challenged, making a James Bond pose, my hands held in the shape of a gun.

Rowan lifted his brow, and I knew he was mocking my very non-mafioso look. Alright, so maybe a colorful tie-dye crop top with a short black skirt and blue leggings underneath wasn’t the most terrifying of outfits. I left most of my extensive wardrobe back at my dad’s mansion and had to do with what I had. The plan was to go on a clothing shopping spree under the guise of starting my new life — new clothes, new you, and all that — but I was too busy to make good on that promise to myself.

“I’m in disguise,” I shot back and Rowan nodded and mimed zipping his lips.

When the bass notes of a new song dropped, the man rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck as if he were preparing for a fight before he offered his hand to me.

The first twirl nearly made me stumble, but then I laughed and found the rhythm of the fast, energetic song. Rowan led as if he had expectations of me. Every fast step, every mirrored pose, or a lean against his body as he crouched lower and lower was a test. I thrilled in meeting his expectations but the times when I didn't, when he changed his grip at the last moment to prevent me from falling if I had too little momentum for a move or dipped me in a pose to cover for my mistake, were the ones that truly stuck in my mind. He had mastery not only of himself but of me during that dance.

The heat of his body when he pressed close, those capable hands keeping me safe... I was glad I had the excuse of a few athletic rounds of dance because my breath was coming short by the time we stopped.

We stared at each other while the world around us fell away. It felt like we were on the verge of something. Something that didn't need words but needed action.

I reached for him.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and other persons of interest, we are ready to blow your mind!" I let my hand fall as we turned to the DJ on the main stage. "Swing by one of the paint tables to get yourself started with our welcome pack! Remember folks, this is a cooperative exercise. Share the color you get with those who want it. We are leaving the bright light on for this song to let you get sorted and, when we switch it off and turn the black light on, we will see what you have done with yourself! Are you ready to make some mess?!"

A responding cry rose from the crowd and I joined in, though I was already looking around for one of the promised paint tables. Rowan tapped my shoulder and nodded for me to follow. We found not only our goal but Chester and Elijah as well.

"Quickly!" I hurried the men to the side once we had four different paint colors in our

possession, one for each person. “Give the jars to me and Chester. You won’t regret it.”

We pooled our resources together and, as the artists of the group, my fellow student and I took charge of the designs. I had ideas, and I would not be deterred.

“You need to look fierce,” I pointed to Rowan. “Let’s go with war paint style. Chester, can you start on it?”

“Sure, but Lisa, I will leave my mark on you tonight, even if I have to hunt you down in the darkness,” Chester warned.

“Yes, yes, go, we don’t have much time! Elijah... how about we add some colorful swirls to your arms? Yes, that should work,” I muttered to myself, already dipping my finger into the neon green paint.

Elijah’s cheeks went on fire as I started drawing on him. I had to make every stroke count before the current song ended, but I took a second to enjoy the sensation of the soft skin under my fingertips. Four of my fingers took on different colors as I used them to spread the paint colors around in a controlled chaos of swirls and spirals. I liked having Elijah as my canvas. He was a work of art before I got my fingers on him, but I could add to that and enjoy the sense of accomplishment it gave me.

With a start, I realized the song was slowing down, coming to a close.

“Shit! Chester, give me your arm!”

I pulled at the redhead and frantically painted the design I had in mind on him, hoping it was going to be eligible enough when the lights switched to the UV, and steadfastly ignored Chester’s protests that he wanted to paint me as well.

In the end, I managed to brand him but he didn't mark me.

With mischief in my eyes, I pressed my paint-covered palm to Elijah's pristine white clothes, leaving a colorful handprint, then used the chaos of the switching lights and the DJ bellowing to get this party started, to vanish.

Chester promised to hunt me down.

Well, I was waiting.

With a bounce in my step, I fell into dancing, finding joy in the press of bodies rubbing against each other. While the borders of propriety were always thin on a dance floor, with the addition of the fluorescent paint they seemed to be blown away. A pretty girl put the first streak on me, a blue line down my arm, then a man left smears of pink on my blue leggings as he pressed his own paint-coated legs against mine when we danced together. By the third person, I wasn't even sure who was putting which color where. The paint transferred easily and my own touches spread it as well, as I lost myself in the thrill of dancing and unstoppable human contact.

When Chester found me I was almost completely covered in green, blue, red, pink, and yellow splotches. The golden retriever of a man walked... no, wait, stalked towards me, cutting through the throngs of people, uncaring that he was forcing his way between dancing couples. I shot him a grin over my shoulder as I grooved with my current partner.

I didn't get a smile in return.

Instead, my dancing partner cursed softly and backed away from me. Chester's glare was fascinating and apparently powerful.

This wasn't the always happy and ridiculous golden retriever I knew. Right now,

Chester was a wolf on a hunt.

I felt that on my own skin as he herded me to the edge of the dance floor and pressed me against one of the big circular pillars. The stone was cold against my back as Chester leaned close enough to be heard over the pounding music.

“You let everyone touch you,” he sneered. “Dirty little girl. I was the one supposed to mark you and now there’s no space on your body free from the touch of others.”

Chester may not be nice now, but he was still as intense as always. Everything the redhead felt he felt strongly and apparently that translated to jealousy. The green-eyed monster had him firmly in his grasp and I basked in my success.

In a great mood, I let myself relax in his possessive grasp.

“There is. A space no one else has touched,” I clarified at his look. “Put the paint on your fingers.”

Chester glared at me as if he wasn’t sure if he could trust my new scheme but took the little jar of red paint from his pocket and coated the fingers of his right hand with it.

My throat bobbed as I swallowed before reaching for his wrist and directing his hand to where he could mark me.

“There,” I said. “Touch me.”

His fingers slid not only under my crop top but under the sports bra I wore as well. His body moved closer as he used his bulk to hide what we were doing, to hide me from the eyes of others as his thumb circled my nipple and I hid a gasp in the crook of his neck.

“Hmm, maybe I will forgive you for letting those undeserving people touch you. Now, tell me, where else can I touch you?”

“Greedy!” I laughed, then moaned as he cupped my breast with his whole hand. “Who said you can touch anywhere else?”

“Then I have to make the best of what I am given.”

“Ah!”

The fucker pinched my nipple! The tremor of lust that shot through my body was too much. And my exclamation was loud enough that some guy was looking at us with wide eyes now. Flushing, I pulled Chester’s hand from under my crop top.

Despite our play time being cut short he still looked smugly satisfied.

“You tired of the dancing yet? Elijah wanted to try some of those radioactive looking drinks,” he said.

“Let’s find him,” I nodded. “I find myself quite... thirsty.”

“I bet you are,” Chester said with a cheerful grin. Ah, there it was, the cute doggo back in the place of the dangerous wolf.

On our way over to the bar I looked Chester over and then it was my time for a smug grin.

“I see my little prompt worked,” I said, gesturing at the hundreds of small and big hearts decorating Chester’s arms, face, and even clothes. The others may have followed my work after saying the scribbled ‘give me your heart’, but I was the first one to draw a blue heart right under the prompt.



“It made finding you harder when people stopped me to draw hearts on me,” Chester pouted. “I’m sure it was all a part of your dastardly plan.”

“Ha, at least one of you recognizes I can be an evil mastermind!” I beamed.

We found our companions near the bar when Elijah waved us over to their table. It had one of those circular couches and I was promptly squished between rambunctious Chester and sheepish Elijah.

“Got tired of the dancing already?” I asked.

Rowan shrugged, which I interpreted as ‘I could keep going all night’ and Elijah winced. I zeroed in on that last reaction, my brow raising questioningly.

“I’m not very skilled at dancing...” Elijah mumbled and seemed to sink into himself, trying to hide his bigger body.

“You see those three people there?” I pointed at a nearby group on the dance floor. “They are literally just jumping up and down to the rhythm. And those two?” I pointed out a couple. “That’s just making out with music added to the mix. You will be fine out there. As long as you want to dance. Do you?”

Elijah opened and then closed his mouth, only to get visibly frustrated when the words didn’t want to come.

“With you,” Rowan said succinctly, and Chester immediately picked up his thought.

“Ooh, Elijah wants to dance, but only with you, Lisa! Is that true, El?” the redhead teased the shy man.

Elijah collected all of his bravery and put it in one word.

“Yes.”

Then he promptly hid behind his hands.

He was so cute I could eat him up.

“How about we let those two order the radioactive drinks you wanted to try, and we hit the dance floor in the meantime?”

“I will order the drinks!” Chester offered, standing up and conveniently unblocking my way out.

I squeezed out from the booth and Elijah followed, even if there was a flicker of trepidation in his gaze.

My hand found his and I squeezed it reassuringly as I led us far enough away we didn’t have to worry about familiar eyes watching our every move.

The song that was playing was nothing more edgy than pop music so I jumped straight into the rhythm, starting with just the simplest moves as me and Elijah faced each other, not wanting to overwhelm the poor man with the kind of acrobatics I practiced with Rowan. There was a bead of sweat sneaking down the brown-haired man’s temple even before we properly got going, and I noticed Elijah was watching me like a hawk, repeating any new move I made instead of trying to complement it. That wasn’t bad per se, but I wondered... I started adding more complicated moves that required both good memorization and reflexes and Elijah copied nearly all of them flawlessly. That was impressive.

“Let’s try this,” I sent a dimpled smile in his direction before I jumped next to him, switching my position so that we were side by side. “You are pretty good at synchronized dancing so I think you will learn some of the meme dances easily. Just

repeat after me.”

Turned out repetition and structure were Elijah’s friends and once he got a dance down there was a bounce in his step. By the time Rowan came to fetch us for the drinks Elijah was flushed from the exertion but grinning. I think it raised his confidence when a group of students spotted us doing a dance from a recent movie and joined us, creating a group around us and letting Elijah lead the dance.

“That was fun,” the writer shared as we slipped back into the booth. “Much less stressful than dancing with someone and having to come up with my own moves.”

“I will teach you more dances next time,” I promised. “But we need to do one thing first.”

“What’s that?” Elijah asked politely.

“You need to know where those dances came from, duh!” I grinned. “I will show you all the games, shows, performances, and tiktoks that were the origin of the best and funniest dances.”

“You want to assign me homework?” Elijah asked dryly.

“It’s not homework if it’s fun!”

“Young lady, you are not getting my friend into Fortnite,” Chester said sternly.

“What? Afraid he will be better at it than you?” I shot back.

“Git gud,” Rowan piped up from his corner.

We high-fived while Chester groaned and Elijah looked amused.

The arrival of the radioactive drinks pushed the conversation to nuclear wastelands of the cyberpunk future. The topic swiftly turned into zombie apocalypse scenarios and speculations about who would have the best chance to survive such an ordeal.

I shook my head, smiling to myself and sipping my neon green drink as the three men bickered. This evening was turning out to be truly wonderful. Shame they had some wrong opinions.

I slammed my drink on the wooden table.

“Strap in, buckos, because I will explain to you how wrong you are. And why I am the best companion to have in a zombie apocalypse,” I declared, then launched into a long, detailed spiel.

The laughter at our table was louder than the booming music.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

Rowan was our designated driver, staying sober all night, and he herded us to the car when he decided the level of drunkenness had reached critical mass.

I eyed the transparent foil spread over the back seats and had to blink the haze of alcohol from my eyes to make sure I was really seeing this.

“Oh, it’s for the paint!” I said triumphantly.

“Yeah, good job, detective,” Chester sniggered, then made an impromptu twirl as if he still didn’t have enough after all that dancing.

“Inside,” Rowan prompted, a cleaning rag in his hands as he tried to get rid of as much paint as possible off his hands.

Elijah slid in quietly while Chester was drunkenly focused on getting some entirely too complicated dance move right, which only resulted in him wobbling on his one foot and nearly braining himself against the pavement. Rowan caught Chester in time and pushed him inside after making sure I slid into the middle seat.

With the middle-of-night reduction in traffic the trip back took us only half an hour, but it was enough for me to doze off. I was tired after so many hours of partying.

I woke in the middle of the ride to Chester drooling on my shoulder and Elijah looking at me longingly. On impulse, I pulled the brown-haired man so that he could lay his head on my shoulder as well, then promptly went back to sleep.

The less said about us getting out of the car and up the stairs to our apartments the

better.

Rowan left me in my apartment to deal with his roommates, only to return a few minutes later and make me take a vitamin B complex pill and drink a full glass of water in hopes of stewing off my hangover.

I felt a little more human after he left, but still not good enough to get all the paint off me, knowing it would involve washing my long, blond hair and a lot of scrubbing. Just the idea made me nauseous. With that in mind, I decided on the way of least effort and only washed my hands and face then chucked my good pillows, the Gokudakimakura, and the white duvet to the floor, deciding one of my old pillows, a ratty blanket, and the bedsheet were acceptable casualties.

My eyes were already closing when I heard a sound and peered over the bed.

“Meow!” Marshmallow said loudly. He was usually such a polite cat. What was with this noise? Was this punishment from the gods, sent to worsen the pounding in my head?

“Shh, shh, come here if you want,” I potted the space next to me.

The fluffy cloud readied himself to jump... only to fail short of its destination. My eyebrows rose at the sound of the claws scratching over the wooden side of the bed and the pitiful meowing.

I watched the ungraceful attempts at scrambling onto the bed, transfixed.

“What, are you drunk as well?” I joked. It was as if the Pers suddenly had four left feet.

In the end, I bent over the edge of the bed, ignoring how the world swirled around

me, to pick the cat up and cuddle him close.

I fell asleep to his machine-gun-loud purring.

When I saw the white cat after I woke up, I laughed so hard the sound stabbed straight into my hungover brain.

Marshmallow looked at me, all disgruntled.

“Well, I thought those of us who were drinking would be the ones regretting their choices today, but I see you are a strong contender, Marshmallow.”

The usually pristine white cat was now rainbow-colored. The leftover paint on my body had rubbed all over his fur during the night when we snuggled close.

“You look so cute,” I cooed at the poor animal, then whipped my phone out to take pictures.

I only got a single good photo before Marshmallow spotted what I was doing and hid under the bed.

“Hey, there’s no need for that,” I tried to soothe the now grumpy cat and lure him out. “How about I take responsibility, hmm? I got you all dirty, so I can clean you up.”

The squished face peeked out from under the bed and Marshmallow made a run... to the bathroom, instead of out the balcony door. Huh. Weird. Did he understand me? Maybe that meant he was one of those rare cats who liked water and I wouldn’t have to wrestle with him to get him back to his normal coloring.

I grabbed an additional stack of towels and entered the bathroom to see Marshmallow sitting primly on the bath runner rug. After checking the water temperature, I filled

the tub just enough to submerge the white kitty just a little, careful not to scare him. I shouldn't have worried: when I scooped the fluffy cat up and deposited him in the water he took it with calm, resigned dignity and let me clean him as much as it was possible.

I tried not to snicker at the typical wet cat look, but it was impossible when Marshmallow, as it turned out, was 80% fluff. The cat gave me a grumpy mrrph, looking pretty miserable as the water dripped down his fur.

"It will be alright," I cooed and pressed a kiss to his forehead as I took him out of the bathtub and started drying him with a towel. There was only so much I could do this way, but a more thorough date with a dryer had to wait until I could get dry as well.

I let the dirty water run and bundled Marshmallow into a cozy towel burrito. He gave me a slow blink of satisfaction and I nearly squealed at getting the honor of this expression of cat affection being directed at me. Marshmallow closed his eyes, purring.

"Such a calm, precious kitty," I praised. "Now, just wait here like a good boy while I shower."

The cat's eyes snapped open just in time to see me shuck the crop top and the bra in one go. Ugh, I hated sleeping in my bra. Now I had marks from where the fabric bit into my skin. My gaze drifted to my right boob, where another kind of mark resided. I smiled to myself at the sight of the streaks of red paint Chester's fingers left behind.

A crash sound reverberated in the bathroom.

"Hey! I said to stay in place," I scolded the cat, who just threw a bottle of shampoo over the edge of the cupboard he was sitting on while trying to escape from the towel burrito. "I will let you out in ten minutes."



Not trusting the cat to not roll off the high place, I bundled him in one more towel and put him between the cupboard and the washing basket, hoping that was going to keep him still for the time I needed. Satisfied with my brilliant plan, I hopped into the shower and gave myself a perfunctory scrub, washing my hair only once instead of doing my four-step routine. That meant that likely some of the stubborn paint was going to remain on me, but I could tackle this again when I didn't have a guest waiting for me.

I emerged from the shower naked and wet. Marshmallow made a sound like he was dying.

"Just a second, precious," I fretted, forgoing getting dressed properly and just slinging a towel around myself in my hurry to finish tending to the cat.

A dryer in my hand, I freed Marshmallow from the burrito prison.

Was he mad at me? The kitty turned his head in the other direction whenever I stepped into his line of sight. Oh well, I was going to have to work hard to regain his trust. Right now, all I could do was send the waves of heated air in his direction and card my fingers through the fur to hasten the process and prevent any tangles. Fifteen minutes later we were back to a fluffy kitty. In fact, Marshmallow looked like he had unlocked a new level of fluffiness.

"A little sheep, a cloud, a cotton ball," I sing-songed to him, delighted at how soft he felt and looked. "You're like new. No one could even guess you became a rainbow cloud for a moment... but this photo is too good not to share."

Marshmallow's ears stood up to attention in alarm, and I swear he tried to prevent me from using my phone to send the photo out. Despite the sabotage, I managed to send a photo to Rowan.

Lisa:

Just look at hiiim!

Rowan:

[laughing emoji] [rainbow emoji] [skull emoji]

Did Rowan communicate solely via emojis when using a phone? This needed thorough testing! I grinned widely, starting a rapid exchange of texts with mister tall, dark, and mysterious. It turned out that no, Rowan didn't rely only on emojis.

He used images and hilarious gifs as well.

“Look, Rowan is suggesting we should do glitter next.” I showed the video of a feline sparkling with glitter to Marshmallow.

The white cat yowled at me in protest.

“Fine, fine, no glitter for you, you big baby. Let's cuddle on the couch, far away from devious paints and glitters. How does that sound?”

This time I got an approving meow. We settled on the comfy couch, Marshmallow loafing next to me as I turned on the TV to idly watch a show. It wasn't very interesting, but I didn't want to end up in a limbo of deciding what to watch for half an hour, so I left the TV on as background noise and pulled out my phone to text Rowan some more.

Lisa:

Is Chester alive?

Rowan:

[eyes emoji] [distressed face emoji] [skull emoji]

I interpreted it as confirmation that Chester was, in fact, alive, and regretted every moment of that state.

“Poor baby,” I shook my head. “He would be much better off if his student friends didn’t find him and talked him into taking shots. He is much too social for his own good.”

Marshmallow meowed. It sounded like a confirmation. He was such a good listening buddy.

“You can’t relate, huh?” I booped the cat’s nose playfully. “Every time I visit Elijah, you hide in the bedroom, choosing to be antisocial. The cuddle time has to happen on your rules or not at all. Do you dislike Elijah or something? Who is your chosen human then? Rowan or Chester? Wait, I know...!”

My fingers flew over the phone’s keyboard again.

Lisa:

Who is Marshmallow’s favorite human?

Rowan:

[picture of me laughing at the club]

I spluttered.

One, when did he take that photo? So stealthy!

And two, was he really suggesting I was Marshmallow's fav human? It couldn't be!

As if to prove me wrong, the white cat climbed into my lap and stretched up to nuzzle my face.

"Aww, you are so sweet. Like a real Marshmallow. I could eat you up," I said, returning the affection with rubs and pats.

My phone dinged and my eyes widened. Rowan was messaging me first!

Rowan:

[white cat emoji] [ginger cat emoji] [black cat emoji] [star emoji] [question mark emoji]

A frown spread over my face. I couldn't choose which of the three cats was my favorite! Cheddar was a personification of chaos, and stupid in that absolutely endearing way of orange cats. Marshmallow was heavenly to cuddle and easy to hang out with. Shadow made me fight for his affection, but that only made it more precious that he was slowly starting to trust me... Wait...

Lisa:

How do you know about the black cat?!

Rowan:

[smiling face with an angel's halo emoji]

Lisa:

Uh-huh. Have you been stalking me, mister?

Rowan:

[shrug emoji] [eyes emoji] [heart emoji]

My face flared with a hot blush at the implied confession that he liked to watch me.

“You know what’s even harder to choose than which of the cats is my favorite?” I addressed Marshmallow, hoisting him up in front of me. “Choosing which one of my neighbors I like the most.”

“Mreow?” Marshmallow made an inquisitive sound.

I sighed and cuddled the fluffy cloud close.

“They are becoming such good friends to me. I do working dates with Elijah, and silent tea with Rowan, and let Chester drag me all around the campus... I’m scared that if I pursue anything with one of them I will hurt the others and our little friend group will fall apart,” I confessed.

Well, not like the cat could help me with that. I had to make a decision about how to proceed myself. There were three options to choose from.

At least until I found the fourth one.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

“ F or you, Lisa.”

I startled at the beautiful and delightfully colorful paper rose thrust in my direction.

“Ah, thank you, Kevin,” I said politely, taking the flower. “Some leftovers from your last stage play?”

Kevin was a theater kid and often added to the visual interest of the school plays with his handmade creations.

“No, the next scene change is in a week,” he said, then stared at me.

“He gave you flowers!” Claudia, my classmate, hissed in a not at all discreet voice.

Oh.

Oh.

“Technically Kevin has given me a flower,” I shoot back then turned back to the waiting man. “...would you like to give me more?”

Kevin nodded resolutely. “And take you on a date,” he added.

I ignored the reactions of my nosy classmates and studied my perspective date. He was nice. Kinda mild. Nothing special, but if I took a chance to know him better... He wasn't one of my neighbors who I was immediately attracted to, but maybe that was a good thing.

I would take three good friends over one boyfriend any day.

“Yeah, sure,” I smiled. “Going to take me to a play?”

Kevin gasped, his usual deadpan expression not leaving his face.

“That’s a third date activity!”

I laughed.

“Then how about we do a classic dinner date?”

“Acceptable,” Kevin agreed, adapting a haughty personality, his actor training shining through. “Shall I have my carriage pick you up, my lady?”

“That would be great. My car is giving me trouble lately, and I didn’t have time to see the mechanic yet.”

We discussed the details and agreed on a time and place. The following Friday, I looked at the time on the clock on the wall, fidgeting in my pretty dress. Kevin was only a few minutes late, but it still made me nervous.

When the knock came, I jumped to my feet and swung the door open only to freeze.

“What happened to you?” I blurted out.

Kevin looked like someone who experienced all the Friday 13ths at the same time. His smart shirt was stained with something unidentifiable and the flowers in his hand (real roses this time) looked rumpled. Was that one stalk broken?

“I have been cursed today, Lisa, that’s what happened,” he sighed. “A black cat

crossed my path, and I had to keep changing my route because it kept showing up in front of me. Then I tripped over a fucking white cat that ran between my legs and it made me scatter the roses all around. And if that wasn't enough, a psycho orange cat attacked my shirt and ripped it!" he gestured at his destroyed shirt wildly.

I had to school my expression into one of commiseration even if this deluge of accidents involving cats, cats I had a feeling I knew, was hilarious. Kevin didn't seem to see anything funny in it because he scowled and said the words that changed everything.

"God, I hate cats."

Being wary of those animals after what happened would be understandable, but he said those words with such feeling I knew his hatred for cats wasn't a recent development. And if anything was a red flag for me, it was hatred for cats or dogs, or any animals really. I should have known when he started talking about black cats bringing bad luck that he wasn't a good match for me.

Now I didn't really want to go on a date with this man and his wrong opinions.

"But what kept me going was the idea of seeing you," Kevin said with a smile and offered me the flowers.

Well, this was awkward. How does one say that you aren't interested anymore?

I was saved by my neighbors coming up the stairs.

"Hey Lisa, we fixed your car!" Chester said and threw a bundle of keys in my direction.

I caught them automatically, my mind still processing the fact that they apparently



stole my car keys... to fix my car for me?!

“...thanks?” I said,

“And who’s this?” Elijah asked politely, eying the man in front of my door.

“This is Kevin, Kevin my neighbors,” I introduced, not going into the names of the three men as Kevin was already narrowing his eyes at them.

“Kevin, right. Lisa never mentioned you,” Elijah smiled.

Kevin spluttered, his fingers tightening on the still not accepted bouquet.

Rowan chose the moment to squeeze past me into my flat and sprawl on the couch.

“How about we take out the car for a test ride and you take us somewhere nice, darling?” Chester suggested, throwing his arm around my shoulders, forcing Kevin to take a step back as he didn’t link past like Rowan, but bulldozed his way to me.

“What is this farce?” Kevin hissed, his cheeks growing red with fury.

“Maybe you just have bad luck today,” Elijah smiled at him, then shifted his attention to me. “I got the almond coffee syrup you liked for you,” the man presented me with the small bottle and I took it.

Kevin threw his roses onto the floor.

“Fuck this,” was all he said as he turned on his heel and stomped out of the building.

With a sigh, I stepped back into my flat, not at all surprised when I ended up with all three of my neighbors in my space.

“Are you done pissing all over your territory?” I asked bluntly.

“Ew, pissing is such a vile term. We were just... scent marking,” Chester grinned.

“You scared my date away, you villains,” I scoffed.

“Not villains. Vigilantes,” Rowan piped up.

“Right, we were mean for a good reason,” Elijah nodded. “You looked awfully uncomfortable in that doorway.”

My shoulders slumped.

“You could tell?”

“We have come to know you,” Elijah said gently. “And you should never look like you did when someone is offering you flowers. You seemed to be in need of an excuse to call this date off so we only filled the required roles.”

“Well, I, for one, still enjoyed taunting that fucker.”

“Chester!” I scolded but had to do it through a bout of giggles.

The situation felt surreal. Here I was trying to run from them, only for them to run towards me.

“Food,” Rowan said, staring at me.

“Jeez, yes, I get it.” I rolled my eyes. “Gentlemen, would you accompany me to a restaurant? My treat, as thanks for fixing my car.”

We piled into my car and to my surprise it really ran smoothly, without the scary clanking noise it had produced before. Guess I had to forgive them for helping themselves to my keys if that was the effect. I brought the three men to a tapas place I was salivating to try.

“Do you want to make me go bankrupt?” I mock-complained as Rowan inhaled a whole plate of empanadas.

“It’s hard to believe all of that food fits in his thin body,” Chester nodded his head sagely.

Rowan glared and pointedly showed his biceps. He was pretty tall and slender but his body was one of an athlete.

“Yes, yes, you are perfect. You don’t have to show off,” I muttered.

Rowan leaned forward intently.

“I think he is waiting for you to praise him some more,” Elijah chuckled.

“I’m not doing that!” I spluttered.

Rowan looked so disappointed as he leaned back and slumped in his chair I hesitated.

“Fine,” I groaned. “I maaay have been calling you ‘tall, dark, and handsome’ in my head.”

“Do me next! Me! Me!” Chester nearly climbed onto the table as he waved his hand in the air.

“I would not be opposed to receiving words of praise as well,” Elijah said quietly, his

words nearly drowned under Chester's enthusiasm.

"You're not the worst," I deadpanned at Chester. My gaze softened when I turned my attention to Elijah. "You make me want to commit only arson and not homicide, when I work on the school assignments by your side."

"Heh, high praise indeed!" Chester clapped Elijah on the shoulder.

I was joking but, at the same time, I was unbearably serious. The work dates with Elijah have been a godsend and I enjoyed our quiet talks when we pushed our work to the side for a moment of reprieve or when Elijah told me about his books.

"What about me?" I tossed my hair over my shoulder. "What praise do I get?"

"You are my duck," Elijah blurted out, then looked as if he wanted to spring out of the restaurant.

"...thanks? I guess?" I said, baffled.

"It's this concept guys in IT use, right? Talking to a yellow duckie?" Chester asked.

"Yes," Elijah said, fighting his blush. "What I meant to say is you help me gather my thoughts and come up with new ideas when I'm stuck and have to talk about a particular stubborn plot point. Programmers have this tradition of talking to a rubber duck to solve their problems because sometimes you just have to talk about something out loud to discover a new approach or find an obvious solution or... I just mean you are amazing, Lisa."

I was struck speechless by such an explanation.

"I'm your duckie?" I beamed at the man. "Even if it has a logical explanation, this is

still the sweetest thing anyone ever said to me.”

“Elijah, man, did you have to set the bar so high?” Chester groaned, sprawling onto the table and pushing his dishes away in his dramatic tiff.

Rowan shook his head at his antics and pulled out his phone. His fingers flew over the screen and not long after my phone pinged with a new message.

That was a lot of emojis.

There were sparkles and stars and sun and moon. My screen was covered in flowers, and fire, and an emoji of a cat with hearts in its eyes. A dancing woman, a crown, a bird, a unicorn, a doughnut, spicy pepper... I laughed when I saw the cheese emoji.

“Why cheese?” I asked and turned the screen away to prevent Chester from peeking at the message.

A second later I got an image of an old book proclaiming ‘You may fascinate a woman by giving her a piece of cheese’.

That was... apparently correct. Damn it, it did work! The hooded stare Rowan sent me told me he knew it as well.

“Whatever Rowan sent you seems to meet your approval,” Elijah grinned. “So now we have only our resident redhead left.”

“I’m not good with words,” Chester mumbled.

We all stared.

The resident chatterbox didn’t think he was good with words?

“I can spew words all day, but that doesn’t mean they matter!” he exclaimed, frustration evident in his voice.

“Then don’t say it with words,” I said gently. “Rowan found his own way to show me what he meant...”

The redhead looked at the ceiling in despair before he blinked once, twice, and that wide smile returned to his face.

“I can draw you!”

The declaration was immediately followed by Chester rummaging in his back and giving a triumphant cry as he found a sketching pad and a pencil, the two things he always had at hand, as the muse could strike at any time.

I amused myself with the food and conversation with Elijah and Rowan while Chester was possessed by his inspiration. The pencil flew across the page, and he looked up occasionally to study me intently for a minute before he went back to the furious scribbling.

Whatever the final result was, I knew it was going to be full of passion.

The sky outside turned completely dark by the time he was done.

“Rowan, my man, switch with me,” Chester requested, and they swapped seats so that the redhead was next to me for the great reveal.

I was excited to discover how Chester saw me.

When the sketchpad was turned towards me, my breath caught in my lungs.

My visage was captured in a profile, with my lips parted, and my hair cascading around my shoulders like a waterfall. The flowing lines, thicker contours, and the pose of my figure draped in a fabric twisting around my body paid homage to one of my favorite artists, Alphonse Mucha. His signature style was complemented by a rosette in the background with the Art Nouveau decorations.

I looked ethereal, pulchritudinous, beauteous. What other fancy word for beautiful was there? I needed them all to describe the sketch in my hand. I took in every detail, my eyes tracing the folds of the dress, the curling strands of hair, the...

“Is that a taco in the background?!”

“Well, I was inspired by what I saw before me!” Chester exclaimed.

“You made me into a taco goddess?” I looked at him in disbelief.

“I can take it back if you don’t want it! I will make you a goddess of... of... of lettuce next time!”

“Don’t you dare. As a taco goddess, I demand a sacrifice! Minions, bring me more tacos!”

“Shouldn’t you be giving us tacos?” Elijah asked teasingly.

“I’m already paying for them. That is the blessing of the taco goddess,” I said sagely.

By those three men’s designation, I was a taco goddess in the shape of a duck, who was fascinated by cheese.

My life certainly won’t be boring with those three around , I thought with a smile.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

That three-way date – because what else could I call it when we had a competition on praising each other ? – made a seed of hope grow in my chest. I was still certain choosing only one of my neighbors would ruin things between all of us, but maybe, just maybe, I didn't have to choose only one of them.

The thought was like a bolt of lightning to my brain; it ignited my imagination and left me on fire. My caution burned to ashes in the fiery tornado of possibility. If there was even a slight chance of getting all of them I was going to fight for it.

And the way they were with each other... there was a strong bond of friendship between them. They were a package deal. We could make this work. We could .

I gave myself a moment to think about how best to approach the situation and took a long walk around the city. During the day the nearby park was bustling with life so I decided it was safe enough to go there and take in the greenery and the sounds of life.

Deep breath in, hold it, let the air out.

I made my decision.

With purpose in my steps, I went back to my flat, intending to lay the cards down on the table.

I wanted them. All three of them.

Before I reached my block I heard angry yowling and sprinted in the direction of the sound. A cat was in trouble!



I stopped in shock when I saw it was Chester scruffing a familiar black cat.

“Enough running! We are going to have a talk,” the redhead said with narrowed eyes, ignoring the hissing and twisting of the cat.

“It’s time we end this,” Elijah nodded from Chester’s side, his expression serious.

The bigger man opened the door to the building for his friend and the distressed cat in his grasp.

Why did they have Shadow? What did Elijah mean by ‘end this’? Couldn’t they see how panicked the black cat was? It was no way to treat an animal!

My stomach clenched as the rose glasses of friendship cracked a little. Were they going to hurt Shadow? I didn’t bring it up during our date, but the cats who bothered Kevin sounded awfully like Shadow, Cheddar, and Marshmallow. I could understand Shadow being aggressive as I had seen him hiss at the people who gave him bad vibes, but the other two shouldn’t even be out of the apartment. In retrospect, it was disturbing how uncaring my neighbors were about letting their cats go as they pleased and vanish for half a day or night in my flat. And when I visited there was always one hiding in the bedroom... now I wondered if the cats were really there or if my neighbors lied to me while their cats were missing, or if they put them outside themselves... If Shadow was their runaway it was another red flag that they never told me to keep an eye out for a black cat and didn’t ask for details when I mentioned one in passing.

I had such a bad feeling about this.

My steps led me to their door for a different confrontation than I had planned.

With dread settling in my stomach, I knocked loudly on the door.

“Where’s the black cat?” I asked bluntly.

“What black cat?” Chester appeared with a big smile.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about.” I narrowed my eyes at him.  
“I saw you carry him here. While he was crying and trying to escape.”

“Haha, this is not what it looks like, I swear!” Chester laughed nervously.

“Isn’t it? Then show me that the black cat is safe and hale. No, show me all of your cats. I want to check all three of them,” I demanded.

Rowan appeared from one of the bedrooms, his expression stormy as he gave Chester and Elijah a side-eye. Did he disagree with the other two about something? Like... the treatment of the cats?

“There’s nothing to worry about. The kitties are safe, I promise!” the ginger said.

“That’s lovely to hear. You won’t mind then if I see for myself.”

I forced my way into the flat, which is to say the three men were too panicked to bodily block me as they knew they would need to use excessive strength to stop me, with the way determination filled my body.

Chester started to spin some story I wouldn’t believe in a thousand years. I ignored him soundly. They watched helplessly as I tore through every room. The flat was small, so it was quick work to open the rooms and even the bathroom to peer inside. One cat, maybe two, could be hidden somewhere, like under the bed, or on top of a wardrobe, but I refused to believe none of the three cats would come to me as I called for them.

Cheddar, Marshmallow, and Shadow were not here.

“What did you do with them?!” I shouted, focusing on my anger because otherwise I felt like I would burst into tears.

“They are perfectly fine. I swear, Lisa,” Elijah said, his voice trembling.

“Let’s just all calm down—” Chester started.

“Prove it,” I demanded. “Prove to me that you are good men and not some monsters who hurt animals. Please .”

My lower lip trembled as I slowly realized whatever it was I probably couldn’t do anything to make those three men confess. The only thing I probably could do was to ugly cry at them until they got tired of the noise.

Rowan stood in the middle of the room, his gaze considering. He stepped towards me and I flinched.

“It’s time,” he said, facing his roommates. “No more secrets. Let me.”

“You really want to...?” Chester asked. He looked scared. “I think... I think I want it too.”

Both men looked at Elijah. His face was pale and he closed his eyes as if he was in pain, but when he opened them again his gaze was resolute.

“The clowder has decided. I hereby grant you permission. May you hold our secret gently, Lisa.”

“What secret? What’s going—” I started to ask, but my words stuck in my throat as

Rowan turned to me and changed.

Where once stood a tall and dark man now sat a cat.

Shadow jumped at me and my arms caught him automatically, cradling the suddenly affectionate cat to my chest.

“Dibs on not having to explain this!” Chester called and promptly changed into an orange cat.

Cheddar wound around my legs, purring up a storm.

I looked to Elijah for answers.

“Traitors. Fuck this. I’m not explaining this alone,” he declared.

And then I had three cats around me.

I laughed so hard I had to stumble to the couch to sit down. The cats took that as a free-for-all invitation and suddenly I had a lap full of Marshmallow. Chester attacked my boots as if he took offense that I hadn’t taken them off yet and revealed his favorite targets known as socks. Shadow perched on the back of the couch and sniffed my hair.

I turned my head to my constant nightly companion and the cat bonked me with his head. Tears threatened to spring to my eyes again, but this time there were tears of relief and of that singularly amazing type of pride you could only feel when a cat chose you and only you. The hard-won affection felt like the highest achievement of my life.

Something settled in me as I knew all three kitties were safe and happy and here, with

me. I was going to deal with the rest of this mess eventually, but, for now, I took simple pleasure in caressing silky fur and feeling purrs reverberate through me.

My neighbors were cats?

My cats were three beautiful men I had a crush on?

The cats were ok?

Magic, or at least shifters, existed?

Wrapping my head around all of this took some time.

“I gave you a bath,” I said to Marshmallow/Elijah, who visibly cringed even if he was in his cat form. “You ate my trash in front of me,” I pointed at Cheddar/Chester, who was entirely unashamed of his action both then and now. He gave me his signature cute blep in response. “And you... you saved me from a mugger!” Shadow/Rowan preened and threw a smug look at the two other cats.

A giggle built in my chest and I couldn’t help but let it out.

The three men stayed in their cat forms until the mental exhaustion of the day took hold of me and I fell into slumber on the couch with three cats around me.

By the time I woke up from my nap they were back in their human forms.

It was time to talk.

## Page 11

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I measured all three men with an inquisitive stare before I spoke.

“Explain.”

“Rock, paper, scissors?” Chester grinned sheepishly at his roommates.

“No,” Elijah stepped forward. “It’s time I took my responsibilities as the leader seriously. I will try to explain the best I can.” He took a deep breath in. “As you saw last night, we are shifters. A fact we endeavor to keep hidden.”

“The permission you gave was to approve of revealing your secret?” I asked, everything coming together now that I wasn’t in the middle of a crazy moment.

“Yes, it’s...” Elijah searched for a word.

“A big deal!” Chester chimed in.

“Sacred,” Rowan said at the same time.

“It’s necessary to reveal the secret, which is not only our secret but concerns the survival of all the shifters that hide from public scrutiny, only to those who are deemed trustworthy,” Elijah continued.

“You... you really trust me with this?” I asked, stumped.

“If there is one thing I am sure about, it’s that you would never endanger a cat,” Elijah smiled at me. “And we are cats, aren’t we?”

I huffed and crossed my arms.

“Give yourself some credit. I won’t reveal your secret, but it’s not only because you are extremely cuddly as a cat.”

“I assure you I am extremely cuddly in both forms,” Elijah said proudly.

“Let’s not get distracted.” I narrowed my eyes, even if I was very interested in testing that theory. “Okay, you are magic or whatever. I can roll with that. What bugs me is why you inserted yourself into my life so thoroughly. Chester sought me out immediately at the University and crawled into my home as Cheddar with no hesitation. Rowan stalked me as a cat...”

“Kept you safe,” Rowan huffed. I ignored him.

“...and Elijah pursued companionship with me as a human before I spotted his cat form. You were keeping tabs on me wherever I was. You got so close to me... I thought... I let myself... Have you been hired by my father?”

I hoped they would protest but the silence was telling. Elijah nodded in the end, confirming my suspicions. My heart was breaking and I couldn’t hide the hurt in my eyes.

“Wait, so when you scared Kevin off... it was on my father’s orders?!”

“No, Lisa,” Chester stopped forward to herd me against the wall. How he seemed to loom over me when he was shorter than me was beside me. “By that time I did it not because I was paid to do it... but because I wanted you.”

Chester kissed me with all the passion and vibrant energy that could barely be contained in him. For a moment I let myself be swept in the strong current of the kiss,

letting my lips part, enjoying the thrill of slickness of meeting tongues. But when we parted, still keeping so close we shared the same air, the world interfered.

I caught how Elijah flinched and stepped back when he saw the kiss. The gaze he dragged away from us was unfathomably sad. He was ceding the ground just because Chester kissed me first...

Rowan, on the other hand, did not prescribe to the rule of dibs. He stepped toward us with deadly calmness, making Chester straighten in alarm, then grabbed my chin and kissed me himself.

If Chester's kiss was raw passion, this was a tease. A brush of lips to make me want more. A placeholder. A promise that it could turn into more, but it wouldn't yet.

"You want all three of us," Rowan said quietly, but in the silence of the room he may have been as well shouting.

My lips were dry as I tried to shape the words.

"Yes."

"We want you as well!" Chester beamed. "Right guys? We were just talking about it when you knocked..."

Rowan and Chester had already made their want clear with a kiss, but I looked towards Elijah. He looked rooted to the spot.

"Elijah?" I asked. "Can I have a kiss?"

That made him move. He took my hand and brushed his lips against it before he took my lips in a careful, hesitant kiss. We ended up holding hands and I could feel his



shake slightly.

“Does this mean I can really have all of you?” I whispered when we parted.

“Not yet,” Rowan said and pulled out his phone. When the video connection flared to life on the screen, he thrust the phone at Elijah and I scrambled out of view.

“Good evening, sir,” Elijah said to the mystery person.

“Evening, do you have an update on my butterfly?”

I froze as I recognized the voice of my overbearing father.

“In a matter of speaking,” Elijah swallowed, then steeled himself. “We quit, sir.”

“What?! You can’t! Who will watch over my flower? I can give you more money. How much do you want? Five grand? Fifty? Done! Now be a good bodyguard and go back to your work.”

“With all due respect, sir, we made our decision and will not be bought.”

“Really? Everyone can be bought. If money doesn’t do it for you, how about being blacklisted from the industry, hmm?” my dad said smugly and I wanted to punch him. “Just a few words in correct ears and your little high-profile bodyguarding gig will crumble like a house of cards.”

I couldn’t take this anymore.

Before the men could stop me I snatched the phone and pointed the camera towards me.

“I thought better of you, father,” I said and saw him splutter. “And you shouldn’t make enemies of my new boyfriends . After all, you are going to see them for Thanksgiving.”

Not waiting for his response, I jabbed at the screen to close the call.

“Holy shit,” Chester whispered, awe in his voice.

“I guess it’s official now... Boyfriends?” Elijah asked shyly.

“Yours,” Rowan said and headbutted me gently, like his cat form did not long ago when Shadow wanted to show affection.

“I hope you will have time to drive a few states over for Thanksgiving?” I said, frustrated by all that raw affection. “It’s only two weeks away, so if you have other plans...”

“No plans,” Rowan shrugged.

“Don’t know if you have heard, but we are unemployed now,” Chester teased.

“Speak for yourself. I still have my books to write,” Elijah pouted.

“About that...” I bit my lip before I continued. “...if our work dates were only because you had to keep tabs on me and you would rather be left alone to work in peace...”

“No! No,” Elijah jumped immediately to hold my hands in his. “It’s honestly a delight to have you next to me when I write, or edit, or brainstorm... or anything, really.”

“Sometimes he would just stare at you, completely entranced,” Chester revealed, his eyes in mischievous crescents as he tried to keep his laughter in.

“You menace!” Elijah pointed at the man who had accompanied us many times in the form of a cat. “Betrayer! I’m not going to help you the next time you get your head stuck in a jar!”

“I don’t mind you staring,” I said, feeling a blush creep up my cheeks. “I have to admit I have caught myself appreciating the sight before me as well... especially when you bite your lip and look so focused on the story as if the whole world is replaced by the one that lives in your head and flows onto paper as your words.”

“Really?” Elijah asked.

We would be staring, getting lost in each other’s eyes for forever, if not for Rowan coughing to get our attention.

“Evicted,” he said succinctly and showed us the message he just got.

“The landlord is trying to evict you because no pets are allowed in the flat?!” I asked in disbelief after reading the short missive. “That’s bullshit! She saw Rowan with Cheddar in his arms last Wednesday and only cooed at the cat. She made no problem then, which means...”

We looked at each other in understanding.

“Your father,” Elijah nodded.

“Fuck, we have till the end of the day to pack our things,” Chester swore. “Damn, I like this flat and we just moved here a few weeks before you. It’s hard to find anything good so close to the university.”

“That’s one thing that keeps bothering me... how are you a second year at the university I’m attending if it’s all a setup?” I asked, my brows furrowing in confusion. “Did you fake studying there?”

“I don’t know if I should be hurt or tickled pink that you think I could pull something like that off,” Chester said. “And you got it backward; it was a crime of opportunity. Rowan had heard about a bodyguard job in our city and me already studying at the university you would be going to was one of the reasons our team was chosen over all the others. I told you education pays off.” Chester shot finger guns at the two men, who shook their heads at his antics.

“But now we have to find a new flat and pack up... on very short notice,” Elijah sighed. “I imagined the day I finally got my first kiss would go a bit different.”

“It was your first kiss?!” I gasped out. “Here’s a second one, and a third, and—”

“Mngh!” I didn’t let Elijah speak as I showered him in kisses. He melted into me after the initial surprise and when we parted he looked dazed.

A job well done!

“Now, I hope this will sustain you through the packing... I have to go. I have an idea,” I said and with three swift kisses to my boyfriends’ cheeks I was out of the door.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

The screen flashed with the caller ID. Dad. I scoffed at my phone and rejected the call. Instead, I dialed a different number.

“Hey Lindsey, I know I already owe you... but could I ask you for one more favor?” I asked as soon as the call connected.

“Hi, how’s life going Lindsey? Kids good, Lindsey?” my friend responded in a mocking voice and I winced.

That was fair.

“Sorry...” I started, but she cut me off.

“Nah, just pulling your chain. You sound stressed, girl. Tell me what’s up. Is your father giving you trouble again?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe.”

Lindsay was my landlord and boy, did I pat myself on the back for refusing my father’s offers of much better flats or even houses, as the independence I gained by renting from someone who wasn’t in his pocket was going to pay off now.

I told her about the situation and couldn’t help but grin when she gave me her answer.

Not wasting any time, I knocked at my neighbors’ door and Rowan silently let me inside. The flat was a mess as the men tried to pack all their possessions. Chester was running around like a headless chicken while Elijah was speaking to someone on the

phone. The pained draw of his eyebrows and the hand pressed to his forehead pointed towards the conversation not going well. Only Rowan seemed to be his usual calm self.

As he prepared tea and coffee for everyone and sipped his hot beverage contentedly, I couldn't stop my curiosity.

“Aren't you going to pack?”

Rowan gestured toward a corner where a stack of sturdy, big plastic containers waited.

“Are those your things? Wait... don't tell me... you didn't unpack yet?! After nearly three months here?” My eyes boggled at him.

“Don't need much,” Rowan waved my concerns off.

If I didn't already have an idea that he was likely in the military based on the way he held himself and always scanned every room, I would definitely reach that conclusion after seeing how he was ready to just pick up his things and run with barely any notice. I was pretty sure he had an emergency bag like one in those spy movies as well.

Considering he defeated a mugger as a cat, I wondered what he could do as a human. Maybe I could convince him to let me watch his gym time... or arrange a spar between him and one of the other guys. Though I feared both Chester and Elijah would rather be punching bags and not challenging opponents.

My mind started to wander a little as I sipped my tea and watched Rowan from under my lashes, but I was called down to Earth when Elijah finally finished his conversation.

“I got us a place,” Elijah said. Chester cheered, but Rowan just raised a skeptical eyebrow as if he could sense the but coming. “Unfortunately, it’s on the edge of the city. Commuting to your classes won’t be pleasant. Sorry, Chester.”

The redhead deflated.

“It’s alright. We would need a miracle to get as good a location as this on short notice,” Chester said forlornly.

I couldn’t let the opportunity pass me by.

“Hi, I’m Miracle.”

I grinned at them, almost seeing the spinning circles as they processed my words. Elijah was the first to get it.

“You have a place for us? Really?”

“Don’t get too excited,” I warned. “It’s a pretty small flat, so it will be a tight squeeze.”

“We will take it!” Chester pumped his fist in the air.

Rowan nodded.

“We are used to living in each other’s pockets,” Elijah pointed out. “It can’t be worse than our first flat.”

Hmm, there was history there, but maybe now wasn’t the time to be nosy...

“Alright, follow me then,” I gestured to the men, and they spilled after me into the

corridor.

“The same building? Sweet. That will make carrying things so much easier,” Chester enthused.

“Yes, in fact, it’s very close...” I slid the key in with one practiced motion and opened the door to my home. “Welcome to your new abode!”

For a second I shocked the three men into silence, but, of course, that wouldn’t work on Chester for long.

“We can live with you?!” Chester shrieked, and I put a hand over his mouth, shushing him, then unceremoniously pulled him inside the flat.

Once Rowan shut the door behind himself and we were all in the privacy of my flat, Chester licked my hand like a teenager.

“I have kissed you. Do you think your saliva grosses me out?” I snorted at the redhead but pulled my hand away to let him talk.

“Are you for real? Realsies? No takebacks?” Chester chattered with supersonic speed.

“Lisa, we wouldn’t want to encroach on your privacy...” Elijah said delicately. “You don’t have to feel guilty and offer your own space. We will manage. The flat I found is not so bad, I promise.”

“Why are you trying to talk her out of it?” Chester hissed.

“It’s better to suffer than to trouble Lisa,” Elijah argued.

I put my hands on my hips and let them go at it as they traded arguments back and



forth. Before they were finished, Rowan had already gone back to his flat and returned with the first of his plastic containers.

The words died on the two men's lips as they observed their comrade calmly putting his things into the spare room.

"Well, Rowan has already made his decision." I smiled.

"I did too! Dibs on the left side of the room!" Chester shouted.

"There are three of us! ...and he is gone," Elijah shook his head at the hyperactive redhead who didn't want to be upstaged by Rowan and ran back to his previous flat, presumably to get a start on the moving as well.

"It will be a really tight squeeze," I said apologetically. "But I thought one bed would do for now because, if push comes to shove, one or even all of you can sleep in your cat forms."

"You know, there are two beds in this flat..."

"Elijah, how forward of you," the corner of my mouth ticked up.

"I didn't mean it like that!" Elijah protested, his hands waving frantically. "I meant just sleeping together! Oh god, that doesn't sound better... Sharing a bed to sleep. Just to sleep!"

My grin only got wider.

"...you love to torment me, don't you?" Elijah asked, his cheeks red.

"I have to admit, it's quite entertaining," I giggled. "But now I'm feeling bad, so

maybe I can make it up to you, hmmm? I will let you sleep with me if you let me be the big spoon.”

“Damn, I see Elijah secured the best part of the flat already. And here I was fighting with Rowan over who gets the dresser,” Chester commented, a half-open box of knickknacks in his hands.

“Be good and maybe you will be allowed in my bed one day,” I teased.

“I’m always good. I’m excellent, a prime specimen!” Chester boasted. “...but I toss and turn at night so I won’t give you an excuse to kick me out straight away.”

“Hogs the blankets,” Rowan reported.

“And kicks! He is a hazard to sleep with,” Elijah confirmed.

“That’s a shame... hope you are a better sleep mate, Rowan,” I winked.

His lips thinned and he shook his head.

“Nightmares,” he said in a haunted voice.

“Oh,” a mournful sound escaped my lips without conscious thought. If he was a soldier... was he haunted by his past? I wanted to cocoon him in blankets and give him only the sweetest dreams.

“Let’s finish,” Rowan nodded at the spare room. “Midnight soon.”

We followed his lead and, between the four of us, we managed to collect all the belongings of the three men. The furniture and appliances were provided by the landlord, so only personal effects had to be carried over.

“I hired a cleaner to come by,” Elijah said with a grimace. “Had to pay a solid premium to get it done in the middle of the night, but I don’t want the landlord, and by extension your father, to make any trouble because we destroyed the flat or something equally ridiculous.”

“Good call,” I nodded. “And take some photos in case you have to prove what state you left the flat in.”

It pained me to anticipate such vile behavior from my own father, but this time he pushed too far and I didn’t know what else he was going to do. For now, I decided to ignore all communications from him and confront him face-to-face during the Thanksgiving dinner.

Exhausted but accomplished, we got ready for bed. Chester had chosen to take possession of the couch as Rowan felt quite territorial, and it was better to leave him to get used to the new space and spread his scent around before he allowed others to sleep in the spare room with him.

Elijah came with me to my bed. He was dressed in a comfortable t-shirt and sweatpants.

“Will you keep me warm?” I lifted the covers invitingly.

“Wouldn’t that be easier to do if I’m the big spoon?” Elijah asked as he slid under the covers.

“No bargaining, no takebacks!” I said sternly and, when he obligingly turned around, I draped myself around him like an octopus.

So what if he was bigger than me? I curled into his back and sneakily moved my hands under his t-shirt to warm them on his skin. He was soft and squishy and I loved

it.

“See? You can warm me like this!”

“Glad to be of assistance,” Elijah said in a strained voice I suspected had something to do with the way I was touching him. “Shall I warm your feet as well?”

“I’m not that cruel,” I said. “With the way we produce double body heat now the space under the covers should be hot enough soon, anyway.”

And it was. I drowsed into sleep, warm and cozy, with a beautiful man in my arms.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

I wasn't a morning person.

In fact, I was one of those zombies who couldn't fully comprehend the world before the first cup of coffee. So when I dragged myself out of bed I was on autopilot. When I heard meowing I opened a can of cat food and deposited it in a bowl. I watched the cat eat while the water for my coffee was heating up and only when Rowan was halfway through wolfing down his food a thought struck me.

"Oh my God, you are human! Rowan, why are you eating cat food!"

The black cat sent me a condescending look, not stopping stuffing himself even for a minute.

"Some of the cat food tastes pretty great," Elijah piped up, and only now I noticed he was observing everything with amusement from the armchair. Next to him, on the couch, Chester was clearly awake, but refusing to join the world of living if the blanket pulled over his head was any indication.

"You buy good brands," Chester mumbled from his cocoon. "This is some gourmet shit."

"But... but... will you get all the nutrients that way? Vitamins! Minerals!" I said desperately.

"More than from a Mac hamburger and fries," Elijah pointed out. "As long as we don't keep solely to the processed cat food there shouldn't be any problems with an occasional feline meal."

“This is weird,” I murmured to myself, then looked guiltily at the three... two men and a cat... but they seemed more amused than offended.

“You are taking all of this quite well,” Elijah noted.

“I guess if someone told me about cat shifters I would have trouble believing them, but I trust my eyes, you know? Seeing is believing and all that,” I made my coffee and gratefully took a first gulp, even if it scalded my tongue. “Ah, did any of you want some coffee?”

Rowan stopped his after-the-meal grooming and raised his paw.

I stared.

“Well, I guess I have to get used to this now. One coffee for a cat, coming right up!”

Life in such a full house proved very interesting. And yes, a bit of a challenge. We had to tackle problems like lack of space for all of our workstations, Elijah’s notes, and my and Chester’s art projects or other prosaic hurdles like not enough electric sockets. During those everyday challenges, I got to know the trio’s adorable quirks and annoying habits.

Chester liked to steal my gold pens, even though he had his own.

Elijah hummed songs under his breath in the morning and tended to give me a new earworm I couldn’t shake off every day.

Rowan always forgot to put the milk back in the fridge. What in the nine hells, Rowan?

I collected all of those little idiosyncrasies and kept them close to my heart.

For the first few days we orbited each other cautiously, but after a week had passed I had decided to make my move.

“I want to go on a date with you,” I declared to the room and three pairs of eyes turned to me.

“We have already been on a date, no? I think the time when we snatched you from that ferrety guy counts,” Chester said brazenly. “But count me in for more dates. Where are we going, sunshine?”

“I was thinking about doing something a bit different this time... How about some one-on-one time? A date with each of you separately and then one with all of us together?” I asked, a bit nervous, as I was unsure what the etiquette in this sort of relationship was. Would they get offended that I wanted them separately? Or the opposite; maybe even though they agreed to be with me they didn’t want this to be some kind of polyamorous relationship where we had dates together as a group?

It was all so confusing!

But when the three men looked at each other and came to an agreement in a split second, I could stop holding my breath.

“Me first!” Chester hopped in place like a little kid.

Rowan changed into a cat and bit him in protest.

“Lisa will be the one to decide,” Elijah said. That’s why he was my favorite. At least until he leaned to whisper in my ear. “But you will choose me, right?”

“Shameless, all of you,” I pushed Elijah away playfully. “I will tell you who goes first when I have an idea for the date. I wanted to confirm you were on board with

this before I concocted any elaborate schemes.”

“Surprise us then,” Chester said. “For you, I’m always free.”

“Don’t you have a hundred sketches to make for the next week?” Elijah asked skeptically.

“Yeah, but who cares? I will just pump myself full of energy drinks and draw the entire night before the deadline,” Chester shrugged as if that wasn’t an insane thing to do.

“Alright, this is an intervention.” I crossed my arms. “Do not put our dates above your health or I won’t take you on any.”

“But you are an artist too! You should understand me!” Chester whined.

“I know I may find myself binge-animating through the night at some point but it will be because my efforts to do it earlier proved not to be enough not because I planned for it,” I shook a warning finger at the stubborn redhead.

“Alright, alright, I will try to start on this assignment, ugh,” Chester sulked but pulled out a pencil and paper and started sketching the view from our window.

“Can the topic be anything?” I asked, observing the graphite flying over the sketchpad.

“Landscapes. And at least 50% of the sketches have to be of some kind of nature landscapes, not thirty different storefronts from the city,” Chester explained. “I have a suspicion it’s the prof’s ‘touch some grass’ agenda in play.”

As he spoke, an idea started growing in my mind, like a green seedling sprouting



from the earth.

“How about...” I started slowly. “We combine those two things?”

Chester blinked at me, tilting his head like his cat alter ego when he was confused.

“A date and your assignment,” I clarified. “Let me show you my favorite nature spots outside the town?”

Chester looked stunned before he placed his sketchpad and pencil on the windowsill and threw himself at me in a hug.

“That sounds brilliant!”

The smug cat got the first date, after all.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

“How do you know about those spots?” Chester marveled at the little creek I led us to.

“Remember Lindsey Smith, the landlord who had so graciously allowed you to stay? I was pretty tight with her family back in the day and me and mum often spent summers around here, traveling between the numerous Smith cousins,” I explained while spreading a blanket on the ground for us to sit on.

“You don’t talk much about your mom. Is she...?”

“Dead,” I confirmed. “It’s one of the reasons my father is so bullheaded about keeping an eye on me. Because my mother once walked out of the flat and never returned.”

“That’s rough, buddy,” Chester winced.

“Is your family still around?” I asked quietly as both of us pulled out our supplies and started drawing, conveniently not looking at each other as the conversation took a too serious turn.

“I don’t think so,” Chester said. “Never knew my father. That’s a rather common thing among the cat shifters. Most of us live in clowders, but it’s more like a community than a family. I joined Elijah’s old clowder when I was young, and I never regretted leaving that clowder behind when we formed our own with Rowan.”

I noted the no mention of the mother but didn’t press further.

“Elijah seems to be your leader?” I asked instead.

“Yeah,” Chester confirmed, then laughed. “Can you believe I tried to challenge him for the role?”

“And how did that work out for you?”

“He just looked at me with an unimpressed stare and said ‘Alright. You are in charge now’.”

I spluttered with laughter, drawing a long line on my paper by accident.

“What changed then?” I asked, curious how this story continued.

“Elijah gave me a list of tasks that he was about to do for our clowder and said he was taking a spa day. And then he left! And I had to deal with everything!” Chester whined. “Paperwork, appointments, groceries... Even my own meeting with some friends I totally forgot about was on the list. I thought I could boss Rowan around since I was the new leader... but guess what? Elijah giving me the reins didn’t mean Rowan accepted that. We had a scuffle and by the time Elijah returned, I found myself not only ousted from the position but at the very bottom of the pack hierarchy.”

“Why didn’t Rowan stay the boss, then?” I asked, my lips twitching in a smile.

“Because he is more intelligent than I am!” Chester threw his hands up. “He knew it was a lot of work and responsibility and he didn’t want it, so he gave the leadership back to Elijah.”

“I have a feeling Elijah was unsurprised by this turn of events...”

“And you would be right with that guess. He handles us both so easily I live in fear of that brain of his.” Chester shuddered. “I’m pretty sure if he would enact one of the murders from his books, he would get away with them.”

“Don’t be stupid, Elijah would never,” I boinked him on the head with my pencil.

He rubbed his head and looked contrite.

“Yeah, you are right. He is too...”

“...he wouldn’t kill anyone himself when he can use Rowan to do it,” I finished my thought with a shit-eating grin.

“He does have those assassin vibes, right?!” Chester said. “Like, snkth, you are dead! Sneak attack!”

“On the other hand, he is a bit too suspicious... it’s best when the least obvious person does the crime,” I mused.

“So, it has to be you,” Chester nodded like we had an understanding and, no, we didn’t.

“Excuse you? It should be you, with your baby face and those innocent blue eyes.”

Somehow, our date turned into a heated discussion about which one of us should be a murderer.

I had a blast.

After the creak, I dragged Chester to a picturesque forest, then a hill with a sole tree on it, and last but not least, a pick-your-own apple farm.

We snacked on the apples fresh from the trees and the picnic food we brought with us. The owner allowed us to stay there for hours so we made the most of it, having fun in the sun and drawing to our hearts' content. Chester was bound to draw the landscapes, but I had no such obligations so I sketched the apples, a cat that observed us from a distance but didn't come closer, probably sensing weird vibes from the cat shifter, the trees, an imagined dragon... And Chester. There were, admittedly, quite a few sketches of him scattered over the pages of my sketchbook. A graphite rendition of his slender hands holding a pen, a bold curve of his smile drawn with a pen, a stylized chibi with a speech bubble full of the funniest things he said during our outing.

By the time the sun started to inch over the horizon and the temperature dropped sharply, I was full of apples and feelings for a stupidly endearing redhead.

I considered the date a success, and the small genuine smile on Chester's face solidified my verdict.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

As I worked on digital drawings for my classes, I kept an eye on Elijah. He had a tell. A particular expression, a satisfied uptick of his mouth and stretching his hands over his head meant that he reached his self-appointed quota of written words for the day. That meant I could bother him now. Good, just in time. We had places to be in an hour.

“We have a new case, dear Watson,” I said in a low voice as I placed my hand on his shoulder.

“What is it, Sherlock?” Elijah played along, his eyes sparkling.

“Now, now, everything will be revealed in time. Chop-chop, get ready and let’s mosey!”

Intrigued, Elijah followed my lead and prepared himself for an outing.

To give him credit, the author lasted almost the whole ride before he asked.

“Is this a date?”

Seeing we were nearly there, I kept him in suspense while I parked the car. Only when we got out of the car did I throw out a dramatic hand towards the building.

“A date with crime!”

Inside, we were greeted warmly and ushered towards the room without even waiting for our time slot. When the door closed behind us, Elijah looked at the room with its

Victorian-style furniture and old objects strewn everywhere.

“You brought me to an escape room for our date?” Elijah asked, his eyes wide.

“It’s one way to prevent you from running off,” I smirked. “Now you are stuck with me here for the next hour.”

“An escape room,” Elijah repeated disbelievingly, his eyes sparkling. “For that you can keep being Sherlock.”

“So magnanimous of you.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Now, Watson, the game is afoot! Let’s get to work.”

A half opened letter envelope on the desk immediately caught my attention and I pulled the piece of paper out and gave it to Elijah, who dutifully read the contents out. It was a missive explaining a man has been killed and his daughter implores Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson to find the murderer. She hopes her father’s study provides some insight.

We had our case!

With excitement, we began scouring the room for clues.

I had an old-fashioned paper in my clutches while Elijah was fiddling with various objects on the desk. A gasp made me look up.

“Look at this! A note behind the mirror!” my brown-haired assistant beamed.

“Someone was trying to blackmail him,” I concluded after reading the slip of paper demanding the man show up in a certain location on the night before his murder.

“A lover?” Elijah suggested.

“It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data,” I tsked, quoting Sherlock.

“You’re right,” Elijah nodded. “Let’s find more info! I bet I can find more clues than you.”

“It’s the quality that counts, not the quantity,” I sniffed. “But you are so on.”

Our search took a frantic note as we went through the room like a localized tornado while shooting looks at each other every now and then. My competitive spirit was on fire. When we converged again after ten minutes, I was pretty happy with my haul.

Until we started to compare our finds.

“...and this report has mysterious initials ASH which I found in several places,” I pointed out proudly. “It has to mean something.”

Elijah shook his head.

“That’s the name of the housekeeper, Alana Sabrina Hetford. It’s a red herring.”

In the end, the clues we found were mostly debunked by what the other person had found.

“I think the room won this time,” Elijah said.

“Yeah,” I laughed and threw an arm around my partner’s shoulders. “Maybe we should actually start working together if we want to get out of here anytime soon.”

After that we investigated together, sharing ideas, solving puzzles, and having a blast.



Frequent quoting of Conan Doyle's works only added to the mirth.

"Excellent!" Elijah cried when we reached a nifty conclusion.

"Elementary," I responded.

We giggled like two schoolchildren.

A cipher, a secret key, a message that had to be read in the mirror... the escape room challenged our thinking skills and it was extremely satisfying when we reached the conclusion.

We rang the bell, signaling we were ready to give the answer, and the attendant opened the door and raised an expectant eyebrow.

"It's the daughter!" I blurted out.

"She wanted to frame the mistress, but we saw through all those false clues!" Elijah grinned.

"Congratulations on solving the mystery! When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth," the attendant quoted and gave us our spoils for solving the case, a small but beautiful edition of Hounds of Baskerville.

"Dinner?" I asked when we left the escape room behind, still riding the high of playing Sherlock and Watson and succeeding at our task.

"I would normally go to a restaurant with good food... but I think we deserve fast food today."

“Hell yeah!”

The food was cheap and messy and the fast-food joint was loud, but it only leaned itself to relaxing me further. It was hard to be nervous when stuffing my face with a hamburger or stealing Elijah’s fries.

The second date was a success as well.

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

I contemplated what to do with Rowan for a while.

Going for some physical entertainment like a paintball game or a climbing wall could be fun if not for my nonexistent stamina. After starting at the University, I found little time for fitness and the combination of behind-the-desk studies and hobbies did me no favors. I made a note to ask Rowan to slowly introduce me to his gym so that I could beat myself into shape in the future, but firmly crossed any exercise off the list of possible date activities.

A diner date didn't quite make the cut as well because one: Rowan didn't seem to care for food in the same way Chester or Elijah did, always eating whatever was put under his nose without protest or excitement, and two: while I was fine with shouldering the burden of conversation I felt like there should be something else to focus on than my babbling to make this date a success.

It didn't help that Rowan wasn't really a people person. Even when he was a cat, his favorite place to be as Shadow was in my line of sight but outside of my reach. He was one of those baffling felines who considered sitting in the same room to be social enough.

Would going to a cinema be too much? I had a feeling he would stab anyone who dared to speak during the movie, including me.

"Netflix and chill seems safer," I muttered to myself only to freeze as an idea hit me.

Mind buzzing with possibilities, I jumped up from my chair to find Chester and Elijah. I had to stop myself from hugging them to death when I found them curled

together as cats in one of the plush circular beds that now littered the flat.

“Cats and gentlemen, can I have your attention, please?” I said like an announcer, and Chester immediately perked up while Elijah only swiveled an ear in my direction. “I have a favor to ask... You see...”

Rowan returned from the gym and, as always, took a shower. He was toweling his hair dry with another towel slung around his hips when he felt my eyes on him and looked up.

“...what’s this?” he asked warily.

“A smoothie,” I memed at him.

He huffed and gestured at what was around me, then lifted an eloquent eyebrow.

“Popcorn, chips, salted peanuts, chocolate chip cookies, soda, beer...” I pointed to the things set around the couch but finished by pointing at Rowan. “...my date.”

Rowan made a noise of surprise before a pleased smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

“Night in?” he asked in a low voice.

“The weather outside is dreadful. I wouldn’t let a stray cat suffer this rain,” I waved at the window, where indeed a deluge of water fell from the sky. “And you are very much a domesticated one.”

“Oh, am I?” Rowan asked.

“You are.” I took a piece of popcorn and stood up to present it to Rowan on the palm

of my hand.

His eyes danced with mirth when he obligingly ate the treat from my hand.

“I guess you are right.”

He licked at the salty residue on my hand. That, combined with his near-nakedness, made me instantly hot under the collar. A not unwelcome start for a date.

Rowan placed a kiss on my fingers, then my palm, then my forearm...

Oh, boy.

“You know, I had a whole date planned. TV shows, we were supposed to watch our favorite shows!” I squeaked.

“Problem?” Rowan asked as he stepped boldly into my space and dragged his lips over my neck.

“N-no problem. No, sir, zero problem! Not complaining!” I said hotly, and I was rewarded with a bite to my neck that made my breath catch.

Rowan’s tongue licked over the stinging flesh and I tilted my head with a groan to give him better access. My hands had been itching to touch since he emerged shamelessly half-naked from the shower and now I didn’t have to feel guilty for my horny thoughts as I reached to touch those wonderful muscles. While my right hand found a firm pec and my left traced just above the towel around Rowan’s hips, his hands traveled to my ass and then to my thighs.

“Hold on,” he said and then hoisted me up.

A high-pitched, surprised squeak left my lips, but my instincts activated on time and I threw my arms around his neck and squeezed my legs around his waist to keep in place. I didn't have to worry; it felt like Rowan could hold me up with only his hands on my ass.

"Show off," I panted out.

The smug smile told me he knew how much I liked his display of strength.

Rowan proved how unnecessary it was to carry me like that when it took only three steps to deposit me back on the couch.

Ridiculous.

But I didn't have breath to complain about his theatrics as Rowan took possession of my lips as soon as my ass hit the cushions.

The man licked at the seam of my lips and I only had to give him the smallest opening for his tongue to invade my mouth. Every movement was a precision strike that made me glad I was already sitting because I felt my knees go weak as I tried to respond in kind and was firmly put in my place. Rowan cradled my face and put me where he wanted with such casual dominance I could do nothing except melt into his touch.

I was ready to let him do anything he wanted to me. Screw the three dates rule, I wanted him to bend me over and rail me until I cried. When he settled next to me on the couch and then pulled me onto his lap, my pussy throbbed and I squirmed, pressing my back to his chest.

His hand slid over my hip, tracing the line of my skirt down to its edge... yes, yes, he only had to lift it up to sneak his hand into my panties.

The fingers left my skirt and then even my leg as Rowan reached forward...

“Which show?” Rowan asked casually as he turned the TV on with the remote in his hand.

I was speechless for solid three seconds.

Then my eyes narrowed.

Two could play this game.

“Let’s start with one of my favorites then,” I said brightly and directed Rowan to a show that practically oozed sexual tension.

Let’s see how long he was going to abstain with this honey trap playing and me squirming on his lap!

Fast-forward to half an hour later and I was the one about to break.

Rowan cheated by cuddling me, running his thumb absentmindedly on the inside of my thigh, and by placing a soft kiss on the back of my neck from time to time.

It was less than I wanted, but more than I could stand.

When the first episode of my pick ended, it was Rowan’s turn to introduce me to a show. It was a sci-fi series with compelling characters and amazing political intrigue. The problem was, it was hard to follow all the twists and turns and appreciate the worldbuilding details when I was so horny I was about to become a personification of the sin of lust.

I turned abruptly, changing my position to face Rowan instead of the screen.

“Look, this show is awesome, but if you want me to focus on it properly, you need to do something.” I tried to go for a stern voice, but it came out more like a whine.

The way I couldn’t stop myself from pressing against his thigh in little back-and-forth movements made it impossible to misinterpret what that something I wanted was.

The smile that spread over Rowan’s face was utterly infuriating. He kept me in suspense as he reached for the TV remote slowly. My breath caught when the sounds from behind me stopped. Did that mean...?

“This show needs proper appreciation,” Rowan said.

The thought that it was the longest sentence I heard him ever speak ran through my mind before I yelped as I was unceremoniously lifted and Rowan pulled my panties down until they slipped off my feet, pooling on the floor in a heap of lacy blue.

Then he slid down the cushions and pulled me forward until my knees bracketed his head. At the first touch of his tongue against my folds, I curled against the back of the couch as a surprised shout flew from my lips.

After nearly an hour of being relentlessly teased I was positively dripping. Rowan’s clever fingers opened me up for his tongue, as he scooped every trace of my arousal as if it was the sweetest nectar.

My fingers dug into the back of the couch as I desperately tried to not suffocate the man under me when I made aborted motions of chasing after my pleasure.

“Rowan, fuck, yes, like that,” I moaned when he targeted my clit.

A playful kiss turned into drawing circles with his tongue around the sensitive nub, then flicking it, as he answered my reactions, my breathy moans for more. I got lost



in the sensation, my head thrown back as I gazed unseeingly at the ceiling.

My thighs shook as I came with a cry.

The methodical savagery of Rowan's strokes undid me so fast my head was spinning as the aftershocks of my orgasm traveled through my body.

He made an appreciative hum as I panted, slumped over him.

A few minutes later, I flopped next to him, letting him sit straight again and clean his face with a tissue. I was about to reach for the bulge in his pants when he reached for something else.

The remote.

He turned the show back on.

Rowan only smirked at my outraged expression and a second later I found myself back where I started: sitting on his lap and facing the TV. The only difference was that my panties now lay on the floor and the post-orgasmic languidness was still present in my body.

With a sigh, I resigned myself to watching a pretty good sci-fi show.

Once the episode was over and we agreed to watch the rest of the series together later, it was time for me to choose another franchise to introduce Rowan to. As his last pick was flawless, I couldn't be upstaged, so I put on a time travel show that was surely going to suck my boyfriend in.

It was a hit.

I spent the next half hour happily babbling from Rowan's lap, pointing out every detail he had to pay attention to and providing trivia about the actors and the production of the show.

While having such a good time, I almost forgot about the compromising position I was in and the bulge that was pressing against my ass.

Almost.

When it was time for the next series Rowan leaned forward to grab the remote which pressed his half-hard cock against me and my horniness returned with a vengeance.

A whine escaped my lips. When Rowan straightened I turned just enough to pepper the underside of his jaw with needy kisses.

"Fuck me," I demanded.

"No. Watch," Rowan said unflinchingly, his fingers grabbing my chin and manhandling me to face the screen.

"I can watch while you fuck me!" I said in my desperation.

We both froze.

"Hmm," Rowan made a considering sound. I sweated as my future hung in the moment. Did I really want to ride his cock while being expected to pay attention to, no doubt, another intricate story?

Fuck it, I was all in.

"I can multitask. Do you doubt me?" I challenged.

“Alright,” Rowan said, and my heart pounded with excitement.

I scrambled to make the promised fucking a reality before he changed his mind. My panties were already decorating the floor, so it was only a matter of getting Rowan’s pants and underwear off — a task I performed with zeal to the amusement of my lover — and to hike my skirt up.

Even if Rowan was trying to pretend he was unaffected by me disrobing him on my knees, his cock, which went from half hard to fully up, revealed how excited he was. I scrambled back into the position, guiding his pretty long cock into my pussy as I spread my legs open and bracketed his thighs with my knees, ready to ride him, my back to him in a reverse cowgirl position.

As he filled me I moaned at the fullness. Yes, this was what I wanted, what I needed. He was so good for giving this to me...

I raised my hips.

Or at least I tried to.

Hands on my thighs prevented me from rising, my lover’s strong grip keeping me in place.

“Watch,” Rowan said and hit play on the remote. “Show over, then you can come.”

I slumped against his chest in despair. Here it was, the catch. I could have his cock inside of me during the episode we were watching, but I couldn’t really fuck him.

Suddenly, I understood why people considered black cats to be the spawn of Satan. Surely Rowan had to at least have some kind of a deal with the devil to have such evil ideas.

Cockwarming.

Rowan was using me for cockwarming .

He was enjoying the snug heat of my pussy while we watched a detective procedural and demanded I pay attention to the unfolding case on screen.

When my attention wandered and I found myself repeatedly tensing around his cock, moving in the only way I could, he slapped my thigh making me yelp.

For a moment I thought I was going to come just from the sudden drag of his cock along my insides when I jumped, but I only shuddered through the new wave of arousal before the feeling plateaued to the constant too-little-not-enough so-good-but-I-want-more sensation.

The blush never left my cheeks for the entire episode and by the time it ended I felt nearly insane, positively feverish with desire. My need turned into a necessity. I was going to die if Rowan did not fuck me this instant. When the credits started rolling a triumphant sound escaped my lips and I surged into motion only to be thwarted again.

“You can’t mean to—! Those are only credits! Credits! Just text!” I moaned. “Please, please, let me ride your cock, please—”

The TV turned off.

That was all the warning I got before Rowan lifted me up, then slammed me back onto his cock.

“AH!”

My cry reverberated through the room, but it was only the beginning of all the filthy

sounds Rowan made me give him.

I thought it was going to be me fucking him wildly.

I was mistaken.

Rowan used his strength to hook his hands under my knees and used his prowess and height to his advantage, moving me on his cock, up and down, up and down. With my feet off the couch, I had no leverage to control the movements in any way. All that was left for me was to moan, and whimper, and claw at his hands as I tried to find an anchor in this blizzard of sensation. Little fucked out sounds and Rowan's harsh breathing filled the room, along with the dirty percussion of flesh slamming against flesh. I was so on edge the arousal felt like a ball of fire in my abdomen. The teasing had an effect on both of us and we quickly lost ourselves in one another, joined in the frenzy of movement and chasing bliss.

The wetness of my arousal leaked down, leaving sticky trails, but it had nothing on the way Rowan's cum filled me and then overflowed, escaping out of my stuffed pussy when Rowan slammed into me with a hiss of pleasure. My lover's hips stuttered wildly as he spilled deep inside me and I choked on a moan as I followed him into bliss, bolstered to join him by the way his breath hitched and his hands gripped me as if he never wanted to let me go. As if he wanted to burrow himself even deeper, stake a claim on every inch of my body.

We breathed together for a moment, the fast rise and fall of our chests synchronizing until the adrenaline went down and our hearts stopped beating like drums. Rowan let his grip lessen and I groaned, suddenly realizing how much my legs were cramping after staying in such a demanding position for so long. Gentle hands helped me unfold and I snuggled with Rowan on the couch.

Unlike before, we weren't really paying attention to the show Rowan put on. It was

only a background noise as I focused on cuddling my wonderful boyfriend. We made use of the snacks and beverages, happily munching the popcorn and occasionally sharing butter-flavored kisses.

It was pure bliss. I was happy, cozy, and warm. I could stay like this forever.

I was drowsing with my face pressed into Rowan's neck when the door banged open.

"Honey, we are home!" Chester hollered, seeing the light in the main room was on.

Shit, shit, shit, I forgot I made him and Elijah remove themselves from the apartment only until midnight!

I scampered off Rowan in panic.

A quick check showed me it wasn't that bad. Rowan had his pants back on and my skirt was dark enough to hide any stains. I managed to straighten my clothes and fix my hair in the short time it took Chester and Elijah to take their boots off, so I greeted them with a smile.

They knew me and Rowan were on a date, but they didn't need to know all the sordid details.

Elijah stopped in his tracks. His eyes were wide. I followed his gaze.

Straight to my panties which were still laying on the floor.

Well, damn.

Chester wolf-whistled and I tried to pretend I didn't exist by hiding my red cheeks behind my hands.

“I see... the date went well?” Elijah said faintly.

Rowan snorted, still sprawled on the couch and utterly unbothered. That was so not fair! He should be burning in hell of embarrassment along with me! He returned my glare with the softest of looks.

“Shower?” he suggested.

Okay, so maybe I wasn’t going to rip him a new one because that was a good idea.

I practically ran to the bathroom and groaned when the door shut behind me, the lock giving me a moment to collect myself. A quick shower later, I felt more at ease but I still didn’t want to make a big deal out of the fact I slept with Rowan nor talk about it so I skulked back to my bedroom, changed into my pajamas, and firmly shut off the light.

I half expected Chester to crawl into my bed and do his usual octopus routine, but, to my surprise, the redhead didn’t claim possession of my bed. Instead, a sleek black cat jumped on the covers.

“Mrrrgh?” Rowan, no, Shadow , made a questioning sound. As if I would say no to the elusive kitty joining me at night.

“Not afraid of your nightmares?” I asked as I pulled a corner of the comforter up, inviting him under.

Shadow lifted his black paw and looked from it to me as if to say being in this shape changed things.

That was fair. I wasn’t sure if being a cat eliminated the bad dreams or if Rowan decided he was less of a risk as a small cat than he was as a trained soldier with a big

body, but, either way, I was happy to have the black cat curl next to me.

When those yellow eyes closed in a slow blink and Shadow let himself fall asleep next to me I was filled with utter contentment.



## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

“ S ooo, you did the horizontal tango with Rowan.”

I sighed and put my notebook away to face Chester. It was dumb of me to even hope the redhead would let it go. He didn't know the meaning of the word tact.

“So I did. What's it to you?”

“I want that too!” Chester whined.

My eyes narrowed.

“What, you think you are entitled to fuck me just because I'm your girlfriend?”

“Of course not!” Chester said, looking offended. “I'm just offering. I want you to let me work for it. To make you feel good. I want to get on my knees for you, baby. Let me worship you. I will do anything!”

“Anything?” I asked.

“...yes?” Chester answered hesitantly, already sensing the trap.

“Great, thank you for volunteering to help me plan our budget!” I beamed at him, showing him what I was working on in the notebook. There were columns, and rows, and numbers. So many numbers.

Like a true artist, Chester looked at the analog spreadsheet with horrified eyes. To his credit, he had gathered himself quickly and nodded, even if he looked like he wanted

to cry. Guess what? I hated such mind-numbing work too, so I decided we were going to suffer together. This was the ultimate couple's experience!

"Elijah insists you three are going to contribute to the household and I need the numbers to talk him down from paying three-fourths of all the expenses," I explained.

"You want me to help you work out how I can pay you less?" Chester asked.

"Got it in one!"

"Damn, alright. I can respect this grind. Let's do it. Do you think he will accept I just want to be your sugar baby?" Chester teased.

"If only!" I snickered and we nodded commiseratingly at each other. In the weird way of life, it was Chester, the decidedly not super-wealthy student, who still insisted on buying me, a trust fund baby, the monthly gift from the art store.

I shook my head with amusement before we went back to our work.

"I think we should have a column for expenses you would have anyway, even if we weren't there..." Chester proposed, and we got lost in scheming for the next half hour while Elijah and Rowan were out.

When the boys were back from their shopping trip I launched an offensive, using the painstakingly prepared notes as a weapon. Elijah fell under the onslaught of my reasonableness and grumpily agreed to pay half of the utility bills and household shopping.

"Let me pay you at least a small amount for the rent," he asked desperately. "It's not like we don't have any money; we do have some savings and my books bring in an income..."

“No. I would be paying that rent anyway. Your presence here doesn’t change that,” I said, my hands firmly on my hips as I took an unmovable stance. Seeing how this was troubling Elijah I sighed and cupped his face. “Think about it as my investment, hmm? Use the money you would for rent to get the best covers and advertising for your books. You can thank me as a mysterious benefactor in the acknowledgment of the new book.” I winked at him.

Elijah crumbled and slowly nodded. I rewarded him with a kiss on his nose.

“Wait, wait, wait, hold on,” Chester interrupted, pointing wildly at us. “Hold your horses. I can’t be the sugar baby but HE can?”

Elijah spluttered.

“That’s because Elijah is sweet and not a gremlin like you,” I said, looping my arms around the writer and cozying up to him.

“Ooh, those are fighting words,” Chester gritted out through clenched teeth. “I may be a gremlin, but I’m also the sweetest! Sweetness attaaack!”

I yelped as suddenly a ball of orange fur launched itself at me and I was brutally attacked by big, wide, green pleading cat eyes. Damnation, Puss in Boots from Shrek had nothing on this expression on Cheddar’s face.

I couldn’t help myself. I reached for that cute face to pet the kitty in my arms.

Cheddar gave a triumphant purr.

“You know, cuteness is not a finite resource. How about you two share?” I asked only for Cheddar to emit the tiniest meow known to a man that made me instantly melt.

Elijah chuckled as he had to hold me up when I started to dramatically slide to the floor, then marched me to the couch where I could cuddle with both the cat and the man. To my surprise, we were joined by Rowan, who situated himself on the floor between my legs with his back to me. I reached tentatively to stroke his black hair and when I wasn't rebuffed my heart grew two sizes. Rowan was too much of a mysterious loner to be called sweet, so he didn't have a chance of winning this impromptu contest, but instances like this, where he allowed himself intimacy, were absolutely heart-melting if only because of their rarity.

“How about this: Elijah is my sugar baby as a human, but you will be my sugar baby as a cat. How does that sound, Cheddar?” I said to the kitty sprawled in my lap.

I decided to treat the headbutt he gave me as an agreement.

Fighting off the smile off my face was a losing battle. My only regret was not having more hands because I wanted to pet all three of those precious men at the same time.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

The day of our trip to my father's holiday estate came quicker than I expected. As they say: time flies fast when you're happy. I didn't let the looming confrontation wipe the smile off my face as we squeezed into Rowan's car.

We have decided to suffer the cramped conditions instead of taking two cars for the joy of shared journey. The moment we sat down, a battle for the radio began.

"Absolutely not!" Chester insisted as he changed the station Elijah chose. "No fancy tunes on a road trip. We need pop music. Songs everyone knows and can belt out!"

"Have mercy, it's too early to start the day with singing," Elijah wrinkled his nose.

I let the two men bicker and made eye contact in the mirror with Rowan. He smirked and held up a USB stick. Chester gasped in betrayal as the radio changed to the music player and the sounds of rock filled the car.

"Driver picks the music!" I said cheerfully.

I regretted those words when Chester took his turn behind the wheel several hours later.

But hey, at least I learned Elijah had the voice of an angel and Rowan's dulcet tones could dip so low the bass reverberation sent shivers down my spine.

It was fun, sharing snacks and stories, playing word games, stopping by the roadside to observe a herd of deer... and cuddling against a warm body when I wasn't the one driving. We made a break for some greasy fast food along the way but otherwise tried

to drive as far as possible — after all, our goal was three states over. It was already dark when we stopped at a random bed-and-breakfast.

“One room with four beds,” I decided.

While cuddling was amazing, every one of us wanted to have a space to stretch out after being squished like a can of sardines in the car.

“I would appreciate it if you would try to get along with my father and brother while we are there. But don’t let them disrespect you either,” I said firmly, even if my mind was coming up with increasingly convoluted scenarios of how this little family gathering was going to hell in a handbasket.

“Of course, we won’t let— Wait, you have a brother? We are going to meet him?” Chester bounced in his seat, twisting like a pretzel to look at me from his shotgun seat. Elijah, the current driver, swatted at him. Chester leaned even further towards me.

“Yeah. His name is Seth. He is the heir to my father’s company. I think you’re going to like him,” I addressed all three men. My bro wasn’t the one I expected to be a problem. In fact, I had already shared a few photos and anecdotes about the guys in our private Discord and the only thing I had to suffer through was Seth making fun of me for, as he put it, ‘having a goddamn harem’. “Go right, we are nearly there.”

I instructed Elijah where to go and soon he parked the car in the garage attached to a medium-sized villa. This holiday home brought bittersweet memories with it, but I gamely shook the small pang of longing away and stepped towards the house.

Seth was already waiting on the front stairs, his hands in his pockets, trying to look casual, as if I couldn’t see how his chest rose up and down from exertion. I was pretty sure he ran through the whole house at the sound of our approach just to strike this

pose.

“He’s your younger brother?!” Chester gaped, making Seth scowl. He didn’t like it when people focused on his gangly looks that betrayed that he was, in fact, still a teenager.

“Didn’t you say he is the heir?” Elijah asked, his brows knitting together. Rowan’s eyes darkened as he followed his friend’s train of thought. Of course, the implied allusion couldn’t remain subtle with Chester in the room.

“Does that mean your father is sexist?” the redhead demanded to know. “If you are the oldest, you should be the heir!”

Seth burst out laughing and immediately had three glares aimed at him. Even the mild-mannered Elijah was sending daggers in his direction.

“Look at them all trying to protect your honor! What do you say, Lisa?” Seth wheezed out between bursts of giggles. “It’s still not too late to become a corporate drone. Come join the dark side! We have, I dunno, pizza Fridays or something.”

“Thank you, but I would sooner drop dead,” I said in a saccharine sweet tone. Turning to my lovers, I explained. “I made a deal with my father; after I finished high school he was going to pay for my university tuition and let me choose any specialization I wanted. All for the price of working at his company for a year.”

“He truly thought you would like it there and change your mind about becoming the new head of the family business,” Seth shook his head. “Unbelievable.”

“Well, the only change in my mind was going from ‘I’m going to become CEO when Hell freezes over’ to ‘even if Hell becomes Jotunheim I’m still not going to let anyone make me the head honcho’,” I said dryly. “You can have this amazing

position.” I patted my brother on the arm as I passed him.

“Gee, thanks sis for leaving me to the sharks,” Seth said sarcastically, but I knew he was pretty pleased with his place in the family game.

My lovers followed me inside the house, a thousand questions on their (mostly Chester’s) tongues.

“Did you have a high position in the company?” Elijah asked curiously.

“Were you the CEO?!” Chester gasped.

“Of course not, silly. I started as an intern, then spent a few months as a regular worker before my father started throwing more responsibility at me. By the end, I was managing a team of twenty people and I hated it.”

“Were you bad at it?” Rowan asked.

“I didn’t bankrupt the department and the people under me didn’t seem to hate me, but that’s all I achieved.”

“From what I have heard, the workers and other managers were of one mind when it came to the performance analysis,” Seth butted in.

“‘Great team player, disappointing leader’,” I quoted with a roll of my eyes. “I’m a great support, okay? I could help someone rule an empire, but that doesn’t mean I want to sit on the throne.”

“Gray eminence Lisa?” Rowan lifted a teasing brow.

“Alas, I will let Seth find someone else to be his puppet master.”



“Hey! I contain multitudes. I don’t need anyone to pull the strings behind the scenes because I will concoct my own schemes myself!”

“I’m sure telling everyone about your nefarious plans is a great way to become a master of intrigue,” a dry voice interjected, and I whipped my head around to see my father emerge from behind one of the doors.

We just stared at each other for a moment. The normally boisterous man looked unsure.

“Can I... get a hug?” he asked tentatively, and I was lunging forward before he even finished speaking.

It was my dad, after all.

We clung to each other tightly, and it reminded me of the months after mum died when it felt like the world was going to fall apart if we didn’t hold each other.

When we parted I was a bit embarrassed at making such a display, but I decided to power through the feeling.

“Right!” I clasped my hands together. “Guys, this is my dad, John. And you already met Seth. Dad, Seth, those are my boyfriends, Elijah, Chester, and Rowan,” I gestured to the appropriate men for the introduction.

“Nice to meet you, sir,” Elijah greeted my father. He looked like he didn’t know where to put his hands and finally linked them behind his back.

Rowan just nodded firmly, his posture a parade rest.

“Hi! Cool house!” Chester immediately went for a compliment, but his eyes darted

around the abode as if he was going to rob the house blind.

“It was my late wife’s favorite place,” dad shared with a wistful look in his eyes. “I would prefer to spend the holidays in a warmer region, maybe Bahamas, but...”

“...it’s a tradition!” Seth and I singsonged together, then grinned at each other like loons.

A smile quirked the corner of my father’s mouth.

“So it is. How about you show the guests to their rooms, Lisa?” the way he underscored the men would not be sleeping in my room made me sober up a little. Everything still wasn’t alright. My father being civil for five minutes didn’t mean he approved. Or that I forgave him for being such a jerk. “I will check on the kitchen in the meantime...”

“Don’t act like the turkey and all the other stuff isn’t already prepared and just waiting to be heated up,” I heard Seth tease father as our two groups separated.

“Hey, I’m making the cranberry sauce from scratch! And preparing the mulled cider. Come, I need a willing victim for the taste test.”

Seth’s groan was the last thing I heard as I led our little group upstairs. I took a moment to show the boys around, pointing out where everything was before I showed them to the guest wing. The rooms were already prepared, all crisp sheets and the faint lemon scent of a thorough cleaning. As usual, father hired a crew to prepare everything, be it cleaning, pruning the garden, or cooking the Thanksgiving dinner, but then dismissed them on the day so that everyone could spend time with their own families.

Each of the men had their own room. We grabbed the bags from the car and settled

them in, then a whole procession accompanied me to my room.

“Why is it so far from us?” Chester complained.

“To give my father an illusion that we would not be having sex,” I rolled my eyes at my old man’s prudishness.

“Oh? Only an illusion?” Chester perked up.

I shoot him a glance from under my eyelashes.

“Be a good boy and we will see.”

“Yaaas!” Chester pumped his fist obnoxiously. “My body is ready, queen. I don’t need to move at a glacial pace like Elijah here.”

“I don’t want to rush,” Elijah bristled. “Intimacy is... special.”

“Oh boy, it sure is! I hope you aren’t the type to wait until marriage,” Chester snickered. “Because I don’t think that’s happening in our situation.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We need to survive Thanksgiving first. And Chester? Teasing Elijah does not qualify as good behavior. In fact, that’s bad behavior. Bad boy!” I scolded.

“The way you are going, I will get there before you,” Elijah said to Chester and I barked out a laugh at his pointed comment.

Rowan didn’t say anything. He was above the petty squabble when he already staked his claim on my body so thoroughly, but his hand brushed my waist for a moment, unseen by the other two. A subtle reminder.

It's not like I could ever forget him.

"I will be the bestest boy, you will see," Chester declared. "AND I will make Lisa's father like me first."

With that proclamation he stomped away in the direction of the kitchen, led there by the scent of cooking cranberries. I was left with a lifted hand to stop him, but after a second I thought better of it and let him do it.

"Maybe it's a good idea to acclimate my father to all of you slowly," I mused.

"And you think Chester is the right one to start with?" Elijah asked and I winced.

Our doubts were confirmed a few minutes later as Seth joined us in the living room. The 'nope, nope, nope' power walk clued us in even before he started speaking.

"Your man made the kitchen into a nuclear zone. He has opinions. And they are wrong."

"Opinions?" Rowan asked from the ancient armchair he staked a claim on.

Seth looked first to the heavens, then to me.

"He told dad tomato is a fruit and therefore should go into the fruit salad."

I closed my eyes for a second, despairing. My dad was a foodie. He had opinions as well. Strong ones.

"I'm not getting in the middle of that."

"Right? I said I would set the table when I fled, so here's the deal people: help me do

it quickly and we will have time to play a round or two before dad and Chester join us.”

Everyone perked up at that, so we made quick work of preparing the table for a feast, the white cloth just waiting for the dishes to arrive. Seth pulled out Uno and established dominance by kicking everyone’s ass. He was pretty competitive, one of his characteristics that made him a better pick for a future CEO than me. My preferred games relied on cooperation and not sending someone to the Shadow Realm with your Reverse card.

Still, we had fun, and that was all that mattered. By the time the missing two emerged from the kitchen and we swarmed to help carry the dishes, fill the glasses with various beverages, and distribute the food, the atmosphere was much more relaxed than before.

We watched the turkey being pardoned, then put on a football game to play in the background as we dug into the feast with a big turkey from one of the nearby award-winning farms as the center of the spread. The cranberry sauce was delicious. Somehow, the mashed potatoes that Chester was in charge of reheating were slightly burned. Both Chester and my father refused to elaborate on what exactly happened there.

There was an occasional scrunched nose or heated stares as the table talk sometimes strayed near dangerous territories, but I used all my presumed-heir education and experience of navigating posh parties where everyone hated each other to keep things civil. Everything went as I expected until Rowan decided to turn the world on its head.

I could not in a million years have predicted what that man did.

It all started when Seth asked my father how the latest shareholder meeting went.

“Good... except for Peterson,” father grimaced.

Oh, that guy. I remembered him. I wish I didn’t; he was a pretentious prick even among pretentious pricks.

“He’s still giving you trouble?” Seth asked and father launched into a retelling of all the small and big roadblocks to the prosperity of the company Peterson put in his way.

“...I wish I could just get rid of him,” father finished his little rant.

Rowan slid a folder over to him.

I was as startled as everyone else. Sure, I saw the shoulder bag Rowan insisted on carrying around the house, but I thought it was just ex-soldier paranoia to have a go bag, or that he wanted to have something useful, like I dunno, tissues, at hand.

Apparently, the bag was used to carry a fricking dossier .

Father reached for the folder and opened it slowly. The entire table leaned forward to peak without any subtlety.

There were pictures.

And notes.

Pages upon pages of content. Screenshots, press articles, medical information...

“Did you just give my father a way to blackmail Peterson?!” I choked out.

“Several,” Rowan said.

“Well, I did wonder where you disappeared to those past few weeks...” Elijah murmured under his breath.

“It thought it was to find a new job!” Chester exclaimed.

“He’s having an affair?” father said faintly as he looked through the photos. He had evidence now. “And he’s embezzling from charity?”

He blinked, still in shock, before he looked at Rowan and a smile spread across his face.

“With this info he’s going down. I will make sure he sells his shares for dirt cheap to me or someone of my choosing. Rowan, you are my new favorite son-in-law.”

Rowan nodded as if it was a given.

He had a look of a cat who dragged a whole ass dead bird into the house and was praised for it.

“I don’t know if I should encourage this behavior...” I murmured to Elijah.

“It worked, didn’t it?” Elijah shared in a whisper.

“I can’t believe he got approval before me,” Chester bitched. “I need to crank up my efforts...”

“Does anyone want cake?” Seth asked, as if being handed blackmail to ruin someone’s life at the Thanksgiving table was perfectly normal. In fact, my brother looked at Rowan with admiration and the man of dubious honor got the biggest slice.

What was even my life.

I shook my head and stuffed my mouth with delicious cake to prevent myself from cackling like mad.



## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

The Thanksgiving day went surprisingly well, so I made a decision to stay for Friday as well.

“Can’t you stay a bit longer?” my father pleaded.

I shook my head.

“Chester and I have classes on Monday and getting back will take us at least two days, with the roads being so full of people returning to their homes.”

“Why not take a plane? I know everything is already booked on commercial flights, but I do have my private jet. You could take it,” dad insisted.

“Ah. I don’t know...” I looked at my lovers imploringly. Chester was mouthing ‘private jet’ with awe, which told me he would never forgive me if I took the experience of using a private jet away from him. Elijah looked embarrassed to have such a fuss made, and Rowan seemed contemplative.

“Let me spoil you a little.” Dad laid a hand on my shoulder and his tone went soft. Ugh, psychological manipulation.

“Are you okay with this, Rowan? We would have to arrange someone to drive your car back...” I asked.

Rowan looked sharply at my dad, who straightened.

“I will ensure my best driver goes behind the wheel. The car will be delivered without

a scratch, I promise.”

Reassured, Rowan nodded.

With the decision made, we suddenly had a lot more time to consider. I looked wistfully out of the window, but the rain had been pattering down for hours now and it looked like a storm was coming.

A day inside, in front of a merrily burning fireplace, it was then.

“You mentioned games?” Elijah asked Seth and a minute later all of us, including my father, found ourselves in a competitive tournament. The loser was supposed to sing a song and the winner would be the one to choose what kind of song.

Chester grinned like a loon when we tallied the scores and he came out on top. He puffed his chest with pride and looked towards my father, expecting his strategic prowess would finally garner him the long-awaited approval.

Then he realized my father was at the bottom of the scoring table.

Dad was already glaring at the redhead. He hated singing.

“What do old people like to sing?!” Chester asked Elijah in a whisper that was entirely too loud.

“Old? OLD?” My dad seethed. “I’m still in my prime, you punk!”

Chester waved his hands frantically.

“I didn’t mean anything by that, sir! Just that you are older than us! The oldest! Crap, that doesn’t sound better... Um, how about a shanty? A shanty should be a safe

choice, right?!” Chester changed the topic desperately.

My father took a deep breath in and bellowed out a few verses of the Drunken Sailor. Every time he sang the descriptions of the bad things done to the poor sailor he kept meaningful eye contact with the trembling redhead.

Poor Chester.

I decided to cheer my lover up during the stay, even if he was still firmly the Least Liked on my father’s list. He was trying, and that was what counted. It was pretty tragic and a bit hilarious that Chester’s every attempt to endear himself to my father only made things worse.

The day was full of good food, fancy drinks, and too much cranberry juice. When father was called away to talk with one of his associates and Seth, Elijah, and Rowan were engrossed in a game of Mario Kart, I pulled Chester away.

“Hey, I’m waiting for my turn!” he protested, but I shushed him, putting a finger to his lips.

“Trust me, you want to come with me. Quietly.”

Intrigued, the redhead followed after me, leaving the gaming group oblivious to our disappearance.

With my hand in his, I led him upstairs.

To my room.

I closed the door behind us with care, making sure it wouldn’t make too much noise.

I gestured to the reminders of my past scattered around us. Once upon a time it was the main residence where mum and I stayed, but after her death we returned here only for Thanksgiving, so the room was left relatively unchanged.

It was a perfect portrait of the life of a teenage girl. Band posters on the walls, colorful accents everywhere, even a few plush toys left on the bed.

“Have you ever thought about dirtying my childhood bedroom with your cum?” I asked.

“Yes! Maybe? I mean, I’m definitely thinking about this now!” Chester babbled, his voice rising with excitement.

I shushed him with furrowed brows.

“If you want to get any, keep your voice down,” I reproached. “Unfortunately, the sound carries to the lower floor. If we are too loud the gaming bros or, gods forbid, my father will hear us.”

“My lips are sealed!” Chester promised and mimed zipping his lips and throwing the key away.

“No, it’s my lips that are going to be sealed... around your cock,” I promised and pushed Chester onto the bed, crawling after him as he scooted up to the headboard until he was sitting with his back to it.

My fingers unzipped his pants swiftly and Chester swore quietly.

You would think he was still a teenager with the way his cock went from zero to a hundred as soon as I pulled him out of his yellow duck-patterned boxers. I decided to take it as a compliment and hid my smile in the curve of his throbbing cock as I

traced its shape with my open lips, then with my tongue. I wanted to take my time, but it was better to not risk anyone would go in search of us, so with a moan I dragged my mouth to the top of my prize, then sealed my lips over the cockhead. Chester gasped, then panted as I sank lower, gulping him down, stretching my lips with his girth. One of his hands darted to my hair, not trying to take control but holding onto me as I did my best to wreck him. When I established a toe-curling rhythm of up and down, I discovered that my lover was equally responsive, whether I was pulling off his cock or sliding it deeper into my hot mouth. The problem was this came with noises.

“Lisa...!” Chester moaned. I glared up at him before I pulled off his cock and swiftly rose on my knees, dislodging his hand from my hair.

“That’s not quiet!” I hissed in his ear and slapped a hand over his mouth.

His eyes were wide as I reached down to stroke his cock but kept my palm covering his mouth. Like this, Chester still made noise, or at least tried to. The broken moans were muffled and that had to do. I didn’t want to stop. With his fast breath against my hand, I could feel how he struggled to keep his sounds of pleasure down. The harsh panting mixed with a wet symphony of strokes, my saliva easing the way of my rhythmic caress.

I pressed with my hand, and Chester’s head thudded onto the headboard behind him. This position allowed me not only to silence him but to keep him in place.

Honestly, the thrill of it went to my head a little.

Chester’s eyes were glazed with pleasure, his fingers tangled in the sleeves of my sweater. He wasn’t trying to control the motions of my hand; no, the desperate grip was him just trying to hold on, to anchor himself among the sea of bliss.

His muffled cries dangerously increased in volume, and I knew I had to finish this fast.

“Good kitty,” I whispered in his ear and it was all it took.

Hot cum spilled over my fingers, but I kept my gaze on Chester’s face. His cheeks were ruddy with the red blush and, under my hand, I felt how his mouth had opened on that last cry of completion. The temptation was too strong, and I dipped my fingers inside, sliding my fingertips over his tongue, feeling him pant around me. Saliva slipped down his chin.

He was a complete mess.

I did this , a proud voice in my head crooned.

“Instead of worrying about people overhearing us, I should have been more worried about someone taking one look at you and seeing how I wrecked you,” I murmured, as Chester watched me with dazed eyes.

He gave me the slowest of blinks, like the cat that he was, utterly relaxed and blissed out.

I was the only thing keeping him from sprawling all over the bed as he became a total noodle. Still, he feebly tried to get his hand under my skirt. I caught it and held it in place.

“You may be satisfied with keeping quiet, but I won’t be. I want you to make me scream. Let’s revisit this when we are back home,” I said.

“M’kay,” Chester agreed and nuzzled against me.

The post-coital bliss really brought out the cat in him.

I had to escape his grabby hands when I went to clean myself up. I returned with a towel to clean my partner with and after we were done with the perfunctory cleaning, Chester wound himself up around me immediately. I was pretty sure that if he was in his cat form he would be purring up a storm.

We should be getting back before the others started to worry... but surely fifteen minutes couldn't hurt. Despite my best efforts I dozed off, too comfortable snuggling with my lover.

"...Lisa? Lisa? ...did she fall asleep?"

I came to consciousness with a rush of panic as the knocking turned into the sound of the door cracking open. My father couldn't see me in bed with Chester!

"...is that a cat?" My father asked from the half-ajar door.

I blinked, then looked at the other side of the bed where an orange cat tried to scramble away. Oh no, you don't, I thought and pulled Cheddar against me.

"Yes?" I answered sheepishly, extremely glad my lover's response time was fast enough to shift before dad saw him.

"...where did you get a cat? Actually, nevermind. It wouldn't be the first time you brought an animal home. At least it's not a squirrel this time."

"Are you going to keep bringing that up forever?" I groaned. "I was eight and didn't know squirrels shouldn't be kept as pets!"

"Give me some new material to tease you with and I will drop it," dad smirked, but

then his smile morphed into a more serious expression. “I want to know about details like that from your life, all the fun little stories but also your struggles, the bad days where you could use an ear to share your worries.”

“And you thought sending three men to spy on me was the best way to get those stories?”

There, we were finally talking about it. The elephant in the room has been acknowledged.

Father winced.

“My primary objective was your safety. It’s so easy to get hurt when you are all alone in a big city. As you getting mugged proved.” He hastily held his hands up when my brows narrowed at that. “But! But I realize it was duplicitous of me to keep the knowledge I assigned you a security detail from you. And hearing about you from others is not the same as listening to you share your life with me. Can you talk to me? Please, Lisa?”

I was silent for a moment as I gathered myself and squeezed Chester until he meowed in protest. Then a deluge of words escaped my lips like a waterfall.

“Oh, I will talk,” I said viciously. “Because too few people call you on your shit as the big, bad CEO and you had gotten comfortable getting away with things you should not. Have you imagined for a moment how I would feel when I found out my neighbors were spying on me? That the men who had become my friends were paid to do so? To get close to me? To share information about me? This, me putting my faith into Chester, Elijah, and Rowan after they had come clean to me, is the best happy ending you could possibly get because let me tell you... If I learned about this by myself I would be gone . I would take the heaps of money from my trust fund and run somewhere where you would never find me again.”



“Lisa—” Father had the gall to look stricken. It was all a game to him and he was mostly ashamed he got caught. I needed to make him realize how close he got to losing me because of his actions.

“If you ever threaten anyone close to me or use your money and power to put me in a fucking gilded cage again, I will... I will...” I felt the tears threatening to spill from my eyes.

Cheddar headbutted my chin and started to purr even as his big cat eyes looked worried.

That’s right. If you do it again I will have three people to support me , I thought with relief. I couldn’t control the actions of others, only hope for the best outcome, but I could control mine.

“I’m sorry,” father blurted out and I snapped my head up. As a born and raised rich boy he was pretty much allergic to this word. To admitting he was wrong. But here he was, gazing at me with those sorrowful eyes. “I know I hurt you, and that’s the last thing I wanted. Give me a chance to make it better?”

“Knowing you, you will need at least three,” I muttered, then sighed. “I suppose I could see you were at least making an effort those past days. It’s a good start.”

“You know... those boys of yours aren’t that bad,” father said awkwardly.

“Even Chester?” I asked slyly.

“He’s certainly... imaginative,” father said diplomatically. “You know, he reminds me a bit of your mother.”

“Oh?” I asked because my mother was a gentle soul who certainly didn’t speak with

the speed of a machine gun.

“She thought tomatoes belonged in a fruit salad as well.”

The cat in my arms turned to stare at my father, his ears pricked up, and I couldn't help but laugh.

“You know, she actually made that salad one day... and I didn't want to disappoint her so I ate it... and then she decided my fake smile meant I liked it, even though I felt visceral wrongness every time I spotted the red among the fruits, so I had to break it to her gently...”

The reminiscence of the old times and the anecdote about my mum pulled me into a stilted conversation with my father and, before I knew it, the words were flowing smoothly between us once more. Some balance, some instinctive trust, was restored, and we traded stories back and forth, while Cheddar eavesdropped shamelessly from my lap.

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

On Sunday, Chester made another attempt at getting along with my father.

“Sir, would you like to go fishing?” he asked.

This time Chester interrogated Seth beforehand about what my father liked, so I wasn’t surprised when my dad agreed. There was a slight displeased twitch on father’s face at the company, but he was a man who would never pass up a chance to practice his favorite pastime, no matter the circumstance.

I wished Chester all the luck with his endeavor but also...

“I think we should keep an eye on this excursion,” Elijah decided, and I jumped to my feet, ready to follow after the pair because yes, the probability of something going wrong was too high for me to ignore.

“Are you coming with us, Rowan?” I asked.

Rowan shot me a bored look from where he was sprawled on the couch with a book in hand and pointedly turned the page.

“Alright, geez, I can see you are too cozy to move. Let’s go, Elijah.”

We found the unlikely pair at the shack solely dedicated to fishing equipment and hunkered down to be covered by the nearby bushes. A few minutes later, Chester emerged carrying a bag full of supplies while my father carried the fishing rods and the bucket for the to-be-caught fish. We trailed after them far enough to not be spotted and hid once my father stopped at the edge of a lake. With the way the trees

near the water were sparse, we couldn't risk getting close enough to hear the conversation, but we could read the body language.

"Oh boy," I winced as it became clear Chester's initial success did not translate to actually getting along with my father. Both men looked tense and ready to snap. Chester was chattering away, but that likely only made things worse.

We watched this clusterfuck in motion for several minutes before it came to an explosive conclusion. Chester made a face when he was given a live, wriggling worm to put on the hook and refused to do it.

"Then fuck off and stop wasting my time!" father bellowed.

"Fine! Fishing is stupid anyway!" Chester threw his hands up and stomped away, back in the direction of the house.

I would be more worried about him getting lost on the way, but he was a cat. In fact, he changed into Cheddar when he was out of my father's sight and ran away.

Dad was pinching the bridge of his nose when I looked his way. Then his shoulders slumped, and he looked at the prepared fishing site and the two foldable seats with such sadness it made me feel bad for him.

The sight had to have an effect on Elijah as well because he bit his lips and thought about something hard before his brows smoothed out as he came to a resolution.

"It's my turn," he said and hefted up the pack of beer we took as an excuse for why we were here in case we got caught.

My brows rose up to my hairline, but I didn't stop him as he got out of our hiding spot and approached my father.

I watched as Elijah passed the beer over, no doubt using the spiel we prepared about how I noticed they didn't take any drinks with them and sent Elijah with the delivery, and then started to ask questions about the fishing equipment.

Father brightened immediately and animatedly started to explain everything. In no time Elijah was given his own rod and, lo-and-behold, he passed the test of the worm without a pause. Huh. This could actually work.

I watched as they settled in for long hours of fishing. Dad made a remark or shared his knowledge from time to time, but, otherwise, the two men were fine with silence between them, only the calming sounds of nature around them.

When dad broke the silence the next time and it looked like it was going to be a longer conversation I scooted closer, close enough to hear what they were saying, banking on the fact my father was going to keep his eyes forward and wouldn't look behind.

"Do you make good money from your writing?" I heard father ask.

"Good enough." Elijah shrugged awkwardly. "What I care about is that there's a rising trend. The more books I push out into the world, the easier it is to make a living of them. But it takes quite a while to do anything by myself."

"By yourself?" father repeated, his gaze darting from the fishing line to Elijah. "Doesn't your publisher do everything for you?"

Elijah laughed.

"Oh no, sir. I publish my books myself. I pay the editors, formatters, and cover artists, but the writing, marketing, admin, and everything else is on my head."

Dad looked at Elijah for a long moment.

“...do you want a publisher? I could get you one.”

“Thank you, sir, but no. Self-publishing gives me more control over my own business.”

“Ha! That’s right!” Father slapped Elijah’s back. “A good decision. Having your future in your own hands is important.”

I smiled into my scarf seeing the interaction. They were going to be alright. As quietly as I came, I disappeared into the forest, ready to sit by the fireplace with a grumpy orange cat who didn’t get his way.

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*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

In the middle of the night, I stumbled down to the kitchen for a snack, only for movement outside the window to catch my attention. Was that...?

Of course it was! That night owl.

I opened the window and called out.

“Rowan! Fancy some hot chocolate?”

The black cat jumped on the windowsill and rubbed himself all over me, marking his territory with his scent before I suddenly found myself crowded against the wall by a tall man.

“It’s freaky how you can shapeshift with your clothes,” I noted. “How does it even work?”

Rowan wriggled his fingers.

“Magic.”

“Right. That’s the answer to everything. Did you have fun stalking the perimeter around the house?”

He gave me a sheepish smile. Ah, so I guessed correctly. This sweet paranoid bastard.

“Have you been to the roof already?” He shook his head and I gasped. “That’s the best part! How about I make that promised hot chocolate, we grab a blanket or two,

and I can show you how to get up there even as a human?”

Armed with the mugs full of delicious choco, a bag of marshmallows, and two fluffy blankets stolen from the couch we made our way around the house to where you could get up onto the shed and find a set of metal bars set into the side of the building. Climbing up with all of our stuff would prove troublesome if Rowan didn't have amazing agility. I didn't know if it was him being a cat or thanks to whatever assassin school had trained him, and, at this point, I was too afraid to ask.

I put one of the blankets on the slanted roof and wrapped the other one around the both of us until we were snuggled together in our little cocoon. The first sip of the hot choc spread through my body in a pleasurable wave of heat.

“Sometimes I don't want to just be warm, you know?” I said. “I want to be cold and then made warm. With fluffy socks, warm blankets, fragrant hot tea...”

Rowan nodded but, due to how close we were sitting, it turned into him nuzzling against my cheek.

We sat, entwined in each other, and observed the stars in the clear night sky.

“When I traveled... the stars weren't the same everywhere,” Rowan said quietly into the darkness of the night and I knew it was my time to keep silent and just listen. The words came a bit haltingly, but I could wait for them to come. There was no rush in our small corner of the world. “Sometimes I could barely believe it was the same sky I knew when each country had different names for the stars, different constellations, different gods trapped in the firmament. I don't put much faith in astrology, but I believe growing up under a completely different view of stars has an impact on you.” Rowan reached a hand out as if he wanted to trap one of the stars between his fingers. “And now when I see the familiar sky I think: this is home.”



I took a sharp breath in when he turned to look at me and his eyes held the same appreciation in their depths as they held for the stars. Two cold hands cradled my face.

“But I’m starting to think I could deal with never seeing the stars again if only it meant you would stay by my side.”

“You can have both!” I insisted, touched by his confession. “If you can’t see the stars, I will... I will... I will bring the stars to you! Or bring you to them! Or describe them so thoroughly you will feel like you can see them in your mind! I will...”

Rowan shut me up with a kiss.

Which was not fair because I had more ridiculous promises to make! I didn’t even get to tell him that if the stars on the firmament were gods, then we could ascend together to be among them!

I found the silence fit us both better when our lips parted. It said as much as the words could. We were content just existing next to each other and finding the beauty of creation in each other’s eyes.

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:40 am*

We were on a holiday trip, that's true, but a writer's life was built upon a routine, so Elijah endeavored to find the time for writing whether we were on the road or in my childhood home. Today, I found him by the window overlooking the winter garden. It was a beautiful feat of landscaping and proof of two decades of love poured into making a rich and interesting mix of plants, shrubs, and trees that could not only survive the cold months but thrived during them.

"Do you like it?" I asked when Elijah stopped typing furiously and kept gazing out of the window instead.

He startled, and I worried I disrupted the thinking part of his work, but the smile he turned in my direction was inviting.

"It helps to have something to look at. Trees and plants, birds, and squirrels... it's perfect because there's nothing I really need to pay attention to, but at the same time you get enough movement, unpredictability, life, to make it stimulating," Elijah explained.

"So, your brain goes brrr when you look at plants?" I teased. "How come you don't have any at home?"

Elijah winced.

"I gave the collection from my previous flat to one of my friends. There's no use trying to shuffle fragile plants over state lines... And we didn't spend long enough in the flat next to yours for me to start rebuilding my collection."

“That I can get, but you moved in weeks ago. Surely we should have at least a cactus by now.”

“There’s four of us in a small flat... you and Chester are always fighting for space for your projects...” Elijah bit his lip. “I didn’t want to get in the way with something as superfluous as plants.”

I stared at him in disbelief tinged with resignation. Of course he tried to make himself small, to take as little space as possible, to not inconvenience me. I wanted to get my hands on the people who taught him his own needs didn’t matter and squeeze .

Instead, I decided to face a matter that I had been avoiding, all for Elijah. I wasn’t above putting his needs above my own.

“I want to show you a place that is special to me,” I said and extended my hand. “Will you follow me?”

Elijah blinked but nodded, saved his draft, and shut down his laptop.

“Bring the laptop with you,” I said as he stood up.

After we donned our boots and coats I led him outside, past the winter garden, down the cobblestone road, and to the towering structure of the greenhouse.

Each step I took towards it was heavy, but I grit my teeth.

He’s worth it , I said to myself.

I let Elijah into the greenhouse and saw the awe on his face.

While the winter garden was beautiful, it contained mostly shades of green, some

blue, and only a few pops of color. In stark contrast, the inside of the greenhouse was alive with a rainbow of blooms. Elijah staggered forward, his eyes wide, amazement spreading across his face as he looked from one plant to another. Purple flowers, red fruits — it was a feast for the senses. Even the green here was different.

In the winter garden, the green hues were muted, bluish, fading into brown... But here, sometimes the green was so vivid it seemed almost surreal — the kind of rich, saturated color you'd expect in a painting or a piece of neon plastic rather than real life.

“My mother created this garden,” I said softly.

Elijah glanced at me.

“Aren't those plants, like, exotic? I don't think I've seen many of them grown in the States.”

“You're right,” I replied. “This section contains plants that need very specific conditions to survive.”

He nodded, taking in the sprawling greenery around him. “It almost looks fake,” he murmured.

“This greenhouse is a feat of engineering. Look up.” I gestured toward the ceiling. “There are special lights to provide enough sun during winter, and climate controls regulate the moisture in the air. Sprinklers and irrigation systems keep everything hydrated. There's even equipment to measure CO2 levels. Thanks to all this, you can even find tropical plants here.”

I waved him deeper into the glass-covered space, and he followed eagerly. I swear there was a bounce in his step as he followed after me like an eager puppy. His

excitement reminded me of my younger self, learning about plants from my mother. For a moment, I closed my eyes, letting the memory wash over me.

When I opened them again I led Elijah to the section with desert plants to stand in front of a collection of succulents and cacti. Their shapes and textures were mesmerizing — spiky, plump, smooth, and sharp. Big and small.

Elijah's eyes widened as he spotted the biggest cactus in the room, its towering spines reached almost to the ceiling.

"I don't think we have space for something that big in our flat," he teased.

"You're right, we don't," I agreed with a laugh. "But look here." I pointed to the base of the cactus, where smaller plants were arranged in an intricate display. The terrain was tiered, peppered with sand, gravel, large stones, and tiny pebbles to create an illusion of a more natural space.

"Aww, cute little ones," Elijah cooed at the plant life as one would at a kitten.

"See?" I said. "There are plenty of smaller ones — small enough to fit on a windowsill. You could take one of these. Or ten," I added with a wink.

Elijah stammered. "I couldn't! I mean... I could just buy some cacti from Walmart or something."

I stared at him, aghast.

"Absolutely not. You have a chance to get your plants from a garden created by a renowned horticulturist and you want to settle for Walmart instead?" I crossed my arms. "That's it. You're getting twenty."

“Ten is enough!” he protested, his voice rising in alarm.

I turned away, hiding a smirk. He didn’t realize he’d already lost the battle when he started bargaining.

“Here’s the deal,” I said. “Pick at least one cactus or succulent now, and we’ll negotiate about the rest later.”

“Deal,” he said quickly, clearly relieved.

I watched as he crouched to examine the display. He hesitated between a plump, stone-like succulent that looked suspiciously like butt cheeks, and a small cactus with a vivid red flower. Whichever one he chose, I planned to grab both.

In the end, the blooming cactus was his pick. I led him further into the greenhouse, knowing the fun had only just begun. These were only two sections of the greenhouse and the rest contained many wonders.

We spent nearly an hour wandering through the massive space. Elijah ran his fingers over delicate petals, his eyes wide as he admired the vivid colors of berries and blooms.

This place felt timeless — not just because winter had no impact here, but because it hadn’t changed at all since I last visited. That visit, years ago, was just after my mother’s funeral. I came here hoping to find comfort, but all I found was emptiness — a deep ache that wouldn’t go away.

In my grief, I had destroyed several plants. They had been replaced as if my tantrum hadn’t happened at all, and the garden was now more pristine than ever. Every plant seemed perfectly chosen, each one working in harmony with the others, whether aesthetically or symbiotically.

Back then, every plant was tended with love by my mother. She used to say those plants were my siblings, and she doted on them as if they were her children. Now, the garden was maintained by hired staff, who upheld the status quo but never added to it. The space felt frozen in time. Forgotten and unexchangeable.

But as I watched Elijah fawn over the plants, eagerly picking his favorites — first five, then eight — I realized something. Maybe this garden didn't have to stay the same forever. Perhaps it could stay a monument, an epitaph to my mum, but from it something new could grow. Something beautiful and alive and thriving. A little fragment of my mother's legacy that I could carry forward but shape myself.

Elijah pointed at another flower. "What about this one?" he asked.

I told him everything I knew about it, sharing the tale of how stubborn the plant was and how mum spent many an hour fretting over it. Only after several minutes it occurred to me to tell Elijah the fact that it wouldn't survive in our flat without temperature controls.

He looked at me with that little furrow between his brows, which told me he was thinking too much. "Say, Lisa, it seems like you really love plants too," he said slowly. "Why don't you have any in your flat? Is it... because you just moved in a few months ago?" Elijah was giving me an easy out, but I didn't take it.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "For the longest time, I couldn't even look at flowers. They reminded me too much of my mum."

"Oh," he said softly. "Oh, sorry. I didn't mean—"

"It's okay," I interrupted. "Actually, you've made it better. I was afraid to come here, but now that I did it, I'm glad."

I stepped forward, kneeling in front of a plant with tiny blue flowers. It wasn't an ordinary plant, but a special one my mother had cultivated over decades. She'd made it smaller and smaller until it resembled a perfect miniature of its kind. It became so cute, so delicate, so unique.

"I'm ready now. I want to take this one with me," I said softly. Then I looked up at Elijah and smiled. "Thank you."

For the first time, it was Elijah who reached out to kiss me.

Emotions swelled between us, but it wasn't a terrifying maelstrom, rather a gentle lapping of the sea along the shore. I could step into those waves and be caressed by them.

"Make love to me?" I asked, feeling like a delicate flower whose petals could be blown away by a too-strong wind.

But Elijah was gentle. So gentle. He murmured praise into my skin as he peeled me out of my clothes and ensured his own were splayed on the ground so that I could lie down on them.

His hands trembled a little when they trailed over my breasts for the first time, but my appreciative moans bolstered him and soon there was this determined glint in his eyes that he got when he was figuring out the murder mystery in his next novel. Those fingers which held a pen with such mastery, which glided over the keyboard with such speed... Oh, those fingers. They were truly a blessing, and I made sure Elijah knew it as he explored my body and drove me insane.

"Elijah, so good," I panted out. "Can you... please, can you touch me...?"

Chester would make a teasing quip like 'touch you where?' and Rowan would look at



me to savor my mounting desperation, but such games weren't what Elijah wanted. His fingers immediately left my throbbing nipples and slid down, down, down , then in.

"Ah!" I cried out then shuddered when Elijah found out he could easily slide in a second finger.

"You are so wet," he said with amazement.

"For you..." I slurred out as he started a toe-curling rhythm of in and out. "I'm wet for you! Because of you...!"

"Well, then I have to take responsibility." Elijah smiled down at me.

His eyes crinkled. He looked so happy I had to kiss him again. Once my lips found his I couldn't stop and it was with us joined in a passionate kiss that I came, shuddering around his fingers.

"Oh, wow..." Elijah said as he separated from me enough to pull his fingers out and look at the evidence of my pleasure on them. "Do you want... ah... more?"

"Yes, yes, yes," I said hotly because I knew that I could ride this wave into another orgasm. Maybe two. I scrambled to pull down his underwear, the last piece of clothing left between us, and groaned as Elijah's thick erection popped up. The pulsing veins, the reddened tip... my mouth watered, but another part of me was equally hungry.

I laid back on the clothes and spread my legs in invitation.

"Like this. Come on," I said feverishly.

Elijah settled over me, looking as if he couldn't believe this was happening. I couldn't have him hesitating.

“Elijah, I want you inside of me,” I said. My hand wandered down to spread the lips of my pussy. “Here.”

Elijah choked on his own saliva at the sight, but a second later he was surging forward and pressing into me. I threw my head back with a shout. Elijah startled and looked as if he was about to ask if I was alright, so I wrapped my legs around his hips, showing him I very much didn't want him to stop.

He took the hint and moved his hips in and out.

There's pleasure in being penetrated, stimulated until you are dizzy with the amount of sensations wrought from your body, but there's also visceral joy in being someone's first. Seeing Elijah discover how a wet, warm pussy felt around his cock was an experience I wanted to burn inside my brain forever.

He sounded devastated.

Like no matter what he read or watched or even imagined as an author, the real thing was thousands of times better and it wrecked him.

I wrecked him.

His hips pistoned into me as he lost any semblance of rhythm, whimpers and moans spilling from his lips.

“Lisa... you feel divine...” he slurred out. “Ah! I'm s-so close... can I?”

“Fill me up,” I begged against his lips. “I want to feel your hot cum inside—”

I didn't even finish the sentence before he came with what sounded almost like a sob.

The loss of his composure thrilled me as much as the feeling of his cock jerking inside of me. My pussy milked him and my own desire rose almost to the cresting point. I snuck a hand down to play with my clit and that was enough to make my body bow into an arch of found completion.

"Nngh!" Elijah made an incomprehensible sound as he felt me pulsing around his spent cock.

He nearly collapsed on top of me but caught himself in time, self-conscious of his weight as if there would be a reason for me not to like his softer body. I liked how he felt under my hands, how he made a wonderful pillow as we settled next to each other. I whispered to him, telling him that and many other secrets. Only the verdant trees and sprawling plants were privy to how Elijah responded in kind.

*Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 2:41 am*

When we were ready to go back home, my father said his teary goodbyes and even spared a nod for my boyfriends. My brother, on the other hand...

"I'm not one for violence," Seth said with terrifying calmness. "But if you break my sister's heart I will find your most embarrassing photos or social media blunders and I will make them trending. Do we understand each other?"

Elijah was mildly amused, Rowan accepted the threat as a promise, but poor Chester... the redhead was clutching his own shirt and nodding rapidly.

"Understood! Yes, sir! Please don't do that!" he said to the younger man in a shaky voice, then muttered so low I barely caught the words. "...there are so many stupid photos of me on the internet. So many. I don't want to become a meme."

Using all my willpower to keep a straight face, I herded my lovers to the car. Once we were comfortably sitting inside, the driver took us away. I watched my old home disappear from the view and thought about all the new good memories I had made there. Maybe I would find it in myself to visit this place more often and not only on Thanksgiving.

The journey passed uneventfully, and we were escorted to a small airport that specialized in catering to the wealthy elite. Thanks to that, we didn't have to spend a long time in queues, waiting to be checked in and scanned. The process was smooth and quick and soon we boarded the small jet belonging to my father.

After the crew welcomed us aboard, went through all the procedures, and then served us drinks and snacks after the liftoff, we were finally left alone.

“I can’t believe we are on a private jet!” Chester exclaimed, his face practically glued to the window.

“Broken record.” Rowan rolled his eyes. Understandable, as the redhead has spent all the way here gushing about the flight.

“I had the pleasure to fly a few times before, but, wow, this is on another level,” Elijah ran a reverent hand over the comfy and stylish leather seats, then reached to take a sip of his champagne.

“No screaming children is the biggest advantage for me,” I said. I was about to make myself comfortable in my own seat but... “Another thing I like is the privacy.”

Elijah yelped when I plonked myself right onto his lap and kissed him.

After the initial surprise, the writer groaned and kissed me back, his hands hovering over my sides as if he didn’t know what to do with them. I reached down and pressed them against my back.

“I know we aren’t quite home yet... but if you wanted a bit of fun... both of you.” I looked over at Chester, remembering my taunting promise of more pleasure to follow. Then my eyes slid to Rowan. I found his eyes already darkening with lust. “All of you.”

Elijah gulped, his cheeks growing redder by the minute.

“What about the crew? Won’t they hear us?” he asked, casting a furtive glance at the closed door.

“Nope! It’s a jet designed for billionaires. It’s made so that business deals and other sensitive information can be discussed here.”

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s all they need the soundproofing for,” Chester snorted.

“Lucky for us, isn’t it?” I said and pulled him down by the collar of his shirt so that I could kiss him while still sitting on Elijah like a queen on a throne.

“Fuck yeah, let’s join the mile-high club!” Chester panted out between the kisses we traded.

Rowan’s hand settled on my back, waiting for me to lead this. I took it for his approval of Chester’s plan, but I needed to make sure everyone was on board with this.

“All of us or no one,” I said firmly, then cupped Elijah’s face. “If you don’t want this, just say so, sunshine.”

He ducked his head, the embarrassment getting the best out of him.

“I can... I can at least watch. We will see about more?” he still stammered out.

I kissed him on the nose.

“How about you hold me while Chester and Rowan do wicked things to me?” I whispered, my breath sliding over the shell of his sensitive ear.

“Yeah. I would like that,” Elijah said, his throat bobbing with a hard swallow.

“Lovely! But first I need to get rid of those clothes.” I stood up, took a step back and splayed my arms wide. “Gentlemen, do your worst.”

Chester fell upon me like the chaotic beast he was, pulling at this and that without a rhyme and reason, while Rowan took a more methodical approach. He knew perfectly

well what he was doing and how much strength he was applying, so when my pantyhose ripped I was certain it was on purpose.

“Ups, it broke,” Chester giggled. “I guess there’s no saving it. We may as well...”

I swore as two sets of hands grabbed at the poor fabric, literally tearing the pantyhose off me. A moan slipped from my lips as I felt the force, the wildness of it against my skin.

Soon after, I was pushed into Elijah’s arms completely naked. I clung to him with my arms and buried my face in his neck as my legs were kicked apart by Rowan. I thought he would take advantage of the position, but I felt him step back as Chester took his place.

“I guess I will get there before you, after all,” he grinned at Elijah, who sank a bit into his seat as if he wanted to hide. Chester stared. “No way. No fucking way! Lisa?!”

“Visiting a garden often means plucking flowers...” I couldn’t help but deliver the answer through, heh, a flowery metaphor for taking Elijah’s virginity.

“I can’t believe I’m the last Pokemon to be collected,” Chester groaned.

“It doesn’t matter how you start. It matters how you finish.” I batted my eyelashes at him and he puffed up. “Besides, don’t worry, I know you are a shiny.”

Chester laughed at the reference to being the rarest of Pokemon. I could nerd out with the best of them and he loved it.

“It seems I am the one who had caught you now,” Chester said and ran appreciative hands along my back.

“I let myself be caught. And now I’m getting impatient. Come on, fuck me,” I wriggled my ass. “For someone who spent so much time whining that he had to wait so long—ah!”

My words turned into a breathy gasp as Chester pushed into me.

Elijah’s arms held me securely, supporting me with loving care as Chester’s cock sank deep into me. He wasn’t as long as Rowan or as thick as Elijah, but he definitely made up for it with enthusiasm. Ever seen bunnies fucking? He was like one of those, but on speed.

“Fuck!” I gasped out as he pistoned into me. “Are you a vibrator? How do I turn you to a lower setting?”

“Sorry,” Chester gasped out, forcing himself to slow down. “It’s just... so good. It’s like you were made for me. Did it... did it not feel good for you?”

What was with this scolded dog act? I hid my blushing face in Elijah’s hair.

“It felt good. Too good,” I mumbled.

I could feel Chester perk up. Including his cock.

“Oh?” he asked, and I knew he had a shit-eating grin on his face. “Are you so thirsty for it you were about to come, Lisa?”

I glared over my shoulder.

“Do you want to bet who is going to come first? Because I will put my money down it will be you,” I sneered.



“You’re on.” Chester gave me a manic grin in response.

His strategy was to fuck me slowly instead of the frenzied pace from before. That was not fair! My body was getting hotter and hotter, but I wasn’t about to lose the bet without some dirty tricks of my own.

I let my eyes water a little, then looked pitifully at Elijah.

“I can’t stand it... make him fuck me properly,” I pleaded.

Elijah’s eyes flared golden.

“Chester!” He barked out. “Fuck her harder. Faster. Fuck her better .”

For a moment I thought I would come there on the spot from just hearing the shy, proper Elijah using such crass language and being so authoritative, but I bit my lip and managed to change the urge to come into a shiver through my body. When Chester indeed started to fuck me hard and fast again I hung just by a thread.

When he spilled into me with a stuttering moan I followed almost immediately, my legs shaking as I let myself go and the waves of pleasure slammed into me. I collapsed into Elijah’s arms, a puddle of goo capable only of whimpering.

“That was cheating!” Chester panted out as he pulled out of me. I could feel his cum drip down my legs. “Elijah, how could you? Using your powers as our leader for evil?!”

“It was in service of our mate, so it couldn’t be evil,” Elijah sniffed. I could see he was pleased with the stunt he pulled. He apparently, what, whammied Chester with his cat-shifter powers?

A quick glance at the grin on the redhead's face as he collapsed on the seat next to Elijah told me the protests were only banter and there were no hard feelings.

"I feel empty," I purred. "If only there was someone who could help me..."

My taunting summons worked and Rowan stepped forward. He did stuff my hole, but not the one that I expected. I moaned protests around the callused fingers invading my mouth, but Rowan made nothing of it and only played with my tongue as he addressed Elijah.

"Do you want her mouth?"

My heart stuttered as my eyes met Elijah's burning gaze. The man licked his lips, warring with himself, then admitted, "Yes."

"Good," was all Rowan said, as he pulled me away from the softness of Elijah's chest and pushed me down on my knees between his legs.

I can work with this. I can very much work with this , I thought.

My mouth-watering, I reached to unbuckle Elijah's pants. Rowan used my preoccupation with the other man to surprise me by sliding his hand under my body. Those clever digits found my clit and rubbed, not making the work of pulling Elijah's cock out any easier.

Fortunately, I thrived on this kind of challenge. When I finally mastered the damn zipper, I hungrily reached inside Elijah's underwear to pull out his fat cock. It throbbed in my hand as I took my first taste, my tongue leaping out to scoop a drop of precum gathering at the top. I moaned as it spread over my tongue, conditioned to associate the saltiness and the musky scent with the heat pulsing between my legs.

“Stop playing,” Rowan’s rough voice said as if he wasn’t the one who had previously teased me for hours during our TV marathon. When I opened my mouth to seal my lips around the crown of Elijah’s cock, Rowan’s rough hand tangled in my hair.

And then pushed me down.

If my mouth wasn’t suddenly full I would moan but I could only make a muffled gurgle as my lips stretched wider, and wider, and wider, until I stuffed my mouth full of Elijah’s cock. It was truly a treat, the girth of his dick a challenge that strained the corners of my lips, but I wanted to take it all. To swallow him down until he entered my throat.

Tiny groans escaped Elijah’s mouth as I sucked on his cock. He was trying to look at me, to take in the vision I had to be, to etch how I looked on my knees into his brain, but his eyes kept shutting as the sensations overwhelmed him. This was his first blowjob, and I was going to make it the best one.

When I sank lower and stubbornly pushed the flared crown of his cock into my throat, he threw his head back with a shout. He looked like he was having a religious experience. His expression was awed, mouth open and panting, his body shuddering under my hands.

I could tell he was already on the edge and I didn’t want this to end so soon, so I pulled off his cock with a wet pop.

My lungs barely took in the first proper shuddering breaths before all the air was knocked out of me when Rowan took this moment to slide into me. In one powerful thrust he was buried in me and I sent thanks to all the gods I could remember that his cock was so long even in this position it filled me completely, leaving no space for anything else.

“Wow, just look at you,” Chester said with awe from where he was lounging next to us. He bounced back from his orgasm much too quickly for my liking. Next time, I would have to wreck him even more. “You are a mess, Lisa. I wish I could draw you like this...”

“You can... ah... you can draw her...” Rowan said, and I was gratified by how breathy his voice sounded. He wasn’t as vocal as Elijah or Chester, so wringing any sound out of him, both outside and inside the bedroom, was a feat I was proud of.

I squeezed around Rowan just to hear him groan.

“Wait, you are right!” Chester said. He was stunned by the suggestion only for a second, then he lunged for his bag and quickly returned with a sketching pad in hand. “Smile for me, precious,” the dumbass said.

My cursing at him was intelligible, as I tried to swear at him with a cock in my mouth.

“Ladies shouldn’t speak with their mouth full,” the redhead taunted and I may have lunged at him if only I wasn’t speared by two cocks, suspended between my two lovers, and if at that moment Rowan didn’t snap his hips forward so hard stars danced in front of my eyes.

“Nngh,” the indescribable sound of bliss was the only thing that escaped my mouth in answer. The sound of a pencil scribbling on paper faded in the background as my attention narrowed to the way Rowan and Elijah had established a rhythm together. Now, when their cocks pushed in they did so at the same time.

I have never been so stuffed, so full in my life.

Control of the situation slipped from between my fingers as I let myself be carried

away on the wave of sensation. Between four hands... no wait, five — Chester had to be the one petting my hair — I drowned in bliss, my body shaking as it was taken to new heights.

I came before even Elijah did, hands scrambling to anchor myself against the floor, against the seat, against my lovers. My body seized, then relaxed almost too much; Rowan had to take a firm grip on my hips for me not to slide to the floor.

Elijah noticed how languid I was even when he was seconds from coming himself and tried to pull out of my mouth. Such a gentleman. I grabbed his hips and pulled him forward until he was fucking in my mouth, lost in his pleasure. I didn't want to be a lady now.

I wanted to be their slut.

Draw me like one of your French girls, I thought feverishly, knowing Chester was striving to capture the moment of my debasement.

Elijah exploded in my mouth with a cry. The salty taste of cum spread over my tongue, my tastebuds tingling with the potent flavor. I swallowed the milky fluid down, letting the warmth slide down my throat and settle in my stomach like a prize.

One more to go.

Elijah's softening cock slipped from my lips and I said goodbye to it with a butterfly kiss. Then I braced myself against my lover and twisted as much as I could to look at Rowan over my shoulder.

“Please, please, make me fly .”

As Rowan answered my cries by pounding into me with furious abandon, I let my

gaze drift to the skies outside the plane's window. The fluffy clouds really made it look as if I was already in seventh heaven but I truly reached the promised land when Rowan spilled inside of me with a curse, his panted breaths pressed to my back as his hips rolled, chasing after the last sparks of fire burning his body.

The warm feeling of being so needed, wanted, craved by three men spread through my mind as now I had the proof of those feelings inside of me. With a shudder and a gasp, I orgasmed once more, allowing myself the freefall of completion.

I give the Mile High Club five stars out of five . Would recommend to friends , I thought as Chester insisted I stay naked until the very last possible minute so that he could draw me all languid and fucked out.

## Page 24

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When I stepped over the threshold of my flat it was a relief. The family visit was amazing and all, but now I wanted time to myself. To decompress, to think through all the feelings I had been exposed to during my stay at the villa.

In the living room a collection of plants greeted me on the table, and I spotted our bags on the floor. Lighting up at seeing that things had already arrived, I turned to Elijah to discuss with him where all the tiny plants should go, only to pause as I saw Rowan inspecting the underside of the table.

“What are you doing?” I asked, miffed.

“Looking for bugs and cameras,” Rowan said nonchalantly, as if that wasn’t some spy-level shit.

“Do you think my father would really do that?” I asked, and Rowan shrugged, continuing his pursuit.

I left the man to his search and returned my attention to the plants. I passed the cactus with the red flower, his very first pick of the garden, to Elijah.

“I’ll start with my tiny blue flowers one,” I said, cradling my mother’s legacy in my hands.

After much deliberation, we placed the miniature plant and the cactus next to each other on the kitchen windowsill; the place getting the most sunlight and therefore the prime location. Seeing the two plants side by side, their colors made brighter by the rays of sun shining merrily through the window, made me feel all gooey and warm

inside.

“All clear,” Rowan reported as he returned from his inspection. That meant the current truce with my father had a chance to continue. The future was looking bright!

“It’s good to be home,” Chester said.

In the few minutes we left the redhead alone he had already almost merged with the sofa, sprawling upon it shamelessly, ignoring any work that had to be done, like unpacking our bags.

I contemplated throwing something at him, but he looked too cute with his face pressed into the cushions. I will let him off just this one time , I lied to myself.

Then my brain screeched to a halt as I finally processed what Chester said.

“Home?” I said as I felt tears gathering in the corners of my eyes.

“Yeah?” Chester looked at me weirdly.

“You have never called this place home before...” I said, emotion thick in my voice.

Chester scratched his cheek in an embarrassed motion.

“Well, you know, home is where the food is and all that...”

“I have been feeding you since day one,” I snorted. “Does this mean this was your home even before you moved in?”

Chester’s cheeks reddened and he wouldn’t look at me.

“Well, maybe just a little...” he mumbled.



I laughed.

“Then let me make you some food. After all, I want you, all of you, to have a home here.”

We shared a wonderful meal and when the night came I did not sleep alone.

First, Cheddar came in with his tail high and jumped right onto my chest, knocking the air out of my lungs.

Then Marshmallow followed, taking cautious steps towards the bed until I stretched out my hand, inviting him in.

Shadow... Shadow suddenly was just there, at the foot of the bed, yellow eyes staring at me as if he could see to the depth of my soul.

I gathered all three cats close and petted them until the bed felt like one of those hotel massage machines with all the purring.

And maybe Cheddar woke me up with his relentlessness even in sleep, maybe Marshmallow's fur tickled my nose and made me sneeze, maybe Shadow startled in the middle of the night from a nightmare and sunk his claws into my leg...

But it was still worth it.

Home isn't where the food is , I thought with a sleepy smile. It's where your cats are.