



We All Go A Little Dad Sometimes

Author: *Shane Morton*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Two lost souls taking a chance on love

Can their love survive their expectations

David- Life broke me, and I crawled back home with my tail between my legs. At almost forty, I had nothing to show for the life I lived except for a marvelous pooch named Liza Minnelli. I was lonely – but too scarred by the past to do much about it. Then, I almost ran over Taylor Lautner with my car. Well, someone who looked a lot like him anyway, and my world flip-flopped in a way I hadn't expected. Every time we saw each other, I fell harder, and the thing that threw me off the most was that he seemed to feel the same way. But all I can think about is if he will leave me too.

Justin- When I failed an entire semester my senior year of college, I had to come home. It sucked. An affair with one of my professors had really done a number on me, especially when I discovered he was married and had kids. I lost myself after that. I felt horrible and filthy – I felt used. Now, I work at a coffee shop part-time so I can pay for my online classes. It surprised me how much I liked it in this small town where my parents had recently moved. Then I met David. Why did I have to have a thing for older professor types with adorable puppies? I had a type. But he was so in his shell, like a turtle hiding himself away. But I was drawn to him and couldn't help it.

Total Pages (Source): 22

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

“I’m on my way.” I reversed out of my parking spot and threw the car into drive. I was running late – I was always running late. “Stop busting my balls and get my cocktail ready, bitch.” I drove down the alley too quickly to be safe. Some of the other condos on my street had to use the alley to get to their parking garages, too, but there was usually no traffic. Besides, I was running late, so speed was of the utmost importance.

“Hurry up!” Zane seethed as his voice blasted through my car’s speaker system. “Do not leave me alone with all these queens, David. Our friends are being so extra today! Like super bitchy, and they don’t want to fall behind and have someone spoil the finale on socials for them. So, get your ass here pronto!”

“Zane, honey, I said that I’m on my way. Hanging up now, and I’ll be there in ten minutes. Love you mean it.” I hung up the phone so my bestie couldn’t complain anymore. It was the finale of Drag Race, and those golden gays could chill. This was the price I paid for having friends even older than I was. They had forgotten how to be patient as time passed by them in a flurry. I understood. I was approaching forty and felt completely unseen by anyone under the age of fifty. Almost forty felt like eighty in gay years.

My phone slid off the seat as I pushed my brakes too hard and screeched to a stop at the end of the street. I reached down and picked it up as I glanced to my left and started to pull out. A blur to my right caused me to slam my brakes again.

“Holy shit!” I couldn’t believe my eyes. I almost ran over Taylor Lautner as he crossed the street in a tank top. He glared at me as if he wanted to cuss me out, and I smiled at him. He was even hotter in person than I... Jesus, those arms were fucking

amazing.

I watched him cross all the way across the street because I couldn't tear my eyes away from his rearview. I noticed him going towards a beat-up, old, maroon station wagon. I chuckled as I looked harder at his profile and watched him slide into his car.

"Taylor Lautner drives that piece of shit?" I glanced away and pulled out onto the cross-street since I was openly staring at him and now felt like a stalker. What was he doing in my neighborhood? I mean, it's one of those streets where everyone knows everyone. We even have street parties where we close the street down for the residents that live here. This is one of those neighborhoods where secrets are discovered, and gossip flies at the first sign of something fun.

If Taylor Lautner had moved here, I would know. Wouldn't I?

I hadn't noticed anyone moving out, or for that matter, anyone moving in. But there was a new condo building that looked like offices, and no one on the street had met most of the people who had moved in, as they had kept to themselves. Of course, we had just sent out the invitation to our next street party, which would happen in two weeks, so... maybe? Perhaps Taylor was one of these new neighbors? Maybe he chose Point Pleasant as his new home and left Los Angeles to escape the hustle and bustle of the big city. We had plenty of celebrities who had moved here over the past few years. I mean, it was possible, and if he was my neighbor... Good Grief! The eye candy would be so much more fabulous! Even if he were married and straight – it wouldn't hurt to ogle the sexiness.

We even had royalty come to The Pleasant every now and then. So, a movie star like Taylor was a definite possibility. I giggled as I thought about him flipping burgers on the grill while he met all of his new neighbors.

I had a type, and the type of guy I found attractive was the type of guy who did not

find me attractive in any way. Fit, muscly boys like Taylor – and yes, I knew he was straight – those kind of boys only ever dated or fucked other guys like themselves. It was gay math. But I couldn't stop how I felt. I liked guys that were hot and in shape, even if I was not any of those things.

I was cute and cuddly. My type was hard and unavailable as they ran out the door right after they finished – if I could even get them in the door. I rarely got anyone to say hello to me, much less come to my house to scratch an itch that hadn't been scratched in way too long.

Why did I have to have a type? My life would be easier if I settled for another man like myself – lonely and desperate. But here in The Pleasant, you never did know what was right around the corner. I had seen quite a few surprising relationships happen to people I knew. I just wished it would be my turn for a fucking miracle. If that miracle was with a hunky werewolf, I'd fucking die happy. For Taylor, I would get over my long list of issues – seriously, it was a very long list.

I turned the corner way too quickly and noticed that Taylor was following behind me in his old station wagon. I passed by the best coffee shop in town and watched him pull in and park on the street through my rearview mirror. If I weren't in such a hurry, I'd... What? Turn around and stalk him? Yeah, that's not creepy at all.

I wanted to be a total creeper. But I was in a hurry.

I sped towards the other side of town and quickly turned onto Zane's Street. Parking would be at a premium since every old queen in a hundred-mile radius was at his house waiting on me. I pulled around the block and, miracle of miracles, found a spot down the street. I power walked toward his house because I didn't want to hear him bitch about my tardiness once again.

“Finally, hooker!” Zane screamed as I walked through his front door. “Your drink is

on the counter. Hurry up!”

I grabbed my cocktail and looked around at my small group of friends, who were all staring at me to hurry the fuck up and sit down so they could un-pause the television. I sat down by Zane in his big poofy chair, and he immediately threw his legs over me, making himself comfortable. We watched – we screamed as Ru chose the wrong winner once again. But we had fun. I always did with these guys, even if I did usually feel like an outsider half the time. It wasn’t their fault – it was just third-wheel syndrome I seemed to relish in.

Benny and Ben had been together for twenty years. They were both in their late fifties and prided themselves on being homebodies who never went out for anything more than an expensive dinner.

Jerrie and Pete had also been together for quite some time but didn’t want to participate in the heteronormative act of marriage. I had always found that hilarious since they were totally monogamous and married in every way except the tax breaks. They also had become homebodies and rarely attended anything except for Drag Race watch parties and birthdays with us.

Then there was Jacob. He was the sweetest and oldest of us all. His partner Stevie had passed away from cancer a decade ago before I knew him. He was sixty-nine and had the mouth of a sailor and the dirty mind to match. He cared for all of us, and if we ever needed a shoulder to cry on – we chose Jacob.

That left me and Zane. We had graduated high school together and came out when we were in college. We had remained good friends, but it wasn’t until I moved back to The Pleasant from Denver that he truly became my bestie. He had moved back home a year before me to help his mom out. She had fallen and broken her hip, so he came back and worked remotely for the insurance company. He could talk anyone into anything – and he convinced them that his working remotely would be beneficial to

everyone, and they agreed.

I moved back home because my company had downsized, and now I work for a start-up and manage their website from my own comfy couch. I had no idea how lonely working by yourself could be, but I didn't feel the need to move to Saint Louis to work in the office. Hey, it was a paycheck and, honestly, not a ton of work for me to do. I usually sat at my desk and watched movies while I waited for the ding from one of my co-workers when they needed something. My Teams app rarely dinged.

Not even at work was I an essential part of anyone's life. I had gotten used to it, even if I did hate it, and I had been doing it for the last six years.

"You want another drink, boo?" Zane shook a cocktail brusquely before pouring it out into an up glass for Benny.

"You know he does," Jacob winked at me.

"Hey! I almost killed a celebrity today." I stood and walked over to where everyone seemed to be congregating as Zane made a new batch of drinks.

"Why would you attempt to murder Blake Hudson? He's very sweet." Jerrie handed Zane his glass for a refill. "He just volunteered to be our master of ceremonies to help raise money for the new senior center."

"It wasn't him. It was Taylor Lautner." I giggled.

"Who is that?" Jacob looked totally confused. He only watched TCM and rarely went to a new movie because he thought they were trash.

"He's that kid that turned into a werewolf in those vampire movies we made you hate watch." Ben grinned.

“Oh, he’s very good-looking. He could be my grandchild, but cute.” Jacob shook his head as he always did when we talked about someone cute who wasn’t under the age of fifty.

“He still is.” Jerrie raised his eyebrows lasciviously and wagged them.

“David, honey. You are going to have to start at the beginning.” Zane laughed. “This is getting us nowhere. What happened?”

“He was crossing the street when I pulled out of the alley, and I almost ran him over.” I grinned. “Taylor was almost my hood ornament.”

“Huh? Why would he be on your street? Did he move here or something?” Pete took his cocktail from Zane.

“No idea. But he drives an old maroon station wagon.”

Zane laughed loudly and slammed his hand on the counter. “Taylor does not drive a station wagon. I follow him on the gram. He and his wife are still living in LA. So why would he be here and driving someone’s old nasty station wagon? It couldn’t have been him,” Zane droned. I hated when he talked down to me like I was a moron.

I held my hand up in the Boy Scout salute. “I swear. He walked right in front of me. Maybe they bought the condo to have a getaway place? It’s totally possible.”

Zane walked over and placed his phone in front of my face. “This was posted four hours ago, and he and the wifey are vacationing in Bali. How did he get from Bali to here in a couple of hours, David? I will need an answer.” Zane excelled at bitch.

“It’s possible that he posted that after he returned.” Pete waved his hand in the air quickly as if this didn’t matter.

“The caption says it’s their first day in Bali, and they can’t wait for the next two weeks. So... Are you calling my favorite hunky werewolf a liar? Sorry, boo. It wasn’t him. But isn’t that better? Maybe this doppelganger is single and gay and into older men with thinning hair and commitment issues? If so, maybe it’s your lucky day.” He grinned happily, which was a totally different grin than his hateful, evil, vile grin. He had a multitude of happy faces that hid all of his other emotions.

“Zane, honey. You’re a total bitch. I love you, but... Maybe tone the tude down just a tad.” Jacob chortled and patted me on the back. “All that chutzpah will cause early aging, and you can’t afford it.”

“I’m in my bitchy era. I can’t help it,” Zane retorted and walked back behind the counter to make another drink.

If it wasn’t Taylor Lautner that I almost murdered with my Prius. Then who the fuck was it, and how could I get his number?

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

It wasn't that I hated Point Pleasant. Seriously – I didn't. But I hated living here with a passion. It was a really cute place that had the feel of a small village instead of a city. It's the kind of town I might've wanted to retire in when I was older. Much... much older. But when my parents moved here last year, I thought it'd be a fun place to visit in between semesters. Perhaps I would spend the holidays here when I began working.

Then...

I hate that word when talking about this.

Then – I dropped out my senior year. I didn't know what to do. I had partied way too hard the semester before and flunked half of my classes. Some were classes that I had to have an A or B in since they were in my major. I got really depressed and started being way too hard on myself, and before I knew it, I had missed weeks of classes while I sat in my room playing X-Box and feeling sorry for myself. The only option I had at that time was to drop out. It sucked. I sucked. There were also other more lascivious reasons, but I didn't like to think about them.

Telling my parents that I was quitting school was really difficult. My dad worked a nine-to-five job for the Point Pleasant Electric Company, and my mom was a teacher's assistant at the elementary school, so they didn't have the money to put me through school, and I sure as hell didn't have a high enough GPA to get a scholarship. I had hopes that I'd get lucky and find a soccer scholarship, but I guess being second string wasn't good enough – so, student loans. To say that the parents were upset at my situation would be an understatement.

Student loans meant I had to keep a good standing at the college in terms of grades. Dropping out meant I had to make up those hours on my own before I could get another loan to finish. I totally fucked my future up. So here I was – living at home and taking one online class at a time. My future was on hold while I fixed my mistakes. I had no friends in town either. So... I was bored. I did, however, have to get a job to be able to afford my online classes and to help the family out while I was living there. I owed that to them. Hell, I owed it to myself. But finding a job in Point Pleasant hadn't been as easy as I hoped. I got a part-time job and also put myself out there on Task Rabbit for handyman and assistant services.

I didn't mind the part-time job, though. It was a nice break from sitting in front of my computer. Online classes sucked. So, my job at the coffee shop had been a lifesaver in just getting away from the house. I also had the coolest boss. Crystal was a firecracker of one-liners and attitude. She hired me on the spot and gave me the nickname Hot Stuff on my first day. She's something else, and her group of friends come into the shop a lot. They sit and gossip while I make drinks and serve the customers for the lunch shift. It's not that hard, and I kind of like it. It pays me almost enough to take my classes and have a little money in my pocket. I rely on Task Rabbit to make up for anything else I need.

Crystal and her friends aren't that much older than me, which is cool, too. I've met them at the gay club a couple of times for drinks. They think I'm straight, and I've not told them any differently. Crystal says she has perfect gaydar – I think she may be wrong about that! I mean, I am Bi. So, maybe her radar is broken. I just smile when they talk about their straight tagalong (me) and see no reason to tell them anything different yet. It's fun. Besides, boy or girl – who the hell am I gonna date in Point Pleasant? I'm just biding my time to get the fuck out of here.

“Hey, Hot Stuff.” Crystal grinned wickedly as she wiped her hand on a towel. “I just pulled the last of the muffins out of the oven. They can cool for the next hour and then get packed to go to the women's shelter in the morning. What do you have

planned for the rest of this glorious Spring day?” She walked around the counter and sat down on one of the stools, still grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

“Nothing, I guess.” I scooped the crumbs that one of the customers had left off the counter and into the trash. “I’ll just go home and try to finish the next assignment and maybe watch a movie. I don’t know. Mom’s making tuna noodle, which is my favorite. So maybe I’ll eat myself into a comatose state.”

Crystal threw her head back and cackled. Her long hair bounced with her shoulders as she filled the room with the sound of her laughter. It was intoxicating. “I weirdly love tuna noodle. Does she put peas in it?”

I held up my hand in front of her face. “That’s an affront to tuna noodle, and there’s nothing weird about it. It’s the best casserole on the planet, hands down. It’s a known fact.”

“Hmm... Is it better than Chicken Divan? Because that’s my mother fucking jam.” She spun around on the stool, quickly throwing her arms up in the air.

“I can’t hate on a good, gooey chicken and broccoli casserole. I mean, it’s good. But tuna noodle is much better. Mom makes it with curry powder and dill weed. It’s like a mouth bomb of flavor.” I chuckled – enjoying this free time with Crystal, as always.

“How’s your class? What are you taking again?” She grabbed the edge of the counter to steady herself as her spinning stool slowed. “Wow... dizzy.”

“Mental health when dealing with a sports injury.” I groaned – leaning onto the counter and resting my weight upon my arms.

“So hetero.” She cackled. “It’s nice to have some macho man energy around here.”

“Your friends are pretty macho, actually. I think that Danny could bench press me if he really wanted to, and macho is highly overrated.”

“He could, and it is,” Crystal nodded and grinned at me. “They all really like you. You can always come to hang out with us whenever you want. You know you don’t need an invitation, right?”

“Thanks. I appreciate that. But I’m not really into the bar scene very much. Never really have been. Frat parties were more my thing,” I chuckled as I cleaned the counter. “But maybe I’ll join you all the next time you go. If I stay at home all the time, I’m gonna get really bored and really boring. Mom hovers to make sure I’m getting my classwork done. It’s annoying but sweet, I guess.” I played coy.

“We’re going out tomorrow night, and I expect you to be there. Consider it work time without pay – well, I’ll buy your drinks, so, paid by alcohol.” Crystal winked.

“Sure. Tomorrow sounds good. I still need to settle an argument with Danny over the best-starting quarterback of all time.” I chuckled. Danny was pretty fucking hot, and if we were both single – who knows? But he isn’t, and honestly, never would have been my type, anyway.

“Danny and his sports. He and Kris were the only jocks in our group. Oh, Hunter, too! I always found sports boring.” She glanced over her shoulder at the front door. “But the sports boys were very cute.”

“I know you like cute boys. Speaking of... Did you get a delivery today?”

“It’s too early for... Oh!” Her eyes widened before narrowing as she stared at me. “Aw... Did Danny gossip about me? He’s a very bad boy.”

“Nope! It was totally Sam. But I didn’t need him to tell me what I already knew. I do

have eyes, Crystal. I asked him about it, actually. I see the way you and mailman Larry look at each other when he delivers your packages.”

She cackled. “You make that sound so dirty, and I appreciate it. But Larry and I tried, and it didn’t work out. I’m damaged goods, sweetheart, and damaged goods don’t get a happy ending like in the movies. It’s not the way life works.”

“So, you did have a thing?” I raised my eyebrows and grinned.

“You are so bad. We did have a thing for a bit. But I managed to... Well... We’re better off as friends.”

“You don’t seem damaged to me. You seem like a badass, boss lady.”

“Badassery covers up the cracks in the veneer. Don’t look too closely.” She flicked her red hair off her shoulders and moved around to the back of the counter again. “Maybe you never met a person with a past since you are just a baby.”

“I’m like six years younger than you.”

“That’s a lifetime, boo. I lived a lifetime before I ever graduated high school. Momma road hard.” Her eyes got this far-off look as she stared past me and saw something beyond the place we were. It kind of freaked me out for a second, and I shuddered as I stared at her. “But the past and dwelling in it doesn’t help you ever get over it. Just remember, all you ever have is happening right now, kiddo. Don’t let your chance at happiness pass you by. Revel in it and grab every opportunity you get because one day you’ll wake up and realize that it all passed you right on by.”

I stood up straight and frowned. “Ok... That got deep and kind of dark.”

“It happens. Wait until you see me on my second bottle of wine when I feel sorry for

myself. Thirty is not a cakewalk.” She huffed and glanced back at the door once again.

“Well, I still have some time.” I chuckled. “So...”

“Larry and I are done – done. Trust me. He’s not a glutton for punishment. Don’t you have some work to do? I’m sure I’m paying you for something.” She smiled wryly. “Just kidding, boo. Why don’t you sit for a bit and chill until the next customer comes in? It looks like it’s gonna be a slow day, and this place is about as clean as it can ever get. I think I’ll take a walk in the park and sit under the gazebo for a while. Some fresh air would do me good, I think. I’ll shake the last vestiges of winter off and enjoy this warm day.”

“Crystal?” I couldn’t stop myself. You’re amazing, and I think you deserve that happy ever after, too—even if you don’t think you do.”

“Thanks, honey. I’m very glad I hired you at the start of the year. You’re good people, and I know that you’ll find whatever it is you’re looking for, too. See you in a bit.” She tossed her apron over onto the counter and walked out the door. The tinkling of the bells echoed through the empty shop. Whatever she was thinking was... darker than I had ever seen from her. Was it something I said, or was it a thought she woke up with? Whatever it was, it had her in a bit of a bind.

I sat in the shop’s window for a while, scrolling through the gram. Liking the posts from my friends who were living the life I left behind. I could see Crystal sitting on the gazebo and staring out into the garden. I didn’t know her well, but she had become one of the only people I cared about in Point Pleasant. I wish I could help take away her pain, whatever it was.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

“Liza Minnelli, sit!” I demanded of the little diva. She just stared up at me with those deep brown eyes. She was demanding and belligerent and always had been. I spent years in classes trying to train her, but she was exactly who she was. An old diva with a bad hip. Just like her namesake.

“Liza Minnelli, please sit?” I begged. She turned her head and licked her ass. “Don’t do that. Good grief.” I bent my head in shame as Liza went to town on her hindquarters. I noticed a maroon station wagon parked a little way down the street.

Liza put her right side down on the ground to gain better leverage for her licking. “Well, I guess that’s kind of a sit. Good girl?” I was a shitty dog owner when it came to training and apparently being the alpha with my dog. Liza Minnelli, my adorable ten-pound mutt, was the one in charge of our relationship. The dog trainer, I am sure, laughed at me behind my back. Why not? Everyone seemed to these days. She did give very good, even if they were stinky, kisses. I loved her, and she was my one and only constant in this place.

“Why do you embarrass me?” I groaned as one of my neighbors approached us. I had a few persnickety neighbors, so I made sure to keep her in the grass area of the curb and not on any of their lawns.

“Hi, David. I see Liza is enjoying herself. Get it?” Bea snorted. She always found herself funny, especially when the joke was pointed at someone else.

“Yeah – yeah. She’s always cleaning.”

“Maybe she needs her glands squeezed?”

“Nope. She just had it done. She just likes to... clean herself, a lot.”

“She certainly does. So, are you ready to be our grill master this weekend? Pam and I have been excited about it all week. I love it when this block gets together for a bit of excitement. Remember last year on Memorial Day when Stevie got drunk on Pam’s margaritas and had to be carried home? Such fun!” She giggled and bent down to pet Liza Minnelli. “Who’s a good girl, Liza? You are! Yes! You are!”

Liza rolled over onto her back and offered her belly like the hooker she was when it came to a good petting. “Hey, Bea. Have you seen anyone new move in recently?”

“Well, the Dixons moved into the condo beside yours about four months ago.” She stood up and stared over at the large brick building that stood beside mine. “I think it was about four months ago. Old lady Haley, who passed away a couple of years ago – it was her place. Don’t you remember all of that? Her kids contested the will because she left the place to some old friend of hers who used to come over. Well, why not? That person was one of the only people who ever came to visit her. But they were in court about it for a while, and I guess they settled somehow. I don’t really know who I’d ask about it. But the Dixons bought it. I met the mother. She’s about my age – maybe a little older. She’s nice. She and the family are supposed to come to the cookout. It could be closer to a year now... Time, dude. It’s elusive.”

“Family? How many are there? How did I not know I had new neighbors?”

“Well, you do work a lot and only get out to walk Liza most of the time.”

“I walk her a lot, though.”

“I guess you just didn’t notice. Maybe you were out of town? Who knows, child? But yes, there are four of them. I can’t remember their names, though. But it’s her and her husband, and... They do walk their two dogs quite a bit. One is pretty shaggy and

always looks like it's excited to be on a walk."

"That's every dog on the street. But I do think I've seen a guy walking a greyish-shaggy dog and a golden retriever a couple of times. I just assumed he lived on another street."

"I think that's him. He walks with a bit of a limp."

I nodded. "They have kids?"

"Yeah, twins. I think they're in college, maybe? One of them has short dark hair and drives that maroon station wagon over there, and the other has long hair and always has headphones on. They're quiet boys."

"He drives that maroon station wagon?" I laughed. "I almost ran him over with my car. I thought he was... never mind." Well, that mystery was finally solved.

Bea grinned widely. "He looks just like that boy from the Twilight movies. I know. Pam swore we had another celebrity in town when she saw him crossing the street. But I've seen him walking the dogs a few times, so he's definitely the other son."

"I am flummoxed. I was positive it was Taylor Lautner when I almost killed him. My friend Zane, you've met him, he..."

"Snarky? Super gay? Yes, I've had the pleasure."

"Yeah, that is him. He looked Taylor up on Instagram, and he was overseas, so... I knew it wasn't him, probably. But it was still fun to think it might be him. So, he's their son? Huh."

"You're fucking hilarious. You're way too old for him, even if he was on our softball

team, which I doubt. Have you looked in the back of his station wagon? What kind of gay guy drives that piece of shit around with a bunch of sports equipment in the back? I mean, maybe he coaches?”

I shrugged. He, whatever his name was – I should just call him Taylor until I found out his real name, whoever he was – he was super fucking hot. “Who knows, Bea? At least he improves the scenery around here.”

“That he does, except for that car. It’s an eyesore.” She snorted. “Anyway, you and Miss Liza have a nice walk, and I’ll have my famous barbecue chicken breasts for the grill. Pam bought enough for the entire city, so we’ll have plenty. Are you sure you don’t want Pam or I to help you grill, hon? Every time we do this, you get stuck behind that metal beast, just sweating as everyone drops off their meat. We’d be happy to help.”

“I enjoy it,” I grinned. “Besides, there’s not enough room for two people on the grill anyway. It’s big, but it’s not a kitchen. I’m fine, but thanks, Bea. I do appreciate it.”

“Well, if you change your mind.” She reached down and patted Liza Minnelli on the head sweetly. “Be a good girl for Daddy. See you, David.”

“Bye, Bea.” I waved and looked down at my sweet fur baby. “Well, Liza Minnelli, should we finish our walk, or are you done?”

Her little tail wagged, and she pranced with her front paws excitedly. I knew what that meant, so we walked a little further down the street. Liza smelled every smell that she could. I always said she was checking her smell-mail when she did this. As she was sniffing an apparently great scent, I noticed that we were standing in front of Taylor’s station wagon. I glanced into the back, and there, just like Bea said, were a couple of soccer balls, a baseball glove, and a bat. Somehow, that made the idea of him even more appealing.

I had fixated on him for weeks and hadn't even seen him again. He was just the kind of guy I pined for. A hot, hard-bodied jock with the face of a movie star – literally. That was why I was alone and obsessing over a guy I hadn't even met. I mean, he could be a total dick, right? But in the end, this meant nothing. I could obsess and find out everything I could about him, but what good would it do me? He was young and gorgeous, and I was not any of those things. Hell, I wasn't really any of those things when I was in my twenties. I had always acted like an old cat lady who preferred to stay locked behind her door, safe and secure.

I was pathetic.

I had always been scared of my feelings when it involved another person.

I was lonely and pathetic – and sad.

I was a weird conundrum of oddities, but I longed for more. I just didn't know how to get it. I surrounded myself with witty and older gay guys who made me feel loved and protected. They were safe. They were my family. But to put myself out there to anyone else – in a romantic way, made me feel terrified of what the consequences might be.

I hadn't always been like I am now. Once, when I was much younger, I let myself fall head over heels for someone else, and he trampled on my heart with his goat hooves and shoved his little devil horns right into my heart. No, not my heart – it was worse than that. He stabbed my soul. I wasn't that same pathetic person anymore. I was a new brand of pathetic these days. I had locked up that part of me that allowed me to be vulnerable, and I hid behind my career. Zane was the only person I still spoke to who even knew about that part of my life. Satan took the rest of our friends. I didn't even try to keep them. I didn't even tell them the truth.

I hadn't been good enough for him. His words – not mine. I was boring, and he

wanted adventure. I was a homebody, and he wanted disco. I was a six, at best, and he was a total nine. I was a Pisces, and he wanted a Gemini because that would meld better with his Aries personality. That one actually made me want to murder him.

Zane was the only one who saw how destroyed I had been. I didn't return the calls of my other friends, and then one day, I saw them all at a distance with my ex – the devil himself. He also had a blond boy with him and was holding his hand. He moved on quickly, which didn't surprise me. But it did make the pain worse.

Yeah... I was lonely. It had been almost fifteen years since that happened, and in those fifteen years, not one single exciting thing had ever happened to me when it came to love. Was I still that broken, or was I just a pathetic, scared man who knew he wouldn't survive if he ever felt that way again?

"She's cute," a deep voice said, breaking me out of my reverie. I spun around.

"Ah... She's Liza Minnelli!" I shouted as I saw the tall, broad-shouldered Taylor Lautner lookalike who stood in front of me wearing a black tank top and gym shorts. His biceps had biceps, and my mouth went instantly dry. What the fuck? I was a moron.

"I didn't know that Liza was a shifter. She does seem much happier this way. Does she miss being a celebrity?" He winked, and my knees went weak.

"She's... uh... very... uh... pop... popular on the street. But I think she misses the stage." I managed to mutter as I quickly diverted my eyes away from the dark-haired young man. I felt dirty ogling him now that I knew he was just a person and not a celebrity. Which was stupid, and I knew that, but his parents lived here, and... And I was a dirty older man who was going stupid over a young college boy because he was hot. That was it. I didn't know him. He was just hot – fucking super-hot, but still.

“Did she bring her Oscar when she moved in?” He chuckled deeply. “Can I pet her?” He grinned.

Liza had already made that choice for him since she was practically humping his leg. “Sure. She loves belly rubs.”

“All dogs do. Don’t you wish life were that simple for us?” He bent down and scratched Liza behind the ears. She instantly fell to the ground and rolled over. He laughed as he scratched her belly. She wiggled on the ground like an earthworm from the pleasure. I was a tad jealous.

“You just moved here, right? Small town – nosy neighbors.” I recovered – reminding myself not to come across like a stalker.

“Yep. Our parents wanted to move to a small town, so here we are. It’s nice. All right, Liza, I have to go meet some friends right now, but I’ll give you more pets when I see you next time.” He stood up and glanced over at me. “Nice meeting you.”

Before I could say another word, he was opening his car door and sliding inside.

I waved as he made a quick three-point turn and headed away from our cul-de-sac.

I was definitely an idiot. I didn’t even get his name.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

“We totally have to stop meeting like this. People are gonna think we’re totally hooking up, and that will destroy my game.” Crystal slid next to me and handed me a beer. “This is one of our faves and even made in state. Tell me what you think.”

I took a sip and nodded. “Smooth and mellow. I like a good red ale. What is it?”

“Redrum Ale. It’s totally a Shining reference. It’s brewed at the hotel where King wrote the book.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of it, but I don’t really read... very much.” I snickered shamefully.

“You’ve seen the movie, though. Right?” Her stare could have turned me to stone.

I looked down and tried to hide my grin. “Nope. It’s old, right?”

She banged her hand on the table. “It’s a classic. You are totally fired.”

Danny scooted onto the other side of me. “What’s going on, guys. Blake said to give you all a big hug, but he’s studying a script right now. He finally got his friend Vicki Dean to turn her book into a script herself. He wants to star and produce it. He seems pretty happy so far, so I’m guessing it’s as good as he hoped for.”

“Adorable. One day, I hope she comes for a visit and brings Cory. I miss him.” Crystal stuck her bottom lip out. “I want to make him my pocket gay.”

“He’s way too big for that. Besides, you can’t replace me.” Danny chuckled. “You’re stuck with me for life.”

“He is totally more fabulous than you, hon. But I would never replace you. Mommas got plenty of pockets for all her little gaybys.” Crystal howled.

“You are so weird.” I shook my head and rolled my eyes at Danny.

“You don’t know the half of it. Crystal collects gay boys like we’re Barbies.” Danny snorted and took a sip of his beer.

“If I could keep you in your cellophane forever, you’d never devalue.” Crystal licked her top lip. “Liberties is slow as shit tonight. Where is everyone?”

“Point Pleasant’s first baseball game of the season is tonight. This place will be packed in about two hours when we lose. We usually lose.” Danny shook his head sadly. “They haven’t had a great season since we all graduated. But the town still goes and cheers and supports the team. I’m surprised you didn’t play football or baseball.”

“Oh, I did, but it’s called soccer.” I laughed. “Kidding. I played football in middle school through Sophomore year, but my parents thought it would be best for me to stop so I could concentrate on soccer, which was my favorite sport. They had read a lot of stories about kids getting brain injuries.”

Danny raised his eyebrows. “Soccer is kind of violent, too.”

I shrugged. “Yeah. I didn’t say they made a lot of sense. I didn’t really like football that much, anyway. I always preferred soccer and baseball. I’m thinking of signing up for the town’s summer softball league. It could be fun.”

“You should.” Danny beamed at me with his million-dollar smile.

“Maybe you should join me.” I grinned back at him. “Might be nice to have a friend

out there.”

“He’s too old,” Crystal said sternly.

“You guys act like you’re seventy,” I huffed. “You’re not.”

Danny chuckled. “We don’t feel as young as we used to. But... I’ll think about it. It’s hard to commit to much of anything with Blake traveling so much. He likes me to go with him whenever I can. Besides, we’re trying to figure out this wedding thing. I wish he would agree to just elope and...”

“I will murder you in this booth,” Crystal pointed her finger at him right across my chest. “I will actually reach over Hot Stuff here and stab you with the... ok, so there’s nothing to stab you with... I’ll throttle you if you take away that moment from me. I want to cry as I watch you tell Hollywood that you will forever. Seriously, I will kill you.”

“I know.” Danny held his hands up as if he had surrendered. “If we did that, you would still be a part of it. It really doesn’t matter how or where we say I do, as long as we... do.”

“It matters,” Crystal frowned. “Evan and Everett should plan it for you. It would serve them right.”

“Nope,” Danny laughed loudly. “I would never let them do that. Their taste is questionable at best. I mean, they did let me plan theirs.”

“You did an admirable job,” Crystal giggled. “It was what Ev wanted. But I don’t blame you. I get it. I do. I just want it to happen as soon as possible.”

They both glanced over at me. “What? I have no idea what you’re talking about, and

you definitely don't want me planning a wedding."

"So... Hot Stuff... It's just the three of us here, and I think it's time you spilled some tea, don't you?" Crystal leaned in and nudged me with her shoulder.

"I have no tea to spill, and I'm enjoying this beer way too much to pour any of it out," I smirked knowingly.

Crystal sighed loudly. "No, straight boy. I mean, spill the tea... Tell the gossip. You've been playing things way too close to your chest. Isn't it time you shared with us a little of your love life?"

I snorted loudly. "I have no love life. I left college and came here. You people are my only friends. What do I have to say? A big fat bucket of nothing."

"Yeah," Crystal said as coyly as possible. "But don't you want a little something-something? What kind of girls are you into?"

"You keep making a lot of assumptions about me," I muttered as I took a drink. My voice was garbled and impossible to understand, which made me almost choke on the beer as I tried not to laugh.

"Well, we know you're straight. So, do you like girls your own age or older women? You're totally into cougars, aren't you?" Crystal was enjoying this way too much, so I decided to play along for a bit.

"I do like more mature people," I shrugged. "Sometimes."

"How old? Thirty?" She posed dramatically. "Or are you into MILF's. You look like the type who would totally fuck your best friend's mother."

“Good God!” Danny cackled. “You are in a mood tonight.”

“I just wanna know,” she whined. “I’ve come to care for the little shit, and he tells me nothing. I hate it, and it’s not fair. Momma needs the kiki.”

“You really want to know, huh?” I smirked. “Are you a professional nosy person or just like this among your friends?”

“Well, you said we’re your only friends, so... Who else would you talk to about this stuff? Come on, Justin, please?” She begged. Her eyes widened as she gave me her most innocent look. It was the first time I had ever seen it. Crystal was anything but innocent, and I barely knew her.

“I do like older people. I’ve never really been into people my own age. There. Does that make you happy?” I grinned, knowing that I was driving her crazy. It was fun.

“What’s with the people thing?” Danny glanced over at me and narrowed his eyes.

“I’m not into farm animals.” I chuckled.

“But you chose that word. Are you bisexual or something? Are we really on the same softball team?”

“At his age, he’s probably try-sexual,” Crystal cackled and then banged her hand on the table again. “Wait! Are you? Holy shit!”

“Do you collect bi boys, too? Am I safe, or will I find myself behind cellophane in a Ken doll box?” I smirked.

“Holy shit!” Crystal looked like she had been struck dumb.

“Surprise,” I said sheepishly.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” She asked pointedly.

I shrugged and looked back between the both of them. “Uh... I don’t really see a reason to tell anyone. If it comes up, I just... It’s who I am. I hate all the coming-out stuff. It’s so last generation, you know? We’ve moved past it. I guess I was just having fun with you since you started calling my straight boy.”

“Well, that’s on us. We shouldn’t make assumptions. Do your parents know?” Danny patted my arm.

I nodded. “So does my twin. He’s bi, too, but he rarely dates anyone. He smokes pot and plays video games. My parents are so proud.” I snorted again. “Completely identical in every way except how we look. He’s a skinny skater kind of dude with long hair, and I’m the jock.”

“But you’re identical? Doesn’t that mean you look exactly alike?” Crystal crossed her arms and stared at me as if she were seeing me for the first time.

“Yeah, but no. When we stand side by side – we’re the same height and share facial features, but... With all the working out and playing sports, I filled out in places he never did. He is much smarter than me, though, and always has been. I used to copy his homework. He’s like a genius or something,” I said proudly. The truth was that John and I rarely saw eye to eye anymore. It was like college had made him a totally different person. I missed the camaraderie that we had all the way through high school. One day, maybe we could get it back.

“Slap my tits and kiss my ass! I am shocked – shocked, I tell you. My own little bi-boy. Momma’s gonna take real good care of you.”

“Welcome to the collection.” Danny raised his glass and winked at me.

“I’m not going behind cellophane.”

“I poke holes in it, don’t worry.” Crystal cackled and threw her red hair behind her head.

“Hi, Crystal. Boys.” Larry nodded as he walked by us.

“Don’t. Just don’t.” Crystal looked down and grabbed her beer before looking back at me. “Don’t.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

“Pam, those look amazing.” I took the large, heavy pan with the marinated chicken from her. The dark barbecue sauce was slathered on and looked as amazing as it always did.

“Bea’s on her way. She also made a bean salad, and she’s cutting up some parsley on top. Do you need any help, hon? I’m not very good at the grill, but I can be your sous chef if you want.”

“I’m good, Pam. You just enjoy yourself.”

“It’s awfully hot for this early in Spring.”

“It could snow next week.” I laughed.

“I’m trying to avoid Pete. He wants to complain about the tree trimming. He thinks the city cut them back too far. He just wants to bitch like he always does about everything. It’s not like I have any control, and honestly, I just don’t want to hear it.”

“He does like to complain. I saw him the other day yelling at Benji about leaving too wide of a gap between cars when the poor bastard was trying to park. Came right out and knocked on his car window as he was trying to parallel park.”

“Well, Benji does do that. He’s too worried about dings in his new Tesla.” She giggled. “He’s a sweet kid, though. Pete can come across like an asshole if you don’t know how much he cares about this place.”

“All he does is look out his window and stare at everyone now that he’s retired.”

“Mm-Hmm... Bless his heart.”

“I’ve been around you long enough to know what that means!” I flipped the burgers, and the smoke rose quickly, making my eyes water. Pam was full of southernisms.

“Let me know if you need any help, David. This is your party, too, and you should have some fun instead of being behind that hot grill all day.”

“It’s fine, Pam. I’ll get the chicken on as soon as these burgers are finished.”

“You got any room on the grill?” A deep voice asked from over my shoulder.

“You can just set it down on the table, and I’ll throw it on when I get a second.” I pointed to the already overcrowded table that held all the raw meat I still had to get to.

“Yeah – no. No offense, but I like to grill my own if you don’t mind.” The deep chuckle made chills burst down my spine even though I was sweating from the heat. Before I could turn to look, Taylor’s lookalike walked up beside me and set his raw steaks down on the table. “No offense, but I don’t trust just anyone with my meat.”

Now, I wasn’t just sweating in front of my new crush – I was also blushing. Either way, I knew I was beet red. It was humiliating.

“How’s Liza? Is she the entertainment tonight?”

“Only if you give her enough treats. Sadly, her only real trick is rolling over so you can rub her belly.”

“I like belly rubs, too.” My head spun as he grinned happily. “Sorry I didn’t get your name the other day.”

“Uh... I’m... uh... David.”

“David? That’s a nice name. I’m Justin, and it’s nice to officially meet you, I guess.” Justin... I repeated his name in my head so I wouldn’t forget it. “Now, about the steaks?”

“You can put your steaks on when I get these burgers off. I just have one more batch to go.”

“Can I help? I really love to grill, and my parents are wandering around getting to know the neighbors, which isn’t really my thing. I could just stay here with you if that’s cool?”

“Yeah. I could totally use the help!” I responded way too enthusiastically. Just being this close to him was making me nervous, but I wanted him to stay here with me so I could get to know him. “I have a lot of... er... meat to get through.”

He snorted. “That sounds like a real problem. I’m happy to help with your... uh... meat. Those burgers are getting a little well done.” He reached over and grabbed one of the clean platters and held it as I quickly pulled them off the grill. I had gotten distracted by the gorgeous man beside me and almost let it all burn.

“I don’t usually do that.”

“What? Grill meat with strangers?”

“No. Well, yeah, that too. No, I mean burn things on the grill.”

“Like I said – I don’t trust just anyone with my meat.”

I gulped again and had to stop myself from throwing down the spatula and running

away before I really embarrassed myself.

“You’re blushing.”

“It’s hot. I’m... just...”

“Here, let me. You can be my assistant for a bit so you can cool off. Besides, you’re really overdressed to be behind the grill today.” He winked, and I almost collapsed onto the hot concrete. “Does it always get this hot in April around here?”

“No. This is... not normal. Usually, it’s sweater weather most of the time. Sometimes it can even snow if we’re totally unlucky.”

“At least there’s Summer to look forward to. I just signed up for the softball league, and now I’m thinking that’s a stupid idea. If it’s this hot now...”

“How do you play ball?” I hiccupped and threw my hand over my mouth. I was definitely putting my worst foot forward around him. He was probably about to throw down the spatula and run away to his parents. Parents? He had parents here... I needed to get my head on gayly straight.

His eyes met mine, and I felt like he was staring into my soul. Those beautiful brown eyes were so big, and don’t even get me started on his long lashes. He was inhumanly pretty. Life wasn’t fair.

“You know it’s a ball, and you play with it.” His smirk almost destroyed me right there on the street in front of all my neighbors.

“Uh... It’s a lot cooler away from the heat. Thank you.”

“Hey, bro. I brought a six-pack if you want a beer. I stashed my cooler beside the

table. Help yourself.”

“Uh... thanks... bro. That sounds great.” I bent down and pulled the cooler open – trying not to stare at his bare legs. He was super tan. Probably from playing sports? Maybe he laid out on the roof or something to achieve that level of tan perfection. Maybe he did it in the nude, so it was even all over? Maybe I was becoming his stalker? He was so close, and it was intoxicating for him to stay here with me instead of with all of the other people on the street.

He was the exact opposite of me in every way. He was tan, and I was pasty. He was tall, and I was short. He had muscles, and I didn’t. He had dark hair and eyes, and I looked like an Irishman. He was young, and I was... not young.

He was just being nice. Maybe he was bored? Most of the people on our street, even in the condos, were all above thirty. Most of us were well above thirty, actually. Half the street was a senior or about to become one. I had been one of the younger people since I moved here. But young? Not really.

“So, you all do this once a year?”

“A few times, actually: Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, the Beginning of Fall, and the first weekend of Spring. It’s fun but a lot of work.”

“You organize it?”

“Not really. They just know that I’ll grill for everyone while they socialize. I enjoy it, and I’m not really all that social, I guess.”

“You’re single?”

“Uh...” I sputtered. “Yeah.”

“And you have a dog named Liza Minelli, not to mention you apparently know nothing about sports. So, either you’re a computer nerd or gay?”

“The latter. Well, kind of both, I guess.”

“Cute.”

“I... uh...”

He flipped the burgers over and adjusted the heat on the grill. “You’re right. Even in my tank top, this is hot. Might as well get a little sun.” He pulled his tank top over his head and threw it down by the cooler. “That’s better.”

“I... uh...” I couldn’t form words. I stood up and mimicked, pulling the cap off of the bottle. “Opener?”

“Here.” He reached out, and his hand touched mine as he took the bottle from me, leaving a warmth on my skin from his fingers. “I didn’t bring one. I learned to do this in the frat.” He took the bottle and pulled his keys out of his pocket, using one of them to snap the top quickly off. “Here. Do you mind getting me one, too? I mean, I am doing all the work over here.” He chuckled.

I took my beer from his hand and bent back down to get him one. “I don’t think you’re doing all the work.”

“Well, I do have the best assistant.” He took the beer out of my hand and deftly popped the top again before pocketing his keys. “These are ready. What’s next?”

I picked up the platter, and he slid the burgers onto it. I carried them over to the table and set them down by the buns before walking back over. He stood behind the grill, grinning, and I finally got a full-on view of his tanned and toned torso. Jesus fucking

Christ – life was not fair! His brown nipples stood at attention, and his six-pack looked like you could grate cheese on it. But what killed me was the dark treasure trail that ran down underneath his waistband. Sweat dotted his chest, and I could have stared for hours as the small droplets ran down his smooth skin.

I was in hell.

I loved it – I hated it.

I felt electrified around him, which was totally stupid. There was absolutely nothing between us in any way, but just being close to him felt like I had been struck by lightning. The particles in the air between us felt charged and exciting – dangerous. Dangerous for me, anyway, since this was totally in my head and not in the reality of what was happening here at all.

He was snarky. He wasn't actually flirting. He looked like that and had his entire life still in front of him. My best years had already passed – in every way. I needed to screw my head on straight and enjoy this for what it was – a new neighbor who just happened to be gorgeous and so sexy that it was painful to be around him. It wasn't my first time dealing with a hottie. I had to remember that.

“Did you just go catatonic on me?” His hand on my arm brought me back to reality. “You were just staring at me or staring through me, maybe? Do you need to get away from the heat for a bit? I can handle it on my own for a while.”

“No, I was just...” He removed his hand, and I sucked in a quick breath. “I was just thinking how strange life was. It's stupid.”

“It's not. My life has felt very bizarre to me since moving here. It's like I'm caught up in this high strangeness. My life feels like someone else's right now.” He frowned. “Chicken?” He pointed over to the hefty platter. “That will take longer than

everything else.”

“I like high strangeness. That sounds... complex.” I brought the platter over and held it as he used the tongs to lay the chicken on the hot grill. The hiss of the meat touching the heat drowned out most of the other sounds on the street.

“It feels it, but in my case, it’s not. It’s just another stupid story of someone’s stupid actions... or inaction, I guess. I left my senior year of college because I had to. I fucked off a little too much, and now I’m here living with my family in a brand-new place I’ve never lived before while taking online classes to graduate. All of my friends are living the life I should be, and I’m in this in-between space... It’s my own fault, and it is stupidly high strangeness. And what’s even stranger is I’m starting to actually like this weird little place.”

“The Pleasant can do that to you. It has a charm. I grew up here and moved away. I never really thought I’d come back, but here I am. Now, I can’t imagine being anywhere else. It’s comforting to be in the place I always felt like home in.”

“Is your family still around?”

“No. My dad died when I was in college, and Mom moved to Florida a few years later to be near her sister. So, I may be home, but it’s not the home I once knew. But that doesn’t make it any less home, does it?”

“Last piece.” He took the last chicken breast from the platter. “This chicken smells amazing. Whatever sauce that is has a great aroma.”

“The lesbians across the street bring it every year, and people go crazy for it.”

“No one’s really eating. They’re all just talking in groups and drinking.”

“They wait for everything to be finished, for the most part. By that time, they’re tipsy and need to eat.” I laughed easily and glanced over at him, trying not to stare at his massive pecs. They were photo-worthy.

He looked back at me and smiled. “I’m glad I decided to stick around. Talking to you has been... nice. I’ve only been hanging around a small group of people who’re friends with my boss. I work part-time in the coffee shop.”

“Crystal’s place? That’s cool. She and her friends are popular in town. I don’t really know them – I just know about them. I’ve seen them out a few times, but I don’t go out very often.”

“Homebody, huh?” He looked me up and down. “That seems to track. You know you have a better chance of meeting someone if you leave your house, right? Sorry... That’s none of my business.”

“You’re not wrong, though,” I smirked. “My best friend tries to get me to go out, but... Liza doesn’t like to be alone for long.”

“That sounds like an excuse.” He shrugged – his shoulder muscles bounced teasingly. “I mean, I don’t really know you or anything, but... It does sound like an excuse. Hell, even I go out every now and then, and I’ve only begun my hate of peopling.”

“Yeah – you’re right. I just don’t...” I stopped and looked at him. “It has to be easy for you. I think about how I was when I was younger – the way your future feels so far away... It’s like you have your whole life still ahead of you while you’re living in the now. At my age... It stops feeling that way. You just look backward and think of what you should have done differently.”

“Well, then that’s the problem. How can you look for a future when you’re looking behind? It’s not like you’re old, David. How old are you?”

I grimaced. Here it was – the moment when this young kid saw me truly as I was. “I’m almost forty and going on sixty.”

“That’s your choice, and almost forty is not old. Why does everyone I meet in this town think they’re old? Crystal and her friends act the same way. It’s annoying.”

“Maybe it feels true for us?”

“Maybe it’s a crutch you use to stop yourself from putting yourself out there. Look at you. You’re adorable. Go out and find the person who’s probably looking for you, too. What do you have to lose?”

“You’re what, twenty-one?”

“Twenty-three. Age means nothing. It’s actions that matter.”

“Sounds like you’re twenty-three, but you’re also not wrong.” I held up my hands in defeat. “I guess we all do our best to be happy, but the older you get, the more you become cautious of getting your hopes up.”

“Bullshit.” He chuckled. “Grab that platter so I can take this batch off. This grill is a lot hotter on the left side.”

I did as he asked and held it as he pulled a few pieces of chicken off the grill. He turned each piece over and looked at it as he pressed down and watched the juices run out, causing the flames to leap up.

“Where was I?” He grinned as he set a piece of chicken on the platter. “Oh, yeah! Bullshit. You never know what life has waiting for you if you don’t let it find you. Maybe what you’re looking for is right in front of you, and you can’t even see it.”

“Oh, I see it.” I bit my bottom lip. “What if it doesn’t see me?”

“You won’t know if you don’t try, will you? I think that’s it. These other pieces need a little more.” He glanced up and frowned. “Shit... My mom is waving at me to go over there. Can you handle it for a bit? I’ll pop back over to put my steaks on and help you finish.” He handed me the spatula and tongs and picked up his shirt off the ground. I watched – my mouth watering as he slid his tight tank top over his sweaty torso. I didn’t even know I had a thing for underarm hair until I saw his. Yeah... I was fixating hard on this young man, and I knew it could go nowhere.

“Go have fun,” I said sadly.

“I’ll be back. Hey, you’re the only person I know here.” He grinned as he walked away. “Don’t burn the chicken.”

He did come back, but we were so busy trying to finish everything that our conversation kept getting interrupted by people waiting for us to finish. As we pulled the last piece of meat off the grill, he sighed and pulled his tank top up to wipe the sweat from his face.

“That was a lot of meat.” He chuckled. “You usually do this by yourself?”

“Yeah. I like it. It keeps me busy.”

“Yeah, busy... I’ll see you around, I guess. I think I’ve avoided my family about as long as I can. Thanks for letting me help.” He picked up the plate with his perfectly cooked steaks on it.

“Justin?” I couldn’t believe what I was about to ask. “What’s your last name?”

“Dixon,” he said casually. “I’m on Insta if you wanna hit me up. Maybe we can go

for a drink?”

With that, he grinned knowingly and sauntered over to his family.

I watched him the rest of the night. He seemed as lost as I felt. Somehow, it made me feel not so alone.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

“What the actual fuck?” I stormed into John’s room and stared at my twin as he slouched in his chair, playing his stupid X-Box. “If you want to borrow my car, you need to fucking ask.”

“You were asleep, man. What the hell, Justin? Have you ever heard of knocking?”

“Don’t try to turn this around on me.”

“I think you’ve done a great job of turning everything around on yourself, bro. Point your finger where it belongs.”

“This is about my car. My car, John – not yours. You said you didn’t need one when we went to college.”

“No one drives in Boston.”

“You’re not in Boston. Sorry that Point Pleasant doesn’t have a tram system. But that doesn’t mean you just take my car. I could have had a Task Rabbit thing this morning.”

“Did you?”

“No. But...”

“Then no harm, no foul, bro. What got your panties in a wad?”

“You did - when you took my fucking car. Jesus Christ, John. When did you get to be

such an asshole?”

“I’m not the one breaking and entering to scream at me about something that wasn’t even a problem, dude. Look, I’m sorry that you fucked up, but that’s not on me, so...” There it was. We had been dancing around this since I came back.

“Just because you graduated in three years doesn’t make you...”

“I never said it made me better than you. Facts are just facts, dude. I studied hard, and you drank harder than I studied. I told you not to join a frat.”

“You’ve always thought you were better than me.”

“I was when it came to grades and school. But you were better at other things. This isn’t a contest. Man, you need to smoke more weed. You really need to chill out.”

“That’s all you’ve done since moving home. When are you going to start doing something other than getting high and playing video games?”

“Justin, man... The parents said I could take a year off to decompress after getting my degree in three years. You know I’m applying to grad schools. You’re just mad because you had to get a job. I don’t because the only thing I do here in town is stay in my room and eat dinner. I earned that. I’m sorry that you had to get a job to help you finish school, but that’s not my problem. Stop trying to take out your anger, bro. I’m not your enemy.”

“I’m not... I didn’t say you were my... Goddammit, John! Just don’t take my car without asking. If I’m not using it, you know I’ll say yes. That’s all I’m asking, ok? Ask me.” He always made me feel guilty for how he made me feel.

“If you want me to wake you up... fine. I just thought you hadn’t been sleeping too

well, so..." He set the controller down and looked up at me. "You know I know, bro."

"Yeah."

"You wanna talk about it? We haven't really had a good... You've been kind of standoffish since you got back."

"Have I?" I shrugged. "A lot has changed."

"True. But you're still my twin. We know, man – better than others."

"I know. I'm sorry, I'm... I'm just annoyed all the time, and I guess it's easier to take it out on you. But you really haven't made it any easier to be back here."

"You kind of came in all asshole at Christmas, bro. I was just giving you some space. Maybe that was the wrong thing to do, but... I guess it was. I should have just known that, but we really haven't seen each other for more than a few days since we both went to college."

"Yeah, I know. I got all wrapped up in the frat and having a good time with my new friends, and you were burning the candle at both ends as you studied your ass off. I guess I was just jealous when all this happened that you did that, and I was just a fuck up."

"Bro – you are not and never have been a fuck up. You did what a lot of kids do when they go to college. I was never like you when it came to being the center of attention. I preferred to be left alone. The only reason I was even semi-popular was because I was your twin." He gave me a big hug, and I melted into his embrace. "You're a fucking rock star, and you know it."

“Yeah, sometimes. This feels good. We should really hang out sometime away from the house, John. We could just go see a movie or something. But you really do need to get out of your room.”

“And you need to get out of your head.” He let go and took a step back as he grabbed my arms and held me in place. “But a flick sounds good. I mean, you’re the one who has shit to do, so just tell me when. Cool? I also have really great gummies, so...”

I nodded and grinned as I stood with the only person in this world who had always known everything about me. He drove me crazy sometimes. But I had forgotten that he had always been the person who had my back, no matter what. Maybe we hadn’t drifted that far apart?

“I am proud of you. You know that, right?” I asked seriously. I know how hard he studied.

“I do. Jealousy is a bitch, my brother. But we’ve seemed to manage.”

“Why don’t you go out with me and my... new friends for a drink soon? It would do you good to meet some people since you’re gonna be here for a while.”

“Sure. Why not? I’m sure Mom would love for me to come out of my room.” He chuckled. “You never meet a stranger, do you? Never have.”

I grinned stupidly. “Speaking of... I met one of our neighbors. He’s nice.”

John chuckled. “You mean, he’s cute.”

“I mean, he’s nice and... He’s handsome, I guess.”

“How old is he?” John tilted his head like a puppy, and I instantly thought about Liza.

“Late thirties, maybe.”

“Did you ever tell anyone about...” He frowned.

“No, and I don’t see a reason to tell anyone. I told you that in strict confidence.”

“I’ve kept your secret for over a year, Bro. I’ll take it to my grave if you want me to. It’s not like you murdered someone, man. It was just a thing that went sideways.”

“I ruined a man’s life.”

“You didn’t know, and it also ruined yours. That’s on him and has nothing to do with you unless you didn’t tell me everything.”

“I did, I... I just feel like shit about it.”

“You’re a good guy, Justin. That’s why you feel like shit. But you have to let that shit go, bro. There’s no reason for you to hold onto it now. It’s over and done, and all you can do is... Well, move on, I guess. I will kick your ass if you ever try that shit again. He lied to you. In the end, bro – not your fault.”

“He lied to everyone.”

“And caused you to spiral. You can blame the frat and partying too hard, and I know that’s all true. But that fucked up situation didn’t help. It made it worse. You being you, well, you didn’t try to find help. You just tried on your own, and...”

“It didn’t go too well? Yeah, I know.”

“Wanna play?”

“I... No, I can’t. I have a class in fifteen minutes, and I’ve gotta hop on Zoom.”

“After?”

“I have to paint someone’s fence this afternoon,” I groaned.

“Ah, task rabbit thing, huh? I’d offer to help, but I’ve got zombies to kill.” He picked back up his controller and fell into his chair. “But seriously, bro - anytime. Just knock, ok?”

I chuckled and turned around, shutting the door behind me.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

I had looked for him on the street like a paparazzi stalking Taylor Swift, but I had yet to see Justin again. I had hoped to bump into him and get to know him a little better, maybe invite him to grab a beer or a coffee—anything to be in his presence again. It was stupid. I couldn't bring myself to message him on... I mean, come on. Instagram?

But he was the one who suggested it. Did that mean anything at all? No – probably not. When we were talking at the grill, though – it had felt real. He wasn't just a twenty-three-year-old alpha-hole, even if that is what he looked like. No, he was deeper than that. Our conversation was more than I had expected it to be, and I had thought about it – well, obsessed over it for the last week.

Fifteen years separated us, and I had no real illusions of him ever falling in love with me or anything actually ever happening between us. But just to be around him felt... It felt good. I felt good.

Fifteen years – close enough. Damn. Not to mention that he's straight, even if he is hanging out with The Pleasant's elite gays. He worked with Crystal, so... Of course, he was. Who wouldn't want him to be a part of their group? They were so much closer in age to him that it made sense. Their token straight friend – Crystal, didn't count. She was more of a gay man than any of her friends. A queen bee that seemed to rule over all of them. At least, that's what it looked like from my distant seat across from them whenever we rarely happened to be in the same place.

I did find Justin on Insta, though. But I couldn't message – I mean... no.

Damn.

He really had a thing against shirts, as did most of the other boys in his photos. Frat brothers, I assumed. There were pics of him at the gym – no shirt. Pics of him playing various sports – no shirt. Pics of him camping or swimming – no shirt. It was like a gay porn site designed especially for me.

The Justin Dixon appreciation site for older perverts who wanted to ogle him over and over again was a treasure trove of photos. I was glad that he couldn't see how often I had been stalking his profile because it had become multiple times a day. That beautiful face and immaculate body were... Yeah, I was obsessed. I was going to make a fool out of myself if I wasn't careful.

I had to be careful.

I had to find a way to be friendly and not become a moron in his presence. I'm sure we'd say hi on the street as he got in his car, but he and I... It would be a miracle if we actually became friends. Almost twenty years of life hung between us like a chasm. I wanted to be his friend. It was more desire than I had felt in a long time. I wanted... more. It wasn't a feeling I was used to experiencing. I hated it. I was reveling in it, even if it was fearfully. I had become a Justin junkie.

Liza Minnelli yawned and stretched herself out on the couch. Even she was bored with me. She was always bored with me when I sat at my desk to work. She was even more annoyed now that I kept opening my phone just to stare at Justin over and over again. She preferred scratching and rubbing. I was walking her more than normal, though – it made her tired.

I put my phone down on the arm of the couch. I needed to get out of the house and go do something. I really should have gone to the store and bought more frozen meals since I was about out. No, scratch that. I should not buy more frozen meals. I should get actual food and cook. Maybe ditch the frozen pizza for a salad?

Actually, I was kind of hungry. I could nosh on something. So, maybe I could kill two birds with one stone?

And that's how I found myself in the car and driving by Margie's Coffee Shop, which was now called Crystal's since she had been the owner for a while. I had no idea when she changed the name. I drove by it so much, like everyone else in town, that I didn't notice the new sign until someone pointed it out to me. It's weird what we actually notice or don't. Sometimes, when I'm not thinking about it, I swear I still see the sign that says Margie's, even though I know it's not there. Just my expectation of what should be, not what really is.

The mind is weird. Mine is an oddity of its own. I cruised by, slowing down to peer through the window to see if I saw Justin. I didn't see him, but the place was almost empty since the lunch rush was over. Maybe he wasn't working? Did it matter? I was still hungry.

I drove around the block and slowed to a crawl as I stared into the window once again. There he was behind the counter, and I swear he looked up and saw me being a total creeper. Maybe he wouldn't know it was me. I pulled into a parking spot a little way down and took a quick glance in the mirror.

I never liked what I saw, and today was no exception. My temples were starting to grey. I had lines around my eyes, and that seemed to happen overnight. Old... I wasn't twenty-three. Damn, I was almost in college when the little shit was born.

Well, I was here, so I might as well go in and get something to eat. Besides, I felt this pull towards Justin and now that I knew he was inside, I couldn't have stopped myself. I had nothing to lose but my dignity.

Thank God Zane wasn't here.

I opened the door and glanced quickly around. An older couple sat at a two-top, having some lunch and ignoring each other as they stared at their phones. They must be tourists. People here in The Pleasant were unlike the tourists we saw throughout the year. Sure, we sometimes lost ourselves in an Instagram or TikTok stalking session, but when we were together, we were always present. A slower life was what you lived here for. It was refreshing and sometimes stifling, depending on the moment.

“David?” Justin said as he walked through the swinging doors to the kitchen, I presumed. “I wondered when I’d see you again. Are you here for coffee or something else?”

Did I hear that correctly? Was that innuendo? Fuck – he knew I had a crush on him, didn’t he? Or was I just living in my own fearful fantasy? Probably the latter. I stood there staring at him with my mouth agape and swallowed.

“I was hungry and thought I’d... I drove by and... Lunch, I guess.”

“Have a seat up here at the counter if you want. I could use a little company since it’s so slow. How’s Liza doing? I haven’t seen her on a walk, and I was ready to give some belly scratches.”

“She’s... you know... Liza, I guess. Old and cantankerous like me.”

“Oh, yeah. Ancient.” He grinned and handed me a menu. “You need this or do you already know what you want? I think only tourists actually look at it.”

“I’ll have the Margie special.”

“A burger and fries’ type of guy, huh? Do you want that medium? I mean, I’ve seen you grill, and I believe you think that medium is well done.”

“I told you that was... Yes, medium would be great. That was an accident. I wasn’t used to having someone hog into my space.” I grinned foolishly.

“I don’t have boundaries. You try living in a frat house for two years and see what it gets you. Fries or a salad?” He smirked.

“Fries, and can you ask for them to be very well done.”

“No flaccid fries for you, sir. I’ll make sure they are stiff and crunchy.”

I gulped.

“And to drink? Please don’t make me do a fancy coffee drink. I just cleaned the frother.”

“Damn, and I was gonna order a cappuccino,” I said teasingly. I swear I even batted my eyelashes. I was in this shit and deeply.

His eyes widened, and a determined look came over his face. “Really?”

“No. I’ll take a Mountain Dew, please, Sir.”

“Sir?” he growled, and my brain shut down. “I could start to like that.” He turned and walked back through the swinging doors and disappeared from view. I sat there trying to wrap my head around the possibility that he was actually – maybe – flirting with me. I mean, I had to be reading this thing completely wrong. It was all inside my head the way that I wanted it to be. He was just a young guy that was totally having fun. He probably didn’t even know the way I was taking our exchange.

“Thanks!” He walked back through the swinging doors and stood in front of me. “So, where were we? Oh, yeah! A Mountain Dew. You know that soda is horrible for you,

right?” He winked as he grabbed a glass from underneath the bar and turned to the soda fountain machine behind him. “The amount of sugar in this stuff is insane.”

“Well, something is gonna get you in the end, anyway. I might as well enjoy what I enjoy while I’m here.”

“That’s very stoic of you.” He furrowed his brows.

“I know that I need to... take better care of myself. I mean, I’m not in my twenties anymore. I should eat better, but I’ve never seen the joy of just cooking for myself when I can throw something in the microwave. It’s cheaper and faster.”

“And probably not healthy at all. Our body is a temple.” He smirked. “Listen, I’m just giving you shit. I eat really well because Mom cooks most of the time. But when I lived in the frat house, the amount of pizza I ate...”

“It wouldn’t surprise me. You lived in a frat house.” I scoffed – and the fantasy continued inside my head.

“Yeah, but I had to put in extra time at the gym the next day – which was almost every day.” He chuckled. “Do you do any kind of working out?”

“Oh, God, no. I hate going to the gym.”

“You walk Liza, but I’ve seen her walk, and it’s pretty slow. You could just walk around the neighborhood. Even that is exercise if you don’t stop to smell the flowers every ten steps.”

“Yeah... I know.”

“Time? Boredom?”

“How did you know?”

“That’s what everyone says. Walking is boring... It doesn’t have to be. Put on good music and enjoy the day. Point Pleasant is beautiful if you get outside and experience it. If you don’t like walking alone, find someone to walk with you.”

“None of my friends are going to walk with me.”

“Then I will.” He held out his hand. “Give me your phone.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled it out. I glanced at it to make sure I didn’t have his profile on Instagram open before handing it to him. That would have been awkward.

“This is my phone number.” He pushed a button, and his phone rang. “Now I have yours. Expect a call later this week, and I’ll walk around the neighborhood with you if that’s what you need.”

“I feel like you’re saying I’m fat.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “You are not fat – maybe a little soft from sitting down so much. But walking just a few days a week will keep you active. Besides, it will be fun for me too. I don’t have a lot of friends here, remember? We can talk, and I will keep you moving. I take exercise very seriously. You’ve seen me shirtless, so you know. When I tell you to catch up – I mean it.”

“You’re saying you’re pushy?” I frowned.

“I’m saying that I can be your exercise dom.” He smirked, and I almost passed out and fell off the stool.

“That’s very specific.”

“I take my job seriously.”

A bell from the back made him turn around and exit back into the kitchen. A few seconds later, he walked out with my giant burger and fries piled on the plate. “Enjoy this. Soon, I may insist you have that salad instead of the fries every now and then. It’s healthier – and no, I am not saying you’re fat. I actually think you look pretty damn good. I’d never know you were almost in your forties.”

“Stop.” I blushed. The sound of the door opening behind me told me that someone was about to take his attention away from me, and I got instantly jealous.

“Enjoy your food. Looks like I have a group. God, I hope they don’t want a fancy coffee.”

“Good luck.”

I watched him hustle and bustle around the counter as he made eight fancy coffees while I ate. Every now and then, he would glance over at me and refill my soda or wink knowingly as I tried to eat as daintily as possible. He was taking their food orders after making their coffees when I laid cash down on the bar and headed to the door.

“David?” he called and held up his hand to his ear and mouthed, “Call me.”

I walked out of the coffee shop with wings on my heels. He wanted to spend time with me. Sure, it may not be romantic, but just to be in his presence was... all I wanted.

I smiled through the rest of the day.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

Point Pleasant – or The Pleasant as everyone around here calls it hadn't been so bad lately. It's weird how you can hear the capital T in the The when everyone refers to this place. It's also a good way to separate the locals from the tourists. I was honestly surprised by the number of tourists this little town gets. They keep me hopping at the coffee shop, and they rarely leave a very good tip. The locals, however, always tip at least twenty percent. It's amazing.

I've been going out with Crystal's gang a little more often and having a great time with them. Danny especially had become an actual friend. But it's not Danny that I think about. I shouldn't be thinking of anyone. That path of thinking was full of danger. The Pleasant was nice enough, but I don't want to stay here and build a life here, even if it has become quite pleasant.

Being stuck in a place makes you put your whole life on hold. I mean, maybe I could get a job at the high school working with the athletic department if a position became available once I got my degree. It wouldn't be a bad life, I'm sure. But I've always dreamed of working with a pro team. The closest thing Point Pleasant has is a minor hockey team that has a fairly terrible record and an even worse name. The Point Pleasant Pheasants. I mean, they had to double down on the irony since, in hockey, a pheasant was slang for bad.

But this place did suck you in. It's idyllic and incredibly beautiful. I had spent part of my summer here and enjoyed basking in the sun by the lake when my parents first moved here. I enjoyed skiing this winter, but there was more to life than recreation, right? Eventually, my brother would leave for grad school, and I'd be here with Mom and Dad, which wasn't horrible, but... It wasn't what I wanted. Was it? Every day I stayed here, a little piece of me reconsidered my future.

If – which right now felt like a very big if – if I graduated and there might be a job here, I could get my own place. I liked my new friends. They were a lot more together than the friends I left at the frat. Maybe being around them would help me get my shit together – keep it together. Who knew? I was twenty-three years old – I didn't have to know everything right at this second. But after failing so stupendously in my senior year, I also felt like I needed to. What would I do when I finally graduated?

I had already decided that I would finish school remotely since it had all been set up for me. I might as well save the money on the frat and room and board. I had grown to kind of like online courses, even if I did miss my old life... sometimes. It no longer felt like an ache or some kind of FOMO that I was experiencing. I didn't want to go back to that way of life. I had already proven to myself that I didn't excel in it. I became a version of myself that I may have enjoyed – even loved at the time – but looking back at what I had gone through because of it made me see it all very differently.

I guess.

Why did my asshole twin get all the brains and I the brawn? It would have been nice if we could have shared our gifts. It was cool to be around John again, and we had really started to re-cement our bond. It was easy to finish classes and walk into his room to shoot some zombies as we laughed at each other. He kicked my ass every time, and I thought I was pretty good at video games. He was better. He was usually better at everything except socializing and sports. Those were the genes I got in the genetic lottery.

“Your phone is buzzing, hon.” Mom brought it over to me. “Looks like someone needs some help.”

“Fuck.” I groaned.

“Language,” she smirked as she handed me my phone from the dining room table where I had left it.

I sat up from my lounge position on the couch and stared at the screen. “I hate task rabbit. I wish Crystal could hire me full-time.”

“If you worked at the coffee shop full time, when would you take classes and study? Besides, she’s already been so sweet to work around your class schedule. It’s just another thing I love about this town.” She hummed as she turned and walked back into the kitchen.

“Me too,” I sighed as I felt the hook of this place pull a little deeper into me. “Fuck!”

A garbage disposal... Super fuckity-fuck! I really should say I’m busy and deny the work, but I really needed the money, and this would be a hundred bucks. I needed it. I ran up the stairs and threw on a tank top and a pair of old shorts. I grabbed my toolbox from the closet and carefully walked back down the stairs to put on my work boots. I hated anything that had drainage, but it was much better money than most of the repair or cleaning work I usually got.

Dad had really tried to teach us as much as he could when it came to being handy. John did not pick it up very well, but I’d always enjoyed it. The time I spent with Dad fixing the car or repairs around the house were some of my favorite childhood memories. I was quite handy, but plumbing could be tricky... I mean, it’s a garbage disposal, and people installed them all alone, so I figured I could handle it. If I couldn’t, I wouldn’t charge them – but a hundred bucks was a hundred bucks!

I opened up the app and grinned. I had gotten lucky and wouldn’t lose my parking spot! The job was here on the street. That made this whole thing a little easier, hopefully. It also meant that I might make a fool out of myself in front of my neighbors. Not that it mattered. I needed the money that badly.

I walked a few condos down and knocked on number six. The yap of a small dog quickly exploded behind the door. I loved dogs, but one running under my feet when I was there to do a job could be annoying. The door cracked, and there stood David with an exasperated look on his face and Liza in his arms.

“Justin? I’m... oh, God, I... What are you doing here?”

“I think I’m your handyman.” I flexed. I couldn’t help it. There was just something about him that made me want to show off. It was easy to see that he had a crush on me, and it made him even cuter.

He instantly blushed. It was adorable. “Oh, God... Really? I’m... I didn’t know you were doing that. I mean, I don’t know everything about you or anything. I’m not a stalker, but...”

“Well, we’re both surprised, I guess. I’m only part-time at the coffee shop, so I do this kind of thing between classes and work whenever I can accept a job. There are a lot of task requests in The Pleasant, believe it or not.”

“Oh, I believe it. Task Rabbit has saved my ass a few times. I’m incredibly unhandy. I can barely change a lightbulb half the time. In fact, the ones in my kitchen I can’t change at all. You have to slide it in and twist it just the right way. I have two bulbs burned out because I can’t get them to go in and snap in place. Why do they make changing a lightbulb a seminar in futility? I should replace them, but... I’m rambling, aren’t I? Did I say that I’m completely unhandy?”

“It’s cute. Lucky for you – I am incredibly handy. So, do you want to show me what the problem is?”

“Oh, well, I mean, the lightbulbs are... I’ve gotten used to living without them.” He glanced all around the house – anywhere but looking at me.

I grinned. “You called me about an issue with your garbage disposal.”

“Oh, yeah.” He was so flustered it was too cute – sexy even. “This way.”

“Hi, Liza.” I scratched her head as I stepped inside, and she wiggled in David’s arms. “You can put her down if you want. We’re old friends.”

“No belly scratching until you get the disposal fixed.” He narrowed his eyes at me and set Liza down on the ground. She immediately ran up to me and lay down before rolling over onto her back.

I quickly bent down and rubbed her. “David? I can’t say no to this, can I?”

David shuddered as he watched me giving Liza the best belly rub of her life. His eyes widened as he stared at me. It was... heartwarming. The look on his face as he watched made me feel warm and fuzzy. It was like he was looking at a memory and remembering something that he once loved.

“She really seems to like you.” He whispered as if it cost him something.

“I like her, too. Her dad, though – he seems pretty... unhandy. He’s cute, though. Even if he is a little hard to read sometimes.” I winked.

He gulped -out loud. I grinned wider.

“Well, he has issues.” He snorted.

I stood back up, and Liza whined. “Sorry, sweet girl. I need to fix the disposal that daddy has apparently fucked up.” I winked at him, and he went instantly red. I liked it. I liked knowing that I had this power over him. I hadn’t felt like myself in a while, and I didn’t mind the attention. I actually quite liked it. If I had a type – and I did – it

had always been studious, older men who looked like they could be a professor. David fit that to a tee.

“I was... uh... trying to... I put some pasta down it.”

“Bad boy. You know that you’re not supposed to do that, right?”

“Yes, sir.” He glanced down at his feet. I felt the flush of blood as I blushed. I liked him calling me sir – a lot. It was empowering and filled me with strength. It was dangerous. David was very cute – too cute - and I found the way he acted adorable. Most people would probably have thought of him as handsome in a total dadbod way. I found it very sexy and always had. But the age gap between us – well, it hadn’t been my friend before. It had taken me a while to get over the last guy that I had this same fixation with. That had been very different, I understood that. But my heart was warning me that I had been down this path before to my own detriment. My scars still ached.

“All right, I better get this working for you then. Your place is great. I love the open floor plan.” I did. Our condo was newer than David’s, but he had a much better layout. Why did designers ever compartmentalize rooms? Open and airy was always a better move.

I walked past the corner bar that separated the living room from the kitchen and stared down into the sink. I ran some water and flipped the switch. The grinding sound was deafening as the blades tried to spin. I flipped the switch and water off. The water sat pooled in the bottom of the sink.

“I’ll do my best, David. But, uh... I’ve never fixed one of these before. But I think I can figure it out. No worries if you want to call an actual plumber to fix it. He’ll charge you triple what I do, but he’ll know exactly what to do.” I shrugged and looked over at him as he clutched Liza to his chest.

“I’m... uh... fine for you to do it,” he said hastily – the blush exploding on his face once again for me to see. He didn’t want me to leave. I didn’t really want to, either. I wasn’t surprised. I knew I had developed a little crush on hot professor David, but... here we were in his house, and I was being manly, so... Instant hardening.

I unbuckled my tool belt and took it off. David exhaled sharply. Power... It was intoxicating. I placed my tool belt gently on the marble counter, being careful not to scratch it. “All right. Let’s see what you’ve done.”

I opened the cabinet doors underneath the sink and found that the cabinet was completely empty except for a sponge and a small bottle of dish soap. I picked them up and placed them to the left of the sink.

“I told you... It was pasta.”

“Yes. You’re a very bad boy – we’ve already confirmed that. But what did the pasta do to the disposal? I can tell that it is clogged because the water is slowly draining. It’s not completely clogged – that’s some good news.” I grabbed my wrench and bent down to find the best way to loosen the connectors.

“I didn’t think it was enough to cause a problem,” he whined as he walked over to the counter’s edge and watched. I could feel his eyes on me.

“This is in a... this is connected kind of crazy.” I scooted back and rolled over to my back so my head and shoulders could fit into the cabinet. The top connector was way up there, and I had never seen anything like it. “Whoever put these pipes in was a fucking masochist,” I grunted as I wiggled my wrench between the insanely placed drainage pipes.

I wiggled the wrench a little more and finally got it around the top connector. I managed, between grunts and annoyed hisses, to tighten my wrench around the pipe.

Liza decided, right at that time, to crawl up on my belly and lay down on my chest.

“Liza!” David giggled. I felt his fingertips through my T-shirt as he scooped her up.

“She knows what she wants.” I tried to loosen the connector and hissed through my teeth. “Damn, this is tight.” I felt it finally give as I pulled harder on it. I scooted further in so I could get a better purchase on it.

I was stupid.

I was uberly aware that David was watching me as I fixed his sink. I liked it too much. So much that I hadn’t thought about the job enough. Instead of scooting out and placing a bowl or anything underneath, I kept twisting until...

“Fuck!”

All of the trapped water and shredded bits of pasta fell out of the pipe that connected to the disposal and directly onto me. Thankfully from the angle I was in – it missed my face. I might have barfed if that had happened. Instead, my t-shirt was covered in bits of pasta and gooey water. I quickly scooted out and sat up.

“Do you have a big bowl and maybe some towels?” I asked quietly – sitting there looking like I had just been involved in a food fight.

“Oh, God! Yes.” I heard a cabinet open, and a few seconds later, a large red bowl was placed in my hands. I scooted back and made sure to put it right under the open pipe that was still dripping slowly. I scooted out and turned around to look at the damage. Most of the water had soaked into me, but the pasta bits had fallen into the cabinet and off my shirt onto the floor.

David hurried back in with a handful of towels.

“Sorry,” I muttered as I glanced up at him. He was flustered, and so was I. I took the towels and made sure to clean the floor and the inside of the cabinet from the debris that had fallen out. I didn’t want Liza to eat any of it and get a bellyache.

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah,” I chuckled. “I didn’t realize I was coming over here for a wet t-shirt contest, though. Sorry, I wasn’t thinking about the... I do know what I’m doing – sort of. I promise.” I bundled the dirty towels in a ball and laid them down next to the open doors of the cabinet.

“You want me to take those?” David asked, and I glanced up at him and nodded.

“I wouldn’t wash those in your... I’d make sure to shake the pasta out into the trash before you wash them. We don’t want you to clog that up, too.” I winked, and I handed them to him.

He left the room quickly – Liza in one hand and the dirty towels in another. I stood up and looked down at my disgusting shirt. Well, I was already in the grime. Why not? I pulled the gooey shirt over my head and wadded it up on my tool belt. I used one of the extra towels to wipe my wet torso clean and heard a gasp from behind. I turned to find David with his mouth wide open and his cheeks about as crimson as they could get. I flexed my pecs as I put the towel down. I couldn’t help myself. It was intoxicating.

“I was very dirty.” I felt the flood of blood up into my cheeks. Standing here in front of him, knowing what I thought I knew, made me feel something that I hadn’t felt in a while. David was exactly my type, and from the expression on his face – which was adorable as fuck – I was his. “Looks like someone’s mistake made me a mess. Someone did a bad thing.”

“I’m sorry.” He almost panted. “Would you... uh... like me to throw that... that in the washer for you? Your shirt?” He stammered so fucking cute that I felt a throb down below.

“It’s fine. I’ll just throw it back on and...”

“No. You can’t wear that... I... I’ll wash it.” He walked over and picked it up in his hands so gently that I smirked.

“It is very dirty.” I stared at him, and the pit of my stomach dropped as I watched his face scrunch up. “If you want, I would appreciate it, David. That would be my good boy if you’d clean it for me.” I dropped my voice and felt instantly guilty. What was I doing? If I kept this up, something was going to happen unless I was an idiot, and this was not what I thought. Maybe he was just a very nice guy who blushed a lot and stared at me more than normal. Maybe he did that to everyone?

“I’ll take care of it for you. It was my... gross stuff that fell all over you. I’ll... I’ll wash it.” He decided and glanced down at my torso. I made my pecs bounce once again. The flush that exploded over his face – Yeah, I was not wrong. He turned and ran into his hallway.

So? What was I going to do about it? I was here. David was here. He seemed like a great guy from our few encounters, and he seemed like he was way into it. I was, too. But this would... could change everything. Was I ready for this after what happened last year? I was still pretty fucked up from the last older guy I fell for. Not to mention, David lived in Point Pleasant. Worse – he lived a few doors down from my family. If I allowed myself to feel...

Hadn’t I punished myself enough? How was I supposed to know about...

Thinking about this now wasn’t going to get me anywhere. I did have a job to do.

Why did it have to be fucking drainage? I pulled out my phone and pulled up YouTube. That was how anyone and everyone learned how to fix anything these days. How the older generation lived without this wealth of knowledge was beyond me.

“It’s in the wash.”

“Shh... Just a minute.” I held up my finger as the person started speaking on the video.

“Are you really watching a how-to video?”

“You know it.”

“I thought you said you were handy.”

“I am. I’m very handy.” I looked up and winked. “But being handy doesn’t mean you know everything. I’m just making sure I’m fixing it and not leaving you with a mess someone else has to clean up. I like to clean up my own messes, thank you very much.”

“Should I call someone else?”

“Shh... I totally got this, David. Now, if you don’t mind, let Daddy watch this so he can fix the disposal that a very bad boy messed up. Trust me.”

“Weirdly, I do. Ok.” He held up his hand, and Liza yipped. He pulled her back to his chest.

“Why don’t you go sit down and pet Liza while I fix this for you? I mean, unless you really want to watch.” I flexed. He blushed. I felt powerful.

“I... I mean... I’ll just go in here and...”

“You can totally see me from in there. You know, just in case you want to keep an eye on me.” I flexed again. I was going into this deeply now, and I was surprised that I wasn’t freaked out. David was a great guy. That was easy to see.

“I...”

“How about when I finish fixing this, you take me out for a drink? I’d like that.”

Liza barked, and David shuddered as he stood there slack-jawed as he processed what I just said. “You would?”

“Yeah, I would. Why not? I’m an adult, and I think you are, too. Seems like fate threw us together this time, so... Let’s go have a drink and... talk. Besides, you never called me.”

“All right. I can... do that. If you really want.”

“What do you want? I think I would like to go with you for a drink.”

“Sure. I’d like that too.”

“Good. Then it’s settled. You go pet Liza and watch me fix this disposal, and then I’ll get cleaned up, and we can go have a drink and get to know each other. Ok?”

“Yes, sir. That sounds great.”

“Damn, I like when you call me sir.”

“I... I’m not...” He melted as he processed.

“Sit, David. Watch.”

His eyes never left me as I watched the video. I could feel his gaze on me as I worked under the sink. I finally got the disposal loose and was able to clear it from the debris that was blocking it. Putting it back together was easier than I had expected, and within thirty minutes, I stood up from the sink and crossed my arms.

David gulped, and I admit I liked the way he looked at me. It reminded me of another older man who had enjoyed every inch of the body I had worked hard for. I didn't like remembering him, but I did like the way David made me feel. I was a dirty, filthy mess, but I knew that if I walked in there right now and threw myself on top of him – he wouldn't say no. The way he couldn't stop looking at me told me everything I needed to know. He was smitten. He was lustful, and he was trying so hard to hide it. It was good that he hid it badly.

I had suffered in my own silence and loneliness enough.

It was time I allowed myself to feel something again.

Maybe David and I crossed paths for a reason. To hell with all the red flags.

“So, a drink.”

“I thought you wanted to shower first?”

“Is my shirt clean?”

“You finished so fast... I think it's about to finish in the washer.”

“How about this? I go home like I just got off a shift at Abercrombie and Fitch, and you throw my shirt in the dryer. I'll meet you back here in about thirty minutes.” I

almost asked to use his shower, but if I did that, I would be getting naked in his house, and I didn't trust myself to not jump headfirst into something I wasn't a hundred percent sure about. If I was going to affect both of our lives, I needed to be sure.

“Ok...”

“I'll be back in thirty David.”

I grabbed my tool belt and held it up in my hand. My bicep bulged.

“I'll be ready.” He looked like he was in total shock. It was endearing, as had been every encounter that we had. I grinned and walked out without looking back.

I felt lighter walking home. It felt good to have something to look forward to. Someone to... maybe look forward to.

Besides, I already loved Liza.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

“Whatever that is your drinking, it looks like a melted popsicle,” Justin teased as I stared at him over my glass. It was yummy, even if it was a bright shade of pink. But the view of Justin – I couldn’t take my eyes away from him. The fact that he wanted to go out with me – that he was flirting and into me, for some reason, made me very nervous. Why me? Why would he be into me? It made no sense.

“It’s a strawberry-lemonade-vodka something. You wanna have a sip.” Even the thought of his lips touching my glass and then taking a sip from that very same spot made my heart flutter.

“I don’t mix if I can help it.” His grin was special – especially when it was directed at me. It made me feel like I mattered, which was utterly ridiculous, wasn’t it? But I was lost in whatever this was – I relished in it.

“You’re young and should be making bad mistakes. Once you’re my age, things change. I can’t even look at a shot of tequila without wanting to crawl into the fetal position.” I grimaced at the thought.

“I’m already there, and as for mistakes – I’ve already made enough to know better.” He winked, and I lost control of my ability to process information for a second. He took away my control by just being near me, and that was ridiculous. I was ridiculous.

“Well, mistakes make us stronger, I guess. At least for most people, they do.”

“I’ll assume that yours didn’t?” He asked like he actually cared.

“No – I mean, maybe in the long term they did.” I shrugged, feeling like a fool. “Instead of growing from mine, I hid my head in the sand. It was easier that way.”

“You’re an ostrich.” He chuckled.

“Ouch.”

“I mean, you find it easier to hide from your problems than face them head-on and deal with them. My brother can be the same way sometimes. It only makes it harder – I think. I prefer to charge ahead and let the chips fall where they may.” He snorted and cracked his neck with a loud pop. “Mine may have been easier if I hadn’t faced it so quickly. It didn’t do me any favors.”

“Charging ahead? So, you’re a... horse?” I smirked.

He raised his eyebrows, and I almost stopped breathing. “You wanna know which part?”

“What?” I felt the blood flush into my face.

“I could show you, but I could get arrested out in public.” He lowered his voice and looked over his shoulder.

“I meant... I mean... a tiger! You’re a tiger.” I regained some composure.

“Maybe in bed.”

And I lost it again. “Jesus! You... stop. You’re making me blush.”

“Oh, you’re beet red. It’s very cute. I like it when you blush.” He chuckled and leaned over the table. “I’m a honey badger. Act first and think second.”

I threw my head back and howled. “Honey badger, don’t give a shit. I loved that meme.”

“Honey badger doesn’t give a fuck, and right now, this honey badger has no more fucks to give. I’m tired of thinking about the past, David. I want to... live in the... what’s happening now, you know? Don’t we all deserve that?”

“Yeah... So, what is happening, Justin?” The words came out before I could think better of them.

“Isn’t that part of the fun – not knowing a hundred percent? I mean, it’s... I’m into it, David, and I’m pretty sure you are too.”

“I think tiger is a much more accurate description of you.”

“I think there is a very good chance that you will see the tiger sometime soon unless you get scared and run away.” He leaned back and smiled at me.

“You’re uh...”

“Coming on a bit strong? I have no reason not to, and you’re too scared to.”

“That’s true,” I mumbled. “Tell me something about you. I don’t know... a lot.”

“Well, you know I almost failed out of school, and I’m taking online courses. I live with my family and work as a handyman and a server down at the coffee shop. What else do you want to know?”

“Anything.”

“I want to work with a sports team when I... hopefully graduate.” He sighed and

stared at me for so long that I almost melted into the chair. “I uh... Ok... How about this? I’ll tell you the truth about why I’m here. No one, well, almost no one knows. It would be nice to... tell someone – to tell you. Especially if we’re... you know, and I think we are. I want to anyway.”

“You don’t have to.” I didn’t deserve his truth. I was a lustful older man who had cyber stalked and beaten off to his photos.

“I want to. It would be nice to get it all out there. When I’m done, you can also share why someone like you is still single in a town like Point Pleasant. I swear if you throw a football around here, you hit a gay guy.”

“True – that must make me a very sad gay man.”

“I think it must make you special.” He smiled as he took a sip of his beer. “You’re like a hidden surprise in this town.”

I sat back in my chair and rotated my glass on the table. I didn’t know how to respond – I felt good, but that made me even more nervous. He saw me, and for some reason, he liked me. Why did it feel so dangerous?

“I did, in some ways, fail out of school. It was my grades and financial aid. But that’s the reason the school had. The cause – the root of the issue was actually something else.” He picked up his drink and took a large gulp. “Ever since I was a... sexually aware, I guess, you could say – I have had a type. Usually, that meant nothing. I mean, my soccer coach was about your age when I was in high school, and I used to fantasize about him. Nothing happened, of course. It’s not one of those kinds of stories. It was just a crush, and an awareness that when I had a crush, it was usually on an older guy. Not always – but most of the time.”

“Ah...” I nodded – finally understanding a little bit more. My heart sped up.

“The summer before I went to college, I had my first encounter with an older man. I had used my youth and good looks to get into a gay bar, and that night, I made out with my first man. A real man, not someone close to my age. I mean, I wasn’t a virgin. But this was the first time that it... It was like a hook inside me that pulled tight as his hands explored my body. He wasn’t that much older, maybe thirty? But to me, it felt like... perfection, I guess. Then, I went to college, and my life was filled with classes and joining a frat. I dated a few girls, a few guys, you know... Nothing exciting, but fun.”

“Then I walked into one of my upper-level classes my junior year and discovered that we had a new professor. He had just been hired by the university to replace someone who retired, and my heart jumped. So did my cock. He was the epitome of what you would expect from a college professor. Glasses and a tie... He looked smart and studious, and... Jesus...” He huffed. “I used to stare at him and lose myself in the fantasy of him instead of what he was teaching me. It got so bad that he had to pull me aside to talk about my grades. He was concerned that I was going through something, you know? But I couldn’t tell him why I wasn’t doing well. I couldn’t say that I was having sexual fantasies as I watched him, and that’s why I wasn’t really listening. He was just so fucking adorable.”

“He kept on me, and I tried, but I was behind and having a hard time catching up on all the classwork. I was also partying pretty hard, which wasn’t helping, either. I know...” He chuckled. “But there was always something to do with the frat – some party or event that we were throwing or had to go to. I should have studied harder, but... Anyway, he finally offered to meet with me in his office to help me catch up. I was trying, and he could see that I was struggling with some of the information, so... tutoring a few times.”

“It was so hard to sit there and listen to him. But I tried because he was giving me this time, and I wasn’t a total idiot. I knew that if I didn’t learn and catch up, I was going to flunk this class, and it would put me behind. He could see me working and offered

to meet me a little more often over the next couple of weeks. I agreed, and one day, after I started to feel better about my grade, I reached over, took his face in my hand, and kissed him. He kissed me back.”

“Months of hiding and sneaking around as I came to and from his office at the end of the day when no one else was around. Late nights and quick fumbles that took my breath away were all I really had with him. I passed his class with an A, and I stayed at the frat over the holiday. Everyone else had gone home, so he would come there, and we would have a drink and talk – I thought I was learning everything about him, and I was sharing my soul with him too, you know? Our quick fumbles grew longer as we now lingered in my bed – my arms wrapped around him. I let my fantasies grow and become something more than I had ever dreamed. I saw a future where we could stop pretending and sneaking around. I saw a mirage.”

“He never spent the night, and once school started for the Spring semester, the hiding began again. Early evening fucks in his office where no one could see. By the end of the semester, I knew that I had to do something if this was ever going to become something else. He had confessed that he loved me and didn’t know what to do about it. He was a professor in my department, and if they found out... I believed him until one day when I was at a bookstore. I saw him.”

“Oh...” My stomach flipped. I knew this was going to be bad, and I hated that he had been through something like this. I felt guilty, and I had no idea why. I sat there frozen as he took a sip and sat his mug back on the table.

“Yeah, oh... I thought, why not, you know? So, I snuck up behind him, and right before I put my hands over his eyes – I saw them. And I heard them. I froze, and I’m sure my face didn’t hide my... surprise. Standing right, there were three children and a woman. I glanced down and saw a wedding ring on his hand. He hadn’t worn that in classes or... Married? I... ran away, and I know that his wife saw my reaction, and... I didn’t know what else to do. I had fallen for this person. I had spent almost a

year developing something with him, only to find out it was really nothing. He was married and had three children. I saw them and couldn't unsee them, and I felt horrible."

"Used. You felt used." I muttered, understanding exactly how he felt.

"Yes. When I confronted him about it a couple of nights later, he told me the truth. He may love me, but this could never be more than what it already was. He apologized and said he got caught up in finally allowing himself to act upon his gay feelings. He knew he hurt me, but he loved his family and..." He sighed. "Do you know what's weird? Six months ago, I couldn't have told you all of this – not calmly, anyway. But it feels so far away now – almost like I'm telling someone else's story. It feels good to know that I have finally put this in my past, and it doesn't have the same power that it once had, you know?"

"I... I guess I don't know – not really. I don't know you that well, I know that. But you have this... You are stronger than you think. You have to be. He broke your heart."

"Looking back, I was definitely heartbroken. I mean, I was destroyed. I lost myself in parties and any other person who I could stick my dick in for a while. I stopped going to classes last Fall. Apparently, we hadn't been as inconspicuous as we thought. There were other faculty members... the secretary, who knew things, and he was not asked to return. I have no idea where he went. But I ruined his career at the university, and I never said a word to anyone about it. But I heard the rumor, and I kept my mouth shut. There was no reason to tell them that it was true, and how I knew."

He picked up his drink and finished it.

"You want another?" I would have wanted one and started to stand up to get it. He

put his hand on my arm and nodded at me to sit back down.

“It’s your turn,” he frowned. “You don’t get out of this. I shared mine, and now it’s your turn.”

“I... My story is just... It’s a normal breakup story, I guess. I just wasn’t as strong as you. I’m not as strong as you.”

“A broken heart doesn’t care how strong you are, David. It takes over, and you have to go through the death of... love. You have to mourn to heal. You’re stronger than you think – I’m positive of that.”

“How could you be? You don’t really know me enough to know if that’s true or not. I would like it to be true. But I’m... I’m an ostrich, Justin. I stick my head in the sand and hope it will all go away.”

“What have you been hiding from? When I see you, I see a man who shouldn’t be hiding. I see someone adorable, funny, and smart.”

“Well, now that I know your type...” I chuckled.

“I guess I deserve that.” He smiled.

“I think I’m hiding from me if you want to know the absolute truth. I know that’s... silly, but...”

“It’s not silly at all. We all deal with things the way we need to.”

“I’ve been dealing with my... drama... for way too long. Maybe not dealing with it is a better way to say it. I met Satan when we were...”

“Wait! His name was Satan, and you dated him? Are you a masochist?” His eyes widened.

“I won’t say his name. I just refer to him as the devil.”

“That lets him keep the power. Say his name, and you take that power back.”

“I haven’t said it in... years. I just call him the horned one or the devil. I think I tried to make it a joke, but... it wasn’t.”

“What was his name?”

“I...” I sighed. His name felt foreign, so I shrugged at Justin and frowned. “I haven’t said his name in over ten years.”

“How long were you with him?”

“It had been almost five years. We met in college and started dating soon after. Our friend groups merged, and so did we. Then, after we graduated and had been living together, things changed. He changed. Hell, maybe I changed? I did, and so did he – but our movements were in opposite directions. He got bored in our life, and I was comfortable in it.” I sighed so heavily that people looked over at me. I could feel my face flush.

“There’s that blush. I like it when you get embarrassed. Your whole face just goes red so quickly.” He chuckled. “Does it bother you that I think it’s cute?”

“No.” I turned redder. “I’m just... Anyway, so I liked our life. I enjoyed staying home and reading or watching a movie. I was never really someone who enjoyed the whole gay bar scene, and clubs were... I don’t dance in front of people.”

“I’ve never been a big fan of those things either.” He nodded and leaned towards me.
“So, what happened?”

“He woke up one day and rolled over. I smiled like I always did, and he said that he wasn’t happy. This same conversation is had by thousands every day, but...” I swallowed.

“It doesn’t make it hurt any less.”

“No. When I asked him what I could do to make him happier, he said that I needed to move out. There was no... He had been thinking about this. I could tell by the way he said it. It was planned like one of those bad reality show scripts. He told me that he deserved more. I wasn’t good enough for him. I was boring, and he wanted to go out and still have fun while he was young. He said a lot more – hurtful things than that. The devil...” I almost choked because I almost said his name. “He was gorgeous, and everyone was drawn to him because he just had that kind of energy. I left that night and came back for the rest of my things when he was at work. It ruined me for a very long time. He moved on quickly, which shouldn’t have surprised me the way it did. But just seeing him and his new boyfriend with all of our friends, it... He got everything, and I didn’t even try. I just gave up and hid away. I ostriched like an ostrich does.”

“And now?”

“It’s easier to avoid ever feeling like that again by not trying.”

“I understand that – I do. But it’s also sad, David. You deserve a happy life as much as anyone else.”

I sighed.

“I know. I just didn’t want to feel that way ever again. It... losing everything – it broke me.”

“Not everyone is the devil, you know.”

“The devil you know...” I shrugged. “Why are we here? I mean, I get the flirtiness and everything, but...”

“I don’t just flirt to flirt, David. I flirt because... so far, I like you. Is that ok?”

I gulped. “Ask me tomorrow.”

“That sounds like a second date to me. I’m not him, David. I’m just fucked up me.”

“That’s scary too. But... a second date sounds nice.”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

Ididn't plan on double booking myself, but... Shit happens.

It was fairly perfect. David had hidden himself away – his words – and now was the time for him to start getting out of his comfort zone. If there was going to be something between us, it had to happen. I could coddle him when he needed it, but from what I've seen – he may need it a lot.

So...

I made a quick decision that I hoped wouldn't backfire on me. The devil on my shoulder told me that this was a great idea and a chance for David to meet new people. The other devil who resided on the other shoulder told me that this wasn't a very good second date. I totally forgot about agreeing to meet my friends at Rumors. They were expecting me, and when I asked David out – I did so in the spirit of the moment. I wanted to see him again and get to know him better. I was infatuated with the possibility of him, and then this morning, I realized what I had done.

A decision had to be made.

I just hoped I made the right one.

“Where are we going?” He looked adorable as he shut his front door behind him before turning to look at me with the cutest look on his face. “Am I dressed, ok?”

“We are going to Rumors, and you are going to have a blast looking as cute as you do.”

“Rumors? Uh... that’s a little... I mean...”

“Hey. I think your date is pretty damn good-looking.”

“Your shirt is very tight.”

“I wanted you to see the work. These muscles don’t come easy, you know.”

“Ok... Rumors.” He nodded. I reached down and gently took his hand in mine.

“It’s time to stop being an ostrich. Besides, I don’t think I really see you that way. I think you’re more of a zebra.”

“I’m prey?” He chuckled. “Figures.”

“A zebra can protect itself from any predator. Did you know that one kick from the zebra’s hooves can kill a lion? I saw it on Planet Earth.”

“I love that series. It’s so gorgeous – like you.” The instant blush that exploded across his face emboldened me.

“You think I’m gorgeous?”

“I think you know that you’re gorgeous.” He giggled. “People are going to be super confused as to why you’re hanging out with me.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. I think it will be fairly clear. There’s... uh... also going to be a few other people with us, too.” I noticed his eyes widen in surprise. “I want to introduce you to my friends.”

“You’re... uh... Ok. I mean, that’s a little... Are you sure you want to do that?” His

voice cracked.

I grinned at him. “I’m positive. I’m also sure that they’re gonna love you.” I got to my car and opened the passenger door. “Your chariot awaits.”

He blushed as he got in, and I shut the door behind him. I knew that my car was a piece of shit that smelled a little bit like a locker room. All of my old sports equipment sat in the back like a remembrance of the person I used to be. I should clean it out – for David, at least, if not for myself.

I got in and reached over to take his hand. He looked surprised as I laced my fingers through his.

“Can you drive with one hand?” He gulped.

“I can drive with no hands.” I started the car and made a quick U-turn on the street.

“These friends of yours... I assume you’re talking about Crystal and the other A-gays?”

“A-gays!” I laughed. “They don’t bite, David. Actually, they are all very sweet.”

“They’re always together like they’re a special club or something. I don’t go out very much. But sometimes my best friend, Zane, he... uh... will force me to go with him when he can’t find anyone else. I see them there, and it’s like they’re holding court. Even at Liberties, it’s like they... like there’s a wall around them.”

“I think that’s just your perception. Trust me, there is no wall. They brought me right in.”

“You and I are very different. Look at you. Who wouldn’t want you to be a part of

their group?”

“They used to think I was straight. It was... I don’t know, maybe a month before I told them I was bi. They hadn’t cared, at all. Crystal and Danny just saw a person who was lonely and didn’t have any friends, so they took me in. They’re like a family, so they are very close, David. But they aren’t snobby. I promise.”

“Do they know I’m coming?” He looked like he was about to throw open the car door and dive out. I wished I could make him feel more at ease.

“Crystal knows – so everyone knows.” I laughed, knowing that statement was absolutely true. Crystal loved to gossip. “David, I... I like you, ok? That’s all that matters.”

I pulled into the parking lot of Rumors and saw Blake’s truck parked next to Crystal’s car. I let go of David’s hand and turned my car off.

“Alright.” He nodded.

I grinned at him before getting out of the car and walking around to open his door. He knew I was going to, and he waited for me. It felt... It made me feel strong and in control. David made me feel in control. It was intoxicating. It had been so long since I had allowed myself to revel in anything. David gave that part of me back. I opened the door and took his hand as I helped him from his seat.

“You really are something else,” I smirked, shutting the car door behind him.

“You make me feel like... I don’t know – like I matter. It’s been so long that...”

I pulled him into me and placed my lips gently against his. I could feel his heart race as it thumped against mine. He sighed, and I kissed him sweetly a few times as he

melted into me. I placed my hands on his shoulders and slowly broke our connection.

“That was... You just kissed me?”

“Is that really a question?” I chuckled.

“I wasn’t expecting it – it’s...” He stared up at me.

“It’s a date, David. I’m here with you, and... I liked kissing you. I will like kissing you again and again.”

“I liked it, too. You’re... I mean – you’re you.” His eyes narrowed as he stared at me. “Sorry, I am not very good at this.”

“We have time. Now let’s go meet my friends.” I offered him my hand, and he put his hand against mine. I closed my fingers around him tightly. He was nervous. I hoped the kiss had helped loosen him up a little. He didn’t see himself the way I did. That would take time.

We walked into Rumors, and I noticed Crystal sitting up on the risers with a few of our friends. Danny and Blake were there, along with Sam and Grayson, who I was excited for David to meet. Out of all of Crystal’s gang, Sam and Grayson were the nicest. Grayson was quite a few years older than Sam, just like David and I.

“This must be David!” Crystal stood and walked around the table to greet us.

“Yes. David, I would like you to officially meet Crystal.”

She rushed over and gave David a bear hug. “Aren’t you the cutest!” she squealed happily. “You have to sit by me. It’s so nice to meet you. I’ve seen you around. This is Danny and Blake. I’ll assume you know who Blake is.” She cackled. “And this is

Sam and Grayson.”

“We’ve actually met. You brought your car into the shop a while ago.” Grayson stood up and shook David’s hand. “I think it was the starter?”

“I did, and it was.” David nodded.

“Sam is a writer, and Danny is a man of leisure,” Crystal teased.

“Leisure?” Danny gasped. “I teach skiing at the chalet for the VIP clients. It’s very nice to meet you.”

“When he has time, he teaches skiing. He’s usually galivanting all over the globe with Blake.” Crystal was on fire tonight.

“I like to have him with me to keep me grounded.” Blake grinned. “It’s very nice to meet you.” He shook David’s hand happily. “Welcome to the club.”

Sam came around and took David’s hand in his. “Come and sit down. I have seen you around, but I’m positive we’ve never spoken to each other. You have to tell us all about yourself.”

I watched David’s face fall. “There’s really not too much to tell.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.” Sam smiled. “But first, I think we need to get you a drink. We can be a lot.” He chuckled. “Especially our grande dame.”

“I am as sweet as punch. I’m just loud.” Crystal shrugged.

“Do you want the same thing as yesterday?” I asked, and I noticed David glancing around the table at what everyone else was drinking. It was a mix of a little bit of

everything, and he nodded at me.

I walked over to the bar and ordered our drinks. I kept looking back at the table and was surprised to see David grinning happily. His discomfort was replaced by the friendliness of the group. I breathed a sigh of relief. It wasn't that I didn't trust them to be nice – because I did. But I also knew that David was a little fragile and uncomfortable in new situations.

It seemed to be going ok so far. The bartender slid my beer over and carefully placed a straw in David's pink creamsicle of a drink. I picked them up and carried them over and slid next to David on the bench.

“What are we talking about?” I asked as I bumped my shoulder gently against David's.

“He's telling us about Liza Minnelli,” Sam cooed. “I can't wait to meet her. I love dogs so much.”

“She is a belly rub whore,” I chuckled. “That's really how we met. She tried to show me her EGOT.”

“So, what do you do, David? For work, I mean,” Blake asked, taking a sip of his beer.

“Oh! I'm in IT for a small startup. I work from home because they are out of state.”

“That's cool. Do you like working from home?” Crystal grinned at him. “I'm a total people person, so that sounds lonely.”

“It's fine. Honestly, unless something goes wrong, they pay me to watch Netflix most of the time. But, yeah... It is lonely in some ways. I've just started to realize that.”

“You’re from here, right?” Danny kicked my leg under the table and gave me a thumbs-up.

“Yeah. My... er... what’s left of my family all moved away, but I came back. The Pleasant has always felt like home, so when I needed to move somewhere, this was the first place I wanted to come.”

“Do you still have a lot of friends around?”

“Well, he does now. He has no idea what he just got adopted into.” Sam smirked.

“Uh... I have a few. Most of my old friends from high school are... I guess a few of them are still here, but I know a lot of them moved away for jobs. My best friend, Zane, moved back to The Pleasant too, so that’s been nice.”

“Oh! I know Zane a little. He went out with one of the twins, but I can’t remember which one.” Sam shrugged. “He seemed nice when I met him.”

“I can’t remember his name, either. But yes, they went on a few dates. Zane is a lot.” David blushed. “I think they’re still friends, though.”

“Yes. I think so, too. The gays of our lives around here are too much to keep up with.” Sam chuckled, and Grayson reached over and pecked him lovingly on the cheek.

“It always has been. I swear there’s something in the water.” Crystal laughed. “So, why don’t we ever see you around here very often?”

David glanced around. “I don’t... uh... go out very much.”

“You’re shy, and that’s adorable.” Crystal put her hand on top of his. “Don’t worry,

we only bite when someone asks for it. Just so you know, you are now officially adopted. You two look very cute together.”

“It’s just our second date.” David blushed.

“But it won’t be our last.” I slide my arm around David’s waist and pull him a little closer.

“I’m just... Justin has been a surprise.” David admitted.

“A nice one, I hope.” I squeezed his side a little.

“I think so.”

It was nice to merge the two worlds of my friends and David, even if it may have been a little sooner than it normally would have. David needed to get to know more people, and these were some of the best that I had ever met. I hoped that they’d do the same for him that they did for me.

Grayson asked David to help him carry some drinks, and I saw the two of them chatting at the bar. David nodded a lot but kept grinning at whatever Grayson was telling him. It was nice watching him interact with my friends, and he seemed to be having a good time. Crystal had been gushing over him repeatedly, which was not a surprise.

“He’s adorable, very handsome. I approve,” she whispered as we all started to leave.

We walked out with them, and they got into their cars as we stood by ours.

“Was it too much?”

He shook his head. “It was great. I don’t know why I... It was nice to meet your friends. They’re not as bougie as I always thought they were. Why I always thought they’d be hard to talk to, I don’t know.”

“I’m glad you like them. I know they like you.” I reached over and took his hand before gently pulling him into me once again. “I really want to kiss you. Is that alright?”

He blushed as he nodded, and I bent down. His lips opened, and I kissed him deeply. He moaned into my mouth as my tongue gently pushed into him. His body pressed against mine, and his hand grasping the back of my hair made me crave more. He tasted sweet and tangy from his drinks, and I relished being the one who was making him come unglued. His fingers brushed against my back as his grip tightened in my hair.

He chuckled into our kiss, and I slowly broke away.

“What’s so funny?” I smirked as he regained his balance and stared wide-eyed up at me.

“You. This.” He grinned. “I’m just...”

“Do you want to go back to your house?”

“So badly that I might burst into flames.” He frowned and looked around the parking lot. “But... Can we wait?”

“What did you think was gonna happen, David?” I shrugged sheepishly. “What kind of boy do you think I am?”

“The kind of boy who I am sure you are.” He laughed and put his hand over my heart.

“It’s... been a while since I...”

“We can wait as long as you want.” I pulled him into me. “Just don’t make it too long.” I kissed the top of his head. “Besides, I think you are totally worth waiting for. You’re not the only one who’s surprised by... I didn’t see you coming either.”

“Oh, I saw you. I just can’t believe you did me.”

“You are going to have to get over that. I saw you – I see you, David.”

“I know, but I’m still... Thank you for a nice evening.”

“We still have to get home and I think I should at least walk you to your door and give you a good night kiss, don’t you?”

“Oh, no.” He laughed. “Well, the ride home is a must. But the walking to the door... Stop trying to tempt me.”

“You can’t blame a boy for trying.”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

“So... what!” Zane made every head in a hundred-mile radius turn to stare at us. “You’ve been holding out on us, and I am not ok with that, bitch.”

“It wasn’t... I mean, I had an infatuation with him, but it’s happened fast.” I was still trying to settle into what all of this meant – might mean, or could mean if I stayed on the path we were currently on. “He came to fix my disposal, and then bam. His tongue was in my mouth, and I couldn’t breathe.”

“That’s called kissing. I think you remember how it felt.”

“Zane, honey? Bring it down just a notch, will you? Can’t you see the boy is freaking out?” Jacob wheezed. “Can we stop walking so fast? A trip to the bookstore should not exhaust you. I’m sixty-nine – and I’m not a sprinter any longer.”

“Of course.” I put my hand through Jacob’s arm to offer support. “Remember how easy it used to be to find parking?”

“Things change – and The Pleasant has been changing rapidly. It’s good for the town, but the year-round tourism has made this place much more crowded. I miss the slow times we used to have.” Jacob squeezed my hand in thanks.

“That article in USA Today calling us one of the best vacation spots in America changed everything.” Zane nodded. “Now, can we please get back to Miss Thang here dating the Taylor Lautner lookalike? I am flummoxed.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, bestie,” I muttered.

“No, it’s... I’m happy for you. I am. I just can’t believe you found a boyfriend before I did.”

“He is not my boyfriend.”

“Not yet.” Zane laughed. “He must be into daddies. He’s what, twenty-two?”

“I don’t think that David is a daddy. He’s not that old. God! What would that make me? Dead?”

“No, you’re grampa porn. It’s a real thing.” Zane cackled.

“We’ve just been out on a couple of dates, and he introduced me to his friends.”

“That’s major.” Zane grabbed me by the arm and stopped us all in our tracks. “I saw him, you know. He was with Crystal and her gaggle of gays at Liberties, and you were totally right. He looks exactly like our hunky werewolf. I almost texted you to tell you I found him again, but I didn’t want you to go into cardiac arrest.”

“His friends were nice. I had always imagined they’d be snobby,” I responded and started walking slowly again.

“They’re fine. I mean, I think they think a lot of themselves, but who wouldn’t when your friend group has a movie star and a rock star in it? That group was always full of the pretty people.”

Jacob grinned. “One of them is a prince now, isn’t he? Crystal has always been a sweetheart. Her mother and I were very good friends back in the day. That poor girl has really been through it. I guess most of her friends have been, what with all of that scandal back in the day.”

“I kind of remember hearing about that. We weren’t here when that happened. What did happen?”

“It was a bad accident. One of their friends died in a car crash, and... Well, there was more to the story, but that’s not my story to tell. The poor kid is dead, and it caused quite a stir. He and Crystal were dating, I think.” Jacob looked off into the distance as we turned the corner and started down the long block. “Yes, I’m sure they were. It was a long time ago, and I can barely remember last week these days. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“That’s... fascinating.” Zane was being his usual self, and Jacob shot him a dirty look. “But can we please get back to the insanity of that himbo dating my best friend?”

“I mean, two dates could be considered dating, I suppose.” Jacob laughed. “But I know that you’re having a complete meltdown inside, aren’t you?”

“And how,” I sighed heavily. “I’m reeling. It doesn’t feel right, you know? I can’t see why he would... I mean, I’m just... me, and he is...”

“I’m just stopping this now.” Jacob stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and pointed over to one of the benches against the wall. “Sit down.”

I walked over and did what he said. It hadn’t been a request, and when Jacob spoke – I listened. “I’m being an idiot, right?”

“Duh!” Zane laughed. “Have you met you? You should be on your knees thanking God – or on your knees thanking that boy.”

“Zane, honey. Sit down and shut up.” Jacob pointed beside me, and Zane followed orders. “You are not old. Neither one of you is old or even middle-aged. So, what if

he's younger than you? Is that what's bothering you?"

"I mean, part of it, I guess."

"You always have this shadow around you, honey. Like a shroud of protection from the first moment I met you, and I get it. You went through a very bad breakup that left you broken for a while. But your biggest mistake is not moving on."

"He sure did, and it didn't take him long. He was a total dick."

"Zane – not helping." Jacob tutted.

"You stayed stuck in that hurt, and you never allowed yourself to truly move past it. It's like you assigned yourself the blame for what happened, and you just shut yourself away. Now, I love you more than I love almost anyone. You are kind, smart, and really funny when you let your guard down – which you do with us, for the most part, except when it comes to dating. You just shut it all off and shut us down. And now, here you are asking yourself why this boy would, or could even like you. Maybe he sees in you what we all see, David?" Jacob stopped and looked over at Zane. "Now you can speak."

Zane chuckled. "Yes, grampie."

"I hear you, Jacob. It just feels like a lot." I know I needed to hear this – but I also hated being present when anyone spoke about me.

Zane put his arm over my shoulder and pulled me into him. "Of course it does. I know I can be a bit of a bitch, sometimes – but all I want for you is for you to be happy, boo."

"I know."

Zane huffed and patted my shoulder. “I hope so. I’m sure the age is a little... I know you, but he’s not that much younger. I mean, it’s barely a decade. But... not everyone leaves, David. Sometimes, they stay. That’s what it really is, isn’t it?”

I slowly pulled away from him and hung my head as the truth sunk in. “You hit the nail right on the proverbial head, I guess. I... I mean, I’ve really enjoyed being around him a lot. He’s funny and sweet and sees me in a way that I haven’t felt seen in a very long time. I want to jump in with both feet and just relish in the moment of whatever this is, but I know me.”

“Yeah. We know you, too. You can’t just be in the moment. I know.”

“All I can think about is the what ifs. What if I start to care... too much, and... God forbid I actually fall in love with him, which would be way too easy to do. He’s just starting his life. He’s about to graduate college, and I did that almost a decade ago. I guess I... Fifteen years separate us, and that is not nothing, right?”

“It’s not everything either. My Stevie was ten years older than me, and we were together for over thirty years before he passed away. When you’re two adults, and you fall in love – why does age matter?” Jacob looked at me with such compassion I wanted to throw myself into one of his gentle embraces. “Everyone gets so hung up on numbers that are actually pretty arbitrary. Look at Zane. He’s the same age as you but acts like he’s twenty, and you act like you’re my age. Maturity has nothing to do with age.”

“I guess that’s true. But he has dreams and ambitions, and I’m sure that he probably won’t find them here. He’ll leave because that’s what he should do. It’s what we did.”

“Like Zane says, honey, not everyone leaves. Maybe he would choose to stay in The Pleasant. Maybe he’d stay because he likes it, or maybe because of you. You’re not tied down to this place either, you know. If the two of you did fall in love, and he

wanted to leave – why couldn't you go with him?"

"I think the cart has been put before the horse," I smirked.

"Like I said, you act like you're sixty." Jacob chuckled.

"Will you do me a favor, boo? Will you just see where this leads? Do it for me if you won't do it for yourself. Seriously, I am tired of worrying about you bitch. Date the boy, and realize that it's not going to work for whatever reason you discover. But! You could also date the boy and allow yourself to fall for him if that's what happens. Don't overthink it and get all in your head about it. Just enjoy the time you have, and whatever happens – happens. Ok?" Zane slowly stood up and offered me his hand.

"I'll... try. It's just... I always think everyone will leave, anyway. They always do."

"Did. He did, and he was one person, David. Just because the devil did what he did, and I know it hurt, and it sucked. But hunky werewolf is not the same person who did that to you."

"Stop living in the past." Jacob snorted. "It's dead, and all you can do is learn from it – not relive it."

"But what if that's what happens? I don't think I could... I don't want to be broken again."

"That sounds like a sad life, honey. You can't be happy without a little pain and heartache. But you're... God, I can't believe I'm saying it... But you're the one putting the cart before the horse. You don't know what is going to happen. All we can do is grab onto whatever happiness and joy that life decides to throw us. Live in the now and let go of the past, and for fuck's sake, stop worrying about the future. It will be the present soon enough."

Jacob's words hit me like a ton of bricks. He was right, and I knew he was, but that didn't stop the pit in my stomach from churning with worry. I let Zane haul me up off the bench, and my knees popped as I stood.

"Well, that sounds ominous." Zane chuckled. "Shall we go to the bookstore?"

"Yes. Thank you. I guess I needed to hear that, and I will think about it all."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

I thought about it all night.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

“Can you just let me win one time, please?” I threw the controller down on the bed and collapsed. “It’s humiliating to come up short in every game.”

“Is your manhood hurt? Are you feeling castrated? Does someone need to be told they get a participation trophy for playing?” John teased me.

“Yes, a trophy would be nice,” I whined and kicked my feet against his footboard.

“Sorry, in this world, losing is just losing, big bro. Stop being a total crybaby. It’s harshing my vibe. If you had a gummy, maybe it would help you become one with the game. I mean, at this point, it’s just disgraceful whooping your ass every time.”

“Indeed, it is.” I rolled over and pulled John down by the shoulder so he was lying by my side. “This is nice. I missed this shit.”

“Me too. It’s good to have my twin back.”

“I know. I’m gonna hate when you leave for grad school next Fall.”

“Well, we’ll see. Is it weird that I like it here?”

“It’s weird that you barely leave your room, so... If you’re talking about your room – then yeah. It’s fucking weird.”

“Asshole, I’m talking about Point Pleasant. I’ve been taking walks so I can... you know, without having to hear Mom yell at me for smoking weed. Besides, it’s been really gorgeous outside. The town’s pretty cool. I even stopped and had a drink a time

or two at a place called Liberties. I liked it. This place is easy, and it's been a while since I've felt this loose and stress-free."

"There is no way that any of us are going to let you stay here, John. You've always wanted to get your master's and then your doctorate – I mean, it's your fucking destiny."

"Dreams change. Besides, I could get my master's degree not far from here and could come home a lot more often if I went to Denver. They have a pretty good program."

"Is it good enough for you, though?"

"You sound like Dad. It's not cute."

"So, the answer is no?"

"The answer is that maybe that's not the question we should be asking. Maybe the question is, what would make me happier? That answer could be a myriad of possibilities. Besides, I decided that getting a doctorate is something only my ego needs. I don't think my life has to have it, you know? There's more to me than just being smart. Maybe I'll start a twitch and make money from people watching me make my twin cry at Mario Cart."

"People would watch." I chuckled and rolled over on my side to stare at him. "Mom and Dad will lose it. Are you ready for that?"

"Mom already knows that I'm thinking about Denver and said she didn't care. I'm the one who's going to go into debt for my master. So, I think I'm also the one who gets to make all of the decisions about my life from now on. We'll see. I don't have to make a decision right now, but..."

“It’s getting close?”

“Yep.” He turned over and faced me. “What about you?”

“What about me, what?” I grinned. “I’m gonna stay remote. I’ll graduate this fall if I take summer classes, too. Maybe? Maybe I won’t take summer classes. Don’t know. I still have like sixteen hours, so...”

“Is it because you’ve met someone? You don’t seem to be in... You seem to like it here more.”

“What’s not to like?” I rolled back over. “I mean, I have no idea what the future holds or what I might or might not do with my life. I’ve never had the drive that you have. I do like it here a lot more than I ever expected. But... I like David, and I think he feels the same way, but... I don’t know, man.”

“I guess you don’t have to know right now. Neither one of us do.”

“Yeah... He’s pretty great, though. I can’t wait for you to meet him. You think Mom and Dad will freak out about the age thing?”

“I mean... they rarely freak out about anything that’s not related to our grades. I think they’ll just be happy for you. But Mom will be happy if either one of us, or both of us, decide to stick around.”

“Yeah.”

“Dude, your phone is buzzing,” John sighed. “Please either answer it or turn it off.”

“How the fuck did you even hear that?”

“I didn’t blast music from my stereo and stand in front of it like you did? Maybe it’s because I’m high and at one with the world?”

“Asshat.” I pushed up from the mattress and sprang to my feet on the hardwood floor. My phone was definitely buzzing over on his dresser. I picked it up and stared at the text message from Danny. “Holy shit!”

“What’s wrong?” John sat up and looked at me worriedly.

“Nothing – it’s just... Danny, one of my new friends, texted me about an opportunity that I... Did you know that Point Pleasant has a pro hockey team?”

“Yeah. The Pheasants suck.”

“Well, apparently, they need a new assistant therapist, and Danny is friendly with the coach. He’s told him about me and wondered if I would like to meet him.”

“That’s super cool. I mean, it’s a pro team, and that’s what you’ve always wanted, right?”

“Yeah... Dude, The Pleasant is fucking crazy.”

“Like I said, I like it around here. It’s easy.”

“It’s not real.” I quickly texted Danny back a thumbs-up emoji.

“It gets your foot in the door, and I bet it makes getting another job a hell of a lot easier after you graduate. Aren’t you tired of being a task bunny and making coffees?”

“I actually like working in the diner, but this is... I mean, of course, I want to meet

him. If I could get a job with the team, it would make everything else a whole lot easier.”

“To not leave, you mean? I get it.”

“I mean, maybe?” I shrugged. “I like David, and it would be nice to see what happens with us. If I have a job – a career here – it would make that a little easier if we did start to... He’s shy and complicated. But I’m already... I really like him.”

“Bro. You’ve gone on a few dates, and I know you’ve hung out and everything, but don’t tie yourself to this place just because of a maybe. Don’t put your life on hold just because you have a hard-on for someone. But a job like this could be a springboard for something else if that’s what you choose, right? Sounds like an easy decision.”

“Yeah... It should be, right? This is what I’ve always said I wanted.”

“Is it still what you want?”

“I mean... Can I make a career out of part-time coffee work and make over a hundred thou in a year? Cause if that is possible... Yeah, it’s still what I want.”

“Did you tell them that you’re on your way and to get a locker and a team jersey waiting for you?”

“I gave Danny the thumbs up. It’s chill.”

“Dude, call him and set up the meeting. This is not one of those moments when you stay chill. This is an opportunity and you need to leap.”

“I’ll call him in a bit. I just wanna... chill?” I grinned and sat back down beside him

on the bed. I slid my phone into my pocket so I could feel it vibrate if Danny tried to get back in touch with more info.

“I think it’s time that I met this guy who has you so tied up in knots. You do need my approval, you know. I’m not letting you make the same mistake again just because you found another older studious type.”

“Why do we both have a thing for nerds and older guys?”

“Less drama. Neither one of us really ever enjoyed the drama. Remember when you dated Becky in our Junior year? That was total drama.”

“She was total drama. That’s why we broke up after a month.”

“You broke up because you had a thing for her older brother. You’ve always been good like that and not led someone on just to stay in a relationship.”

“I eventually did fuck her older brother our senior year.”

“I remember. Becky walked in on you guys.”

“Yeah. That was also more Becky drama.”

“I want you to do what’s gonna make you happy. I think that’s all we can ever ask of ourselves and each other, Justin. Do the thing that will make you the most happy, and let the chips fall where they may.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too. Now stop being chill and go get on that sucky hockey team’s staff.”

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

This felt important, and it made my stomach clench in knots just at the sight of Justin standing in front of my door. A movie night with the man that was driving me crazy was like winning the lottery. Justin looking at me the way he did, felt like winning the lottery. Him kissing me felt like flying. The thought of letting this progress – terrified me in ways I had never known.

He was not the devil of my past, but that didn't mean he couldn't hurt me just as badly. It wasn't fair to either one of us – I knew that. But I was scared of what could happen.

Live in the moment – that's what my friends told me to do, and that's why I said yes to him coming over for what could possibly be the most intimate moments of my life over the last fifteen years.

All of these thoughts flew around in my mind as he grinned at me, and he wasn't even through the door yet.

“You are gonna invite me in, right?”

“Oh! Yeah – of course.” I stepped back and left the door open. Liza barked happily as she ran up to him and flopped herself down at his feet. “Looks like she's happy to see you.”

“Well, I hope her father is, too.” He bent down and scratched her belly. “Who's a good girl, Liza? You are! Yes, you are!” He looked up at me with the happiest of grins. “Hi, Liza's daddy.”

“Hi, Justin.” I felt the blush betray my feelings.

He slowly stood up and stepped over to me. One of his hands shut the door, and the other wrapped around my waist. “I think we can say hi better than that, don’t you?”

I was flying once again as Justin’s tongue sweetly slid against my own, and I felt my body weight shift as he tightly pulled me into him. I could swoon. That would be embarrassing. But it was a strong possibility as this young, hot man took whatever I was willing to give him. By now – it was almost impossible not to give him anything he wanted – and that was just as scary as the rest of it.

“You... smell... very nice...” he managed to say between kisses.

“It’s... soap...”

He chuckled into my mouth and slowly broke away from me. “Soap, huh? You cleaned good for Daddy?” The look on his face made me want to fall to my knees in front of him right now.

“Daddy? Are you Daddy?” I inhaled slowly as his eyes bore into mine.

“Daddy is a state of being, and I give big daddy energy, don’t you think?” I almost collapsed when he winked at me.

“Oh – Jesus,” I moaned.

“What? You like that? I think you should give Daddy another kiss,” he teased, and before I could answer, I was back in his arms with my leg thrown around his waist and my hands pulling the back of his hair while he kissed me passionately. I was coming unglued from my reality in his arms – his tongue pressed into my mouth – his hand sliding down my back and grasping my ass.

Yeah...

I lost my balance.

“Did I make you faint?” His warm laugh sent ripples of goosebumps across my body.

“Maybe?” I steadied myself and slowly took a step back, no longer trusting my instincts in his presence.

“Maybe what?” His dark eyes narrowed as he stared down at me. “Say it, David.”

“Maybe... Daddy?” I felt foolish even saying it out loud. This boy could almost be my son – well, biologically, I was fifteen when he was born, so... I could have been. I’d just have been a very young daddy. He would have been a high school whoops.

“You have no idea how that makes me,” his whispered voice told me everything I needed to know.

“Ok...” I forced my body to turn away from his gaze and felt him follow me. Jesus! Somehow, just his mere presence today felt so large and important that he filled the room, and I wanted to wallow in this feeling. “So, I pulled out a couple of movies. Your choice.”

I walked quickly over to the kitchen and pulled down the air popper from the cabinet. “I thought you might like some popcorn?”

“If you want some.” He walked over and looked at the DVDs I had laid out in front of my television console. “You still watch your DVDs? That’s so sweet. I don’t think I’ve done anything but stream for years now.”

“Old habits. I like owning my stuff and being able to see it. I rent some movies every

now and then from Apple, but I prefer to be able to see my possessions.” I laughed happily as I poured some kernels into the top. “You should see my CD collection.”

“Do you still have a CD player?”

“I do.” I turned the popper on and walked over to the large console, which sat against a wall. “I don’t listen to them very much. Not anymore, really. But every now and then, I do.” I opened the large console and grinned. “Turntable, CD player, and even a cassette player, and it all still works perfectly.”

“Where do you keep your music?” He glanced around.

I opened up the bottom of the console. “Records and my favorite CDs are stored down here, and I have boxes hidden in the closet. I think I still have almost every CD I’ve ever bought.”

“You have a bit of a Taylor Swift thing, huh? Are you a Swiftie?”

“I mean...” I huffed. “She’s like the next Joni Mitchell in terms of songwriting, I guess. Her music over the last few years has been great. So...”

“You are totally a Swiftie,” he teased. “I like her a lot too.”

“What kind of music do you like?”

“All kinds, actually. I grew up with my parents listening to 80’s music, and we... John and I learned to love it. But I’ve always been partial to Vampire Weekend and Beaches. Also, MGMT was pretty cool. I don’t listen to that much music right now, though. But I used to keep my headphones on most of the time when I was younger. Now... I guess I just haven’t taken the time to really let myself relax like I used to. If it’s not on the radio, I probably haven’t heard too much newer music. John’s the same

way now. He lives in a video game.”

“I still have a CD player in my car, so... I keep a few in there that I want to listen to the most. The Pleasant doesn’t allow for a lot of time on the road. Traffic may have gotten worse, but it’s still just small-town traffic. Thank God the tourists don’t travel here by car that much, or it would be really bad.”

“Tell me what you love the most about living here. It’s... surprisingly grown on me.”

“Well, I was born here, so it’s always felt like home. You know, like a comfy sweater that you can’t get rid of even though it has a hole in the sleeve. The Pleasant is where I’ve always felt the most comfortable, and even though my family doesn’t live here anymore – this is still the place I would rather be. The people are great, and it’s just easy and pretty. I love winter here more than anything else.”

“Do you miss living in Denver?”

“Oh, God, no. Talk about bad traffic. My commute every day was almost an hour because I lived on the other side of town, and... It was crowded, and even though there were some nice people, it was... No, I don’t miss it and wouldn’t ever want to move back. I’m home, at least, for now.”

“Would you ever decide to... I guess, leave The Pleasant if there was a real reason to?”

“I don’t know. Maybe? I guess it would depend on the reason.”

“How about selling your DVDs and going strictly digital?”

“Bite your tongue.”

“I’d rather bite yours.”

“I’d... uh... let you.” Fire exploded onto my face.

“You would, huh? I’m going to take you up on that.”

“Ok.” I stepped towards him.

“Ok, what?” His voice hardened and deepened as he winked at me.

“Are you really going to make me say daddy again?”

“Trust me – Tonight, I plan on making you say daddy a lot.”

“Shit!” The sound of popping had stopped, and I ran back over to the kitchen and quickly salted the kernels. Making popcorn was part of the perfect movie experience, and it had to be made exactly right, or the whole thing was ruined. Every kernel needed the right amount of salt. There was a rhythm to it. Salt, then shake the bowl, making sure to toss a little up so the bottom kernels also get covered.

I heard Justin laugh as he picked up a DVD. “Pretty in Pink? I don’t think I’ve ever seen this.”

“Then you, my friend, are in for a treat. It’s the perfect date night film.”

“I’m not so sure that I’m going to be able to focus on the movie very well.”

“Why not?”

He set the movie down and turned back to me. “Because there is a very handsome man who will be sitting just a few inches away, and I don’t think I’ll be able to stop

touching him.” He turned and sat down right in the middle of the couch.

“A man old enough to be your daddy.”

“A very young daddy.” Justin leaned back on the couch and put his hands behind his head. “But you don’t really give daddy energy.”

“Oh, and you do?”

He flexed his arms and chuckled. “I think that’s fairly obvious, don’t you? Now be daddy’s good boy and come sit down with that fucking popcorn. We have a movie to watch while I let your hands roam anywhere they want.”

“You are killing me – and here I thought you were coming on strong before.”

“I decided why the hell not. I know what I want, and I think you do too.”

“I do.” I was fucking horny that I thought I might explode. It had been so long since I... let myself feel anything. I walked in and set the popcorn down on the table.

“You do, huh? Then why are we watching a movie?”

“I like movies, and I think you will love this one.”

“Hmm... Do you have a TV up in your bedroom?”

“Yes, but not a DVD player.”

“That would be a problem, I guess. If we had to watch a movie. We could just turn on the Weather Channel. I won’t be paying attention to the screen anyway.” He stood up and gently grabbed the front of my shirt.

“Do you want to forget the movie?”

“What movie?” He nipped at my chin.

“I should make you suffer.” I moaned as he kissed my neck.

“My suffering may be bad, but I think you have as big of an itch to scratch as I do.” He fucking licked the side of my face, and my knees wobbled.

“I’m sure my itch isn’t as big as yours.” I managed to say as I tried to catch my breath.

“Lucky for you, I have plenty of itch for both of us.” He took my hand in his and moved it down his torso to his cock. His hard and thick cock that was straining to break free from the jeans it was stuck in.

“Oh, God...” I felt my lungs empty as I stood there with what had to be the most lustful look in all of creation plastered on my face. “We can... uh... watch the movie... uh... some other time.”

“Yeah?” He smirked, and I had to keep my feet on the ground as I squeezed his cock through his jeans.

“Yeah.”

“Fuck!” Before I knew what was happening, he threw me over his shoulder and carried me up the stairs. He started to turn right, and I slapped his ass.

“Not that way. That way!” He turned, found my bedroom, and dropped me on the bed.

“Clothes – off – fucking now.” He growled, and I started ripping my clothes off as fast as I could. My shoes and shirt were expelled from my body, and I unbuttoned my pants.

He stood there and watched me as I undressed, a smirk on his face.

“What?”

“I like it when my good boy does exactly what I say.”

“Are you just gonna stand there?”

“Yes. I am gonna stand here until those pants are completely off.”

“You’re making me feel very vulnerable being the only naked person here.”

“You’re not naked yet. As soon as you are, I’ll take mine off, too. Now get those fucking pants off, boy.” He sounded so husky and rough that I did exactly what I was told and quickly covered my hard cock with my hands.

“Hand away. I want to look at you.”

I stared back at him, and he crossed his arms. I slowly pulled my hands away and lay there nude and open for him to see.

“Nice.” He rubbed his cock through his jeans. “I love the hair on your chest. So fucking hot, baby.”

“I feel fat.”

“Not fat. Just a little belly and I have to admit that it does things to me. You wanna

do things to me?”

I nodded.

“You’re gonna be good for Daddy, aren’t you, and do what I say?”

“You’re really doubling down on this role-play, huh?” I giggled, and he frowned. I gulped.

“I said you’re gonna be good for Daddy, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Daddy?”

He chuckled. “I told you that I give off big daddy energy. There’s just something about you that makes me wanna take care of you, my little otter pup.”

I have no idea why I did it. I put my hands behind my head and stifled the giggle that threatened to explode. But the way he was looking at me was so fucking hot I couldn’t stop myself. I needed to please him, and I had never wanted anyone so bad in my life – ever as I did him right now.

“Yes, Daddy. All I want is to please you.”

“All I want is to make you happy, baby. You want Daddy to make you happy?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

He slowly pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it to the ground. “Slowly stroke your cock, babe. Let me watch you.”

I didn’t have to be told twice. My cock was throbbing, and all it wanted was to be

touched. I moaned as I slowly stroked myself. “Like this?”

“Fuck. Just like that.” He rubbed his hands over his smooth pecs and slid his other hand down his pants. “Yeah, stroke your cock and show me how much you want me. You do want me, right?”

“I’m about to jump on top of you at any moment.” I wheezed as my other hand pulled gently at my balls.

“You want me to take my pants off, or do you just want to lay there and watch me – watch you.” He brought up his arm and flexed as he grinned, knowing full well what he was doing to me.

“I haven’t... I could come at any minute.”

“No. You won’t come. Not until I tell you to.” He grunted as he flexed his pecs and rubbed his crotch. “Now, what do you want?”

“I want to see you – all of you.”

“You wanna see my cock? You want to touch it?”

“Please,” I begged, throwing away all sense of decorum. He had made me come completely undone without even touching me.

“Why don’t you come over here and take them off for me.” He wiggled his finger at me.

I crawled off the bed and quickly dropped to my knees in front of him. My hand reached up and slid up his hard torso. His muscles had muscles, and I couldn’t believe that he was here with me – that I was here with him – in this way instead of

helping him with his IT needs. People like him didn't choose people like me. But here he was. My hand was on his hard washboard abs, and I gently felt the ridges as he flexed his torso for me to explore. He knew what he was doing, and what it was doing to me – for me.

“Pop the button on my jeans, boy. But don't take them off yet.”

I did as I was told. I had no idea that I would be so into this kind of role-play. If he wanted me to call him daddy, I would scream it if it pleased him.

“Do you want to see how hard I am? Put your mouth on it.”

I opened my mouth and pressed it against his thick shaft that was straining against the fabric. I mouthed it, and he ran his fingers through my hair. “That's nice... Fuck! Do you want this jock dick? How bad do you want it? I could show you how badly I want you if you agree. Do you want this cock, David?”

“I have never wanted anything more than I do your cock, Justin.”

“Daddy.”

“Daddy.”

“Unzip me.”

I didn't need to be told twice. I unzipped his pants to discover that he was not wearing any underwear. His thick brown shaft slowly unfurled from the binding and fell free as I pushed the fabric out of the way. It was an uncut monster, and I groaned with need as I stared at it only a couple of inches from my face.

“Open your mouth, boy.”

I left my mouth gaping wide and stuck out my tongue as I waited for what would come next. I could already taste it, and it was still standing there throbbing in front of me as he made it bounce with his ab muscles.

“I went to the gym today and got very, very sweaty. I almost didn’t shower, thinking that you might like that. Would you have liked that, David? Me all sweaty and tangy from my workout?”

“Yes,” I moaned.

“I showered. But next time, I won’t. I’ll come straight to you and let you lick the funk off my cock. God, you have a nice mouth.” He picked his shaft up in his hand and stroked it. “Just the tip for now. Suck on my... fuck...” He exhaled sharply as I tasted him for the first time. I sucked on his swollen glans and rolled his head around on my tongue as I swiped at it, sucking it like a lollipop. “My boy is a fucking cocksucker. That’s right... Fuck, baby. That feels so good.”

I had to stop myself from saying thank you, Daddy, because my mouth was full, and good boys don’t talk with a mouthful of cock. I slurped on his head and sucked it like I was trying to get the bone marrow from it. It was so thick and veiny with a head that tapered. I chewed gently on his foreskin, and he pressed gently on the back of my head.

I took this as a sign that I could go further, and I let his head press over my tongue and slowly slid down his rock-hard shaft. God, the smell of him made me crazy. He smelled clean and fresh yet so much like a man that I took all of his thick meat in my mouth, nuzzled my nose into his trimmed pubic hair, and inhaled as much as I could, taking his scent in.

He rocked his hips. “Fuck, baby... yeah, that’s it. So hot and wet. Suck me, David.”

I did as I was told and slowly slid my mouth up and down his pole as I licked at his glans with every ascent. His moans told me that I was doing it like he wanted, and soon, his hands were on the back of my head as he slowly thrust into me. I tightened my lips and let him use me for his pleasure and reveled in each thrust of this beautiful man who had chosen to be here with me.

He grasped my chin in his hands and slowly pulled out of my wanting mouth that watered with a need for him.

“David... I mean, boy, I... Fuck you can suck a dick.” He breathed heavily.

“Years of practice.” I giggled. “It’s so big, Daddy.” I giggled.

“I thought you might like that, but I’m having a hard time keeping it up.”

“Seems hard as shit to me.” I wrapped my hand around it and squeezed.

“Oh... Not that. I was rock-hard before I even walked into your house. I mean the daddy thing. It’s not my usual, but... Something told me that you’d like it.”

“I don’t hate it. I would have also loved you showing up in a football uniform, but maybe next time?”

“I still have it.” He chuckled. “I even have my pads and helmet somewhere. You’d like to fuck a jock?”

“My entire life.”

“Can I please...” He hauled me off my knees and pushed me gently onto the bed. “Cock or ass? Hmm... Choices.”

“As much as I’d love to watch you suck my dick right now – if you don’t stick that inside me, I am going to scream like a little baby – Daddy.”

“Oh, you’ve totally asked for this, boy.” He growled as I flipped over and offered myself to him. “Nice or rough? Your choice.”

He slapped my ass playfully, and I moaned. He spread my cheeks apart, and I almost fainted when I felt his breath against my hole – then his tongue. No one, and I mean no one, had ever done this to me before, and I was almost forty years old. Eating ass was gross, the devil would say. Well, Justin seemed to feel very differently about it.

“Rough but nice?” I managed to whisper, and I heard him chuckle. The vibrations ran through my hole. My cock throbbed, but I was scared to touch it – I could come at any moment. I was so fucking engorged.

His tongue lapped at my hole and pressed inside. I almost crawled off the bed. His breath and tongue were doing something incredibly special to me back there, and I balled up the covers in my fist. Tongue and a finger pressed so gently.

“Lube? Please tell me that you have lube.”

“Bottom drawer where everyone keeps it.”

He laughed as I heard the drawer slide open and shut once again. The cold feel of the lube as it trickled onto my hole, and his finger pressed it gently inside. “I had brought a condom just in case, but I see that you bought a brand-new box. Expecting something, were we?”

“Just in case.”

“Maybe I should make you wait.”

“Oh, my God, Daddy, please!” I begged as his finger slid in further.

“You’re very tight.”

“It’s been a while, so... You’re pretty huge, but I’ll...” Two fingers. “manage. God, even your fingers are big.” I groaned.

“I’ll be gentle yet rough.” He bent down and kissed the back of my neck as he finger-banged me. “You ready?”

“Please, Justin. I fucking want you so bad.”

“Really? I could just keep doing this for a while and make you wait.”

“Asshole. Fuck me, Goddammit.”

“Language...” He chuckled as I felt his fingers withdraw. “Reach back and hold yourself open for me. I want to see your hole.” He ripped the condom open and grunted as he put it on.

I pulled my cheeks apart and felt the tip of his cock press against it. Then, pierce it as the tip slowly went inside. It burned, and I lost myself in the feeling of this fucking sexy beast wanting me – wanting to be here naked with me as he slid his cock into my ass. It was unimaginable if you had asked me two weeks ago or when I almost killed him with my car.

“Justin Lautner... Fuck...” I moaned.

“Did you just call me Justin Lautner?”

“Let me have this fantasy.”

“If you are imagining Taylor Lautner right now, you need to be punished.”

“I have been very, very bad, Justin... Daddy... please.”

“Wow! How much can you beg? Inch by inch? Tell me?”

“Please fuck me! Fuck... You are so big.” I panted. “Please more...”

“I had no idea you were going to be a big old cock slut. I like this side of you. More?”

“Fuck! Yes... more.”

Inch by inch, he slid into me as I begged him to fill me up, and he did. My ass felt like it was about to explode with the size of him. I felt like he would never get the whole thing in, or I wouldn't be able to take it, but eventually, as I demanded more, over and over, I felt his pubes brush against my ass cheek. “Fuck... Is that it?”

“Eight inches of Daddy's dick,” he chuckled as he rotated his hips.

“God, you feel so... huge and... so fucking good.”

“You are so tight, babe. It's like an iron grip on my cock.”

I pushed my ass against him. And ground into him.

“You want this that bad? You are a little monster.” He slowly pulled back, and I moaned as he pushed back in.

“Please, Daddy... Justin... whoever the fuck you are – fuck me.”

“You can call me Taylor. I had a girlfriend who used to... whatever.”

Holy hell!

I begged, and he unleashed hell on my ass.

His hands pressed into my lower back, and the sounds of his hips slapping onto my ass was like music to my ears. I met him thrust for thrust, and his grunts and moans made me throw my head back and wail with joy as I took all of him into me – thrust after thrust.

He pummeled into me just as rough as I craved and gentle enough to still be enjoyable. I had a darker side that he had unlocked with his role-play, and I was greedy. I wanted it all, and I wanted all of him.

“Flip!” I demanded. “Let me on top.”

“Your wish is my command.” He pulled out and laid down on the bed. I instantly pounced and crawled up on top of him. I reached back and grabbed his cock and held it as I slid myself down his length and felt him stretch me open as I took him all the way inside. I rode him hard and fast, bending down to kiss his nipple, lick his armpit, and kiss him as he writhed under me.

“Fuck... so much cock...”

“So fucking tight...”

I rode him until he held me in place and pistoned into me fast and hard. My cock sprayed all over his chest, and I threw my head back and howled at the power of my orgasm.

“Fuck... I’m...” I jumped off him and ripped the condom from his cock, and he sprayed my face before I could take his cock back inside me. I licked the cum from

his head and sucked the rest of it into my mouth, savoring the taste of him – so tangy and sweet. Of course, it was.

“That was... Fuck you are a Goddamn tiger.”

“Baby likes to please Daddy.” I crawled up to him and kissed him passionately as he grabbed my head and slid his tongue inside my mouth.

“I am a messy bitch.” He laughed.

I giggled as I fell down beside him, and he took me in his arms. “This was much better than a movie and popcorn.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

“That was... I’m not sure that I can walk.” He chuckled and the sound of his easy going laughter made me smile.

“It was for me, too. I know I made you call me Daddy, but maybe it should be the other way around. You’re a bossy little bottom.”

“Was that... ok? Honestly, I didn’t even know I had that in me.”

“Well, you did have a lot in you.”

“I was afraid it might be too much in me, but I... managed.”

“David, you did more than manage. I... That was everything and more than I could have ever expected. Are you getting in your head about this?”

“No... I... Maybe? You’re just hot and young and very hot. I didn’t want you to get bored.”

I barked a quick laugh and wrapped my arm around him, pulling him tighter against me. “Bored? I was fighting to keep up. That was... Don’t worry about me being bored while we’re fucking, David. That won’t happen. All you need to be is exactly who you are. It’s you I like – not a different you, ok?”

“Ok... I just wanted to impress you.”

“Well, my abs are burning from that workout, so consider me impressed.”

“I think I’d like a cocktail. Doesn’t a bourbon sound great right about now?”

“I’d never say no to a drink. I’m a frat boy, remember?”

“Trust me – that is information I would never forget. It makes you even hotter, somehow.”

“Hot, huh?”

“You are like fire.”

“Keep talking like that, and we won’t need that drink.”

“I think you might be the death of me.”

“Well, at least you would die happy.”

“I... I knew that we would probably, but... I mean, it’s just not the kind of thing that happens to me, you know. Boys like you don’t even usually give me a glance.”

“They haven’t gotten to know you, and trust me, I glanced as soon as I met you. I mean, I love dogs and everything, but it was the man with the leash that made me say hello. I wish you could see yourself in the way I do.”

“I... Ok! A drink.” He slowly crawled away and sat up on the edge of the bed. I reached over and let my fingers trace down his spine. He shuddered and looked back at me. “You really are going to be the death of me. I’m not twenty-two.”

“Neither am I.” I rolled over and lay on my back with my hands behind my head.

He stood up and turned around. “Bulging your biceps is only helping my case. God...

Look at you.”

“Look at you. Your ass is perfect. All that dog walking has paid off.” My cock slowly started hardening. His mouth slowly dropped open.

“See? Only a man as young as you can get a hard-on so fast.”

“It’s just going to get harder if you stand there naked and keep looking at me. I have to decide exactly where I am sticking this when you get back – unless you decide to just crawl back in bed.”

“Oh, I definitely need a drink first. But after, I... I bet I could take care of that for you.”

“Take care of what?”

“Are you really going to make me say it?”

“Take care of what, boy?”

“Your... dick, sir.”

“Daddy thinks that is a great idea.”

“Daddy needs to stop calling himself daddy!” He chuckled and turned as he walked a little funny from the room. “My legs really are jelly from daddy’s big cock.” I heard him giggle from the hallway.

“You just wait!” I grinned as I imagined all the positions I wanted to see him in. Damn, I hadn’t been lying to him. That was one of the most amazing fucks I had ever...

David's scream made me jump off the bed like a cat as I ran to the door and into the hallway. Lying at the bottom of the stairs was my sweet David, and I took them two at a time as I ran down them to get to him. He was on his side and holding his foot.

"Fuuuuuck!"

"What happened?"

"I... my ankle rolled a couple of stairs up, and I... Fuck! Is it broken?"

I took it gingerly in my hands, and his wince told me that it was at least a very bad sprain or a hairline fracture. "It's still facing the right way."

"Not helping. Isn't your major sports injuries?"

"I would need an X-ray to be sure, but it doesn't look like a bad break to me. But we need to get you to the hospital. Did you hit anything else?"

"My body... My shoulder is sore, but... I might have hit my head a little, too. I don't know. It happened, so... Just bam, and I was on the floor. The floor came at me really fast. My whole body hurts."

"Alright, if you might have hit your head, I think we need to call an ambulance. I don't want to get you on your feet if it really is broken, David."

"I thought you said it didn't look broken."

"I said I needed an X-ray. Do not argue with me. I'm calling an ambulance and..."

"Oh my God! Do you know what the neighbors are going to say?"

“That you have a very handsome boyfriend?”

“Boy being the key word. I’m gonna die.”

“You are not...”

“Of embarrassment. I’m fucking naked with an ass full of lube. Jesus Christ! Zane will never let me forget this. It’s gonna be in the paper.”

“It’s not gonna be in the... Well, maybe? But not the lube part, David. Just wait a second, ok? You gonna be ok?”

“Where are you going? Wait! Maybe you should leave, and then I can call the... I’m naked! Oh, Jesus Christ. Liza, no!” Liza licked at his face as he tightened into his fetal position. “Stop it.”

“Liza! No, girl.” I laughed as I bent down and, picked her up, and ran back up the stairs to grab what I needed. I rifled through his drawers and found a pair of underwear, sweatpants, and a T-shirt. I dumped Liza on the bed, and she immediately jumped off and ran back downstairs. I could hear David begging her to stop and chuckled as I grabbed a washcloth and wet it.

“Liza, please, baby. You’re not... I know you love me, but... Oh crap!”

I walked back downstairs with my own clothes and David’s piled in my arms. Liza was sitting on David’s hip, and he looked like he was about to pass out.

“Liza,” I grinned and carried her over to the couch. “Stay, girl.” I held out my hand as I had seen other dog owners do, and she sat down grumpily. “Good girl.”

“What are you doing?”

“Before I call the ambulance, I want to make you as presentable as possible, ok?” I held up the washcloth and looked at him as seriously as I could. “Do not argue.”

“You’re gonna... what? Oh, God – I am mortified!”

“I can at least wash any signs of... uh... Just be quiet, or I’m gonna spank you.”

“You are now taking this daddy thing too far.” He whined as I bent down behind him and spread his ass cheeks. I wiped at it gently and he winced as I gently moved him to get him clean.

“I really don’t think they would spread your ass cheeks for a sprained ankle, but... You are as clean as I can get you. Now, let’s try to put some clothes on. This is probably gonna hurt, David.”

“It’s already hurting. I’m such a baby. Jesus, you just gave me a sponge bath like I’m your old grandfather.”

“Stop whining. Can we get back to the part where you called me your boyfriend?”

“Are you really gonna talk about semantics right now?”

“I kind of liked it. This is gonna...” I carefully pulled the leg opening over his swollen foot and ankle. It was actually swelling pretty good, and he would definitely need an X-ray. He inhaled and bit his bottom lip as I finally got both feet through.

“I’m gonna pull them up, but you’re going to have to help me a little, ok?”

“Ok – I’ll try, it...”

“I know it hurts, baby.”

“Oh, God... baby.” He burst into tears.

“Not that kind of baby, you moron. Baby as in a term of affection. I... Just scream if you need to, but I’m almost...” He arched his back and grunted in pain as I got his underwear up, and even though they were a little twisted – they were on. “Sweat pants now?”

“I... I don’t think I can.”

“Yes, you can. You would be just as embarrassed in your underwear, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes... I... Thank you, Justin. I... I’m sorry I...”

“Had a complete accident? That’s not really your fault. You said you weren’t sure you could walk, and now we know the truth. I fucked it out of you.” I tried to make him laugh so I could get his foot through. I knew this wasn’t going to be as easy as the underwear was, and it was going to hurt.

“Ow! Fuck... Ow!” He went stiff, and I realized this was going to be like ripping a band-aid off. The slower and more careful I did it, the more it hurt him.

“Take a deep breath, and...” I quickly pulled the pants over his foot, and he squirmed and burst into tears. “Sorry, baby.”

“Ok... I know, and... I liked that baby much better.”

“Did you? Ok, I have to get these pants all the way up. Can you arch your... Good!” I quickly pulled his pants up and handed him his T-shirt. “Put that on, and I am calling the ambulance now.”

Liza jumped off the couch and ran over to her daddy and licked his face.

“Liza, I”m... Good girl. Who’s daddy’s good girl, huh?” David slowly sat up and winced as gravity hit his ankle. He quickly laid back down and Liza curled up by his face. “Good girl... Justin?”

“Hi, we need an ambulance at... Fuck. What’s your house number?”

“7453. Unit 2”

“Yes, we need an ambulance at 7453 Mountain View Lane – unit number 2.”

“Justin?”

“He fell down the stairs and might have broken his ankle. It’s already pretty swollen, and...”

“Thank you. No, I have not moved him.”

“Thank you.”

“Justin?”

“Yes, David.”

“You stayed?”

“Of course I did.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

Being wheeled out on a gurney for all your neighbors to see as your hot new boyfriend walks behind and climbs into the ambulance is not quite as humiliating as I thought it would be. In a town like The Pleasant, an ambulance on your street brings everyone out to see what's happening. We all know each other, and if something is wrong – everyone wants to know. Plus, that gives us something to gossip about later.

I was sure that Justin's mere presence with me would give this street something to talk about for weeks. What would Justin's parents think? I wasn't the kind of guy that they were probably hoping he would introduce to them one day. I was about ten years too old – at least.

Thankfully, if they were there, I didn't notice. I didn't notice anyone because of the excruciating pain I was in.

I hate going to the emergency room. Normally, whenever I've gone in the past, I have wound up waiting for hours to be seen. But apparently, when you're brought in by ambulance, you go right into a room. It's like Doris Day parking in those old Rock Hudson movies. She always managed to snag a spot right in front of the door. Lucky me.

Before I could even believe it, my vitals were being taken, and a nurse was giving me the once-over. I cursed as she touched the parts of me that hurt – that was just about all of me.

It wasn't long before the doctor came in and winced when he saw my ankle. "That's a beaut!"

A ‘beaut’ he called the monstrosity that once used to be my ankle. It was now swollen and already splotchy with the bruise that would eventually turn dark. I could barely look at it, and the doctor seemed to want to give it a sash and a crown- hell, why not a title? Miss Bruised Point Pleasant a contestant on the next season of Drag Race.

“This is gonna hurt.” He touched my foot and I almost jumped off the uncomfortable bed. “Yeah... We’re gonna take you down to X-ray and check that out. If I had to take a guess, I’d say at least a hairline fracture. But we want to make sure what damage your fall caused. The paperwork said you fell down a couple stairs. Are you sore anywhere else?”

“I might have hit my head.”

He spent a few minutes feeling around and moving the other parts of my body. I winced when he rotated my shoulder, and he nodded. “What?” I asked quickly.

“I think you were very lucky. You banged yourself up pretty good, but it looks like the ankle took the brunt of the injury. As for your head, let’s see.” He shined a small flashlight into my eyes. “It looks fine. Who’s the current president?”

“Biden.”

“What’s your wife’s name?”

“I don’t have a wife.”

“What do you have?”

“I might have a boyfriend?”

“What’s his name?”

“Justin.”

“That’s a good name. What’s your name?”

“David.”

“I think you’re fine.” He placed his hands on my scalp and pressed gently. “No contusions or swelling. Your neck seems fine, too. Let’s get that X-ray out of the way and see what we need to do for you.” With that, he walked out of the room, and a few minutes later, a young man came and wheeled me down to the X-ray machine. It was not a fun experience. However, this was much better than any experience I ever had in a hospital before, so I must have been winning. The ones in Denver were atrocious.

Finding out that I did indeed have a stress fracture and would require a boot for the next six to eight weeks, where I couldn’t put any weight on it, was also not fun. A couple of hours later, I was wheeled out with a thick black support boot and a long list of things to do – and things I could not do. My life was about to get very difficult.

Justin stood as he saw me, and I noticed that he had a pink teddy bear in his hand. He smiled, and I melted into my wheelchair. This was not the way that a new... whatever this was – should go.

“I was about to storm the barricades. But Priscilla over there,” he waved at a woman with grey hair and thin lips. She grinned and waved back at him. “Well, she kept me informed. Broken, huh? I was afraid of that. Are you going to have to have surgery?”

“No, he was very lucky.” Hell, I had forgotten that there was a nurse behind me, even if she was the one pushing me. “Are you going to be his caregiver?”

I gasped. “No, he...”

“Yes. If he needs one. Let me guess, he can’t put any weight on his foot, right?” Justin gave me the teddy bear, and I held it tightly against my chest.

“Correct. It’s a hairline, but we want to make sure it heals and doesn’t grow. He needs to ice and elevate. It’s all right here.” She handed him my file. “You listen to your son, ok?”

Justin laughed. “Oh, I’m not his...”

“Just fucking push me down a larger flight of stairs, please.” I groaned and sunk into the chair, feeling absolutely humiliated.

“He calls me daddy,” Justin winked.

“Oh! Well, isn’t he lucky?” She giggled. “If it gets any worse, bring him back in. He should follow up with his primary doctor no more than two weeks from now. If you will sign this release over at the window, you can take him home.”

“Don’t mind me. I’m just gonna sit here and hope I die.”

“Shush, you. Don’t move. Lucky for you, John brought my car over while you were in emergency, so you have a ride home that doesn’t have flashing lights.” He winked and walked over to the window, where he pointed at me. A few minutes later, he came back, and they wheeled me outside. Justin ran ahead to get his car and quickly drove up in his station wagon. If the neighbors didn’t get a good looky-loo when they wheeled me out to the ambulance, they would get a second chance when Justin pulled up in front of my house and helped me get inside.

Why was I so embarrassed about this? When the very strong Tylenol they gave me

wore off, I would have to think about this. Was it our difference in age – or was it that everyone would wonder why he would ever choose someone like me? Maybe it was both? Maybe this fucking medicine would start making the pain would go away? Everything from my foot to my head seemed to throb with every crack on the cement as the wheelchair rolled me to Justin's car.

“Your chariot awaits.” Justin opened the passenger door and scooted the seat back as far as it would go. “How are we going to get him inside?”

“Here's his crutches,” the nurse or orderly – whoever the masochist was that was pushing me handed them to Justin who opened his trunk and threw them inside. “I'm gonna wheel you right beside the car, ok?”

Great, now he was talking to me like I was a fucking child. If I wasn't in so much pain... But I was.

“Now, don't put any weight on that foot. Just keep it lifted and I'm gonna help you up and over.”

“Can I help?” Justin offered.

“You can help steady him, but because he was discharged from an emergency, I will need to help him get out of the wheelchair.”

“He is right here – and he is already hurting, so get me the fuck up and push me into the fucking seat, please,” I snapped.

“Ooh!” Justin laughed. “Baby has fangs. Hang tight, David. This is probably gonna hurt.”

The orderly gently took my feet off the footholds and put his hands under my arms.

“I’m gonna lift, and you just stand on the one foot and we will get you into the car as quickly as possible.”

Justin reached out, and I took his hand. The orderly was strong, but the pain in my body made me wince as he hauled my ass out of the wheelchair. “Fuck! Ouch!”

“Ok. You’re right by the door. Reach out and put your hands on the side, and we will lower you down.”

Justin’s eyes widened. “Hold on. I have an idea.” He ran away. I tried to see where he was going, but... “Ok, I’m ready.”

Justin was in the car, and I peered down to see him wink at me with his arms out. The orderly helped lower me with his hands digging into my underarms. I gasped as Justin’s hands caught my ass and held me firmly. Instead of falling – my hunky, big biceped daddy was guiding and actually lowering me down into the seat so I didn’t jar myself.

What did I have to fear about people seeing us together? He was sweet and strong and willing to help me – wanting to, even. My ass hit the seat, and it did hurt, but it wasn’t as jarring as it would have been if Justin hadn’t been here.

“Thank you,” I said to both of them, but mainly to Justin. He reached over and put his hand on my knee.

“You ready to go home?”

“How the hell are you gonna get me out of this fucking car?”

“Don’t worry, babe. I have plans.”

He held my hand all the way back to our street, literally picking me up, carrying me up the stairs, and gently laying me down on the couch. He then ran out and got my crutches, setting them at the foot of the sofa while Liza jumped up and curled beside me, licking my face.

“Good girl. Did you miss your daddy?”

“Looks like she did. Are you comfortable?”

“Could Liza get a job in IT?” I couldn’t stop the snark; I was throbbing all over. “I hurt.”

“Those pills will help dull the edge, David, but it’s not going to take it all away. You need a little more of them in your system, babe.”

“Babe? I like that more than I should.”

“You’ll get used to it. I think it fits you quite nicely.” He bent down and kissed my forehead. “I’m gonna go and grab some things from my house and tell Mom where I’m going to be, ok? I’ll be gone about an hour tops. Do you need me to help you do anything before I leave?”

“I’m just gonna lay here and suffer.”

“I had no idea you were such a drama queen.”

“You know it might be better if you have someone come over just in case you need a glass of water or to go to the bathroom.”

“I’m fine.”

“I insist. You are to not get up for any reason unless you have someone who can help you.”

“Where’s my cell phone? I think I had it in my hands when I fell naked down the stairs. Maybe I... It could be up in the bedroom still, I...”

“I know where it is.” He walked somewhere else. I couldn’t see over the fucking couch. He returned with the phone in his hand. “You must have been scrolling while you were walking down the stairs. Maybe that’s why you fell?”

“Are you judging me? Trust me, it wasn’t that.” I grinned knowingly. “I told you that I wasn’t sure I could walk.”

“Next time – I will get the bourbon when you need a drink.” He chuckled. “I really wish you weren’t in pain. I miss your naked body underneath mine. Now, that will have to wait.”

“I might like a little suffering.”

“Who are you calling?”

“Zane. He’s really the only person who I know will come. He’ll be pissed I didn’t let him know I was in the emergency room. I mean, he may not answer if he’s out or at some trick’s house.” I pushed the button, and Justin stood there with his arms crossed and his biceps flexed as I put the phone on speaker.

Zane answered. “Girl, what are you doing?”

“I fell down the stairs, and I hurt. I just got back from the emergency room.”

“Bitch! What!”

“Zane? This is Justin. David is a little out of it and can’t walk on his own at all. He has a fracture and can’t put any weight on his foot. Can you come over and stay with him while I take care of a few things?”

“Bitch, I am already walking to my car! That’s my bestie. I’ll be there in about ten minutes.” Zane disconnected, and Justin laughed lowly.

“I think I like him more now.” Justin kneeled beside me and stroked my cheek. “Does your head still hurt?”

“Everything hurts. It’s not that bad. My foot and shoulder hurt so bad I barely notice my head.”

“I’m sorry, baby. Those stairs are gonna be difficult for the first few days. We need to see if you can get up them with your crutches. We’ll sleep down here tonight if you think you’ll be comfortable enough. Honestly, I don’t think we have another choice. I could try carrying you up the stairs, but...”

“You are a He-Man. But I’m not a kid and...”

“What if I got halfway up and had to put you down. That would be bad. I’ll grab things when I come back.” He adjusted my couch pillow and grabbed the other and slid it carefully under my foot. “You need to keep it like that, ok?”

“Ok. You don’t have to... I mean, stay here with me. Zane will if I ask him.”

“That’s not negotiable, David. I will be back as soon as I deal with a few things. Understood?”

“It shouldn’t make me this happy, should it?”

“Why not? I’m happy I can do it for you. Besides, I like being with you, babe.”

“Babe...”

The front door banged open, and Liza jumped onto the back of the couch and barked.

“Bitch! You really fell down the fucking stairs?” Zane walked into view. “Oh, honey. You look like someone beat you up.”

“I feel like someone beat me up.”

“Zane? I’ll be back in about an hour. Do not let him...”

“I got this boy scout. Go do your thing.” Zane snapped and Justin kissed me on the forehead again. As he walked by Zane – he grabbed him by the arm. “Thank you for being here, Justin. I... Thanks for being here for my bestie.”

“He’s important to me too. Thanks for coming, but I can see that nothing would have kept you from it.”

“Maybe a ten-inch dick. No – not even that.” He grinned. “I’ll stay as long as you need.”

“Thanks.” Justin turned to me. “Stay on that couch.”

I heard the front door shut.

Zane pursed his lips and sat down on the chair facing me. “So... I think you have a lot to tell me.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

I had some explaining to do in order to go back to David's. It wasn't that my parents weren't cool – more like surprised. They didn't even remember him from the cookout, and I didn't go into all the details of why I had been there or why I was staying there. Not yet.

Why didn't I just tell them?

I wasn't ashamed or anything. I just thought dropping it all on them at once was too much. We'd gone out on a couple of dates and had become friends, and he was alone and in bad shape. Mom insisted on making dinner and bringing it over to him tomorrow, and I thanked her.

My brother knew everything and just high-fived me before going back upstairs to get high and play video games.

I barely slept on the floor right beside the couch on a pallet I created out of David's extra family quilts. Barely slept, I mean. David moaned throughout the night, and getting him to the potty was difficult. I know he was embarrassed by it, but there was no help for it. I was glad to do it for him.

Love? I mean, not yet. But infatuation? Yes. I was totally smitten even with all of the drama that followed our amazing evening of debauchery. Maybe even more because of it. I liked being needed, and he needed me more than anyone ever had before. I had a Florence Nightingale complex, apparently.

When Zane came back in the morning, I made breakfast for us all. I made David stay on the couch and added cushions behind his back so he could sit up and keep his foot

elevated.

“Thanks for staying with him for a while, Zane. I won’t be too long.”

“You do not have to thank me for being a good friend, bro. I like you more than I did before, but the jury is still out. I’ll be here, and I’ll take care of her – don’t worry.”

“I think I like you more than I did before, too.” I snorted. “Got it. Still, thanks. I really need to go do this today.”

“No worries. But bring back some ice cream. Doesn’t that sound good, David?” Zane smirked. “David loves ice cream. Did you know that?”

“I guess I do now. I’d ask if he likes vanilla, but I know better.”

“Oh my God! Will you two please stop having a pissing competition? Peanut butter would be great. You both are here, and I appreciate it, but I don’t need to hear your bickering. Got it?”

“Who’s bickering?” I chuckled.

“Please, bitch. This is just foreplay.” Zane shrugged and went to sit down in the chair, curling his feet underneath him. “Besides, he looks like he can take it. If you two are gonna do what you do – then he has to get used to what I do, too.”

“Lord, someone please murder me.” David shifted so Liza could snuggle deeper into the crook of his arm where he was cuddling her. She had barely left his side since we got back. She was a very sweet daddy’s girl.

“Peanut butter – got it. Snarky best friend comments – check. Maybe a Greenie for Liza?”

David giggled. “They’re in the cabinet. Trust me – I am prepared for stanky ass breath.”

“I’ll give her one.” Zane stood up and went to the cabinet. As soon as Liza heard the door open, she flew out of sight to get her treat. She knew she had bad breath, too.

“Alright. I’ll be back in a bit.” I walked out and headed to my car. I was nervous, but I had tried so hard to hide it this morning that I had almost fooled myself.

It was a short drive to the stadium, and I drove to the rear just as Danny had told me to. He stood there leaning against his truck, looking like a model in a Ford commercial. His curly hair blew in the wind as he waved at me. I pulled in beside him.

“There you are! You ready. They’re excited to meet you.” Danny grinned happily as he slapped me on the arm.

“I can’t believe their name is the Pheasants.”

“The Pleasant has a unique sense of humor. Have you seen the mascot? He’s actually sitting on a bench in the logo. It’s hilarious.”

“Anything more I need to know?” I asked as we walked towards the metal door.

“The guy you’re meeting is named Little Timmy. His best friend is named Big Timmy and he also works for the team. Little Timmy is huge compared to Big Timmy. It’s a whole thing and just another piece of weirdness here in The Pleasant. Sometimes, I think we may all be a little mental.” Danny chuckled as he opened the door. “I’ve known them both since we were kids. We played football together for a season or two. Little Timmy was a little older than me.”

“Little bit of advice,” I snickered.

“You catch on quick.” Danny let the heavy door shut behind us with a loud clang. “He’s a great guy, and the team does a lot of good around here. They write big checks for all of the kid’s sports teams and are a major sponsor for the high school athletic program. They may lose a lot – but they have the hearts of winners.”

“That’s great to hear. Do you have any other advice before I meet him?” My palms were damp, and I could hear the sound of my heart in my ears.

“Just be you, Hot Stuff. They will fall in love with you the same way that we did.” Danny stopped outside the offices and put his hand on my shoulder. “Be you and be honest. They are willing to put in the time and money for someone they like. You can get paid and get your Master’s in Therapy all on the team’s dime. It’s a win-win for everyone and for me too. It’s nice to have another friend in town. Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.” I took a deep breath before turning and walking into the main office.

Twenty minutes later, and a little sweaty, I exited the office feeling great. I hadn’t exactly been given a job on the spot, but it seemed to go well. I would have to finish my degree faster than I had planned, and that would be a lot of classwork to finish in one semester – but it could be done. Of course, I’d be training for this job at the same time. But a pro team! It was what I had always wanted, and even better, I could stay here in The Pleasant. My life had taken a turn that I had not expected.

It wasn’t just David – though he was definitely a part of it. He was sweet and funny, and I was super attracted to him. The way his body responded to me was mind-shattering, as was the sex. But it was more than that. I had made friends here that were totally different than the ones I left behind. They made me better by just being around them.

Then there was being near my parents. I wished I didn't live with them, but being close by would be great. I hadn't appreciated them the way I should have when I was younger. I wouldn't make that mistake again. If John did get his masters in Denver, then we would be close to each other, and I had missed him more than I realized.

It was also this fucking town. I loved it, and I could easily see myself staying here and growing a family that... Woah! I needed to slow my roll... I was nowhere ready for that shit – but I wanted to be. I wanted... this.

Now all I needed was a fucking miracle. A job offer and one semester of doing nothing but taking classes – could I do it? Yes, John would keep me on track if I asked him. David would keep me stable.

I liked my life, and that was a mind fuck. All I wanted to do when I got here was get away. Now – I would be devastated to leave.

I backed out of the parking space, and my phone rang. I fished it out of my jeans and answered.

“Dude. I couldn't wait to call you.” Danny sounded excited.

“I'm just leaving. I think it went...”

“I'll say! Little Timmy just texted me and said you were amazing and exactly what they had been hoping for. Dude! You need to go ahead and register for summer classes and get that shit rolling. I'd expect to hear from him by the end of the day. Congrats, Hot Stuff. I can't tell you how happy I am that you're gonna be sticking around. Ok, I gotta go. Blake's yelling about something.”

I hung up and drove back to David's. I needed to find a way to pay for a full semester. Somehow.

If I told Mom and Dad why I had to do it – they would find a way to help me pay for it. But that wasn't what I wanted. They worked hard and I didn't want to be any more of a burden than I already was. There had to be another way. I just had to find it. The team would pay for my masters, but I'd need to find a way to finish my Bachelors.

I went home and ran upstairs to my room, and turned on my computer. I didn't want to say anything to anyone about my interview until I had a firm offer. Danny's call made me think that it might actually happen. But until I got that call myself...

I logged in to my student portal and pulled up my enrollment for the summer. I had only signed up for one class. I had finished all of the classes in my major now except for one, and all I had left were some general education classes that I had put off for too long.

I pulled out my credit card. This was going to hurt, and it was probably a very bad decision to go into credit card debt for my degree, but what choice did I have? There were two sessions of summer classes, each six weeks long. I added twelve hours to session one and then twelve to session two—but the class I needed to complete my major wasn't offered.

It had been offered this semester online. I clicked around and saw that it was being offered in person for the second session. In person? How would that work?

I mean, I could handle being gone for six weeks if I had to, but... Did I really want to go back there? Would I fall into my old patterns? Would I fail once again? I didn't even have a place to live! I couldn't go back to the frat. That would be complicated, and over the summers, those guys never stopped the party. So that was out of the question. Besides, it wasn't like it was a quick drive. It was quite a long way away.

I went ahead and signed up for the classes I could take and entered my credit card. Ouch...

But I had no idea what the hell I could do about the other class.

Had I just fucked my life? I should have waited until I...

My phone rang

And it was a number from here that I didn't know.

"Hello, this is Justin."

"Justin! It's Little Timmy. How'd you like to work for the Point Pleasant Pheasants?"

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

“Why are you slamming a hammer into my foot?” I snapped as Justin tried to pull my pajamas over my swollen foot.

“You’re the one who has to wear pajamas to bed. This would be a lot easier if you’d just go nude.” Justin looked up from where he was kneeling. “I wouldn’t mind.” His voice dripped with meaning.

“You, sir, are a very bad influence.” I giggled. “I will not sleep nude beside my dog. Besides, I’ve been wearing bottoms to bed for as long as I can remember. They make me comfortable.”

“Is this torture making you comfortable? You could just sleep in your undies?”

“Just pull them up, and I’ll scream into this pillow.” I covered my face with the pillow as Justin managed to get my foot through the hole and pulled it quickly up. “Are you done?” My foot throbbed, but I didn’t have to scream.

Liza jumped up on the couch and sat on my chest, yapping. She could sense how uncomfortable I was and wanted to help me.

“She’s such a good girl. Raise your hips,” Justin stood and pulled my bottoms all the way up.

“Thank you. This is as humiliating as I thought it would be.” I huffed and scratched Liza’s head. “When I first met you, I had no idea you would be carrying me to the bathroom and dressing me like an invalid.”

“Well, you are kind of an invalid, babe. We’ll have to get you up on the crutches tomorrow. However, you should look on the bright side – I do.”

“What is the bright side?”

“If I had to wipe your ass, I’d run away screaming. So just take the win.” He pinched my cheek and bopped me on the tip of my nose with his finger.

I grabbed his wrist. “I’m older, so that doesn’t bode well for our relationship.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.” He grinned mischievously.

“Ok... Now I’m having visions of our future and freaking out.”

“I think we have a very long way to go before we ever get to one of us wearing diapers.”

“First, it’s a broken leg, and the next thing you know, one of us is in a wheelchair.”

“How did we get to wheelchairs? I think you could still wipe your ass if you’re in a wheelchair.”

“You have no idea, and neither do I. It’s a slippery slope.”

“Slipping is how we got here.” He leaned into me and placed his head against my neck. His hot breath caused shivers. “Alright, how did we get on this topic?”

“Ah! I think you brought it up.”

“Can we just get back to you sleeping naked? I apologize that I ever said a thing.” He nuzzled, and his lips left trails of fire.

“Well, you did say you would leave me.”

“I mean, this is new. Would you blame me?”

“Well, you would be leaving me in my hour of greatest need. So, yeah.”

“I give up!” He laughed and sat back on his knees breaking our contact as he threw his arms up in the air in surrender. “But I have a great idea! We can hire someone who we’re not sleeping with to do it for us if it ever comes to that.”

“I could live with that.” I grinned. “Can you fluff my pillows?”

“I’d do more than that to your pillows if you weren’t so sore.”

“Fuck this broken foot.”

“I’m not sure I’d know how to do that.”

“I don’t mean literally.”

“You mean I can’t literally fuck you in your foot? Well, this relationship is doomed.” He rolled his eyes, and I giggled.

“I meant,” I held out my hand, and he kissed it. “I meant that I wished I hadn’t broken my foot and had stayed in bed with you.”

“I wished you had, too. You won’t feel so crappy after a couple more days, and then I can ravish you once again.”

“Ravish!” I giggled. “I like the sound of that. It’s just... I have a hard time believing this is all real.”

“We’re not doing that. You’re hot,” He kissed my hand. “I’m hot.” He kissed further up my arm. “Together we are fucking steamy.” His lips found mine, and his tongue slowly pressed inside me. I moaned into the kiss and had to stop myself from pulling him down on top of me. I wanted him on top of me so fucking bad.

“Besides...” He pulled away before kissing me quickly once again. “I have some news. I hope you’re as excited about it as I am.”

His breath was all the balm I needed to make me feel better. Another kiss like that, and I would grin and bear the pain as I grinned and bore the pain. “What?”

“Remember when I had to leave you today with Zane?” He stood up and stared down at me. Why do people always look so menacing when they’re standing above you?

“I broke my ankle, not my brain.”

“Well, I had a job interview.”

“A what? Where?”

“Remember when I said what my dream job would be?”

“Why do I feel like you’re checking me out for dementia? Did the doctors tell you to do this?”

“I’m being serious. Do you remember?”

“Yeah. You’re getting your degree in sports therapy – or is it physical therapy for sports? Anyway, you wanna work with a professional team when you graduate.” I felt a hole open up in my heart as I thought about what this could mean. “You had an interview? Where... where would you be going?”

He nodded, walked over, and sat down on the chair. “That’s the interesting news. A position opened up here in The Pleasant with the Pheasants.”

“I know nothing about sports, and even I know they suck. But... That’s great. What about your degree? Don’t you need it?”

“Yeah. That’s the... cool part?” He scrunched up his face. “It’s also the hard part.”

“What does that mean?” I didn’t like the ominous way he said that.

“It means that I have to get my degree by the end of this summer. I was already taking a class or two each session, but now I’m going to finish everything over twelve weeks. If it all works out, anyway.”

I sat up too quickly. “Ow! Justin... that’s too much, hon. I mean, how long are the sessions? Six weeks? How can you take a full load in that short amount of time?”

“I only had thirty hours left, and I’ll have completed six hours remotely, but yeah... It will be a lot. But it will also be worth it. All I’ve ever wanted was to work with a real pro team, and it’s right here. I can stay in The Pleasant. Doesn’t that make you as happy as it does me?” He leaned forward, resting his muscled arms on his knees, and looked at me with such care. It was overwhelming. “I can’t promise that I know where this is going, babe, but I know I want to find out.”

There it was. My head spun as I thought about what he was doing. “You can’t stay here for me, Justin. That’s not fair to you.”

“It’s not just for you. It’s for me, too. This place is... I can’t believe how much I like it here. You’re here, and my chance to fulfill my dream is too. It’s... I was surprised – pleasantly.” He winked.

“If it’s what you want.” Was he sacrificing something important – missing bigger opportunities because of us?

“I thought you’d be a little more excited about this.” He huffed and leaned back.

“I’m on pain medicine. But... I am excited – for you. I just don’t want you to settle. Your whole life is still in front of you.”

He chuckled. “Yours is, too. Almost forty isn’t dead. Maybe our lives are in front of us together. Maybe they aren’t? But I think I know where I’d put my money if you asked me right now.”

He was so serious, and it broke something inside me as it also stitched it back up. “You do say very pretty things that make me giddy and terrified at the same time. I’m broken in some way, but you... You make me feel less so. I just want you to be happy, Justin. That’s all. I... I know what it is to live with regrets, and I don’t want you to feel that way. Not because of...”

“You?” He chuckled. “My decisions are mine, David. I get to decide what makes me happy and what... If I am settling. It doesn’t seem that way to me. I think that you’re just scared.”

“I’m terrified of you.”

“I’m captivated by you. You do not need to be scared of me.”

“I’m not scared of you, dummy. I’m scared of how you make me feel.”

“Sexy? Cared for?”

“Yes—and I’m not used to that. You make me feel something that I haven’t felt in a

long time, Justin. Hope.”

“I don’t think anyone has ever said something so nice to me before. Hope is what keeps us all going.”

“Hope can easily turn to despair. Hope is just as dangerous as any other emotion that can destroy you. But... sometimes... I look at you, and all I hope for is for you to stay... with me... here. But other times, I realize how selfish and naïve that is for someone like me.”

He stood up, came over, and sat back down beside me. “That is enough of you talking down about yourself. I don’t want to hear you do that anymore. Ok? I think you’re remarkable, and when I see you – I see hope too. I know I’m younger and... maybe not as smart or haven’t lived as long – maybe I’m the one who’s naïve. But I don’t care about any of that. All I care about is you and me and the way I feel when I look at you.”

“God, you do talk pretty.”

“There is a bit of a problem, though. One of the last classes I need for my major isn’t being taught online, so I’m not sure what to do.”

“Well, that sucks. So, you tell the job you can take it in the fall.”

“I don’t know. They were pretty – well, they sounded serious about me having my BS before the end of the summer. They want to start paying for me to get my master’s right away. And... It is being taught, just... I don’t want to go back there for an in-person class.”

He would have to leave... But he needed to do this. If not for his present life – for his future one. “You could see your friends. I’m sure you miss them. You did like your

life there before... all of that. That's the impression I got anyway."

"I did, but I didn't really like me. Not if I really think about it, you know."

"I don't know what to tell you," I whispered.

"You can tell me not to go." His voice broke. "I... guess that's what I want you to tell me. Sure, I miss my friends... some. Kind of yes and no, do you know what I mean?"

"I do. But I can't tell you to stay, Justin."

"Why not? I want you to."

"You have to do what's best for you, not what's best for what we might become."

Liza yipped at me.

"Even she doesn't believe that." Justin pouted.

"It's just for the summer. You'd be coming back here."

"I..." He stood up and walked back over to the chair. "Can we not talk about this anymore?"

"We... sure. If that's what you want. It's your life, and before you think about settling or settling down for what you might want – you need to think about what it is you need to do to have a future – to achieve your dreams." I held my hands up. "Ok, I'm done."

"I really like you."

“I really like you too. I will still be here.”

“I know, it’s... I just don’t want to go.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

“Stop moping, or I’m gonna dock your pay.” Crystal snapped her fingers in front of my face. “You walked in all angst-ridden and haven’t stopped biting that sexy lip all morning. What’s happening, Hot Stuff? Shouldn’t you be celebrating some very good news?”

“Of course, you know.” I chuckled. If there was gossip in this town, Crystal always knew the juice.

“Yeah, and I’m pissed that you didn’t walk in and tell me right away.” She walked around the counter and stood by leaning. “So, what kind of drama is happening in that pretty little head of yours?”

“It’s just... It all happened so fast, and...”

She held her hand up. “Did something happen with David?”

“Besides him falling down the stairs?” I shrugged. “Yeah... I guess it did.”

She leaned on the counter and grinned at me. “Tell momma about it. This has become my only purpose in life besides slinging coffee and making witty remarks.”

I scrunched my face up as I thought about it. Even this morning, when Zane came over so I could go to work, there was something off, and I wasn’t sure what it was. It didn’t make any sense. “He wasn’t as happy about it as I thought he’d be. He kept poking holes.”

“Were there holes that needed to be poked?” She poked me in the chest. “David

seems pretty level-headed to me. It's not like he could jump for joy in the shape he's in."

"He said he didn't want me to settle. I mean... What?"

She took a deep breath. "Oh, I see."

"What does that mean?"

She threw her head back, cackled, and patted me on the cheek. "You're a very sweet thing. You're... in your early twenties, hon. You see things differently when you're in your thirties, especially if you've had a hard time with love. David cares about you more than he probably expected. He's probably scared."

"Yeah, he... said something like that. Why should he be scared? I've... I'm totally falling for him."

"I don't think you know how others see you, hon. You are... even here with all my other hot gay boys. You are special. When people look at you, they see something that is almost ethereal in its beauty. You look like you stepped out of a magazine – always – even in that stupid apron." She flicked the string over my shoulder. "David feels threatened by it, in a way. People who look like you – You're..." She squeezed my bicep. "Then there's us. Those normal people, like me, can get burned if we fly too close to you and bathe in your rays for too long. When you take that light and warmth away, it could destroy whoever you left."

"That's way too poetic for me." I shook my head, trying to make sense of what she said.

"I'm a fucking Shakespeare. But it doesn't make it any less true." She turned and picked up a coffee mug from the rack and walked over to the pot we just brewed.

“So, loving me is dangerous because I’m too pretty?”

“Exactly. It’s gay math. Trust me – you come with warning signs – whether you know it or not.”

I turned and leaned against the counter as I watched her pour the coffee. “Do you know what’s interesting? I feel the same way about David. I was destroyed because of a man about his age, and I wasn’t sure I would ever get over it.” I grabbed a cup from the rack and joined her at the machine. “I know I’m hot. I’ve known it my whole life by the way people have treated me, but that doesn’t mean that my heart can’t be broken just as easily. David could destroy me.”

“I know that, hon. But does he?”

“I dropped everything to stay with him when he broke his foot. He’s not just some toy that I’m playing with. He’s... absolutely wonderful. I would never want to be the cause of him feeling bad – I’d never want him to feel the way I felt.”

“The way he already felt, you mean. See, there is the big difference, I think. You are young and bounce back quicker than people our... well, David’s age. He carried his hurt around a lot longer than you and never let anyone in to help soothe that pain. But you were able to pick yourself up faster than he did. A year later, and you found a way to move on.” She touched my cheek. “That is not a criticism, or even a – your pain wasn’t as great as his, kind of thing. I’m glad that you could, and I know that you were broken by what happened. It’s why you are here, isn’t it? Because it hurt you so bad you couldn’t pull yourself out. Imagine living in that for years.”

I put my coffee down and just wanted a hug. “How can I break through something like that, Crystal? I want him to see that I’m not running away. I mean, damn... I practically begged him to tell me not to go.”

She cackled at that and looked at me with such compassion. “Of course you did. You sweet thing. What do you think his response meant when he said he couldn’t do that?”

“How did you know?” I asked, slack-jawed.

“I would have said the same thing. Maybe I did already to my own someone that... I just knew.”

“I don’t know. That he cares?”

“That he put you first. He can’t make your decisions for you because if he did, he would always wonder if you only stayed because he asked you to.”

“It was just for a summer,” I mumbled. This had gotten even more confusing and garbled in my brain.

“Not even if it was only a week.” She slapped the counter. “Your decisions have to belong to you, boo, or they don’t mean anything. Do you understand?”

And there it was. Understanding. “Shit... Yes.”

“Good. Now, what exactly did he not want you to settle for? I guess I should have asked that. I got preachy. It comes naturally when you run a gay harem.” She carried her coffee back to the counter and leaned on it as we usually did during our slow times.

“Well...” I joined her. “I have to finish my degree over the summer. It’s about nine hours each summer session, and he was worried that it would be too much. I mean, it is a lot. But the real problem is I can’t take one of the last classes I need for my major online. It’s not being offered, but it is in person. I don’t want to go back there, but

David thinks... Maybe he thinks I'm still running away from it all? Maybe I am."

"You have to take that many hours over the summer? Honey, that's almost a full load during regular semesters. How long is each session?"

"Six weeks."

"That's... How could you even do that? You'd do nothing else but..."

"Study. I know. I'd have to not work at all. I could make it work. I mean, I'd have to. I want this, and I don't want to leave David. It's stupid how it all happened so fast – meeting him and falling for him, but I did. I don't know how to make any of this work. But I'm gonna find a way."

She laughed and wrapped her arms around me, pulling me close. "Oh, Hot Stuff... That's not how we do it here in The Pleasant. I thought you were paying your way through these online classes by working here."

"I am. I put it all on my credit card."

"You what?" She broke our hug and grasped my arms. "Justin, that is... Do you know the interest you're gonna have?"

"What was I supposed to do?"

"Alright – looks like I'm gonna have to clean up this mess. Let momma show you how we take care of each other in The Pleasant." She pulled out her phone and started scrolling through her contacts. "For your knowledge, I once helped Little Timmy deal with a very serious situation after he graduated high school, so... That mother fucker owes me."

“Crystal, I just got the job offer,” I whined. “Don’t do anything to...”

“You shut up and sit down.” She pointed to me, and I walked around the counter to one of the stools. “I got this, and I will always have you.” She cleared her throat and grinned. “Hey Little Timmy Tim, It’s Crys... Yeah... I’m good, you know... Yes... Yes...” She laughed and threw her hair behind her shoulder. “Actually, I want to talk to you about my new friend Justin, who Danny said had just been offered a job... Yes... Oh, I adore him, but I’m sure you already realized that. Yes... So here is what I was thinking. I need you to step up and do me a favor... Exactly... Yeah, so here is what I want you to do.”

By the time she was done, I couldn’t believe it. If I ever needed an agent – I would ask Crystal.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

Zane sighed so dramatically that I thought he was the one lying on the couch with his broken foot on a pillow.

“What is wrong with you?” I regretted even asking. If you opened the door an inch for his drama, Zane would rip that door off the hinges to waylay you with all his dirty laundry, and I had enough of my own right now.

I jumped as he clapped his hands loudly. “You, Mary. You are what is wrong. You’re lying there way too pathetically, and it’s totally annoying. What the fuck is on your mind?”

“Oh... nothing.” I didn’t really want to get into it, even with my bestie, not until I could rationalize it better myself.

“Do not lie to a professional fibber. It’s unbecoming and only makes you look like an idiot. Spill bitch.”

I sighed and tried to set up a little. “Justin had an interview yesterday. That’s where he went when you came over. He was offered a job. Can you... I can’t...” I struggled, but the pillow kept bunching up.

“Oh, boo... I am so sorry. When is he leaving?” He came over and readjusted the pillow.

“Thanks. He’s not leaving.”

He stared down at me and narrowed his dark eyes. “Then I am super perplexed or

overly sexually frustrated to the point that nothing makes sense. What the fuck are you talking about?”

“He is a... His degree is in... Or it will be in physical therapy for sports or something straight like that.”

“I didn’t know he was still in school.”

“Yeah, he’s finishing everything online because of...” I paused and frowned at what I was about to do. “You know what? That’s his story to tell, I guess. He had a bad last year and dropped out to come here. I guess I can say that. But now he has to finish his degree so he can work with the Pheasants.”

Zane laughed as he picked up Liza and sat down on the edge of the sofa by me. He held her in his lap and rubbed behind her ear. She melted into him. “Oh, God. Hey, at least we have a pro team. I like to go and watch the Hunky violence every now and then. There are a couple of gay men on the team who go to Rumors every now and then. I may have made a small fool of myself by hitting on one of them a few times. That’s great. It’s a job here. So why are you acting like he died? He’s finishing his degree, not breaking up with you. I mean, you are together, right? It seems like you are totally together.”

“He’s used the word boyfriend, but... it’s not official – official, I guess. I suck at this. I would never date me. I’m a fucking mess.” I huffed and crossed my arms. I hadn’t allowed myself to walk down this road in a long time, and it felt treacherous.

“Duh.” He rolled his eyes and smirked.

“You are not helping.”

“Yet, I am sure I am completely meeting your expectations,” he quipped bitchily.

“Totally.” I pouted.

“You are still not making any sense. Once again, why is any of this a problem?”

I shrugged, unable to put the words to my feelings. “It shouldn’t be, should it? But...”

“Ah... You really do have one fucked up head because of the devil.” He looked at me sadly. “You have to get over him, boo. Seriously, it’s been a long time. Stop mourning and wearing black because someone else needs it for another funeral. Your time has come to an end.”

“I am totally over him. Just... It’s not really him. It’s just, I remember how bad I... Why was I so weak, Zane? People break up all the time, so why did I stay so fucked up? Am I like... broken?”

“Oh, trust me, I have pondered this many times in my life.” He stood up and gently deposited Liza on the chair, and she quickly curled up on the blanket. “Stay, girl.” He patted her head and then turned to look at me. “I used to get so mad at you because you just stayed messed up for so long that it pissed me off. I missed you, you know. You were there, but... It wasn’t really you, was it?” He walked over and sat down beside me again.

“But I always came back to the same reason as to why you stayed so... like this. Some people love in the moment, David. But you... Boo, you love with your entire being, not just your heart or your mind. No, you love with every molecule that you possess, and when asshole broke you apart – your atoms flew all over the place because it was safer for them to stay in orbit – or flee mode if you prefer – than it was for them to ever come back together. It happened slowly – but you did eventually come back. You just never forgot how much pain you were in, and that’s okay.” He reached over and ruffled my hair gently. It was already a hot mess. “But trust me, I have seen how that boy looks at you. I have watched how he touches you and cares

for you. I've seen how he has brought you back to me – back to yourself. So, don't fuck it up by being a moron."

"I'm being an idiot."

"You're making decisions based on fear instead of what's actually happening. Honestly, I'm a shallow bitch, and even though I'm your best friend, you really should be having this conversation with someone who has much more emotional depth than me. But here is the truth, David. You can let go now. Let go of everything you have protected yourself from because if you don't, you're going to lose him. You can't push people away and expect a different outcome. Look at me. Why do you think I'm still in the game of trying to find someone to love? Because when it gets tough – I split. Don't do that. You deserve so much more. No regrets, hon."

"You deserve it too, babe. Underneath all the quips and snark is one of the most loving people I have ever met." I patted his knee.

"True. But I hide mine, and I need to totally work on that, I agree. But this isn't about me, boo. This isn't my therapy session – it's yours. It's about you holding onto something that is worth holding on to. He dotes on you, and it makes me gag with the fucking sweetness of it. Do not fuck this up." He bopped me on the nose.

"I mean, it's not like we've been dating for long."

"Love is not love that alters when it alteration finds."

I giggled. "Jesus! Who are you?"

"I have the quote on a pillow. Anyway, why does that matter? A month or two years makes little difference when you allow yourself to live inside your feelings. You love him."

“Yes. And it...”

“Scares the fuck out of you, I know. He’s here, isn’t he? He chose to be here.”

“And he’s choosing again, even if it might not be the best decision for him.”

“Maybe you are the best decision for him – have you ever thought of that?”

I took a breath and let his words settle in the very core of me. “Hmm... No.”

“Then stop worrying about what might happen in the future. Sure, in four months, this thing could... change. That could also happen in twenty years. Relationships change, boo. They grow, or they falter. But if you stifle it right away... How can a plant grow if there’s no water or sun to provide the nourishment?”

“Jesus, I had no idea you could be so wise.” I grinned at my bestie, who bent down and kissed me on my forehead.

“Even a wise-ass can make good decisions, sometimes. So that is what you do. Make good decisions, and stop being so fucking noble and let that grown-ass man make his own decision without you meddling. Got it?”

“Loud and clear.”

“Yeah... But you have always sucked at following directions.”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

I came in, and Zane walked over and gave me a quick hug before dashing out.

“Don’t let him give up on himself. Or you,” he whispered before closing the door behind him.

I locked it and carried the take-out bag from Liberties into the kitchen. I set it down on the counter and grabbed a couple of plates. I wanted to share my news, but I was also a little scared about telling him. Last time, it hadn’t gone exactly as planned, and with Zane’s whisper, my heart beat a little faster. “I brought burgers and fries. I figured it was a safer option than having me cook.”

He giggled, and it made me feel warm. “Cool. Thank you. How was your day?”

“Interesting. How was yours.”

“It too was... interesting, even if I barely got off the couch. Zane helped me walk around on the crutches a little, and I’m not as dangerous anymore. I didn’t knock anything over.”

“That’s a very good boy.” I chuckled. “Slow and steady. I’m sure you’ll be off them in a little over a month. How’s the pain?”

“It’s... It doesn’t throb like it did before. It’s there, but not so bad, actually. I can deal with this a lot better.” He sounded lighter than he did when I left this morning. We barely spoke, and it was a little awkward. I didn’t know the words until after my talk with Crystal.

“Good.” I unwrapped the burgers and placed them on the plates before dumping out the fries. “Ketchup?”

“Sure. Just a little.”

“I drown mine.” I grabbed the ketchup from the fridge and shook it, squirting a large pile on my plate.

“I’m not surprised. I used to, but something changed, I guess. Now I just like a little dab. I like the crunch of the fry. Hell, I like the taste and don’t wanna cover it up with the ketchup.”

“I like the burger. I’m starving. It’s been a... Well, the day took a few unexpected turns.”

I carried the plates over and set them down on the small bamboo TV trays that unfolded, then carried them over to the couch. We used to have a set of these when I was younger, but when I was in high school, Mom made us all sit at the dining room table. Mom preferred that we talk instead of watching some TV show as we stuffed our mouths. It was her way of getting some quality time with us.

“You need me to...” I reached out, and David grinned.

“Got it... Maybe?” David carefully pushed himself up into a sitting position. “See, I did it myself.”

“No weight on that foot?” I narrowed my eyes.

“No. See?” he said proudly. “I even have it stretched out.”

“Good boy.”

“I’m... God, that smells so good. Dad used to bring these home every Friday night as a treat for us. Liberties was one of the first places I went to when I came back home. They have the best burgers and fish and chips in town. It’s always felt special to me.”

“The Moosehead is pretty good, too. That burger is huge.” I laughed as I sat beside him on the couch.

“It’s way too much. I’m not sure I ever ate the whole thing, but trust me, I tried. The patty is almost as big as my face. But I do like the Moosehead.”

“I have totally eaten it. John and I had a race to see who could finish it first.”

“Who won?”

“John. He was totally stoned. They have really good pizza, too.”

“Yeah. The Pleasant has really... Hey - tell me what happened today. I’m sorry that I... I’m weird, ok? It happens. You’ll get used to it. I’ll get weird again.”

“I know, and I don’t think you’re weird. I know that you care, ok? That didn’t change anything, David... Babe. It just took me by surprise, I guess.”

“You guess? Hell, even I was surprised.” He took a bite and wiped his mouth.

“I know. I was surprised. I thought you’d be happier.”

“Oh, I am. I am...” He put his burger down and turned to me. “My first thought was that you were going to stay, and then all of those selfish thoughts came break dancing through my head. I just want to make sure that... Look, you’re an adult, and your life belongs to you. Who am I to say that... Well, anything?”

“I think that you are exactly the person—maybe the only one who has a right to say anything at all, besides my parents, I guess. I have been living under their roof.” I grinned, picked up a ketchup-covered fry, and offered it to David.

He opened his mouth and grimaced at all the ketchup that covered it. “Your life is yours, Justin. I know we’ve... Ooo... That was gross. I mean, I know that you’re here with me right now. I know that we both like each other, but... It’s barely been more than a month since we met. I don’t have any right to tell you anything.”

I took a deep breath and turned back to him, picking up his hand and holding it. “Well, would that change if you were my boyfriend?”

“You’ve already called me that too...” He blushed. “Oh! Are you actually asking me? You are! Ok... Yes. I suppose it would.”

“I haven’t asked yet.” I winked. “Will you be my boyfriend, baby? I should have asked you officially. In my mind, you already were.”

He blushed, and his eyes misted over. “You are really trying to make me choke, aren’t you?”

“Please be my boyfriend? Are you going to make Daddy beg?” I nudged him with my shoulder.

“No, Daddy.” He giggled. “I won’t. I would be very happy to be your boyfriend. Honestly, at this point, it’s all that I want. And that is...”

“Scary?” I reached over and pecked him on the cheek. “I’m not going anywhere, and now I don’t have to at all. You better get used to me, babe.”

“What does that mean?” he asked slowly.

“It means that The Pleasant is the kind of place where fucking miracles happen, babe. Come on! I met you and Liza, and you’ve totally changed everything, David. I... I’m falling in love with you, dummy.” I laughed happily.

“Even with this boot?” He grinned.

“Even with the boot, babe.”

“I... feel the same way. I just didn’t want you to settle for... all of this when you might...”

I put my finger over his lips. “Why would you call it settling when it’s what I want? I don’t think I’ve ever wanted someone or something as bad as I do us at this moment, David. I just want to sit out on the porch with you and make the neighbors jealous.”

He shuddered. “I would rip your clothes off right now if we weren’t eating.”

“You’re horny! You must be feeling better.” I took a bite and chewed quickly before swallowing. “But wait! There’s more, babe. And don’t think you’re getting out of ripping my clothes off. I can be gentle if I have to.”

“Who needs a foot? I’ll survive.” He whispered.

“I talked to Crystal today, and she... She is a fucking badass. She called the fucking Pheasants and told them what they were going to do, and the amazing part is that they agreed. Not only are they paying for my master’s, but they are also paying me over the summer while I’m in school finishing my bachelor’s. It’s not the entire cost, but it will definitely help, and the best part is... Wait for it... An hour later, they called me back, and my school offered me the class I needed as a special study. I can stay here and graduate remotely.”

“How did that happen?” He looked at me with amazement.

“Apparently, Little Timmy, my boss, made a call to the Seattle team’s manager who happened to know the Dean at my school. It was that fucking easy.”

“That’s amazing. But it is The Pleasant, and Crystal is super connected. I mean, she hangs out with stars and princes, so...”

“I know that I’m... not going back – not wanting to go back to school is...” I took a deep breath. “I like who I am now, babe. Going back there would make me remember all of the shit. I was kind of an asshole, I guess. I barely came home to see the family – choosing to stay and party most of the time, and that’s not who I am any longer. I don’t want to be that person ever again. I’m different now, and this is what I want. You are who I want.”

He set his burger down on the plate and stared at me lovingly. “Damn, all of this over burgers and fries.”

“It is a life-changing burger. I don’t think people give the burger and fries combo the respect that it deserves.”

“I blame fast food.”

I took his hand. “I want to make you happy, David. I’m not just in this for... now. I can’t promise what the future holds, but I can promise to be honest and to be the best boyfriend I can be. I would never hurt you, babe – not intentionally. I’m not...” I swallowed, and he put his other hand on top of mine.

“I know you’re not, Martin.” His eyes widened in shock. “See? I said his name instead of calling him the fucking devil. I know, Justin. You are a very good man.”

“Wait?” I laughed. “His name was Martin? Did you call him Marty when you got pissed at him?”

“I should have. He hated that.” He smirked and let go of my hand to pick up his burger again.

“So about ripping my clothes off...”

“Can I please finish dinner first?” He took a bite. “See, this is the problem with having a younger boyfriend.”

“I don’t think you mind.”

“I do like my meat... But this burger is really doing it for me right now.”

“This sausage could fulfill you just as much.”

“But would I be full when I finish it?”

“Oh, it’s a full dining experience.”

He set the burger back down, and we sat in silence while he chewed. He swallowed and sighed. “I’m happy, and... I haven’t been that way in a long time. Not really. I forgot what it felt like.”

“I don’t think I’ve been either – not til you and Liza. I can’t promise you a happy ever after, but I can promise you a happy for now. We’ll have to see what the future holds. But... I could promise you a very happy ending.” My cock stiffened.

“You make sweet promises. But I do have a broken foot.”

“I’ll make sure to not stick my cock in your foot then.”

“Justin? You’re gonna have to put Liza up in the bedroom if we’re...”

“Are you done?” I pushed my tray table away and stood up.

“Yes.”

I grabbed the plates and practically threw them in the sink before coming back to stand in front of him.

“Liza can stay down here. I’m taking you upstairs.”

“How? I don’t think I could...” I put my finger over his lips and reached down to grab his hand.

“Stand on one foot, please.” I pulled him up and wrapped his arms around my neck before I lifted him into my arms.

“You are going to kill us.”

“Then we die together. But, babe. I think Daddy is totally strong enough to get you up those steps today. I don’t think anything in the world could stop me.”

“I have never loved anyone as much as I do you right now.” He kissed me gently, and I groaned.

“I think that’s just your libido. I’m gonna have a hard time getting up the stairs with this hard-on.”

“No, it’s not just my libido. I mean it.”

“Good. Cause I love you too. Now shut up while I carry you up these stairs and have my way with you.”

He nuzzled into my neck, and I didn’t falter once on the stairs.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

“I got it.” I snapped worriedly as I pushed my crutches out of the way so I could take off my seatbelt.

“I’m just trying to help.” Justin chuckled easily, which instantly made me feel like an asshole.

“You help enough, honey. I have to learn to manage things. Fucking crutches!” I struggled with the seat belt with one hand and holding the crutches up with the other.

“Can I please help you?” He sighed and nodded, and I quickly reached around and unbuckled his seatbelt. “Listen to us bickering like an old married couple.

“Don’t give me ideas. I already know what my colors are.” I blushed. He made me a red mess.

“Orange and Black?”

“Asshole. No.”

“It’s lilac and a soft green.” He whispered into my ear, and I shuddered.

“How did you know that?” I opened the car door and managed to get the crutches outside.

“It’s the colors you chose for the vases in your living room and I think that they’re perfect.” He got out and walked around the car.

“Are you? You’re not saying that... we... You’re not...” I grunted as I slowly stood up and managed to get the crutches under my arm.

“When I propose, you will know.” He kissed me on the cheek, and I shooed him away.

“When?” I started making my way to the front door. I was better, but I was still a hellion on these things. I teetered. I really needed to work on my upper body strength. My left crutch came out from under my arm. “Fuck.”

“Are you coming?” He turned and grinned.

“I just can’t get it to stay under my arm... There. Now I’m actually coming.”

“They’ve been asking when I was going to make you get out of the house.”

“I hate these crutches.”

“But they’re so fashionable.”

“Get out of my way, or I’ll stick this crutch up your ass.”

“The things you promise.” He opened the door, and I made my way through.

“I can’t believe I’m going to the gay bar on crutches. People are gonna stare.”

He kissed me on the cheek. “You already caught me, so I don’t think it matters. Let them look. I’ll only be looking at you.” His hand rested on my lower back, giving me comfort and support as I teetered and tottered my way into the bar.

Crystal whooped and waved at us, and I hobbled over. I had gotten much better using

the crutches, but the stairs were still tricky. Of course, my new friends were all on the upper level, which had two stairs.

“Can I help you, sir?” Zane slid out of the booth and came to one side. Justin wrapped his arm around me, and with their help, I hopped up the stairs. “Shall I get you the usual? Justin? Beer?”

“Thanks, Zane – that would be great.” Justin helped me over to a chair at the head of the table, and I carefully lowered myself into it. Justin pecked me on the cheek and sat down next to me.

“How’re my two favorite love birds?” Crystal cooed.

“Nesting.” Justin grinned. “I think my mom is glad to have her craft room back. I went over there the other day, and my bed was scooted up against the wall.”

“I’m officially adopted. John comes over and has drinks with us every so often, and Julie, Justin’s mom, keeps bringing us food,” I said happily. “That woman can cook. It’s a shame Justin didn’t get any of those genes.”

“I think you like the genes I did receive,” he chuckled. Mom believes that David walks on water. She’s so happy that I found someone stable and kind. If I tried to move back home now, she’d get mad at me. Dad found out that David knows how to play Cribbage, so he’s been coming over every Saturday afternoon for a game. I see them more now than I did when I lived there.”

“How long until the boot comes off?” Hunter asked.

“Three more weeks. I’m just now learning to actually walk on those stupid crutches.” I groaned. “Where’s Kris?”

“Working. Always working these days.” Hunter grinned. “We both have our busy seasons and enjoy what we do. You’ll see. It will be like that for you two, too when season begins.”

I had grown to like this group quite a bit. I was hoping that Claybourne would be here because we had so much in common—well, our age, anyway. But every single one of them was loving and opened their arms to me without blinking an eye. Being laid up had somehow brought me closer to them, and they visited quite a bit. Justin even had everyone over for dinner—takeout, of course. Liza had loved the attention.

“Drinks for the men of the hour!” Zane slid our cocktails in front of us and sat down on the other side of me. “You didn’t kill anyone on your way in with those crutches. I’m so proud.”

Crystal had quickly taken to Zane, and he had become one of her gossip buddies. I was glad that our friend group had merged so easily.

“When do you start your semester from hell?” Crystal placed both of her hands on the table as if she were holding court. “We are all prepared to circle the wagons if necessary.”

“Next week,” Justin groaned.

“Are you ready?”

“David, let me move some things around in the guest room. I have my desk and computer all set up there. So, I have a space to concentrate.” I had insisted upon this. I wanted him to succeed without any problems. He was already taking a class load that was going to be extremely difficult. He accepted my offer without hesitation. We had gotten much better about listening to each other.

“I usually work on the dining room table. I wanted him to be free from any distractions.”

“He means Liza.” Justin laughed loudly. “She has adopted me as her new daddy and demands to sit in my lap most of the time.”

“Yes – she’s become quite a monster. But now he can shut the door. If David is around these days, she just curls up in his lap and takes a nap. She’s a whore and demands constant petting from him. Of course, he obliges and urges her on.”

“She’s a sweet little belly-rubbin” monster,” Justin chuckled, reached over, and took my hand. “Just like her daddy.”

“Oh, I think we know who the daddy is, don’t we?” I winked.

“And don’t you ever forget it.” He reached over and placed his lips against mine. It still made me quiver.

“Young love,” Crystal giggled as her phone buzzed.

“I think that everything has worked out exactly as it was supposed to.” Danny raised his glass, and we all followed suit. “To us and new family.”

“To us!”

Justin never took his eyes off me.

Family – I had finally found mine.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:42 am

My phone dinged.

“David, honey? Was that him?” Julie grinned excitedly as she busied herself with the giant cheese tray.

“No, that was just an email.” I slid the phone back into my pocket and picked up Liza. “He’ll text. I told him that I may need him to pick up dinner because I’ve been busy with a work project.”

“The little white lies have begun!” John popped a small cherry tomato into his mouth and grinned.

“You eat one more thing, and I’m kicking you out,” Julie laughed as she swatted at her son.

Looking at John and Justin together was strange when you knew they were twins. They are so much alike, yet so different in almost every way. Only their faces were the same if you looked hard enough. I had come to appreciate John and enjoyed his company. He was smarter than almost anyone I knew, even if he did reek of pot from time to time. Liza also adored him. Of course, she loved anyone who would pay attention to her. She was such a slut.

“But where would I go? Would you do that to your only other child?” He gasped and grinned at his mother.

“Both of my boys are getting their masters at Denver. So glad that John will be close and Justin will be right next door.” Julie looked at her handiwork and wiped her

hands on the small towel.

“I love you too, Ma.” John grabbed another tomato and dashed away from Julie before she made good on her promise. He went and joined our friends. Crystal wrapped her arm around him. She had already been trying to set him up on a blind date with someone she knew.

Crystal was an enigma, but she was also one of the sweetest and most caring people I had met in The Pleasant. When she welcomed you into her family, she welcomed you into her heart.

My phone chimed the special tone I had set for Justin, and everyone’s heads looked up and turned in my direction. At one time, this would have made me very uncomfortable. But now, I relished in my new friends and family – my chosen family – a family that had chosen me.

“Is that the man of the hour?” Jacob asked over his martini as he sat on the couch with his legs crossed.

“It is.” I typed quickly. “He should be a few minutes out. I told him that I didn’t need him to stop anywhere. I made pasta.”

I picked up Liza’s leash, and she ran over to me with her tail wagging rapidly. Now that Justin had finished his classes, he had been going into the Pheasant’s office for the last couple of weeks, and Liza always knew when he was about to come home. She could tell time better than any of us.

“Good girl! Are you ready to go see Daddy?” I hooked the leash onto her harness, and she almost fell down because her tail was wagging so hard.

“Should we hide?” Danny laughed as he looked around.

“No. When that door opens, it will be him, so make it count,” I laughed as I picked Liza Minelli up and carried her outside, making sure to shut the door behind me so Justin wouldn’t see. I had asked everyone to park on the next block over so things would look normal on the street.

I set Liza down, and she took a few steps before doing her business. “Good girl.”

We walked a little down the block, and she looked at every car as it passed. This had become our routine, and she knew that Justin was coming. It was a beautiful day, and the sun was still bright, with the leaves dappling shadows on the ground. This block had become even more of my home since Justin appeared. It felt like a large weight had finally been lifted off me – one that I had carried for far too long.

The future felt promising, and as long as I had my happy for now, I knew that it would continue to be so.

Justin slowed down, and Liza barked happily as we watched him pull his station wagon into a parking space in front of our house.

Our house...

“How’s my boy and my girl?” Justin shut his door and came to kneel in front of Liza who rolled right over for the belly scratching that she expected.

“We’re great, Daddy,” I teased. “I made spaghetti and meatballs, so I hope you’ve worked up an appetite.”

“I have totally worked up an appetite, but it’s not food I want,” he looked at me lustfully.

How I wish I didn’t have a house full of company right now because all I wanted was for Justin to throw me over his shoulder and make me beg. But... That was not how

this was going to play out.

“I love coming home to you – to both of you!” He rubbed Liza and picked her up.

“Let’s go in. Did she do her business?”

“Right away, ’cause she’s a good girl.” I gave Justing the leash.

“Alright, babes, let’s go in.” He walked up the stairs to the house and turned to me. “I love you.”

I grinned stupidly. I never got tired of hearing him say this, and he had been saying it a lot recently. Safe – I felt safe and secure in us.

“I love you too.”

He opened the door, and the roar of our friends and family greeted him.

“Surprise!”

“Happy graduation, Daddy.”

“I thought we were gonna watch a movie? I suppose I will never watch Pretty in Pink.” He grinned.

I was truly home, and so was Justin.

The End