



Pies &
PROMISES
DUCKIE MACK

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Content Warning

Pies & Promises contains a medical situation with recovery and a brief scene in a hospital with mentions of equipment sounds. I understand that a lot of people have faced difficult situations with loved ones, and wished to include this note for those that may find it triggering

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Be adventurous. Eat the pie.

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Tucking the sides into the brown box, I sealed it with a sticker that said “love baked into every crust” under my logo. Was it cheesy? Perhaps. But I didn’t care. Cheese sells. I carefully packed the trunk of my Flex, trying to make sure nothing would slide around, as I counted boxes and went through my checklist on my phone.

It always seemed like too much and yet I constantly worried about not having enough. The goal was to come home with as little as possible, while also not running out too early. It was a tricky balance.

I got in my dad mobile and drove cautiously to the library. No sudden stops or sharp turns for me. My income was in the back of the car. My *only* income at this point and it didn’t go very far as it was. The Grove Hills Public Library roped off its parking lot and turned it into a farmer’s market twice a month. The Heartcraft Market featured local farmers, vendors, crafters, makers, foodies of all types. I’d been a regular for almost a year now.

It started out as a hobby, something I did for myself and that got me out of the house. It morphed into a business when I started selling regularly and getting repeat customers that sought me out. The business once provided a little extra play money, something for myself where I didn’t have to feel bad about asking Julie when I wanted to do something. Everything changed this year and now it was no longer extra funds, but something I relied on. And even then, it wasn’t nearly enough

to keep up with the bills. I tried not to think about that or I might get dragged down into a pit and struggle to get back out of it.

It was early enough that the ropes weren't up yet blocking the through traffic as I drove in and backed up to my usual spot. I pulled out my canopy and tables first. Luckily, I'd gotten into a routine with Dash, the guy that had the booth next to mine. He'd come over and help me set up my canopy, and then we would do his. I had to admit to sneaking a glance on occasion at the tattoos that were revealed when his shirt lifted with his arms above his head. He had other tattoos on his arm that were visible too. We were friends though, I might have appreciated the view, but he wasn't my type at all. He was fit and twunky and I always felt a little intimidated.

"Got anything new today, Jason?" Dash asked as he set up his booth.

"Yes, actually. I decided to try a little fruit-cheese combo." I was hoping cheese really did sell. I'd been pretty happy with it when I was experimenting and it was unique enough I thought it could be a seller. Unfortunately, a new product usually meant giving away a lot of samples, which dug into profits but had the potential for future sales. Though future sales two weeks away was a bit long to wait.

"Really? Like a cheesecake? I'm a big fan. But you could put pretty much anything in cream cheese and I'm in."

I smoothed out the branded tablecloths on the three tables that were set in a U-shape to allow maximum use of the space.

“No, kind of the opposite of that. It’s an apple pie with a cheddar cheese crust.”

Dash whistled, “Damn, color me intrigued.”

“Let’s hope everyone else will be too.”

With everything set and ready, I moved my car. Dash kept an eye on my booth as we often did for each other. When I got back, I added the finishing touch, an apron that said Webber Pie Company.

While I could talk about food endlessly, it was having to be *on* and being a salesperson all day that was draining. It was always good to get out and talk to adults for a while, but after a few hours, I started to miss the comfort of my home.

I put on my best smile and did what I loved. Sharing my pies and seeing the reaction and ecstasy on a person’s face when they got that perfect bite of crust and filling. It made my heart flutter every time. A sample here and there was well worth it when it teased them and had them wanting more.

All in all, it had been a decent day. Customers seemed interested in my new pie and I only had a few left of my classics; cherry, sweet potato, pecan, and apple-berry. The individual pies always went first, they were the perfect snack to nosh on while people enjoyed the market. The big pies could be hit or miss, depending on the weather or if there were holidays.

When I pulled in front of the condo, I grabbed a pecan pie from the back and went to the door. As soon as it opened, I

was practically knocked over, carefully trying to save the pie.

“Daddy!” Parker and Emily shouted in unison. That one word was enough to wipe away any exhaustion or worry. Emily had her arms wrapped around my leg and Parker squeezed my side.

“Hi, my munchkins. I hope you guys were good for grandma.”

“We were!”

I ruffled my son’s hair and scooped up my daughter in my free arm. My mom leaned in the doorway, watching us with a smile on her face. I kissed Emily’s head before setting her down. “Go grab your things so we can head home.”

As the two ran past, I walked over to greet my mom. Leaning in to kiss her cheek, I whispered in her ear. “Thank you for taking them on such short notice.”

“I never mind spending time with my babies. Though it would be nice if Julie didn’t back out of her responsibilities,” she said under her breath.

I shot her a look. “You know how it is, she had to work.”

“I’m just saying, she’s a parent too. And you’d think now that she doesn’t see them throughout the week, she would make an effort on the weekends.”

“Mom, not now, please.” I didn’t have the energy to rehash the same old discussion. It was frustrating to have to rearrange my plans at the drop of a hat, and I was lucky enough that my mom lived close by, but it was something I came to expect

with Julie. It was never malicious, but it happened all the same.

My mom clasped my cheeks with her hands, “I’m sorry, Jase. I just love you and the kids, and I hate to see her still pulling this crap.”

“I know. I get it. But this is just how things are. I can’t divorce her any more than we already are. I need to move forward for the kids, for myself. All that fighting was exhausting and I’m ready to get to the point where we can be cordial and live our lives.”

My mom’s expression softened before she flapped her hands, waving off the bad energy. “Alright, moving on. Is that pie for me?”

I held out the box. “Pecan.”

“Mmm. My favorite. Thank you, Jase. I hope everything went well today.”

I shrugged. “It went as well as it could. And now I’m beat. Thank you again, we’ll get together soon. Love you.”

After we got home, I unloaded everything, did a final inventory, and calculated the credit card and cash payments while the kids got in their pajamas. I tried to ignore the too-low net profits that seemed to stare at me judgmentally. I promised Parker and Emily earlier that we would watch a movie together after we got home. When they came bounding back in—Parker in his Spiderman pajamas, and Emily wearing a clashing top and bottoms that she proudly picked out for

herself since she was a big three-year-old now—we settled on the couch together and pulled up Disney Plus. I put my feet up on the coffee table and had Parker tucked into one side and Emily on the other. This was what I lived for. Moments with these two.

I became a stay-at-home dad shortly after Parker was born. Once Julie stopped nursing, she'd been ready to head back to work and I was happy to stay home. She had always been ambitious and her job paid more anyway, so it made sense. I'd spent the last six years with these two, doing everything with them. I was teacher, chef, monster hunter, nurse, protector, and playmate. And I loved every second of it.

Parker was in first grade, so it was strange not getting to see him all day. Though I had to admit that it was nice getting more one-on-one time with Emily like I had with Parker before she came along. But that might all change if I couldn't figure out how to increase my income, which changed drastically once Julie moved out.

I got child support from her since they lived with me ninety percent of the time. But that money was for them. I refused to touch it and use it for anything else. Though, the savings I had were dwindling each month. Selling pies twice a month and the occasional order wouldn't sustain us.

Every time I opened job search sites, my stomach soured and my heart ached as I thought about leaving Emily to go to work. She would have to go to childcare or preschool. While I knew that wasn't the worst thing that could happen, guilt ate at

me because that would mean that I wouldn't get to be with her like I was Parker. It wasn't right.

I dropped my arms around my kids and squeezed a little tighter. Parker groaned and wiggled away, while Emily snuggled closer until her head rested on my leg. She was such a cuddle bug and I didn't want to miss a second of it before she started to grow out of it like her brother.

Before I stopped to become a full-time parent, I worked an office job. The thought of returning to a cubicle six years later was akin to waterboarding. My life was filled with princess dresses, superheroes, teddy bears, and karate. While I didn't mind dressing up, having to wear a suit and tie and stare at a computer all day sounded like death. It was hard to imagine that I once had corporate dreams. Though the dream of a family was always present. It was what I wanted more than anything. That was one thing I was thankful for with my time with Julie, she gave me these two. I only had to figure out how to make everything work on my own.

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The beeps were the worst part. He would start to nod off, trying to get the sleep he desperately needed, when some machine or another started beeping. I wasn't even the one in the hospital bed and it was unnerving. I watched those squiggly lines on the heart rate monitor like it was a TV show. Each blip or irregularity had me leaning forward in my seat to see if it needed attention or if it would level out.

My mom came in and handed me a cup of coffee. "How's he doing? Any change?"

I sent her away to take a break earlier since she hadn't left my dad's side in the twelve hours since we arrived. "Pretty much the same. The nurse was in here a while ago and he said that everything was looking good. I think Pop is more tired than anything at this point. But those damn machines keep waking him up." I tried to keep my voice low, but the fear-laced frustration pushed my words out sharper than I intended.

“He’ll get to rest when we leave, I’ll make sure of it. I’ll need your help though. You know how stubborn your father can be.” She gave me a wistful smile. The man hadn’t taken a sick day in as long as I could remember.

“Of course, Mom. Whatever you need me to do.”

“For now, we just wait. At least they don’t seem concerned, that’s a good sign.”

I agreed silently as I sipped my coffee. It was a minor heart attack. That moment when my father clutched his chest and his eyes went wide was burned into my retinas. A sight I didn’t think I’d ever forget. Luckily, we’d gotten him seen before it was worse. Now he was being monitored out of caution. While exhausting and frustrating, I was glad they weren’t sending him out the door right away.

Pop always seemed indestructible to me. It was hard to see him in that bed looking weak and pale. He was my hero, always had been. The doctor told us he was going to be fine, he would just need a few changes in stress levels, diet, and exercise. But change wasn’t an easy thing for the man. His time in the Navy had ingrained a sense of routine and tradition that was sewn into who he was. Hell, he’d worn the same style of clothes for as long as I could remember, the only thing that had changed was the size.

I gave my mom my seat and walked around the room, stretching my legs.

“Would you quit pacing? You’re making me dizzy.” My father’s voice rasped out from the bed. The first words he’d

spoken in a while. My mom and I rushed to opposite sides of the bed. She took his hand and held it in hers. I rested mine on his arm.

“How are you feeling, Grumpy?” My mom asked.

“I’m fine, no need to make such a fuss over me.”

“You’re not fine, Pop. You had a heart attack,” I said flatly.

“Meh, it was a baby one, just skipped a beat is all.” His attempt at a smile was a pathetic one, though I felt a lot of relief at seeing some of his personality show through. If he could be a pain in the ass hooked up to all the wires and tubes, he’d probably be okay.

My mom let go of his hand and cupped his face, leaning over him. “Don’t you dare do that to me again.” She kissed him.

Pop softened, “I’m sorry I worried you, Mitchie.”

“Yeah, well, you will be sorry when you have to eat salad instead of steak.” She put her hands on her hips with a resolute expression.

“I think I’d rather go into the light.”

“Not funny, Pop.” I had to mask the smirk that tried to tug at my lips.

“What? Too soon?” His voice was weak and he was too pale, but I couldn’t stop the laugh that burst out of me. I clapped my hands over my mouth as my mom shot me a look with narrowed eyes that said I shouldn’t be encouraging him. I

was merely relieved after such a long night of waiting to see a glimpse of the hero I saw my father as, inappropriately-timed jokes and all.

He was finally released after the doctor checked on him for morning rounds and a couple hours later we had prescriptions and instructions. The biggest thing would be for him to rest, take it easy, and avoid doing anything strenuous or stressful. Once we got him home and settled, my mom pulled me aside.

“Nico, I’m going to need you to take over the diner. It’s the only way I’ll be able to talk him out of walking into work tomorrow or the day after.”

He had a solid, trustworthy crew at the diner, with shift leads that we knew could handle everything. But when it came to managing the place that he built from the ground up thirty years ago, he didn’t trust anyone to do it but himself. And me, *partly*. I started working at Pop’s Diner as soon as I was legally old enough. Over time, he taught me a few ins and outs of the business side of things, though I always felt like he would never hand the reins over to me. I spent more time in the kitchen than in the office.

“Of course, I assumed as much. He’s not going to like it though.”

“There’s not much your father is going to like about any of this, but it doesn’t matter. Right now his health comes first. So you handle the diner and I’ll handle him.” My mom lifted her chin, ready for the fight that lay ahead.

“I think I got the easy part of this deal.” I chuckled. Even though running a whole business was far from easy. Especially one that has been stagnant for a long time. Pop’s Diner wasn’t doing badly, but it hadn’t seen an upward trajectory in a while. There were things I tried to talk to him about before, but he was a man that didn’t do change well. Maybe now that he was forced to step back, it would give me a chance to shake things up a little.

When I got home, I sent out a group text to the staff, knowing they were all waiting to hear updates on Pop. He was a hardass as a boss and as stubborn as they come, but he was loved by all. I tried not to do group texts often because it usually turned into an unending chain of responses.

Me: Pop is home and resting. We are grateful for your concern, your positive thoughts, and your prayers. 5 AM staff meeting tomorrow for the morning shift. Everyone else plan to come in at 2 and I’ll catch you up. If it’s your day off, you’ll get paid a minimum of 2 hours for attending the meeting. Please only reply if you can’t make it. It’s been a long couple days. Thanks for your understanding.

I could see when it was read by each person and thankfully they didn’t respond. I was exhausted and morning would come way too soon. Not only that, I would have to go in with a plan to keep things running as smoothly in Pop’s absence as possible. As much as I was ready to fall into bed and enter into a mini-coma, I had some work to do. I sat at the computer and worked up a new schedule and wrote the notes I needed before I met with everyone. Leaning back in my desk chair, I took my

flat cap off and scruffed my hand over my prickly head. I needed to shave. Exhaustion was taking hold and I was getting antsy and itchy. I didn't need to accomplish everything tonight. There would be time to work things out over the next week or so.

Morning, if it could be called that when it was the darkest part of the night outside, assaulted me with its presence. I got up begrudgingly, not bothering to shave my fuzzy head, though I did use the clippers and trim my facial hair. It was important to keep that maintained in the kitchen. I stared at my reflection, heavy, dark bags under my brown eyes made me look years older than the thirty-one that I was. With how stiff and sore my body was from the long hours in the hospital and the tension I kept in my shoulders from the stress, I *felt* a lot older too.

My hair, which was normally shaved smooth, was scratchy and patchy. I threw on my herringbone flat cap and headed in for work. I got there early enough to get the coffee going and ready for everyone coming in for the first shift meeting. It was rare that I found myself at the diner alone, completely quiet. Friday through Sunday, we were open twenty-four hours a day. On the weekdays, we managed to close for about six hours. We used to get the occasional straggler coming in the middle of the night, but it wasn't enough to keep the place open and pay people to work all night.

With arms crossed over my chest, I surveyed the place. It had a long counter along one side with round wooden stools, square dark wood two-tops with simple arched-back chairs

that could be kept separate or pushed together for big parties. Along the wall were dark wooden benches with faded red cushions that had seen better days. It was dated, in that weird stage between retro and simply old, but it was Pop's pride and joy. It had the same look as it did when he first bought the place. I had suggested on several occasions that it might be time to renovate, but he wouldn't have it.

I often wondered what it would look like if we took it from aged to vintage. Could we pull off the full checkered floors and chrome tables with teal and red? I thought we could. The place definitely needed some color. It didn't need to be full rainbow, though I certainly wouldn't mind hosting pride nights. It would be nice to do a little something to brighten up the place.

Everything here was a reflection of Pop and the work that he'd poured into it. And a reminder of his absence and the scare we had. As much as I was ready to make some changes, it wouldn't feel right without him.

The jingle of bells let me know I was no longer alone and soon I was being embraced by my second mom. Beverly was as much a staple at Pop's as Pop. She had been working here since it opened. Her husband had been in the service with my dad, and when he died of an aneurysm, Pop offered her a job to help her take care of her family.

I let her hold me for a moment but when my eyes started to burn with tears that I hadn't shed yet, I squeezed her shoulders and pulled back.

She tilted her head back so she could connect with my gaze.
“How are you doing, Nico?”

I let out a deep sigh, knowing I was going to be asked that many times today, but this was Beverly. “I’m hanging in. Honestly, I feel like I could sleep for days, but I’m fine. I’m not the one who had a heart attack.”

“And Pop? Is he really okay? Don’t give me whatever bullshit line you plan to tell everyone else. I’ve known that bastard longer than you have, so don’t try to coddle me.”

Despite the names and the bite to her tone, I knew it came from a place of love. Beverly and Pop might as well have been siblings for how close they were and how much they fought. Bets were often placed among the staff on who they thought would win when the two went head to head.

“He is going to be okay. He’s gotta take it easy for a while, and he’s looking at some lifestyle changes that are sure to make him more miserable than he already is, but we caught it before it got worse. But, for a while there...I thought we might lose him.” I sniffed loudly, trying to hold back the emotion that threatened to drown me.

“You don’t have to be here today. It’s been a lot. You should take some time for yourself.” She patted my arm.

“Thank you, but this is exactly where I need to be. I need to get out ahead of things and get a new structure in place before it goes sideways.”

The bells rang again. Jenny and Fiona came in next. They were two of our cooks, who happened to be married. I had to admit with how unchanging and stubborn my father was, he had been the ally I didn't expect when I came out. He may not be a pride-attending, rainbow-toting parent, but he showed acceptance in his own way, in that treat-everyone-exactly-the-same kind of way.

Jenna and Fiona met on the job, and my father started harping on them about flirting in the kitchen from day one. When he was grumpy and said something gruff, you always felt like there was a lack of force behind it. I swore he smiled when he noticed them growing closer. He even insisted on hosting the rehearsal dinner at no cost.

Of course, he didn't miss the opportunity to ask when it might be my turn. The endless question. It wasn't that I didn't want that, I just hadn't had a lot of luck finding guys that wanted the whole monogamy, future, and family thing. I loved my family and hoped to have my own someday.

When the rest of our morning staff arrived, I got started. I glossed over the extent of Pop's health problems, but let them know that he would be taking it easy for a while. I was going to be filling in and any questions, decisions, ordering, problems would all be directed to me. I had to rearrange a few schedules to cover my shifts in the kitchen, freeing me up to handle the administrative side. Everyone was really receptive to the changes and happy to do their part to help fill in while Pop was out.

The diner had become a family. We were a loud one sometimes, but you never left feeling like you weren't wanted back. We were lucky to have people that were devoted to it and to my family. We had very little changeover unless outside circumstances forced someone to move on. It was a relief to know that I wasn't in this alone. Ultimately, the responsibility was on my shoulders, but I had the support of each person here. For the first time since I saw my dad in that hospital bed, pale and weak, I felt like it was going to be alright.

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Wednesdays were early release days for Parker, which somehow made those days busier. He had to be picked up two hours earlier than normal, which meant less time for me and Emily. He was happy to be out of school, but it usually made him wired. Full days of school had been a big change for him compared to Kindergarten. He needed the challenge and the activities which helped him focus his energy. On days when he was out early, it made him squirrely. I loved my kid, but sometimes he was exhausting.

Surprisingly, Julie had been the one to recommend putting him in karate. Something that could help him channel that energy and learn how to control it. At first, her off-hand suggestion bothered me, because it was one more task she was putting on me. It was always easy to offer ideas when you weren't the one having to carry them out. I had to admit, though, she might have been onto something this time.

Parker loved going. He took every command and challenge their instructor gave them and did them to the best of his ability. I'd never seen his face light up more than it did when they got to break a board in their first class. It might have been pre-snapped making it a sure thing for each student, but it didn't matter. Not when he was beaming and proud of himself. So often kids hear adults tell them they can't do things yet, or they have to wait until they are bigger, but that was an empowering moment for him.

I usually stayed and watched while he was in class. Emily had her backpack filled with toys and coloring books, enough to keep her occupied most of the time. She was an entirely different kid than Parker, content to sit and play, whereas Parker was always busy at her age. Still was really. When we got to class today, Parker told me we had to leave. They were working on a special routine for their showcase and I wasn't allowed to see it beforehand. His blue eyes shone with determination. I ruffled his short, brown hair with a chuckle and promised we wouldn't watch.

It wasn't enough time to go home and come back, or go anywhere too far but I needed something to do with Emily while we waited. I stood outside the dojo and looked around. It was situated in a business plaza with a recording studio, a small dental office, an accountant, a dialysis place, and a diner on the corner. There really wasn't much else nearby, unless we drove a few miles, but I would rather stay as close as possible. At six, I wasn't ready yet to be too far away from Parker in case something happened.

I wasn't planning on spending money today, but I could get Emily something at least. "Do you want to go to that restaurant, maybe we can get a little snack?"

Her little eyes rounded. She and her brother had the same blue as mine. A lot of her features took after her mom with her blond curls and round cheeks, but those eyes came from me. "Can we get dessert?"

I was merely a man, incapable of turning down dessert when my sweet girl looked at me like that. "Alright, we'll get dessert, but you have to eat your dinner when we get home."

She bobbed her head enthusiastically. Maybe she had me wrapped around her finger, but I couldn't bring myself to care. The diner was close enough to walk to, so I took her hand in mine and we crossed the parking lot.

The door jingled when we walked in and we were greeted immediately by an older woman with her hair up in a bun. "Welcome. Sit anywhere you like, we'll be with you in a minute."

We passed by a couple that seemed entranced with each other. One man wore a leather jacket and had dark blue hair, the other man had long brown, wavy hair and wore a shirt with a video game logo on it. I smiled to myself at the way they held hands across the table. They were probably a few years younger than me. It was nice to see, but at the same time, an ache settled within me. I missed having someone like that. Someone you could be lost in and who could transport you anywhere even if you were in an old diner having a shake.

When we sat in a booth, the old cushions sank in a little, leaving Emily's chin practically on the table. I raised a hand and the woman came right over with menus in her hand. Before I could say anything, she looked at Emily and smiled. "Well, princess, that won't do at all, will it? How about I get you a throne to sit on instead?"

She left us with menus and returned quickly with a booster seat. Em was on the petite side, but the bench seats were pretty low. She got herself situated in the booster and sat much higher than she was before.

"Thank you, ma'am. I think we would just like to see your dessert menu if that's alright."

"Sure thing, hun." She flipped my menu to the back and pointed at the bottom where it said *Shakes & Drinks*.

I scanned it and the only thing not liquid was a scoop of ice cream. I wasn't opposed to ice cream, I quite liked it, but I was expecting a few more options. "Oh, I was thinking something along the lines of a brownie or cake."

"Or pie!" Emily said excitedly.

"Sorry, hun. I'm afraid we don't really have baked goods here. But we can split a mean banana if you're looking for something a little more special."

"My daddy makes the goodest pies."

"Best, Em, not goodest." I corrected even as I felt my cheeks grow warm. *That sounded cocky as hell.* "Not trying to say that I make the best pies, just, uh, grammar."

“But you do make the *best* pies.” She looked so pleased with herself.

The old woman quirked her mouth to the side, stifling a laugh, “I bet he does.”

“A banana split would be great, thank you.” I quickly handed her the menus back, hoping she would get the hint and leave us alone, so I could crawl inside of myself. In the right situation, I could sell my pies to anyone, but being put on the spot like that was not my favorite. I loved that Emily was proud of me, and her little voice happily declaring mine as the best warmed my heart, but it was still awkward.

After a while, the lady came back and placed a rather large banana split between us with two spoons. Emily’s eyes were as big as it was. I hadn’t planned to eat anything, but there was no way she would get through all of this. Sometimes a parent had to make the hard sacrifices. I dipped my spoon in, getting chocolate ice cream, caramel sauce, and a chunk of banana. *Mmm*. Not a hot dessert, but satisfying all the same.

As I savored the flavors in my mouth, my gaze drifted around the diner. There were a handful of patrons, and then a group, standing in the corner. They seemed to be in deep discussion, and when it was done, a few hands patted a tall, broad-shouldered man on the arm. He wore a flat Irish-style cap. His hat-covered head hung down for a moment as his group dispersed. I wondered what kind of burden was weighing him down. My heart went out to him. He seemed to shake off whatever heaviness he bore and straightened, before

turning around with a forced smile on his face. It was almost passable. If I hadn't spent as much time as I did pretending to be happy in my marriage, I might not have recognized it.

I noticed he had a name badge on that matched the one our server wore. He worked here then. He must have felt my stare because he lifted his head and looked straight at me. *Shoot.* I glanced away and shoved a heaping spoonful of ice cream into my mouth. An action I immediately regretted when the coldness of the ice cream went straight to my head, making me squint, undoubtedly looking like a mad man. Somehow in the middle of my brain freeze, I managed to look back at him to reveal the facial contortions. And just my luck, he was heading straight for us.

Once my mouth was less full of ice cream, I chugged some water. Emily was happily unaware of any of my strange behavior. She had pulled one of her toy ponies out and was dipping its face into the side of the banana split making eating sounds.

“Lulu, ice cream is for people, not ponies. It can make them sick.” And I didn't know when the last time her pony's face had been cleaned. I tried not to think of all the times it had been on the floor and now its head had been in the dessert we were eating.

“But Buttercup loves ice cream, she won't get sick, promise.” She looked at me with those big eyes. It was like she was completely aware of the effect that had.

“Oh, dear. We don’t want to take that kind of risk. I happen to have some pony-safe ice cream in the back. What do you think? Should I get some for Buttercup?” A baritone voice spoke from above me.

I tilted my head up and found myself staring into the rich brown eyes of sad flat cap guy. “Oh. You don’t have to do that. We’re fine. Thank you.”

“Please, Daddy! Buttercup wants her own ice cream.” I was torn between wanting to give my baby anything that made her happy and ending the interaction with a man who probably thought I was some weirdo.

“It’s no problem at all. I’ll be right back.” He winked at me and walked away. It was one simple gesture, one he probably did to all of his customers. So why were there butterflies in my stomach? It had been a long time since anyone had given me any kind of attention. The spark was gone long before our marriage ended. Maybe I just needed to get laid, especially if such a small thing like a wink from a guy in a hat and a trimmed beard got my heart racing.

I rolled my eyes and thumped my head with the palm of my hand. *Get it together, Jason, and pretend like this isn’t the first time you’ve interacted with another human.*

“Why did you hit your head, Daddy?”

I winced internally, my captive three-year-old audience forgotten for a moment. “Brain freeze.”

Emily took a bite of ice cream and then thumped her head. “Brain freeze,” she said with a giggle. Great, I would have to break that habit now, especially after she did it two more times, completely amused.

The man came back a moment later with a small container that might normally be used for salad dressing. It held a tiny scoop of vanilla ice cream with a dot of whipped cream on top.

“Here you go. This is for Buttercup. And if you have any other questions or need anything, you can ask for me.”

Emily squealed with delight and dipped her pony’s face right into the tiny sundae. As for me, those butterflies were back in force. I flicked my gaze back to the man. This time I got a good look at him, not just those brown eyes that looked like velvety chocolate. Despite the smile on his face, he seemed...worn. Not just physically but emotionally too. I knew that look. I felt it to my core.

I reached out my hand and he took it. “Thank you. That was really very kind of you.”

Before he released my hand, I could have sworn he did the up-down, checking me out. It was probably wishful thinking. *Very* wishful thinking. I did love a person who could rock a hat, and he did.

“It’s really not a problem. Here at Pop’s, we’re happy if you’re happy.” He said the line as if he’d said it a million times. His smile wavered from fake to real and back to fake in a matter of milliseconds. My heart went out to the guy and I found myself wishing I had another chance to talk to him,

even though the logistics of the current conversation didn't require any further discourse.

Emily had completely forgotten about eating, she was too busy making sure Buttercup was getting down to the bottom of her bowl. Which was probably a good thing, she didn't need that much sugar before dinner. It also worked as a great distraction from the head-bumping game.

The man dipped his head and stepped back to leave us alone. "Wait. What's your name?" I blurted out the question and immediately felt my cheeks burn. "You said to ask for you if we needed anything, but I don't know your name." *That was logical, wasn't it?*

He stopped and gave a half-smile. Half of a real smile sure beat the full fake smile. "Right. I'm Nico. This is my family's place. So anything you need, I'm your guy."

Your guy had a nice ring to it. I cleared my throat before I got carried away by that thought.

"Your place, huh? Are you Pop then?" He seemed too young to be called Pop, though I was Daddy to two kids, so you never knew. I immediately regretted asking when his expression dropped.

"No, but I'm his son. Pop won't be in for a while, so I'm running the place. With the help of an amazing crew."

With the change in the way he held himself, it was clear that *Pop* or his absence was a part of whatever was weighing Nico

down. I wanted to say something, anything, but a sympathetic smile was all I could offer.

“Buttercup says thank you.” Emily held out the pony whose face was covered in cream.

“You’re welcome, I’m always happy to see a satisfied pony.” Nico inclined his head.

“Let me clean her up,” I took the pony from Emily, dipping my napkin in my water to get it damp, and wiped the plastic face off so it wouldn’t be sticky.

“Buttercup likes ice cream, but she likes pie the goodest. I mean best. She likes apple pie because ponies love apples.” Emily bounced the pony around so it trotted on the table.

Nico leaned over to whisper loudly, “You know what? I like apple the best too.”

“You should try my daddy’s pie. He is the bestest at making pies.”

Apparently, Emily was going to hype me up to everyone today. She could have stopped with the older woman. Instead, I sat here with heat crawling up my neck.

“Is that so?” He raked his gaze back over me.

“Do you ever go to Heartcraft?” My mouth betrayed me, I hadn’t meant to say that.

“Heartcraft?” Nico shook his head. “No, I’m not sure I know what that is.”

“It’s a farmer’s market. But they have vendors and makers as well. It’s the first and third Saturdays of the month. I, well, bake and sell pies there.”

“Oh? So you are serious about your pies then?”

I shrugged, hoping I came off nonchalant and not like I was trying to hide my burning ears in my shoulders. “A bit, yeah. If you ever find yourself there, come see me, and I’d be happy to give you a taste.”

Nico’s eyes sparkled with interest. “A taste?”

That heat continued to creep up my neck and grabbed my cheeks. “A sample, I mean. I’m a regular there. You can ask anyone and they’ll be able to point you in the right direction.”

Nico put his hands behind his back. “Alright, I might have to check it out. But if I’m going to ask about you, I think I might need a name too.”

“Yes, right. I’m Jason. This is my daughter, Emily, and you already met Buttercup.”

“Nice to meet you Jason, Emily...Buttercup.” Nico smiled for the first time since I’d seen him. A real one, a full one. Dang, he looked really good like that.

My phone started ringing and I yanked it out of my pocket. “I’m sorry, excuse me, this could be my son.”

Nico waved his hand. “Of course. It was a pleasure. I hope to see you soon, Jason.”

I answered the unknown number. “Hello?”

“Hi, Dad. We got a quick break to call our parents before we do our cool down. Can you come in a few minutes?”

“Okay, Porkchop, we’ll be there soon.”

I left a twenty on the table, more than enough to cover the ice cream and a tip. Emily and I walked back across the parking lot to the dojo. I glanced back at the diner, wondering what just happened. I was glad to finally get my awkward self out of there, but a part of me wished I could have stayed and watched Nico a little longer. Or talked to him, because that sounded less stalkery.



Nico

The brief exchange I'd had with Jason and his adorable little girl was the highlight of my day. Funny how one interaction with a pony could play on repeat in my head. Even an hour later as I was wiping down the counter, I felt my lip tug up on one side. Emily wasn't the only adorable one of the pair.

Jason had a nerdy cute vibe that I loved. His short brown hair was just shaggy enough that it stood up in different directions. It was that perfectly mussed look that some people spent lots of time and product to perfect. Total Lord Morpheus bedhead aesthetic. Yum. I may have re-watched *The Sandman* a few times just for him. I wondered what Jason looked like rolling out of bed.

On top of that, he wore thin, black-framed glasses that made his blue eyes pop. Men in glasses were my weakness. I would take Clark Kent over Superman any day.

The guy had kids though. He was probably married or cohabitating at the very least. But I wasn't imagining the blush that crawled up his neck at him offering me a taste. I wouldn't get in the middle of a relationship. I went down that road unintentionally before and it got ugly.

Still, I was intrigued and I found myself wanting to see him again. If only to confirm my suspicions so I could let it go.

What possible reason could I have? Oh! Pie!

“Beverly? Have you ever been to the Heartcraft Market?”

She looked up from the table she was clearing. “Yes, of course. It’s a cute outdoor market over in Grove Hills.”

Grove Hills used to be unincorporated land full of orange groves until developers came in and cleared them all to make way for new housing developments. The population grew enough and with higher-income residents that it eventually became its own city. My dad had very strong opinions about what they did to the farmers and their land that he refused to step foot in Grove Hills if he could help it.

They got the newer chain restaurants and stores there compared to our aging part of town. I hadn’t been in a while but it might be time to go back.

“I think I might check it out.”

“Oh? Looking for anything in particular...or anyone?” She leaned her hip against the counter, wiggling her eyebrows at me. Had she overheard my exchange with Jason?

“One of our customers mentioned that he sells pie there,” I said as nonchalantly as possible.

“Pie?” Beverly smirked.

“Yes. I thought it might be a good idea...for the diner.”

“For the diner, of course.” She was full-on grinning now. “Well, I hear they are the best.”

“Really?” Maybe there was something to him if she’d heard about it too.

Beverly looked at her trimmed nails and replied without looking up. “Yup. That’s the word on the street.”

I was about to ask her more about it when a tray clattered to the floor, glasses shattering on the ground. *Shit!* I grabbed the caution stand to block the area, while Joey stood there staring at the floor. He was our youngest on staff at seventeen. I didn’t know his whole story, but Pop hired him when he heard that Joey was having a hard time at home.

“I am so sorry, Mr. Leone. I screwed up. I guess I should just go.” His arms wrapped around his middle and he seemed to withdraw into himself. The pained expression he wore gutted me.

“Hey, kid. It’s no problem, really. It happens. Go grab a broom and dustpan, we’ll get it cleaned up. No big deal.”

He shook his head and I saw his eyes begin to mist. “I’ll take care of this and hand in my apron.”

“Joey.” He looked up at me at the sound of his name. “You’re not going anywhere unless you want to. We like having you here, you’re part of the family. Besides, Pop would be really sad to hear that you left and he doesn’t need that right now.”

Was I playing dirty? Maybe a little. There was truth in it too. I couldn’t bear the thought of breaking any bad news to him right now. Jason and his daughter had been a nice distraction from everything, but every second of watching the blips and beeps on the monitor at the hospital came back to me. It wasn’t just about my dad though. If the kid really didn’t

want to be here, I wouldn't stop him, but he looked like he needed someone to fight for him too. With Pop gone, that fell to me.

“Yeah?” His brows raised and hope started to trickle in.

“Go grab the broom, kid.”

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I wiped my sweaty hands on my dress slacks, trying to calm my nerves. My throat felt too tight with the tie I was wearing. It had been a while since I wore a suit during the day. I'd dressed up for special occasions, but my daily wear was much more casual. Especially, since I was busy running around with the kids or taking care of the house. I tried to keep my knee from bouncing out of control while I sat in the waiting room to be called.

“Mr. Webber? They are ready to see you now. Just go down the hallway, it's the second door on the left.”

My heart raced as I stood and blew out a breath, trying to calm myself. As I followed her instructions, I went through the answers I had been repeating in my head. I hadn't been on an interview since starting my last job, before the kids.

Two older men stood on the other side of the conference table and I already knew this was a mistake. They looked like they had lifetime memberships in the good ol' boys club. But I

could be wrong. Who was I to judge based on appearances? I pushed my glasses up my nose, a habit even when it wasn't needed, but it gave me something to do before I reached out and shook their hands.

“Thank you for coming in, Mr. Webber. Please have a seat.”

I did, grateful for the table concealing the fact that I was squeezing my leg with my hand. I forced a smile and confidence that I didn't feel. “Thank you both for the opportunity.”

“Yes, well, we'll see how this goes, won't we?” The man on the left looked down at me, making me feel small. They sat across from me with flat looks on their faces that said their minds were already made up.

“Tell us about your experience.”

“I graduated with a B.A. in Accounting and worked for Hewitt & Holmes for two years in their Accounts Receivables. I have letters of recommendation from both partners. They are attached to my file.” I would have gone to them to ask for a job again, but they didn't have an opening for me.

“Uh-huh. I see that. But you left H & H over six years ago and then your resume ends. What have you been doing in all that time?”

The question I was dreading. I listed a lot of my skills and tasks that I used regularly, but it didn't look the same on paper as an employer. “I have been a stay-at-home dad. It was important for us to give them a solid foundation.”

“And you chose to stay at home? What about your wife?” He looked perplexed like he couldn’t figure out why any man would want to choose to be with his kids.

“She was building her career as a lawyer and working up through the firm so it made more sense for me to be home. It’s been an honor to do it and I wouldn’t trade it for anything. It’s not an easy job either.” I tried to keep the bite out of my voice. I always hated when people made assumptions about being home with the kids and how it was a lazy and easy option. It’s the hardest and best thing I’ve ever done.

“Yes. Well, a lot has changed in six years. The software changes regularly. We are looking for someone who can move in seamlessly and has a solid understanding of the programs and procedures we use.” Old man number one replied.

“I understand. Technology isn’t a problem for me. I’ve kept an eye on the software and use a smaller version for myself. I’m a quick study and can catch on easily.” Every word I said made me realize how little interest I had in going back to justifying myself and my work to twelve different supervisors.

“Thanks again, Mr. Webber. We’ll be in touch.” The two stood together, signaling the end of the interview. *Thank God.* I shook their hands and left. As soon as I walked outside, I loosened my tie and yanked it off. It was stifling. The tie, the office, the single-minded old men. If they were so bothered by the fact that I chose to be an active father to my kids, then they would flip their lids when they found out I wasn’t straight. I couldn’t imagine feeling comfortable bringing a partner that

wasn't a cishet woman to a company party. Fuck them. I didn't need that.

Except, I needed...something. I sat on a bench in the parking lot and ran my hands through my hair. What was I going to do? It was desperation that brought me here in the first place. The thought of having to go back and work a nine-to-five made my stomach sour.

When I decided on a B.A. in accounting, I figured it would give me something solid to work with. That there was always a need for people who dealt with finances, and math came easy to me. In truth, I didn't have a dream job I could envision when I was in school. The one thing I knew for sure even when I was little was that I wanted to have a family. Nothing in my life felt right until I held Parker in my arms for the first time. When that tiny hand wrapped around my finger, I was on top of the world. He and Emily were my dream. The corporate world didn't have anything on that feeling.

I pulled out my phone to turn the sound back on, not wanting it to go off during my interview. I was done a lot earlier than I told Julie I would be. Part of me was tempted to enjoy the thirty minutes of me-time, but after the bad taste in my mouth from that interview I just wanted to see my baby girl. She was the light that I needed.

Me: Hey, I'm done. Are you ready for me to pick up Em?"

Julie: Sure, that would be great. Roberts just announced a new client and set a team meeting in an hour. If you pick

her up, it will give me time to prep.

Me: Ok. Be there soon.

Any other day, I might have been annoyed that Julie had our daughter for such a short time and was already ready to hand her back. At this point, though, I didn't care. I knew work hours were a challenge anyway, so I had been surprised when Julie agreed to let me drop her off at the office. At least it made it easier that Parker was at school. The two of them together were a lot more to handle.

When I got to Julie's law firm, I was waved back by the receptionist who gave me that sad smile she always had for me since the divorce. I liked Kathy, we had gotten along pretty well in all the times I had been here. She knew what the lawyers were like and how demanding their schedules were. Kathy's expression always told me she understood the decision that was made. I had often reassured her that it was a good move for both of us. It was. Julie was free to focus on her career and I was free of the exhaustion and fights over her priorities and not feeling supported.

I knocked twice on her door and she called out, "Come in."

When I pushed the door open, I saw Emily sitting on the floor, bent over a coloring book on a coffee table. Julie's office was big. She had a sitting area with a couch and two chairs across from it. Her desk sat in front of the wall-to-wall windows. The sunlight gleamed over her as she stared at her computer, not looking up when I came in. She wore a silky beige blouse with her hair up in a tight bun. Julie looked like a

badass boss lady. And she was. It was part of her appeal that enamored me as a young, dumb twenty-year-old that thought with his dick.

“Hey, Jules.”

Emily flicked her head up, her eyes glowing when she saw me. “Daddy! Look what I made! I colored a picture of Mommy.”

She hopped up and ran over, showing off a picture with a blobby human-like figure in front of a box. It could have been Julie’s desk or the computer. “That’s great, sweetie! Did you show Mommy?”

“Mommy, I made you!” She ran behind the desk to show her mom. Julie glanced up at me before looking at the picture our daughter waved around excitedly.

“Thank you, I love it. Do I get to keep it?” Julie asked. My heart softened a little. She wasn’t a bad person and moments like that reminded me of the good times. Not enough to wish we were back together—I knew we were better apart—but enough to cast out some of the shadows often associated with our interactions.

“Thanks again for watching her on such short notice,” I said.

Julie placed the picture on her desk and walked around it. She stopped in front of me, crossing her arms in front of her chest. “Sure. You caught me at a good time, I’m glad it worked out. How did it go?”

I shook my head slightly. “No good.”

“What? Why? You are more than qualified. You’re intelligent and a hard worker.” More compliments than I had gotten from her in a while, with a little time and distance between us. Though, I might not have complimented her much in the end either.

“Thanks, but all they see is the gap in my resume. They look at that and think that I’ve been an unemployed couch potato.” I shrugged, trying to play it off like it didn’t hurt. I didn’t want the job, but it still sucked to be viewed that way.

“They don’t know their ass from their heads.” On that, we definitely agreed. “We have some openings here if you want a job.”

“Yeah, thanks, but no thanks. I don’t think it would be wise.” Probably the worst idea ever. We didn’t work well together, that’s what got us to where we were. “Besides, I don’t think I actually want to be back in the corporate world. I like being with Parker and Lulu. I think I have to figure out something I can do from home.”

Julie took a step closer and lowered her voice. “Is this a money thing? I send you child support, is it enough?”

I waved her off. “The kids are fine. Anything they want or need, they get. The rest isn’t your problem.”

“Okay. I still care about you too, you know. I’m here if you need anything.”

Feeling like I was still having to depend on her money was something I didn't want. I felt icky even taking the child support that she offered, but at least that was one way she knew how to provide. She wasn't super touchy-feely and was often absent, so to her, it probably made up for it. Julie came from a family that didn't express their affection. I never heard them tell each other they loved them. Financial stability was their love language. It was a hard lesson for me to learn and so far removed from my own love language. We were never a good fit, but it took me a long time to see it.

"I appreciate that, but I'll be fine." I didn't know how yet, but I would figure something out.

"There are donuts in the lounge. You're welcome to grab some on the way out, take one for Parker too." Julie offered.

"Yay, donuts!" Emily bounced and clapped her hands. My little bubbly fountain of joy.

"Thanks, Jules," I whispered as I kissed Julie on the cheek before walking out with Emily's hand in mine.



After picking up Parker, working on homework, and getting the two settled into bed, I began my routine of making pie crust. I set out a bowl full of ice water, flour, salt, and grabbed a container of nearly frozen cubes of butter from the freezer.

The pretty golden chunks always looked so enticing. I used imported butter from Ireland. It had a richer flavor and that bright yellow color that came from the grass-fed cows there. It added a little extra color to the dough and enhanced the flavor in every bite.

With my flour and salt measured out, I began to cut in the butter, using my fingertips. Sometimes I would speed things up by using a pastry knife, but it didn't have the same effect as gently flattening the fat between my fingers as I tossed it in the flour. Leaving larger, flat pieces of butter made the crust flakier. The trick was not playing with it too much. I didn't want it to melt with the heat of my hands. The process was soothing to me, and after the stress of the day, I needed it. Some people had meditation or crystals, I had pie.

I added a tablespoon of ice water at a time until it formed a loose dough. Once I was satisfied, I dumped it on my silicone mat and formed it into a ball, then cut it into portions for each individual crust. I was able to get four crusts out of each double two-crust batch. Shaping each portion into rounds, I flattened them slightly until they were thick disks. It was a lot easier to store when they were flat rounds instead of balls of dough. Each one got wrapped in plastic wrap and set aside. Then I started again. Over and over until I had enough crust for twenty double-crust pies or forty single-crust pies. Into the freezer they went with the batch I did last night.

In the off weeks between market days, I prepped and made crust, since they kept well in the freezer. During the weeks that led into market days, I worked on my fillings. It was a process

that had been working well for me. It gave me a schedule that I could maintain and I looked forward to it. My days were often busy and loud, not that I minded it, but having the time to myself that was methodic and quiet helped calm my mind and my spirit.

There was no way I would feel the peace it brought me if I was working in a cubicle being looked down on by old men that thought they were better than everyone. Going back to work had been on my mind for months. Going to that interview had been awful, but I knew now more than ever that I could never be content at a place like that. Even more so, knowing that I had to leave my babies with other people for me to be miserable at a job I would hate. There had to be another way.

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“Are you serious? That’s all you can give me for that price? It’s barely enough to get through breakfast. I know for certain that was not the deal you had with Pop.” I pinched my nose as I held back the slew of cuss words I was ready to fling at the guy on the other end of the phone. The more I covered for my dad, the more I came to understand the amount of work he poured into the place. He made it seem effortless most of the time.

“I have history with Pop. He’s been a solid, reliable customer for as long as we’ve been in business. But I don’t know you. You have no credit with me. This is the standard rate, take it or leave it.” The butcher that supplied the meat to our diner was trying to gouge me on the price, in particular the ham, which he claimed had gone up across the industry.

“I’m not some random new owner, I’m Pop’s son.” I bit out. With the silence on the other end, I knew arguing wasn’t going to change anything, and I didn’t have the time or resources to

look for a new supplier. Besides, Pop said he was the best and would be horrified to find out that I talked to someone else. “Fine. It’s fine. Charge the diner.”

“You got it. We’ll have your usual delivery out by noon.”

Bastard. I shoved my phone down on the desk and added the expense to the program on the computer. In truth, we could afford it, but I was hoping to start setting aside funds toward a remodel. Or maybe I’d have to do a loan. I cringed as I imagined broaching the subject with Pop. He was not a fan of owing anybody anything unless it was favors. But owing a bank? *Fuhgeddaboutit.*

I’d spent the last hour behind the computer and I was getting twitchy. I didn’t mind the administrative stuff, well, not entirely, the numbers tended to swim on screen. It wasn’t my favorite, but it was necessary. It was also new to me. I’d sat with my dad sometimes as he went over things with me, but mostly, I was used to being active. Hopping around the kitchen, jumping on dishes, or checking on customers. Whatever was needed. There was no job there that I hadn’t done.

I walked out into the dining room, needing to do something that wasn’t plunking at computer keys. After washing my hands, I grabbed a sanitize cloth to wipe down an empty table. Beverly came up behind me and smacked the back of my head.

“Ow. What the hell? I’m the boss here, I don’t think you should get to smack me around.” It didn’t hurt, it was

something she'd done to me since I was a bratty kid. I was *not* a bratty kid anymore. I was a grown-ass, *sometimes bratty*, man.

“What are you doing?” She put her hands on her hips and cocked a brow.

“What does it look like? I’m cleaning a table.” I rolled my eyes.

“Don’t you sass me, Junior.” Her lip curved up slightly belying her tone. “You’re the boss, as you just said. So you don’t need to be out here bussing and wiping down.”

I shrugged. “I don’t mind. I like doing it. Besides, I’m feeling a little antsy, like there’s more I should be doing.”

Beverly’s expression softened. “Sometimes, you are so much like him. But listen here, not a single person in this place thinks you aren’t doing enough. They know you, they see how much you give. Just like Pop. Too much at times. His body finally forced him to slow down, but you don’t need to wait for a wake-up call like that. You’re doing great, we’re all here to help you, but you need to give yourself a break too. Have you even taken a day off since Pop got out of the hospital?”

It had been ten days. I came in during different shifts to check in, but I’d worked every one of those days. It wasn’t a lot. I certainly had worked more consecutive days in the past, and I had big shoes to fill. The fear of disappointing Pop or making him feel as if he couldn’t trust me with his baby compelled me to work harder than ever before.

“You took entirely too long to think about that, which tells me exactly what I need to know.” Her wrinkled eyes looked over me and a devious grin stretched her lips.

“What? Why do you look like that?” I looked down to make sure nothing was spilled or stained on me.

“It’s Saturday,” Beverly said as if that were answer enough.

“Obviously. We’re in the calm between brunch and lunch. We’re about to get busy.”

“No.” She waved her hand between us. “*We* are not going to be busy. But we,”—she swung her arm out to the dining hall behind her—“will be busy and we will handle it just fine, like we always do.”

“I don’t follow.”

“I love you, Nico, but you are dense sometimes. I’m invoking the power given to me by...me and kicking you out. Go spend the day outside. Go for a walk. Or maybe, I hear there’s a great farmer’s market in Grove Hills.”

“Grove Hills? Why Grove Hills?” She was acting so strangely. What was she up to?

“I hear they have pie. You like pie.”

Pie? What? Oh! Cute, nerdy pie guy with his daughter. I may have used the image of him and his Sandman hair to fuel my distraction and help me take the edge off. Maybe a couple times. I felt heat prickle beneath my skin. I thought about seeing him again but didn’t think it would actually happen. I didn’t even know if he was available or even played for the

same team. Now that she had spelled it out for me, because maybe I was a little dense, my curiosity was certainly piqued.

“You know? I do like pie.”

That knowing smirk almost made me want to take the words back to refuse her the satisfaction, but the idea of seeing Jason again overrode the need to prove her wrong.

“Uh-huh, I thought so. Go. Get yourself some pie. We’ll be fine here. And besides, maybe we won’t be the only ones getting busy soon.” She winked at me.

I couldn’t help the chuckle that popped out of me. I kissed her on the cheek. “Thanks, Bev.”

It was weird walking away when I knew the lunchtime rush was coming, but Bev was right, I needed a break. The sun was shining, it was a beautiful spring day. Summer usually came early here in the Inland Empire, but March had a few weeks of California perfection. When was the last time I let myself enjoy a day like this?

Well, maybe not so long ago. I didn’t live and breathe the diner like my dad did, not until I took over for him. It was easy to see how all-consuming it could become when you felt the weight of the business and everyone that worked there on your shoulders. At least growing up, when it seemed like Pop was always busy, he still had us to come home to. With my apartment empty and lonely, and the excuse of checking on the diner, it was easy to stay longer than necessary. I didn’t want that, though. I wanted a life and someone to share it with. It

had been a while since I'd been with anyone. My longest dry spell yet.

Two years since I last dated someone, but Rick didn't want anything serious. At the time, I was feeling the looming presence of my thirtieth birthday approaching, my life flashing before my eyes. There were so many things I hoped to accomplish by the time I turned thirty; marriage, family, a career outside of the diner. And none of those things came to pass. When I brought up the subject of kids with Rick, who was a few years younger than me, he dropped me faster than a stripper on a pole. Now, I've crossed into some weird too-old-but-not-old-enough window for most guys I tried to meet on Grindr or in person. I wasn't looking to be anybody's *Daddy*, not like that. I was lonely though. I'd given up on dating for a while, but remembering the pie man had me thinking it might be time to try again.

Hell, I'd be happy with a hookup right about now, just to have someone else's hands on my cock than my own. Okay, not really. I wasn't one to dick and dash, not anymore. I liked the feeling of holding someone in my arms and feeling them relax into me. A flutter of something swirled around in me as I thought of having that with Jason. *Ugh!* What was I doing? Simping after a guy I talked to for a few minutes. A guy who may or may not be married, or queer for that matter. Those minor facts didn't seem to do anything to settle the butterflies.

When I pulled up to the library and saw a parking lot full of canopies and booths, I was surprised to see the size of the event and the number of people shopping. It was so busy I had

to park two streets over. I tried to convince myself I was simply out for a stroll on a lovely day, to take in the local food and craft scene. No big deal. My stomach didn't believe me.

I didn't plan to come here today, or I might have worn something different. Instead, I had a blue short sleeve polo with the diner's logo on the front pocket. I was wearing my charcoal gray Irish cap. I wasn't Irish, but I always felt the style flattered my face and it protected my bare head in the sun. At least I managed to trim my beard this morning before I went to work. I kept up with that regularly, to make sure it didn't grow long enough to shed while cooking.

My heart raced with each step I took. *Was I really doing this?* With my hands in my pockets, in an attempt to look casual, I wandered through the Heartcraft Market. Each booth had something unique. There were farmers or gardeners with produce and flowers, but also a lot of handmade items. A rack full of knitted beanies and scarves. A table covered in honey and beeswax products. An acrylic shield with a man wielding a chainsaw behind it as he intricately carved wooden stumps into animals. Jewelry, pottery, glasswork. I had no idea we had so many local artists with such a wide variety of skills. This was much bigger than the small farmer's market I had envisioned.

A burgundy banner was strung across the top of a canopy with a mouth-watering pie in the middle that read *Webber Pie Company* and beneath it, the motto, *Love Baked into Every Crust*. Webber? Was that him? Everything looked professional, a lot more than some of the other vendors. It looked like a

business and not an individual's hobby. I was about to move on, afraid I was in the wrong place when he stood up from behind one of the tables with a brown box in hand. That purposely ruffled brown hair and those glasses. He smiled at his customer and that smile nearly knocked me off my feet. So much better in person than in the playback I'd been using in my head.

Jason wore a burgundy apron with his logo on it. He had a thin-average build, and as I felt myself moving closer to him, I realized he was maybe half a foot shorter than me. Height was hard to distinguish when people were sitting in the diner booths, especially since the cushions had been sagging for a while. I stood there, trying my hardest not to gawk at him, or picture him wearing nothing under that apron, as he finished the transaction with the old woman.

When she left, his eyes met mine at last and rounded with recognition. Red started to crawl up his neck and I wanted so badly to see if the rest of him blushed like that. *Down boy*, I scolded myself.

“Oh? Nico, right? Hi.”

Jason remembering my name was nice, but hearing him say it, even better. “Yup, that's me.”

“What are you doing here?” Surprise colored the tone, and I couldn't decide if that was a good thing or bad.

I opened my mouth to respond, but he waved his hand, cutting me off.

“I’m sorry, not what I meant to say. Please ignore that. It’s nice to see you again. How can I help you?” Jason forced his voice into a professional tone. I liked the surprised one better. Somehow, knowing I threw him off made my skin tingly.

“I thought I’d stop by, check the place out. I was lured by the promise of a taste,”—his cheeks pinked and I let the suggestion linger a little longer than necessary to watch him squirm—“of pie.”

Jason blew out a breath and fidgeted with the edge of his apron. He let out a nervous chuckle. “Right. Pie. I have that.”

I pointed at the graphic on his apron, “I should hope so.”

He cleared his throat. “Well, I’m afraid I’m out of samples and it’s too late in the day to cut one up, only to waste it. So, I only have whole pies available for purchase. Uh, sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I have absolutely no problem whatsoever enjoying dessert.” I patted my stomach to emphasize. Besides, I was practically ready to buy whatever he had, to taste something made by his hands. *Get it together, man.*

“Okay. Great. Apple, right?” He had his brow quirked behind his glasses.

“You remembered?” What did that mean? Had I made an impression on him as much as he had on me? Or did he merely have a thing for knowing people’s preferences? It was a great skill to have. We had our regulars at the diner, most of them *were* the regulars, but they loved it when you knew their orders.

Jason folded his hands in front of him, which drew my attention dangerously low, and I forced myself to keep eye contact. His cheeks were pink but his eyes shone brightly. “What’s your poison? Classic, crumb, mixed with other fruits, or are you feeling a little...adventurous?”

“You know, any other day and I would say classic, but adventurous feels like the theme for the day.” I had already taken a leap to come here, might as well go all the way.

One corner of Jason’s mouth tilted up, and I could see a glimpse of a playful side that had me thinking all kinds of naughty things.

“Alright. I’ve got just the thing. It’s new this week, an evolution in my recent exploration of flavor combinations. But that’s all I’m telling you. I’m just asking that you try at least three bites. The first one might surprise you, the second might give you pause, but the third bite...that’s where the magic happens.” Jason seemed to be more comfortable and confident than he’d been a few moments ago and I liked it.

“Okay, I am definitely intrigued. I’m in.”

Jason winked at me. Winked. Behind those glasses. Sending me all the nerdy cuteness a man could handle. While he busied himself with retrieving a brown bakery box, I found myself not ready to leave or for this oddly alluring interaction to end.

“Where are the kids today? You have two, right? I think you mentioned a son, and of course, I met Emily. She’s adorable by the way. And I can’t forget Buttercup.” And I was rambling. *What the fuck, Nico?*

“Yes, two kids. Emily and Parker. They are with their mom today.”

Mom? Shit. Of course. I guess that answered that question and I was barking up the wrong tree. How did I bow out gracefully and not make this weirder than it probably already was?

“Yeah, my ex,” Jason added, emphasizing the *ex* part, which I found interesting. Perhaps the door wasn’t closed quite yet.

“Ex, huh? Is it recent?”

Jason shrugged. “About six months now.”

At least he wasn’t fresh out and looking for a rebound. I didn’t want to be that guy. Not that he was looking for me to be that guy. “That sucks, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks, but we’re better off this way. It’s just made certain things a little trickier.” Jason waved his hand. “You don’t need to hear about that. I’m good. I’m happy with how things are.”

I wanted to hear about it. I wanted to know everything about this man who made adventurous pies and wore an apron like a boss. “Yeah. Sometimes it’s just not meant to be. Listen, I know we don’t really know each other, but if you need someone to talk to, I’m available.”

I shoved my hands in my pockets, wondering why I offered that to a practical stranger. Jason eyed me carefully. I would give anything to know what thoughts he had going through his head.

“Are you doing anything now?” He asked.

“Well, no, not really. I was kicked out of the diner.”

“Kicked out?” Jason smirked. “How does that happen? Aren’t you like *running the place*?”

“Basically. But my staff decided I needed a break. They were probably right.”

“It’s good you have people looking out for you. Work can easily consume you until it’s taken over your life and you miss out on the important things. Believe me. I’m glad your break brought you here, though.”

“You know? I am too.”

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“I’ll be finished here in about thirty minutes? Would you want to stay? After I’m done, maybe we could grab a drink?”

“Yeah?” Nico’s brown eyes glowed. “Sure. I’d be happy to.”

I didn’t know where my boldness came from, but I liked the way Nico looked at me. I caught his gaze drift down a few times and I didn’t hate it. Not one bit. It’d been a while since I had the kind of attention he was giving me. Even longer since I’d been on the receiving end of a man’s attention. I missed it.

Nico was big, solid. He had a broad, barrel chest and strong-looking arms. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d gotten wrapped up in big arms and pressed against a hard body. The thought made me shiver.

Nico took up a lot of space in my booth. Not only physically, but I was extremely aware of him. He sat in my folding chair while I talked to customers and I could feel the

heat on my back under his gaze. I may have leaned forward against the table and popped my ass out more than necessary, knowing he was watching. The shuffling I heard in the fabric chair was amusing. I was imagining his body reacting to seeing mine. A thought that made me want to tease him even more. When I asked him to hand me products, our fingers brushed against each other and it was electric, at least it seemed so to me.

The relief I felt at the closing of the market was astronomical. I had this hulk of a guy hanging around simply because I asked. I wasn't sure what I expected would happen, except that I didn't think he would stay.

"I've gotta grab my car to load up. Do you mind keeping an eye on everything for a few minutes?" Normally, Dash was my eyes on the pies guy.

"No problem, at all. I will gladly tackle anyone trying to get their hands on your goods." Nico said.

My cheeks burned and I turned away and fled before he noticed the way I reacted. Did he mean that the way it sounded? Because it sounded—*sigh*—really nice actually. I was never one for possessive types, but after the lack of affection and fight for our relationship towards the end with Julie, I wouldn't mind having someone fight *for* me.

When I returned, I found Nico standing there with his thick arms crossed over his broad chest with a grin on his face.

"What? What are you smiling about?"

“Oh, nothing really. I was just chatting with your neighbor.” He pointed to the booth next to mine.

Dash gave a partial salute with a devious look. “Okay, then. I just need to load up and then I’m free. For a little while at least, I’m not sure when Julie’s going to be bringing the kids back.”

“Let’s do this. Do you have a certain order? What goes first?” Nico unfolded his arms and his expression turned serious.

“Uh. Thanks, but no. You’re supposed to be taking a break today and I’m not going to be the one that ruins that.”

Nico grabbed a stack of boxes near him and started making his way to the trunk of my Flex. “I’m not *at* work. That’s the difference. And besides, the faster we get you out of here, the faster we can have that drink. It’s purely selfish motivation.”

I laughed and shook my head. I couldn’t possibly turn down a man like him eager to spend time with me. “Fine, you win. But I have a system, so if you’re going to help, you have to do it my way.”

“Lead the way, Pie Man,” Nico said.

We were done in half the time. My heart raced as I shut the trunk, before deflating as I felt the sun on my back. “Shoot.”

“What’s wrong?” Nico appeared at my side, looking down at me. He was close, close enough to get a whiff of musk, a uniquely male scent that had me wanting more.

“I don’t really like leaving everything in the car unattended. That’s my livelihood in there.”

“Shit,” Nico muttered. He took off his cap, revealing his bald head that he rubbed, before putting his cap back. My focus lingered, wishing it were my hands that rubbed over his head. I wondered if it felt smooth or fuzzy. “No big deal. We can rain check maybe.”

“If that’s what you want. Or we could...never mind.” I stopped myself before letting the words loose. I didn’t even know him, but I wanted to.

Nico reached out and squeezed my arm, “We could what?”

“It’s nothing. I’m getting ahead of myself here. Just forget it. We’ll try again another time.”

He took a step closer and I felt him looming over me in a way that left me feeling tingly and hot. “I’d like to know what you were going to suggest. Let me decide if it’s too much or not.”

I fiddled with the edge of my apron. Here goes. “What if we get that drink at my place? I don’t have anything fancy, but I have beer and wine.”

Nico’s eyes flared with interest, but he hesitated. It was a bad idea. I’d pushed too far. It sounded like a proposition. As much as I wanted to know what those strong arms felt like around me, I wasn’t ready to invite him up to my bedroom.

I rushed to clarify. “Just a drink, that’s all. Julie could bring my kids back at any time.”

Nico visibly relaxed, the pressure was off. “That sounds perfect.”

My heart felt like it was trying to escape my chest every time I looked in the mirror and saw him following me. Was I actually doing this? I hadn’t officially started dating since the divorce, though I thought about it often. I wanted to be touched and admired, and hell, I’d like to get fucked. But the kids were my priority, always. Though my mom prodded me enough and reminded me that the right person would take me as a whole package and she was available to babysit. With how eager I was to spend more time with Nico, maybe I *was* ready. Somehow I went from not dating at all to inviting a man back to my house. I was simultaneously relieved and frustrated that our time would be cut short.

I pressed the clicker on my visor to open the garage door and saw Nico pull up and park at the curb. He was here. At my house. I didn’t even have his number or know his last name. The guy could be anyone. He could be a creep or worse...a bore. No. I was overthinking it. Or maybe I had underthought it initially and was now catching up. Either way, he gave off good vibes that made me feel comfortable or I wouldn’t have done this in the first place. *Right? Right.*

I drew in a deep breath, trying to steady myself, and exited my car. Nico was already walking up the drive, hands in his pockets, staring up at the house. It was too big, but we had gotten in when the neighborhood was under development and got a great price on it. Now, the mortgage was killing me, but it was Parker and Emily’s home. They grew up here and had

gone through enough changes. I hated the thought of displacing them too. *The kids! Shoot!*

“This is really nice,” Nico said.

“Uh, thanks. Just a warning. I have kids.” I tried to remember the state of the house before I left that morning.

Nico chuckled. “I’m aware.”

“No. I mean, kids have stuff like toys, and blankets, and so many freaking water cups. So, uh, judge lightly?” I winced. This was a terrible idea.

Nico looked like he wanted to reach out and touch me, and God, I wanted that. Instead, he dropped his arm. “No worries, it’s fine. You and your family live in your house, there’s nothing wrong with that. I think I would be more concerned if I walked in and everything was pristine and untouched. Besides, I may have a glass or two on my counter and I’ve got no one to blame but me.”

His warm smile removed some of the panic but did nothing to slow my racing heart. We unloaded all of the perishables, but I decided to leave everything else for now, the anticipation was killing me.

I invited Nico to sit at the kitchen island where I had four tall stools with backs. I was always afraid Emily was going to topple out of them, but she liked sitting up there to watch me when I was cooking or prepping. It was weird to have a man there now. In the house, in general. But good weird. I liked the way he looked in my kitchen.

“Beer or wine? Or I think I have CapriSun if you’re really feeling wild.”

Nico laughed. “Is it weird that a juice pouch actually sounds perfect right now?”

“Not weird at all, welcome to my life.” I smiled as I opened the fridge and pulled out the lower drawer. The kid draw held all the snacks they were allowed to grab for themselves; string cheese, yogurts, sliced apples, and grabbed two of the juice pouches.

Watching Nico with his big hands trying to shove a thin straw into a plastic pouch did funny things to me. It was probably the cutest and weirdly hottest thing I’d seen in a long time. No, I was wrong. Watching him drink from the pouch that looked tiny in his hands was even better.

“Damn, that takes me back. It tastes the same as it did when I was a kid. Why can’t a grown man just buy juice pouches whenever the fuck he wants? You’re lucky. You’ve got an excuse to get whatever throwback foods you desire. If you gave me a pizza Lunchable, I’d be yours for life.”

My cheeks burned at the joking suggestion as I slurped the clear, sweet juice. I cleared my throat, “So, tell me about the diner. How long have you been there?”

Nico shifted so his knees were turned toward mine. He had one foot touching the floor, the other resting on the bar in a casual, easy position that looked like he belonged there. “Shit, my whole life really, but legally started working there at fifteen.”

“I’m surprised you stayed that long. Have you ever wanted to do anything else?” I asked.

Nico shrugged his big shoulders. “Sure. I had dreams of doing a million different things, but the diner is more than a job. It’s a family and not just because it’s Pop’s place. I have equally hated the closeness of the staff and knew I would miss it if I went anywhere else. I’m honestly not sure what I would be doing if I wasn’t there.”

“I could see that. And now you’re the manager? Is that right?”

A cloud seemed to cast over Nico for a moment and I regretted the question. “I’m sorry, ignore me.”

“No. That’s alright. It’s just been a difficult couple of weeks, and I’ve been good at keeping myself busy, trying not to think about it. My dad, Pop, he had a heart attack recently.”

I placed my hand on his that rested on the edge of the island. “I’m so sorry. Is he...?”

“He’s alive.” Nico quickly answered my unspoken question. “That old man is too stubborn to let something like this take him out. But he’s been forced to take a step back and I was thrown into his place without time to prepare. So, it’s been a challenging shift. I’m lucky enough to have a reliable crew though, so that’s helped a lot.”

“A reliable crew, but no one that bakes? How is that possible?” I teased, trying to pull him away from the heavier

subject. It was a lot to suddenly take on that kind of responsibility, all while worrying about his father.

Nico laughed. A hearty sound that filled my ears and warmed my chest. “Okay. Funny story. Pop’s always been the cook of the family. He started out as a CSS, Culinary Specialist in a submarine. He learned how to get creative with limited supplies and how to make meals for a lot of hungry folks. Mom, on the other hand, is hopeless in the kitchen. It’s comical really. Many a dish have been burned while we waited for Pop to come home. We used to have a big oven at the diner that we planned to use specifically for baked goods. I wasn’t there when it happened, and the story changes and grows each time, but essentially, there was a fire that put the oven out of commission and my mom had a hand in it. Pop never bothered to replace it and the other ovens we have are used constantly for entrees and sides. So he swore off baked goods. Which... actually was the reason I came by the market today.”

“Oh?” I didn’t know how to feel about that. I liked the idea that he sought me out simply to see me.

Nico brushed his foot against my calf. “Well, not the only reason.”

There was no way I was reading into that. That wasn’t a bro-friend gesture. I could have convinced myself that the other little things I noticed were merely me projecting, but not that. And I liked it, a lot. There had been a shift at some point and I was curious why. “What changed?”

“What do you mean?”

“You talked to Dash and something changed.”

Nico laughed, “I wasn’t sure if I had a chance with you, but Dash told me he’d caught you checking him out on occasion.”

My ears burned at having been caught. I hadn’t realized Dash noticed. “You’ve seen the guy, right? Hot and sort of mysterious. But, yeah. You’ve got a chance.”

Nico smiled softly. “Tell me more about you, Pie Man.”

“I mean, what’s there to know? I’m a dad and I make pies. That pretty much sums it up.” I shrugged. Whenever people asked about me, they never wanted to hear about my adventures in dadding which made up most of my current life.

Nico sipped his pouch until it shrunk in on itself. That shouldn’t be sexy, but somehow with him it was. “I don’t think that’s true. I think there’s a lot of layers to you and I find myself wanting to peel each one away.”

I shifted in the stool and darted my eyes away, trying not to show the effect he was having on me.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable, just tell me to shut up. God knows I’m telling myself that enough.” He laughed nervously.

I shook my head slightly. “No. You don’t make me uncomfortable. It’s just been a while since someone has expressed interest in me as more than Parker and Emily’s dad or Julie’s ex. It’s...nice, actually.”

Nico’s eyes lit up. His hand rested mere centimeters from mine, but it moved just enough for the tips of our fingers to

touch. When he spoke it was with a serious tone. “I want to know your deepest, darkest secret. Why pie?”

A surprised laugh popped out of me. “Okay. You’re really going deep here, but I think I can handle this one. The easy answer...pie is delicious.”

Nico’s lips pursed in amusement. “And now the complicated answer?”

“I don’t know how complicated it is. We had a cooking class we could take in high school. I might like theater, but I was never comfortable putting myself out there. And a singer? I am no Denver Greene, not in front of people, at least.”

Nico leaned a little closer. “Oh? You’re a Denver fan? It’s not my style, I like my music a little harder, but his voice is so dreamy. It could cast spells on people. Must work too. Have you seen the redhead that hangs on his every word?”

“They are a beautiful pair, I may have stared at their pictures for longer than necessary. Harder music, huh? Like what?”

“Crow’s Nest is my jam. I think I have at least a few of their songs in every playlist I make. Anyway, we’re not talking about me right now. We’re going deep into the depths with your love of pie.”

I found myself smiling as I pictured Nico headbanging and jumping around in a mosh pit. I liked how easy it was with him, but kind of wanted to see him let loose too. I got carried

away with the image and had to shuffle back to remember what I was saying.

‘Oh, right. In school, I saw the option to cook as an elective, it sounded perfect. We did a variety of basic skills. The number of people that didn’t know the difference between a teaspoon and a tablespoon was embarrassing. When we got to desserts, we spent a couple weeks learning how to make compotes, curds, fruit fillings, and then we moved on to the pastry side. When our teacher talked about the practice it took to get a pie crust just right, I took it as a personal challenge. I kept making them over and over, spent hours on end trying to perfect a crust, and when she moaned obscenely and praised the perfect bite I knew that was something I wanted to do. So, it’s simple really. I like to make food that makes people happy.’”

“You like to give people mouthgasms,” Nico smirked.

“Haha. I suppose that’s one way to put it, and that moment may have replayed in my teenage fantasies. But it’s more than that. It became an escape when things weren’t great. The process a meditation that helped still my mind. So I make pie.”

Nico pointed at me. “See, layers. I can appreciate that though. When I’m cooking at the diner, I get into a zone. The busier and the more orders we are filling, the more it just takes me to a space in my head where nothing else matters.”



Talking with Jason was easy. We kept it mostly light, even when I mentioned my dad, Jason quickly redirected it. Which was good, I didn't want to be all *woe is me* on our first...date? Could sipping on CapriSun be considered a date? With the way Jason reacted to my touch, and the way we'd inched closer, his hand resting on mine, my knee touching his thigh, it felt like a date.

As much as I was dying to ask about the whole situation with his ex-wife, I figured it was up to him how much he wanted to share. He would tell me when he was ready, if we got to that point. I hoped we would. I wanted to know everything about him.

Jason's phone beeped. When he checked it, a whole spectrum of emotions danced across his face. "That was Julie. She'll be here soon."

"Ah. I guess that's my cue to leave then, huh?" He never said I had to be gone before his children got back, but it

seemed logical.

“Uh. Maybe so.” Jason traced his fingers over the back of my hand. I turned my hand up so his palm slid over mine. “This was really nice, though. Can we maybe do it again?”

I couldn't stop the smile that tugged at my lips. “Yes. I'd really like that.”

We both got up from the high stools and stood there awkwardly for a beat before Jason's eyes widened. “Oh! Don't forget the pie you bought.”

“I almost forgot about my adventurous pie, too busy enjoying this current adventure.” I winked.

Jason's cheeks were that lovely rosy color that I was finding I quite enjoyed. He pushed his glasses up his nose, before poking my chest lightly. “You, Nico, are trouble.”

I grabbed his hand and held it in place. “Is that a problem?”

He stared up at me, his blue eyes amplified behind his glasses. “No, I don't think it is.”

“Good. Let me see your phone.”

He handed it over wordlessly and I plugged in my number and sent myself a text so I had his before giving it back to him. I wanted so badly to kiss the goofy expression right off his face. I looked around, knowing there were no tiny people here yet, but wanting to make sure we were alone. Except my eye caught on all the full brown boxes we brought back from the market.

“What do you do with all the pies you don’t sell?”

Jason looked confused for a moment, clearly as ready as I was to get a taste. “Oh. I, uh, usually just have to give them away. I sometimes have orders to fill but I make those fresh.”

“Let me buy them from you.”

He shook his head in surprise. “Nico, you don’t have to do that. There’s fourteen of them, that’s too much.”

I had the business credit card in my wallet. I would normally check in with Pop before making a purchase that wasn’t something already accounted for, but this felt like a risk worth taking. “It’s not for me. It’s for the diner. Like you said, we need baked goods. And tomorrow is Sunday, our busiest day. Let me buy them and we can put them on the menu. I’d hate for them to go to waste when we can use them.”

Jason stared at me with uncertainty. “Wait. Are you serious? I mean you haven’t even tried them yet”

“Completely serious. And I don’t have to try them to know they are going to be good, quality products. You gave your teacher an orgasm from one bite and I’m sure you’ve only gotten better since.”

“I, uh, wow. If you’re sure. I mean, I hate to ask you to do that, but that would actually be a huge help. And I’d like to know that they were enjoyed. Besides, if it helps you too, then that’s even better.” Jason looked hopeful.

After we agreed on a price and I sent him the payment, we carried the boxes for the third time and took them to my car.

With that done, I leaned against the side of my car making me nearly level in height with Jason who stood about a foot in front of me.

“Thank you for that, really. It means a lot.”

I grabbed his hand and tugged him toward me. He didn’t resist at all and stood between my legs. “It’s my pleasure. Thanks for today. I really enjoyed talking with you.”

Jason entwined his fingers with mine and stared at my lips. “I did too.”

I couldn’t hold back any longer. I put my hand on his neck and drew him to me and his lips pressed against mine. Hesitant at first, but then he practically purred and leaned into me. My hand slid down from his neck and held his back. Jason tasted so good, sweet with a hint of the fruit punch we’d had. Our mouths moved together, teasing and nipping, and sinking into each other. I stood up to my full height and leaned over him, wrapping both arms around him as his hands clutched the sides of my shirt. I was so focused on him that I didn’t notice the car lights that shone over us. Not until a horn honked and scared us apart.

A sedan pulled into Jason’s driveway. Jason slid his gaze to me, “That would be Julie.”

“Shit. I’m sorry. I hope this isn’t going to cause any problems for you.” That was the last thing I wanted to do.

“It’s fine. We’ve talked about dating. I maybe would have liked to have had a conversation with her before she found out

this way.” Jason didn’t seem nearly as bothered or panicked as I thought he might be. And there was no reluctance when it came to kissing me. I didn’t know enough about him or his history yet, but kissing a man didn’t seem to phase him, even though he had an ex-wife. I caught on to one word that he said though.

“And are we? Dating that is?”

Jason turned back to look at me with a playful smile. “Uh, yeah? I mean, I hope so. And not just because you bought my pies.”

I let my hand brush against his. “I’d buy all of your pies if it meant more time with you.”

“I don’t know if you could afford me.”

I liked this teasing version of him. It had me wishing we didn’t have an audience and we could continue this, but alas, it wasn’t to be. Not yet anyway.

The driver’s door popped open and the vibe in the air changed instantly. Did I duck out, or stay and meet the family? Was it too soon for that? I’d met Emily already. I leaned over and whispered to Jason. “Should I go?”

“I’m not trying to hide you, Nico, but maybe just this time. I’m going to need to talk to Julie and I don’t want to make it awkward for you.”

“No problem. I get it. We’ll talk soon though, right?”

Jason leaned close and surprised me by pressing a light kiss on my scruffy cheek. “Soon.”

Okay. He willingly did that knowing full well his ex and maybe kids were watching. It was unexpected but incredibly intoxicating. I said a quiet goodbye and left him to his family. I stopped by the diner and dropped off the pie with strict instructions for the staff to keep their hands off. Luckily, Beverly had already gone home or I knew I would never hear the end of it, especially not with the ache in my cheeks I had from the smile I couldn't seem to contain. I was still riding the high when I got to my childhood home. Mom made me promise I would visit today.

When she opened the door, she examined my face and no doubt saw the excited joy written all over it. "You have news. Come in. I want to hear all about it"

She held her arm out, inviting me in. As I walked past her, I leaned down briefly, and whispered, "I met someone." I kept walking and held up the box in my hand. "And I have pie."

I heard the door close hard and her rustling steps behind me as I headed toward the kitchen.

"Oh, no. Don't you dare drop something like that and not say anything else, you little shit. Spill." She walked around me and dug through the utensils to get out a knife.

I blatantly ignored her request, knowing it would annoy her even more. "How's Pop doing?"

She sighed heavily. "He's a grumpy asshole. But that's nothing new. And don't think you can distract me."

I grabbed three small plates from the cupboard and took the pie cutter from her. Whistling innocently, I sliced us each a piece and put them on the plates. Decadent layers of apples slid out and I was hit with an aroma that was sweet and rich and practically had me drooling. As I looked at it, I saw green flecks in it that didn't look like apple skin. Adventurous, right. There was some sort of surprise inside.

I took two plates and went to the living room where I assumed Pop was plastered to his recliner chair. Mom followed with her plate and took a seat next to my father.

"Your son comes in here, saying he met someone and hasn't said a damn word since."

Pop perked up and lowered the foot of his chair. "Is that so? Are you going to tell us about him?"

"Maybe." I shrugged with a gleam in my eye. I handed a plate to him and his eyes widened with pure lust.

"You're letting me have pie? I've had nothing but bland chicken and rice and all things meant to be thrown in the trash. I'm getting prison food, it's inhumane."

"You can have a bite." My mom instructed.

"I'm going to override you this once, Mom, because I was told you have to have three bites of this pie before passing judgment."

"Yes! I'll take it. Sorry, Mitchie, it's the rules." Pop said all too happily.

“And who was the one that set these rules? Does this have anything to do with the person you are not talking about?” My mom pointed her fork at me and narrowed her eyes.

“Maybe,” I repeated with the same dismissing tone as earlier. Though I knew I was losing the battle of containing the smile that wanted to break free.

I cut away a piece with my fork and popped it into my mouth. A weird mixture of sensations hit me. Sweet, salty, savory, tangy, and there was a punch of heat I didn’t expect. Not knowing ahead of time what was in it besides apples, my tastebuds tried to pinpoint each flavor. One bite. Don’t trust it on the first bite. More prepared the second time around, I held the food on my tongue for a moment, savoring the taste. It was strange, but not bad. Not bad at all.

My parents both made pondering sounds, all words suspended, as we tried to decipher the flavor. I took a third bite, fully prepared for the combination. With the surprise gone, I found the mixture of sweet and heat incredible. “Magic.”

“Is that green chile in it?” My mom asked as she tilted her plate examining the ingredients.

“Hot damn, that is good.” Pop was about to scoop another heaping forkful into his mouth, but my mom stopped him.

“Oh, you definitely can’t have any more of this.”

I never saw a man look more defeated than he did with his plate taken away. I took a nice heaping bite and moaned. The

pleasure was real but a little more dramatic than necessary. Pop took the blanket off the top of his chair and chucked it at me. I dodged, gripping my plate and tilting it quickly to keep the pie from sliding off the edge.

“What the hell? You almost made me drop it!” I glared at Pop.

“Serves you right for being a little shit!” Pop smirked. *Little Shit* might as well have been my nickname, for how much I heard it.

“Excuse me! I’m the one that brought you dessert in the first place. If it weren’t for me, you’d probably be chowing down on a fucking rice cake right now.” I threw the blanket back at him.

Pop shuddered in disgust, drawing a pointed look from my mother. I couldn’t help but smile at the antics. After all the worry and stress of the last two weeks, it was good to see Pop being Pop. The hardest part about the whole scare was not having my dad be his normal, unruly self.

We were a loud family that teased and cussed and bickered. It was how we showed our love. It wasn’t the same when Pop was more subdued or when Mom was tiptoeing around things. That didn’t last long anyway. Even still, it did my heart good. Doubly so with the lingering warmth from my day with Jason and the memory of his lips on mine.

Mom set her plate on the side table and leaned back in her recliner, crossing one leg over the other. “Tell us about your guy.”

“It’s all really new. We had a sort of impromptu date that may not have started as a date but definitely ended as one. And we’re planning to see each other again. That’s all I got for you. Well, he’s also the one that baked this.” I indicated the dish in my hand.

“Fuckin A, Son. That man’s a keeper.” Pop’s eyes practically glowed.

“You just want me to date him so you can reap the benefits.” I teased.

“Can’t a man be supportive of his son’s love life and also hope to get delicious food out of it? The two aren’t mutually exclusive.”

“Don’t go putting pressure on the boy now.” My mom chimed in.

“Oh, don’t play high and mighty over there. I saw you inhaling that pie.” Pop grinned.

“Speaking of pie,” I said, redirecting the conversation. I wasn’t ready to tell them more about Jason yet, it was all too new. Instead, I told them about my plan and the pies sitting at the restaurant ready for Sunday service. Pop, who was always resistant to change, actually seemed on board with the idea. It was probably to my advantage that he got to sample the goods first. My mom grumbled something about the ban on baked goods and that it wasn’t her fault. It might have been a little her fault.

When I got back to my apartment, I set the brown box on my counter, kicked off my shoes, and got out of the work clothes I'd been wearing all day. I propped up the pillows in my bed and leaned back against the headboard. It was a good day. A really good day. A fucking fantastic day. Tomorrow morning would come way too soon. Sundays were our longest, busiest days. With the change-up, I knew I'd have to get there early to go over prices and sizes. I didn't even bother taking an inventory of what kinds of pies we had and how many, but I had no doubt they would go.

I stared at the text from Jason's phone that I sent myself earlier, debating whether I should reach out. Was it too soon? Was he asleep? Or busy with the kids? Or his ex? I closed it and opened Instagram. Scrolling absentmindedly, I tried my hardest not to think about him. It wasn't working. It wouldn't be too forward to tell him that I liked the green chile apple pie, right? Before I could overthink it any more than I already had, I sent a message.



I'd just finished reading a book about dragon farts with Parker who giggled excessively. Okay, I may have laughed a bit too. Farts were never not funny. Well, unless they were farts you weren't prepared for and they came out at the worst time. Having Parker lean against me while I read and helped him sound out some of the smaller words was the perfect way to end a night. He'd already stopped calling me Daddy in front of his friends and I was not prepared for that era to end so soon. Luckily, I was still *Daddy* in private. I enjoyed every moment I could get with him, but especially when he didn't try to be older or look cool, and could simply be a kid. He had the best laugh too. Made me smile every time.

I slid out of his bed, tucked him in, and kissed him goodnight. After I left his room, I pushed Emily's door open just enough to see her fast asleep. She managed to turn herself sideways with a foot hanging off the bed. I snuck in and gently moved her over and covered her up, tucking her stuffed kitten back in beside her.

They had a good day with Julie, which I was glad for. They needed time with her that wasn't in her office or while she was working from home. It was tense for a moment after Nico left. We set the kids up with a movie and talked in hushed tones in the kitchen. It was a shock more than anything. She reassured me she wasn't mad at me and she wasn't bothered that I was starting to see people. Actually, she had been surprised that I hadn't sooner. Julie admitted she wasn't sure how to navigate the whole dating thing when it came to the kids.

“You trust me and my judgment when it comes to Parker and Emily, right?”

She stopped pacing and gave me a soft expression. “You know I do, Jase. That was never a concern.”

“Then trust that I wouldn't bring anyone around them that I wouldn't feel completely safe and comfortable with.” I'd spent one day with Nico, not enough to know his whole life story, but I'd already gotten a peek at how he was with Emily when he was merely a stranger at the diner. That interaction alone had me swooning. Talking with him today, I got a sense of who he was even without all the information. I knew I would feel safe with him around the two most precious people in my life.

“I hear you, I do. It's just...uncharted territory.”

“It is. I don't want this to get awkward or shut you out, so I am asking for your support as we navigate this new terrain. You know I love you and a part of me always will, but I need to move on, Jules.”

A hint of sadness washed over her for a minute before she straightened and put her shoulders back, pushing away the emotions she always hated feeling. “I’m not going to stand in your way, Jason. I worry about the kids getting attached and having it end badly, that’s all.”

Truthfully, I had the same concern. It was one of the things that stopped me every time I thought about dating. They had already gone through one split and it was hard. We tried to make it as easy a transition for them as possible, but they felt it. On the one hand, I was glad they were young. I hoped, eventually, they wouldn’t remember the confusion of their mom leaving and having a second house to go to, but it was harder to explain to little ones that didn’t comprehend why their lives changed. I really hated the idea of them going through that again. But no matter what happened, they would have me and we would get through it.

“There are no guarantees with things like this, clearly. But I don’t think we can let the what-ifs stop us from living. Besides, we only just met, so I’m not ready to start planning for it to end yet. If it does get to that point, you can know that the kids are my priority no matter what.”

Julie sighed. “I know. I know. I want you to be happy, Jason. You deserve it.”

I squeezed her hand lightly. “Thank you, Jules.”

As Julie said, this was uncharted for us. We’d gone from friends, to lovers, to married, to parents, to exes. I really hoped we could find our way back to being friends again. We were

connected and would always be in each other's lives, but the firsts of everything were always the hardest. And now I'd had my first date since we split. It might get a little sticky for a bit, but I knew we would get through it.

With Julie gone and the kids in bed, I reflected on the day. By the middle of the market, I was growing a little disheartened. Customers were sampling more than buying. Some days were like that, it was a part of the game. I had purchases off and on, but not consistent enough to hit the numbers I was hoping to make. When Nico showed up, it completely turned my day around. He helped redirect my focus, something I very much needed.

And that kiss. Holy cannoli! Feeling his scruff against my cheek, being enveloped in his arms, his tongue flicking over mine. I wasn't ready for it to end. Julie's unfortunate timing was probably a good thing, though, or my desperation might have driven me to take it further than I should have so soon.

The thought of seeing his big chest, exploring his body, being devoured by his kisses had me getting hard. I closed my bedroom door, which I normally left cracked so I could hear every noise the kids made. I stripped out of my clothes and turned on the shower.

With the water heating my skin, I imagined Nico pressed against my back, his body warming mine. His presence enveloping me. I leaned on one arm against the cold tile wall while I stroked myself with the other. Slow, easy movements

at first, wishing it were him touching me. I gripped harder and twisted slightly, reveling in the friction. But it wasn't enough.

I planted one foot on the lip of the bathtub and reached behind me, my hand caressing over my cheeks and dipping between them. My finger brushed over my hole, just a tease that had me wanting more. I pressed the tip of my finger in.

I pumped my finger in and out while stroking myself. It was an awkward position and my leg started to cramp, but the vision of Nico behind me, of him exploring my body and readying me for him kept me going. I pushed through the discomfort too close to release to move. With a slight shift in my stance to change the angle I was hitting and the push of my fingers along with the rapid pressure and slide on my cock, I came hard. Carefully pulling out and lowering my leg, I leaned my head against the wall I'd just painted in spurts, trying to catch my breath.

My body was shaky but in all the best ways. Well, there were a lot of better ways I could think of, ones that involved another person and not a solo job. Still, it was intense, letting myself use his face to go with the need I felt.

I didn't always picture someone when taking care of my needs. With Nico so fresh in my mind, and the taste of him haunting my lips, it was hard not to bring him into the moment with me.

After washing down the tile wall and rinsing myself off, Itoweled off and put on a clean pair of boxers and a t-shirt. I didn't like to sleep naked in case of an emergency, or if

someone needed a drink of water, and someone *always* needed water.

My phone chirped as I sat in bed. When I saw Nico's name, I froze and my pulse skyrocketed. Had he somehow known that I was fantasizing about him in the shower? My gaze darted around the room as if there might be a secret camera and he was at home watching me. *Fuck*, why did that idea get me hot all over again?

Nico: Holy shit man! That pie was unreal.

A loud sigh of relief escaped me as I slumped against my pillow. Pie. This was about the pie and not the fact that I wished it were his hands exploring every inch of me. At least he couldn't see how red my face felt.

Me: Thanks, I'm really glad you liked it. I'm pretty proud of that one.

The text showed that Nico was typing...and typing...and typing. Did he really have so much to say about my pie? Or was it something else entirely? My brain started coming up with a number of scenarios and most of them ended with "it was fun, but I'm not ready to take on a family."

When it finally chirped again, my heart was able to settle and I could tuck the doubt away, a little.

Nico: Was everything ok with your ex? I hope I didn't get you in trouble.

Instead of racing out of control as it had been a moment ago, I got a little flumpity in my chest. It was really nice that

he was concerned for me.

Me: That's sweet of you. No worries, everything is fine.
Well, it will be, I thought to myself.

Nico: So...she wasn't surprised to see you kissing me?

Me: Uh, yeah. But it's just a new phase for us. It was going to happen sooner or later.

Nico: What I mean is...she was ok with you kissing... me?

Oh! That's what he was worried about. We didn't go into our histories much when we were talking earlier. I'd been married for so long, I didn't have to think about assumptions and perceptions of who I was or what I wanted. There were pros and cons to being in a straight-passing relationship. Did Nico think I was testing the waters with him? The waters had been tested quite thoroughly, and enjoyed, if I might add.

Me: If you're wondering what she thought about finding me kissing a man, that's not remotely a concern. Julie and I dated the same guy (unintentionally) in college.

Instead of getting a text back, my phone was suddenly ringing in my hand. I stared at it in panic and nearly chucked it across the room. What did I do? Did I answer? Of course, I should answer! I glanced at my bedroom door which was still closed and listened carefully for a moment. The only sound was the trilling in my palm. I blew out a deep breath and answered.

“Uh, hi?” My voice squeaked out. I cleared my throat and answered with a more firm, “Hi.”

“Okay, this is a story I have to hear.”

A laugh burst out of me at the eagerness in his tone and the fact that he happily ignored my pathetic attempt to answer the phone like a human.

“Which part of it?” Wasn’t there some rule about not talking about exes on the first date? Julie was a part of my life, so she was someone I would talk about, and it was Nico asking and not me offering up unwanted ex tales.

“I was dating this blondie in college, he was a total Chad, but so hot. I was young and blinded by the Chadness. But all of his excuses and blowing me off were getting to me. So I did the jealous thing and followed him only to find him making out with Julie. I left before saying anything, too shocked and heartbroken to confront them. I texted him and said we were done, because I was too chicken to face him, afraid I’d fall for his tricks.”

“So how did you and Julie end up together?”

“For all I knew, Julie was aware that she wasn’t the only one he was banging. Maybe they were open, but at least on my end, I believed we weren’t seeing anybody else. But if they weren’t casual and seeing other people, I didn’t feel right about him stringing her along too. I thought it was best if she heard the truth from me. I sought her out and told her I wasn’t fighting for the ass hat back, I was done with him, but thought she should know. To say she was livid was an understatement,

though she was never mad at me. We were both being cheated on. Julie and I teamed up and confronted him together. The look on his face when we walked arm-in-arm was priceless. We became friends and it grew from there.”

It was strange to think of the way things were when we started out now that it was over. Not entirely over, we would always be connected, but it would never be like it once was. I might regret the way things ended, but I would never regret the life and the family we built together.

“Sounds like a hell of a college experience.” The deep timbre of Nico’s voice drew me back from my walk down memory lane.

“I don’t know. I suppose. We were probably too young and sure of ourselves. But we had good times too. What about you? Any wild college stories?” I was ready to shift the focus away from me.

There was a heavy pause, one that had me regretting my question. I was about to change the subject when I heard a rustling sound.

“Sorry, I was getting under the covers.”

Dang! I did *not* need to know he was in bed, especially when I was too. Blood was redirecting south, despite having just relieved myself in the shower. I adjusted myself and laid back in bed trying to think of anything else, which wasn’t easy when the rumble of his voice filled my ears.

“No. No college stories for me. I never went.”

“Right. You worked the diner. Was there ever a time you wished you did?” I floundered and waffled so much in my younger years about what I wanted to do, switching majors several times and generally feeling aimless. Julie had always known what she wanted and worked with a single focus to accomplish it. Something I once admired, until her plans and mine collided.

“Honestly? Not really. I mean I thought about doing other things, but college wasn’t one of them. I didn’t do the best in school, it was a struggle to get through most classes, so I had a hard time thinking about paying money to suffer.”

“That’s totally valid, it’s not for everyone. You have something that’s important to you. I once thought that my degree and my college years were the most important thing about me. Besides listing it on a resume, I haven’t thought about it in a long time. Priorities change.”

“They do. I agree. My priorities used to be growing my hair out, but that didn’t work out so well.”

I snorted. “I happen to like the smooth look. At least on you.” Heat bloomed over my skin. I wasn’t used to being so forward. “Ignore me. I’m out of practice.”

Nico’s laugh purred through the phone. “Having a cute man tell me he likes the way I look is no hardship to hear.”

“Cute?” The word barely made it past my lips. He’d been eyeing me all day and we kissed, hot and exploring kisses. I shouldn’t be surprised to hear of his attraction to me. No one

had called me cute in a long time, besides Emily when she dressed me up, but that didn't count. Not like this.

“Adorably so. The glasses, the hair. It was a challenge not staring at you all day, especially when I wasn't sure if you were...available.”

“I am. Available, I mean. Very much so,” I blurted out.

Nico chuckled. “I assumed as much when you stuck your tongue down my throat. No complaints though. I haven't been able to stop thinking about it. Well, your pie distracted me. So there was a moment when I loved having that in my mouth as much as your tongue.”

“Oh God,” I moaned and palmed my hardened cock.

“Fuck,” Nico hissed.

“What? Is everything okay?”

“Fine, more than fine. Just hearing you like that has me wanting...a lot. When can I see you again?” The thought of him in bed as hard as I was had me squirming.

“I, uh, don't know. My schedule isn't really open. I have the kids. I can check with Julie or take them to my mom's. Shoot. Dating as a single parent is all kind of new for me. I'm not sure how to do this.” Facing the reality of the situation might as well have been a bucket of ice dumped on my crotch. “Are you sure you want to do this with me? I come with baggage.”

“Jason. I'm sure. And children aren't baggage, maybe an added challenge, but it's a bonus in my book.”

If I wasn't already lying down, I might have swoon-fallen right to the floor. That had to be the single sexiest thing I'd ever heard. I didn't actually think of my kids as baggage, but in all the scenarios I imagined with dating again, I often wondered how they would be received. I wasn't a lone wolf that could do whatever he wanted. I had a pack of my own that depended on me. Though I could hope for a partner to share it with. Nico wasn't scared off by the idea and I was beyond ready to see him again.

“Would you want to come over for dinner? Or after? Or maybe when they go to bed? I don't want to throw you into the deep end.”

“I'd love to, Jason. How about Tuesday? What can I bring?” My heart accelerated once more at the thought of having him in my home again. We worked out the details and chatted a bit more. I was both anxious to see him again and completely at ease with him.

Nico sighed. “This is nice.”

“Yeah.” It really was.

“I have an early morning at the diner. I really should try to get some rest.”

“Yeah. Probably so.”

A yawn came through the line. I needed to let him sleep. We were both quiet for a moment, neither of us wanting to burst the bubble we were in. When Nico spoke at last, I could feel his reluctance. “I don't want this to end.”

I stretched, both hyped up with the great conversation and relaxed with the soothing sound of his voice. “Me neither. Maybe it doesn’t have to. It’s nice to hear someone in bed with me again, even if you aren’t here. We could keep the call on and if you fall asleep, I won’t wake you. That’s weird, right? Never mind, forget I said that.”

We spent a day together. One single day. Already I was wanting to fall asleep with him. But the bed at night felt empty and quiet. Keeping my bedroom door open was two-fold. It helped me hear if the kids needed anything, but I also got some comfort from the snores and rustling around. I got up and opened the door again, the cadence of their heavy breathing a balm for my soul.

“It’s not weird. Sounds pretty nice actually.”

That was a relief. I climbed back in bed and put the phone on speaker, setting it on the pillow beside me. With my door open, I kept my voice low as I asked him random questions. The lights were out and hearing his voice next to me, I could almost imagine he was here. When his answers slowed and his voice grew raspy, I knew he was done.

“Goodnight, Nico,” I whispered.

A sleepy “Night, Jason” was the reply but neither of us hung up. Unwilling to let him go, I plugged my phone in and left the call open. Soon his breathing became heavier and more rhythmic. I found myself subconsciously trying to match his pace with my own breath. It lulled me in a tender caress. My

room felt more occupied than it had in far too long. It didn't take long for me to be swept away with him.

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Despite the few hours I slept, I felt more rested than I had in a while. More relaxed and more myself. Though there was a moment of absolute confusion when my alarm went off and I heard a voice in my room. Disoriented, I sat up trying to place where I was and what was happening. When I heard the voice coming from my phone, I laughed, shut my alarm off, and picked it up.

“Good morning, Jason. Sorry if my alarm woke you.”

“Good morning, and it’s no problem, just unexpected.” Jason’s languid voice was deeper and scruffier than normal and it sent shivers of delight through my body.

“Thank you, for last night. I really enjoyed that.”

“Me too, Nico. Have...a great...day today,” he said through a yawn.

“Thank you, you too.”

Hanging up was hard. I hadn't wanted to last night and I didn't want to this morning, but I had to get to work. Especially since I needed to go over everything about the pies for the day.

When I got to the diner, I felt like I was walking on air. The whole world seemed brighter today. As the cooks were prepping for our morning customers, I printed out special price lists and stuck the papers in plastic sleeves. The *Sunday Pie Specials* were placed on every table.

Once my servers arrived, I gave them the rundown of what I wanted them to say and had them practice a few times. I didn't expect to sell any to the breakfast regulars, anticipating that most orders would happen later in the day. I completely underestimated the excitement of new items, and dessert at that.

With each slice that was ordered, heads turned as it passed by their tables, prompting more sales. By the time our post-church brunchers were done, we were nearly sold out. Beverly came in for the mid-day shift, her eyes rounding at the sight of our specials. I could tell she had been itching to talk to me, but it was our busiest shift of the week. When the customers dwindled down to a more manageable rate, she found her way next to me and leaned her hip against the counter.

“So, I see your trip to Heartcraft paid off, huh?”

I straightened and fidgeted, trying not to look as elated as I felt, but I knew I couldn't hide anything from her.

“That obvious?” I lifted my shoulders.

A wicked grin stretched across her face before she thwacked me with a rag. “I meant all the pies, but clearly they weren’t the only thing you sampled.”

“Well, I may have spent some time with the pie maker. His name is Jason, by the way. But that’s all you’re getting out of me.” I folded my arms over my chest.

Beverly gave me a knowing look but instead of prying like I expected, she squeezed my forearm. “Happy is a good look on you. You should wear it more often.”

“Thanks, Bev.”

Monday morning, I went over the numbers from the day before to discover our highest sales in a long time. That was something solid I could show Pop. If we could get more days like that in the books, we’d be able to set funds aside for a renovation. The gamble I took with the purchase more than paid off.

The thought of telling Jason about it had me all excited. I couldn’t wait to relay all the raving feedback we received. Whenever anyone asked, I was happy to direct them to *Webber Pie Company* which could be found at the Heartcraft Market. Even though we had talked well into the night and essentially slept together, I was trying not to come off as too obsessed. I only had a little while longer before I could see him again. The restraint it took to keep from texting Jason at random was using up all my willpower.

When the time finally came to go to his house the next day, I was a nervous wreck. I even texted my mom to ask her what

foods young kids liked much to her confusion. When a string of questions was her response, ones that I wasn't ready to answer, I decided to go with an old faithful. It was something we made at the diner all the time but I added a couple extra touches, hoping to win some brownie points with Jason.

I hadn't put too much thought into it before, especially since I'd met Emily already. But I met her as someone working in a diner, not as someone interested in her father. Parker, I hadn't met yet but hoped I could win him over. As I took each step towards his front door, I felt the pressure of what I was about to do. I met a man that I liked and wanted to get to know more, but if things didn't work out with his kids, there was no way I would stand a chance.

With a hot glass baking dish in hand and a bag hanging from my arm, I took a deep breath before hitting the doorbell with my elbow. *I could do this.*

I heard a thump against the door and a small voice shout, "I'll get the door."

"No, you won't. You don't open the door to strangers." Jason's voice boomed out and it stirred something in me. It had been a few days since we talked, and hearing him again made me more certain than ever there was nowhere else I'd rather be.

The door opened and when his gaze met mine, he gave me a full, beautiful smile that had my heart bouncing around in my chest. I took him in, his perfectly mussed hair, his glasses, the

striped shirt he wore under a denim long-sleeve shirt. He was so fucking cute.

“Hi, you look great.” I leaned over the dish I was holding and placed a soft kiss on his clean-shaven cheek. My lips lingered for a moment as I breathed him in, wishing I could kiss him properly. Jason bumped into me and he huffed out a laugh. I straightened to see two sets of eyes peering out from behind him. They were adorable. Emily with her blond, bouncy curls, and Parker...he was the spitting image of his dad. Fluffy brown hair that wasn't perfectly mussed like his dad's.

“Nico, this is Emily and Parker.” Jason pushed them out from behind him. I smiled and gave a wiggle of my fingers, as much a wave as I could offer while holding the hot dish.

“Hi, Emily, it's great to see you again. And Parker, it's really nice to meet you.”

“Kids, this is my friend, Nico. He's joining us for dinner tonight.” Jason took the dish from me and indicated for me to follow him.

“You gave Buttercup special ice cream,” Emily said. She reached up and grabbed my now free hand and tugged me along. Just like that, I was in.

Parker walked in front of me but kept looking back, uncertain what to make of me. “Parker, your dad tells me you do karate. Do you like it?”

His eyes lit up with that and he stopped in front of me abruptly. If I hadn't been watching I might have trampled right into him. "I love it. I got to break a board on my very first time. And they are teaching me how to be strong. Look at my muscles."

Parker proudly pushed his sleeve back to show me his little arm. I laughed. "Wow, look at you."

"Yup, and I can kick really high. Wanna see?"

"Sure thing, bud." He kicked his foot up to waist level. "Awesome job."

"Parker, Emily, go wash up for dinner," Jason called out. He gave me an apologetic expression when they ran off. "Sorry, we don't have new people over a lot, so they are going to show off."

"It's fine. They are adorable."

Jason stepped in close and wrapped his arms around me, tucking his head under my chin. I set the bag down on the counter and held him back. "I'm really glad you're here. Sorry it's not a date with just the two of us."

I kissed the top of his head. "I'm glad I'm here too. We'll have other chances to be alone."

"God, I hope so," Jason whispered before pushing back.

Jason watched as I unpacked the two bottles that were in the bag. One Pinot Noir and one sparkling grape juice. "You didn't have to bring all of this."

“Sure I did, you treated me to drinks last time, so it was my turn.” I winked.

He gave me a sweet, goofy look before rifling around in a kitchen drawer for a wine bottle opener. The kids came stampeding back down the hallway and sat at the table. I helped bring all the food to the table.

“This looks delicious, Nico. Thank you.” Jason scooped out some of the homemade mac and cheese with broccoli onto Emily and Parker’s plates. He cut up pieces of the chicken he cooked for his kids too. His movements were easy and graceful, actions he had done countless times. It was sweet to watch, getting a glimpse into the life of a father with his children.

Once we began eating, I started to tell Jason how well the pie specials had gone but kept getting interrupted by questions. That wasn’t a bad thing, it was really cute. Jason squeezed my thigh under the table with a look that said we would talk more later.

“What’s your favorite dinosaur?”

“The bald one.” I took off my cap and got a laugh from Parker.

“Do you like Anna or Elsa?”

“Kristoff.”

“Have you done karate?” “Do you like fairies?” “What’s your favorite color?” “Do you like to play catch?”

I was in the hot seat, but I took each question as they came, glad that Jason's family seemed to be comfortable around me.

"Marvel or DC?" That one came from Jason. When I looked at him with my brows raised, he shrugged with a smirk. "What? I'm trying to get to know you too."

"Asking the hard questions now. Hmm...I think I'll have to go with DC."

"Spiderman is my favorite." Parker piped up.

"DC? Really? I'm going to have to reassess some things here. I'm not sure how to feel about that." Jason said with an amused tone.

I reached over and lifted his glasses, whispering, "It's Clark Kent that does it for me."

"Are you my dad's boyfriend?"

I coughed in surprise, glad I didn't have wine in my mouth or I might have sprayed it or choked on it. Shifting back in my seat, I looked at Parker. "Um, well, I'm not really sure. Would it be okay if I was?"

Parker tilted his head. "Sure. He's pancakesicle."

"He's what?!" I pinched my brows together trying to figure out what he meant. I could hear Jason snickering beside me.

"Dad can have a boyfriend, girlfriend, or theyfriend."

Jason let out a loud laugh. "It's pansexual, Parker. You were close though, good job."

I stared at the man next to me, I was sure shock was written all over my face.

He played it off like it was no big deal. “Gender identities and sexualities are not bad words. There’s no reason to hide who people are or who they love.”

“Well, shit.” I was flabbergasted. My parents accepted me when I came out, they were supportive and invested in me and my partners or crushes, but I couldn’t fathom it being talked about so openly at such a young age. It was refreshing and unbelievably endearing.

“Oooh.” Emily and Parker chimed together.

Jason grinned and placed a finger over my lips. “Now, that. That is a bad word.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. Do you have a swear jar or something?”

“If you say something bad, you have to say three nice things after,” Emily said in a sing-song voice.

I looked back at Jason who seemed rather amused. “Yup, that’s the rules. We all make mistakes and say things we shouldn’t sometimes, but if you do you have to say three nice things. If it takes more effort to correct the action, then you might think twice before you do it again.”

“Are you serious?” I glanced around the table with three sets of eyes watching, waiting to see what I would do.

“Completely.” Jason’s lips pursed together.

“Okay, here goes.” I held up a finger, “One, Emily you are a magical princess.” Two fingers “Two, Parker you are a smart and funny kid.” Three fingers and I kept my eyes on the two little ones in front of me and whispered conspiratorially. “And Three, I think I really like your dad.”

Turning back to face Jason whose amusement had shifted to something that held longing and affection, I asked, “There, does that make up for it?”

He nodded his head with a slight smile. “It’ll do.”

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Watching the big man interact with pieces of my heart made it feel fuller than ever. He took everything they threw at him. I probably should have rescued him a while ago, but I couldn't help it, I was enjoying it too much. Many people might not have made it past the initial interrogation, let alone through two rounds of Candyland.

“Go brush your teeth, it's time for bed,” I told Parker.

“But I want to stay up and play with Nico.”

Me too, kid. Me too. Which was why I needed them to go to bed. “You have school tomorrow, Porkchop. Nico will come over again soon.”

Nico lifted his eyes to mine hopefully. I leaned over him and whispered, “Stay, I'll be back in a few minutes.”

Scooping up Emily, already blinking heavily, I took her to her room and helped her change into her pajamas. When she

climbed into bed, I handed her her stuffed kitty and kissed her head. “Goodnight, Lulu. I love you.”

“Goodnight, Daddy.” She yawned.

Emily was my easy one. When she was tired, she passed out. Parker had a harder time settling, so our bedtime routine usually took longer. I read to him almost every night as a way to help him calm. Even with silly stories that made him giggle, it redirected his thoughts and eased him into sleep.

I picked the shortest book I could get away with, knowing I had a big, handsome man waiting for me. The awareness of him only feet away made it hard for me to concentrate on dad duty. Luckily, Parker didn’t seem to notice and sounded out words as we went. I kissed him goodnight and tried not to run back to the living room.

When I not so casually strolled back in, Nico sat on the couch, one foot resting on his knee with his phone in hand. He looked completely at home there. Like it was his spot on the sofa. It was probably problematic that I already saw him fitting into our lives so seamlessly. I really shouldn’t be thinking that so soon. Desperation and need were clouding my vision.

Nico looked up to see me standing there, staring at him like a creep. He waved me over and I was helpless to do anything but get closer to him. He grabbed my hand and I sat down next to him, my knee pressed into his thigh.

“Thanks for waiting and for putting up with everything tonight. You are a patient man, Nico.”

“I enjoyed myself and I had good reason to be patient. If getting to spend time with your family, means getting to spend time with you, I’ll take it. Besides, I like them. You’ve done a great job with those two. They clearly adore you and it’s easy to see why.”

Nico caught me up on what happened with the diner and the pies. I loved that he supported me and my business, but that it helped him too. My head rested on his shoulder while we chatted. Nico stroked his thumb across the back of my hand.

Every touch filled a need and started a new one. I wanted all those sweet, simple caresses, those tender touches, but dang, I wanted so much more. We had a day of talking, a night of hearing each other sleep, an evening of him being with my family, and now I was ready for *him*. Maybe it was fast, but it felt as if we had already spent a lot of time together.

Pulling my hand free from Nico’s, I took off his cap and set it on the back of the couch. I ran my hand from his neck over the smooth back of his head. Nico closed his eyes and leaned into my touch.

“That feels really good.” He practically purred and I was itching to know what other sounds I could get him to make.

I turned to face him and slid a leg over his until I was straddling his thick thighs, loving the way his muscles felt under my own legs. Nico glanced toward the hall, though he shifted over enough to let my knee settle fully beside him, centering me to the position I wanted to be in.

“They’ll be fine.” I only hoped that was true. Grabbing Nico’s scruffy cheeks, I bent down and smashed my mouth into his. The kiss I had been aching for since he arrived. It was a clash of tongue and teeth, both of us starving for the other. I rolled my hips and swallowed the moan that rumbled out of him. I could feel him harden beneath me as I kissed along his jaw, the stubble scratching my skin in delicious ways. The smoothness of his head and the roughness of his face were a wonderful combination. He seemed to really like it when I rubbed his bald head.

Nico’s large hands rounded over my ass and squeezed, pulling me closer. The friction between us had me moaning softly. I was trying not to be too loud. Nico tilted my head and pressed his mouth against my throat. It felt so good, the pressure, the suction, and yet...

“No visible marks, please. I don’t want to have to explain that. I already get enough weird looks as a stay-at-home dad.”

Nico let up right away. “Understood. No visible marks. It’s too bad, though. Your skin tastes so good. I guess I’ll just have to find other places to taste you.”

“Dang,” I breathed out. My entire body felt like it was blazing under the heat of his words.

Nico smirked and rubbed his thumb over my lip. “You are so fucking cute, especially with your shoots and dangs.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve learned to be careful with the little munchkins. They are like sponges and soak up everything.”

Nico looked pensive. “I come from a loud family. Cussing is second nature. I’ll try to watch my words around them, but it might slip out.”

“Then I guess you’re just going to have to think of a lot of nice things to say to make up for it.” I grinned.

“I’ll start making a list because I have a feeling you are going to make me say some very bad words.” Nico tugged me toward him and kissed me once more. I was more than ready to take him to my bedroom and hear whatever came out of his mouth.

A cry sounded down the hall, launching me off of him while Nico grabbed the nearest throw pillow to cover his crotch. I waited a minute to see if it was merely a dream or if a kid was awake. Neither of us breathed. A moment later tiny footsteps thudded. My head fell back against the couch and my erection retreated. Playtime for Daddy was over.

I couldn’t be mad though, not when I heard Emily sniffling. I stood quickly and saw her standing at the doorway to the living room with her kitty hanging by one foot from her hand. Making my way around the couch, I crouched down in front of her. “What’s wrong, Lulu? Are you okay?”

“There’s a monster in my closet.” She sniffled again. The scared, sad tone of her sleepy little voice about broke my heart.

“It’s okay. Daddy’s here. I’ll make sure there’s no more monsters.” I was about to scoop her into my arms when she peeked around me.

“Can Nico come too? He’s bigger.”

I glanced back at him, asking him silently if he would mind. He rose and luckily it seemed the problem he was concealing with the pillow was gone. That was a shame. Well, not for the moment we found ourselves in now, but that the one just minutes ago was over. He crossed the room and I carried Emily. While we walked she held her hand out and Nico took it, forcing him to walk awkwardly through the hallway that was too narrow for us to be side by side. Still, the three of us were all connected, making my heart do weird flippity-flops.

Once we were back in her room, I laid her in bed, tucking her in snugly. Nico made a big show of checking behind everything and moving clothes around. He even got into the closet as much as he could and announced that this room was off limits and under his protection, all while I sat on the edge of Emily’s bed admiring the scene. When he was done investigating he came to the other side of the bed and knelt beside it.

“I think they’re all gone now and they won’t be coming back,” Nico said softly.

Emily threw her little arms around his neck and hugged him. Nico froze for a moment before hugging her back. When he looked up at me, his eyes were misty. *Fuck me!* I might not curse out loud often, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t think it. Why did he look so perfect holding my little girl?

“Alright. Goodnight, Emily. Sleep well.” He pulled away and Emily laid her head on her pillow. I said goodnight and

gave her one more kiss before we both quietly exited her room.

As much as I hated to admit it, our night was over. We wouldn't be returning to our heated passion. Maybe it wasn't the *happy ending* I hoped it would be, but it was pretty dang perfect anyway.

We stood in the kitchen, nearly chest to chest. Nico towered over me. Emily wasn't wrong when she said he was bigger. He was. Much. I might have been bothered by how easily replaceable I was when it came to monster fighting, but if it helped her feel safe and comfortable, I would be glad to offer up that power to Nico.

We both opened our mouths to speak at the same time. I indicated for him to go first.

"I just wanted to thank you for trusting me with your family and inviting me in like this. Tonight meant a lot to me." Nico's tone was heartfelt and he blinked away the moisture gathering in the corner of his eyes.

I grabbed his hands in mine and tilted my head to meet his gaze. Already, I pictured him in my home and in my family, but was it really fair of me to ask so much of him? "It meant a lot to me too. But now you see what my life is like. Those two are my world. I have little privacy or time to myself. Being with me isn't easy and carefree. I can't do something casual unless I keep it away from my kids, but that's not something I want. I'd completely understand if this is too much. We only just met, you have no responsibility to take all of this on."

Nico placed a hand on the back of my neck, keeping me from retreating away from him. “I don’t want casual either, Jason. Been there, done that. I might have done it again, but it wouldn’t have been what I wanted. I’ve spent my fair share of time swiping through apps, but an easy fuck isn’t what I’m looking for. I want something real. And this”—he waved his hand at my house—“this feels like a dream in a way, but it feels like the kind of real I’ve been hoping for. So, if you want me in your world, I’m in.”

“I want you.” The words squeezed past the lump in my throat, laced with so many needs. “And if you’re not looking for an easy fuck, you came to the right place. It’s complicated as hell.”

Nico smiled so bright it drew me towards it like a moth to a light. “Look at you and your dirty mouth. You better think up some nice things to say.”

Nico bent down and kissed me, claiming my mouth with his. A nip on my lip, a sweep of his tongue. With one last soft brush of his lips, he pulled back, stopping things before we ended up in the same situation we were in before we got interrupted.

“Thanks again. I’m going to go before it gets harder to leave.” Nico swiped my lip with his rough thumb.

“Yeah. You should go. But if you find yourself feeling lonely later, I’ll have my phone nearby.”

“I might take you up on that. Talk to you later, Pie Man.”



How long was a respectable amount of time to pass before calling him? I was hard the whole drive home, making my walk to my upstairs apartment more than a little uncomfortable. My poor dick had been through a rollercoaster. Up, down, up again. Jason's offer played on repeat in my head, making my foot heavier on the gas pedal. I never thought I would be so anxious to get home and away from a man I wanted so badly.

Things weren't going to go any further for us if I were at his house, that was clear. Disappointing, but clear. Now that I was home, though, his voice was just a phone call away and that would have to suffice for tonight.

My shoes went flying and I unloaded the baking dish, my wallet, and anything else that might have gotten in the way as I scrambled to my room. With all layers gone, I sat in bed and called.

A laugh was the first thing I heard when Jason picked up. “A little eager, are we?”

“You have no fucking idea.” I stroked myself once.

“I might have some idea.” Jason’s voice lowered, humming over my skin. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“You can tell me anything.”

“I thought about you in the shower after you left the other night.”

My dick perked up, as though it heard its name. “Really? What were you thinking about?”

“I was thinking about how good it felt in your arms.”

I pumped up and down once. “Mmhmm. You felt really good in my arms too. Is that all you were thinking?”

Jason grunted and I heard movement on his side. “No. I thought about you in the shower with me. Your chest against my back, pressing me into the wall. Your cock against my ass.”

“Fuck! I’m liking where you’re going with this, hold on.” I opened the drawer of my bedside table and pulled out a tube of lube, squeezing some over myself. If he was thinking about us in the shower, I needed to be wetter for this. The smooth glide of my slickened hand had me groaning. “Alright. What else did you imagine?”

Jason’s voice was thick and unsteady as he spoke, talking through what I hoped was him working himself like I was.

“Hot, soapy water flowing over both of us as you teased my hole. I used my fingers, wishing it was you pushing inside of me.”

“Fuck, Jason. That is so hot!” I squeezed harder and pumped faster as I envisioned him in the shower, priming himself for me. Tension was growing, I was nearly there, just a few more strokes would push me over the edge, Jason’s voice alone was nearly enough.

“Shoot!” Jason whisper-yelled. “Someone’s awake. I should go. I’m so sorry. You’ll have to finish without me. But I’ll catch up later when I can.”

I threw my head back into my pillow in frustration, but it wasn’t his fault. Jason had responsibilities. Still, I was hoping we would *finish* together. “It’s fine. Just make sure you think about me when you do. Goodnight.”

“Don’t worry, you’re all I can think about right now. Goodnight, Nico.”

Rewinding back to when his thick voice was describing the shower, I used that as the inspiration I needed. It didn’t take long before release rocked through me, spurts shooting over my stomach. With closed eyes, I lay there, wishing it was his load that coated my skin. Instead of cleaning it up, I let it dry, leaving it as a reminder and a fantasy of what it was and what it could be. I so badly wanted to hear Jason as he lost control. He was nearly there with me, I could hear it in each breath that caught. Jason was right about one thing, he was no easy fuck.

Not even over the phone. I had a feeling, though, that when it did happen for us, it would be worth the torturous wait.

It surprised me when he said he wanted me inside him. I wasn't sure what he would be comfortable with. He'd been with men before but he married a woman. I made an assumption that he would prefer topping, which I would deal with if it meant I'd get to have him. I'd bottomed a few times, but it wasn't my preference. At this point, I was eager to bring Jason pleasure whatever that looked like.

I was tempted to call Jason back simply to hear him on the other end and fall asleep with his soft breaths in my ear. One night of that and I was hooked. But I didn't want to come off too needy. Still, with the stickiness drying on my chest and the euphoria after a big orgasm, I was nearly as relaxed as I had been *phone-sleeping* with him.



The next day at work, my parents visited the diner. I was surprised Pop had managed to stay away for as long as he did. The man came in ready to work, but my mom and I were both determined to keep him from lifting a finger. Luckily, he got enough attention from staff and from our regulars that it helped keep him out of the kitchen and the office.

Mendel, an older gentleman that frequented the diner with his wife, Lucy, grasped Pop's hand with his shaky one. "You gave us a fright, young man. You still have thirty years to catch up to me. I won't hear of you kicking the bucket early."

Pop smiled and clasped his other hand over theirs. "Don't worry, Mendel. I'm not going anywhere. Besides, someone has to look out for this place."

"Junior's been doing a great job. You should be proud. I was especially pleased with the pie specials on Sunday. I do hope we'll get to see more of that." The lines around the old man's eyes crinkled with joy.

Pop thanked Mendel, and after their slow exit, he turned to me with raised brows. "Tell me about the pie specials. How did that go?"

I waved for him to follow me to the office. As much as I was trying to keep him from working, I was excited to show him the results. With the accounting program pulled up and the handwritten notes I'd taken, I showed Pop everything I could. How much it cost me to buy the pies, how much we sold each slice, by itself or a la mode, and how quickly we sold out of each type.

"Now, this was a one-off, so it might be a fluke. But I have to say, customers seemed really excited and we sold out a lot quicker than I expected. I think we would need to give it a few more tries to see if it will stay consistent."

Pop examined everything carefully and nodded slowly. "This is great work, Son. I appreciate how thorough you were,

especially noting the times. It always helps to see trends per meal and times of day. So, this price you got, was that the *boyfriend* price?”

“Fishing much?” I asked pointedly.

“It’s purely a business inquiry, for accounting purposes.” My father’s smirk belied his flat tone.

“I insisted I pay whatever his normal asking price would be.”

Pop tsked his tongue. “I thought I taught you better. Friendships are the backbone of a business. You get in good with your suppliers and they treat you well, maybe offer you a special rate.”

“Pop!” I reprimanded. “I’m not going to take advantage of my boyfriend. It’s not right, and this is his business too. He deserves to get the full retail price.”

“Aha! So he *is* your boyfriend.” Pop pointed a finger at me with a wicked grin on his face. It had been a trap and I’d fallen right in. Not that I didn’t want to shout to the world about being with Jason, but I wanted time for us to get to know each other more before having my family insert themselves into our relationship.

I pushed my cap off, rubbed my head, and replaced the cap. “Fuck! Yes. Okay? Jason and I are dating and going to see where this will go. But I really like him, alright? I don’t want to jeopardize anything with him by trying to wheel and deal. He has a family to support.”

“A family?” My mom’s head peeked around the corner as if talking about my... Jason summoned her from across the diner.

I let out a sigh, knowing there was no way she was going to let me leave it at that. “Yes. Jason is a father. He has a son and a daughter, both too cute for words.”

“You met his kids already?” Mom’s eyes shone bright with a future that flashed before her.

I couldn’t help the tug of my lips as I thought of Jason with Parker and Emily. “Yeah. I did.” If I didn’t curtail this quickly, it would turn into a full interrogation. “But back to the point. I am not going to ask for a deal. The sales more than made up for it. I think it would be in our best interest, *for the diner*, if we do a few more test days and see if it’s going to work for us. I believe that if we can consistently get even seventy percent of the sales we got on Sunday, then we’ll be able to do a renovation in the near future.”

Pop’s gaze narrowed. “What renovation? Pop’s is iconic.”

“It’s more like antique. The benches, the chairs, the tables, the equipment. It needs an overhaul.”

Pop stood and his cheeks reddened. “I designed this place myself.”

My mom placed a hand on her husband’s arm. “Don’t stress yourself out. You need to watch your blood pressure.”

I winced. Upsetting him after his recent health scare was not my intention, but the words I had on the tip of my tongue were

extinguished when my mom cut me a look. *End of conversation.*

“I think that’s enough for today. Let’s get you home, you need to take your meds.” My mom pulled on Pop’s arm.

He wasn’t an unreasonable man, but change was hard for him. And change was what this place needed. Since I’d been given the opportunity to take over, I wanted to make the most of it and make Pop’s the hopping spot I knew it could be. I was torn between the frustration I felt at not being heard, and the concern that coupled with the guilt I felt at riling my dad up when his heart nearly stopped a couple weeks ago.

Five minutes later, I got a text from my mom that said I was doing a great job and yes to pies. Her message helped alleviate *some* of the guilt that was bubbling up in me. Flashbacks to Pop pale and weak in the hospital bed, the incessant beeping that haunted me. Part of me knew I wasn’t responsible for his condition, but it didn’t feel any less bad knowing he wasn’t as strong as he used to be. The diner had aged along with my father, a man who was supposed to be indestructible. He wasn’t and neither was the place he built. But with a little help, the restaurant could gain new life. Whether he was on board yet or not, I knew it was the right thing to do.

With my phone in my hand and a plan in mind, I texted Jason.

Me: Hey Pie Man, how’s it going?

Jason: Better now. Sorry for having to leave you hanging. I hope everything...worked out ok. (winky face)

Me: It was a bit of a sticky situation (water drops emoji)

Jason: Mmmm. You're making it HARD to fold laundry.

My skin got hot and blood rushed south at the memory of his husky voice walking me through a soapy play-by-play. Glad I was in my office alone, I adjusted myself and tried to focus.

Me: Fuck me, that's not actually what I messaged for.

Jason: Is everything ok?

Me: Yes. All good. But, I have a proposition for you. Would it be possible for you to come by the diner sometime soon?

Jason: Uh, sure. Actually, Parker has karate today, so we can be there this afternoon while he's at his lessons. I haven't been allowed to stay lately. I'll have Emily with me, is that ok?

Me: Absolutely. Oh, and bring your price list and maybe something to take notes.

Jason: Kinky, but ok (winky face) see you in a little bit

A flutter of excitement went through me at the thought of seeing him again so soon. I shouldn't be so eager, having seen him the day before. But the exhilaration of being with someone new, someone that I saw potential with, made me feel light and giddy.

I channeled my anxious energy into creating a contract and made a list of any questions or suggestions I could think of. It

was going to be hard enough to focus on numbers when I was looking into those gorgeous blue eyes behind the glasses. At least if I was prepared ahead of time, it would help me stay on track.

When he walked through the door a couple of hours later, my heart stopped. It took Emily yelling my name and running at me to break me from the trance. She jumped and I scooped her up just in time. Her small arms wrapped around my neck and the heart that stood still at the sight of her handsome father was now pitter-pattering out of control. How could one joyful hug from a little girl be so magical?

“Hi, Emily.” I gave her one more squeeze before setting her down. Jason watched us with an endearing grin. Ignoring the fact that we had an audience and this was my family business, I closed the distance between us and planted a quick kiss on Jason’s cheek. Some small part of my brain was still aware of our location and the fact that we were newly dating that I managed not to press my lips to his in a fiery greeting.

“Thanks for meeting me here. I would have come to your place, but I don’t trust myself to focus.”

Jason’s expression turned serious. “Yeah, of course. What’s going on?”

I brushed the back of his hand with my own in an effort to quell the worry I saw in him. “Everything is fine. But I wanted to talk business, so I thought it would be easier to do so here. Is that okay?”

I led the two of them to a booth in the corner, farthest away from the other customers. There was a booster seat for Emily set up on one side, and Jason helped her into it and scooted in beside her.

“Order whatever you want, it’s my treat.”

Jason arched a brow in question and I nodded confirming I meant it. They settled on a shake and fries to share.

“So what’s this proposition, exactly?” Jason asked warily.

The file I prepared earlier was sitting on the table. I opened it and started out with the comments left by customers about our pie specials. Pop was old school in so many ways, but then a lot of our clients were too. We had a customer comment box by the register, sometimes people put gum wrappers or toothpicks in it, but occasionally they used it for the intended purpose.

“The cherry crumb with vanilla ice cream was delicious, I hope this comes back on the menu.”

“The sweet potato pie reminded me of my childhood.”

“Pecan pie is my favorite, and this one was top-notch. Kudos to the baker.”

Jason’s cheeks pinked in that way that I loved. “What is all of this?”

“Those are just a few of the comment cards after we served your pies on Sunday. I also got some new reviews on Yelp. We haven’t had new reviews there in forever. Your pies were a big hit.”

Jason rubbed the back of his neck, and his eyes clouded with worry for a moment. “Wow. I’m really glad it went well. Thanks again for doing that. It was a bigger help than you could know.”

I wanted to know. I wanted to know all about him, the good and the bad. I hated the idea that he might be struggling or that he felt like he needed to keep it to himself. Though we hadn’t gotten there in our relationship yet, we’d barely started.

“So, here’s the thing. Pop’s is not what it used to be. I’ve been trying to convince my father that we need to do some upgrades, but if we don’t ever change anything, nothing will change. But Sunday, with your pies, we saw a big change. I can’t commit to something regular yet, but I’d like to do a trial run to get more numbers to work with. If you’re willing and able, I’d like to plan to offer pie specials on different days over the next few weeks to see if it’s something I could work into our menu regularly.”



I was trying to wrap my head around what Nico was saying. Emily fidgeted and pulled on my arm to show me the leaps her pony was doing.

“That’s great, Lulu. Buttercup has gotten really good at jumping,” I responded automatically.

Nico waved a hand and the older woman who served us last time came over. “Beverly, you remember Jason, my”—he cleared his throat—“boyfriend and his daughter, Emily.”

The woman’s eyes darted back and forth between us with a smirk. “Of Course. It’s great to see you again...boyfriend.”

Hearing him call me that in front of someone he worked with made me feel all tingly. I hadn’t been introduced as anyone’s boyfriend in ages. While husband was a title I wore proudly, this felt special on its own too.

I reached out my hand to her. “Great to see you again, too.”

“Emily, Princess. Do you want to help me find a box of toys?”

“Toys?”

Nico bobbed his head. “We used to get more younger families and we kept a box of toys on hand for customer use. I think it might be in my office. Jason, would that be alright, if Emily went with Beverly?”

“Yes, that’s fine. You be good and use your nice words and stay with Ms. Beverly.” I hoisted Emily out of her booster and stood her on the floor next to the booth. Beverly gave me a reassuring smile and led my daughter away.

It would give us a chance to talk alone without distractions. That was very appealing. While I wanted him alone for many reasons, I needed to know more about what he was suggesting. It felt strange taking the money of a man I was interested in, but when he made the big purchase on Saturday, it couldn’t have come at a better time. Even this morning, I was staring at the bills, trying to figure out which ones I could put off and which ones were more urgent.

With Julie, we never had to worry about that. Everything was set up automatically with never a wonder if the payments would process. Now that we no longer shared a joint account, I learned pretty quickly to cancel those automatic payments, because I couldn’t always guarantee the money would be there when they went through. There were a couple of times I had to dip into the accounts set up for the kids. Julie deposited child support every month, a generous amount at that. I told myself

that paying for the home they lived in was for them, but it never sat right. After the two desperate times I'd done it, I vowed never again. That money was for the kids.

Nico watched me, likely seeing the rollercoaster I was going through, despite that I tried hard to keep it under wraps. "Why Lulu?"

I blinked in surprise, not expecting the question. My body relaxed, tension easing up. Talking about my kids was easy, I could do that any time or day. Too much probably. "Oh, when she was little and finally had enough hair to put up in a ponytail, we used to call her Cindy Lou Who, after the little girl from The Grinch. It eventually got shortened to Lulu and it just stuck."

"It's cute and it suits her well."

"Thank you." I meant it for more than the interest in Emily's nickname. Nico gave me a knowing smile, one that told me he knew the topic shift helped ease whatever nerves were building up. I straightened in my seat. This was Nico, a man who survived a million questions from my kids and who committed to taking on a whole family. This wasn't some interview with an old man who had his mind made up about me. I hadn't known him for very long, but I could sense that he would have my interests at heart. Well, mine and his father's diner.

"What are you thinking, exactly?" I asked.

"I'd like to hire you, temporarily. I want to order double the pies I purchased from you before, and on five different days

over the next few weeks. That's about all I can set up right now until I can show my father the return on the investment. Does that sound doable? I know it's a big order and you have your hands full. So, I'm happy to get whatever you think you can reasonably do."

The mental calculations had me slumping back on the bench. If he paid me for all of this work, it might be enough to buy me another month or two before I'd have to make a really difficult decision about our house. It was a lot of pies though, but I could do it. Even if I stayed up and worked through the night while the kids slept. I would make it happen.

"That's doable, but are you serious?"

"Completely. But I don't want you giving me any discount. I am going to pay your normal asking price, just like any other customer. I don't want to make things murky between us by mixing business and pleasure, but I wouldn't be asking if I didn't believe in you and your products. And I have customers to back me up. Your desserts are the only ones I want to showcase in our diner. I do have a contract though, as this is a business deal. I don't want you to worry about me not following through in case anything changes between us." Nico's expression was a mix of determination and concern.

I reached across the table and held his hand. "Nothing is going to change between us, except that I hope things continue in the direction they are headed. I *do* appreciate the separation because I admit I feel a little torn. I don't want to take advantage of our relationship, especially while it's so young.

This is huge, though. And honestly, it's kind of the break I've been hoping for. I don't want you to feel obligated. Are you really sure you want to do this?"

Nico turned his hand over in mine so that they were palm to palm. "I feel an obligation to the diner to do what I can to help and I think you might be the key. Let's consider it a deal between Pop's Diner and the Webber Pie Company, as the contract states, leaving us to be simply Nico and Jason. How does that sound?"

A deep breath released from me. "That sounds pretty perfect. Thank you."

Over the next twenty minutes, we talked out what type of pies and quantities and settled on a price. I tried to offer a bulk discount, but Nico wouldn't have it. He said the profit they would make more than covered the cost. The end total, minus my production costs, wasn't life-changing, but it was month-changing for sure. That, on top of the regular days at the Heartcraft Market, and I was looking at being able to hold back some of those red letters that came in the mail.

Before we left to pick up Parker, I grabbed Nico's face and kissed him squarely on the lips. I might have asked first before initiating PDA, but he had been the one to kiss my cheek when we arrived. I was overflowing with gratitude and needed to show him a little of that.

"Can you come by sometime soon? I'd like to thank you properly," I whispered in his ear.

Nico purposely put some space between us and I liked to think it was to keep things under control with our closeness. “It’s a date.”

The weight I felt that morning while staring at the pile of bills started to fall away. The contract and check that Nico cut felt like my way out. I didn’t know how long it would last, but for now, it bought me time. Luckily, it was an off-week between market days since I had a ton of work ahead. After getting Parker and a trip to the bank, I stopped at the grocery store to stock up on ingredients.

As much as I wanted to see Nico, I wanted to make a good impression too. I worked around the clock. During the day, while I was home with the kids, I prepped what I could. At night, I cooked and froze anything that would hold up to the process.

We talked on the phone and texted throughout the week. Sometimes about everyday things, catching up and getting to know each other better, and other times we ended breathless and panting. Hearing him groan with pleasure over the phone was intoxicating. But I was anxious to hear it in person, to see the look of ecstasy on his face. It had been me and my hand for half a year. Longer than that, really, as things faded with Julie months prior to the divorce. I couldn’t wait to have another person’s hands on me and mine on them.

The next time I saw Nico was at the crack of dawn on Sunday morning to make my delivery. Mom came over to stay at the house, so I didn’t have to wake the kids. Even though it

was early, I rubbed some hair wax between my fingers to warm it up before yanking it through the longer hair on top to give me that styled bedhead look. It had just enough hold to keep my hair standing up in the playful way that I liked. When I saw Nico, his attention seemed to float upwards and lock on my hair, which was exactly the response I was hoping for.

Only one other person was at the diner when I arrived. A young man, maybe a teenager. He seemed a little haunted, but when Nico welcomed me in, his whole countenance changed in Nico's presence. He looked at him with some kind of hero worship, which I got. Nico was the kind of man who could make you feel special and important.

Nico squeezed the young man's shoulder. "Hey Joey, can you help unload Mr. Webber's pies from his car?"

"Sure thing, Mister, uh, Nico." He responded happily. As soon as he walked outside, Nico tugged me into his office and shut the door. I was going to object, not wanting someone else to do all the work, but the words left my mind when he pushed me against the door and framed me with his strong arms. He turned his flat cap around so the brim was in the back. Not even a breath later and his mouth was on mine. The taste of minty toothpaste brushed across my tongue and set me on fire. His body pressed against mine, my dick aching to reach his as it nudged into my hip.

He let up the fierce assault on my lips, leaning his forehead on mine. "Sorry, I have been waiting to do that all week. You

have had me all tied up in fucking knots. And then you walk in looking like an oasis in the desert and I couldn't help myself."

I ran a finger across my kiss-swollen lips. "I'm not complaining. A guy could get used to being greeted like that."

"Hey, Nico? Where exactly am I supposed to put these pies?" A shout came through the door rudely ending the moment.

"I'll be out in a minute, Joey." *Sorry*, Nico mouthed to me.

It was probably a good thing we were interrupted. If not, I had images of being bent over his desk running through my head, but this was his business...and a restaurant. We couldn't do that here. I wasn't some desperate and horny college kid anymore. No, I was a desperate and horny full-ass man, but I could contain myself to proper locations. Besides, I was a father, I didn't need to be doing anything that reckless and stupid. *Le sigh*. Being a responsible adult really sucked sometimes.

"Are you free for the day? Do you want to stay for breakfast?" Nico asked hopefully.

"Maybe just breakfast. My mom's with the kids this morning, but she has a book club this afternoon. I'll just text her and let her know I'll be a little later."

Nico pulled me away from the door, grabbed an apron from a hook, and led me out to one of the spinning stools at the long counter. After he put the logo'd apron on, he washed his hands and stood across from me on the kitchen side of the counter.

“Welcome to Pop’s Diner, what can I get started for you?”
Nico winked.

I propped my elbows up and rested my chin on folded hands. “Hmm...what’s the specialty for the day?”

“Pie.”

A laugh burst out of me. “Thanks, but no thanks. I think I’ve seen enough pie for a while. Surprise me.”

“Alright, one Nico Leone, Junior Blue Plate Special coming up.” Nico went to work while I got to appreciate the view. A few other staff trickled in and started preparing to open. If anyone thought it was strange to see their boss, or boss’s son, cooking for a random man before hours, no one said anything. Though I did get a couple of raised brows and brown-chicken-brown-cow wink-winks. And Joey, who seemed to glance over wistfully. Here I was before the place even opened, it probably looked like I had woken up with Nico. *If only*. I wanted so badly to spend the night with him and wake up to him cooking for me.

Nico turned around and placed a small sizzling skillet on a wooden board in front of me. The smell of onions, peppers, potatoes, and ham wafted up. I didn’t normally eat this early, but my stomach growled at the sight.

Nico produced two forks before walking around the counter to sit on the stool next to me. When I reached for a fork, he pulled it back. “Nope. No dining and ditching here, I expect payment for your breakfast.”

I tilted my head as I tried to puzzle out what he was getting at. He put a finger on his lips and I felt a smile stretch my own. Turning on the stool to face him, I leaned across and brushed my lips across his. Just once, lightly.

“I suppose that’ll do, for now.” Nico offered the fork as a prize.

I bumped my shoulder against his. “You’re terrible, Nico Leone, Junior.”

“You like it.”

I mumbled my agreeance around the forkful of food. A perfectly seasoned bite with layers of flavor. The groan that escaped me was louder than I intended. Though I found some amusement in the discomfort the sound seemed to cause Nico as he shifted in his seat. Even as we shared the breakfast skillet, I wished we were somewhere less peoply. I was glad the kids weren’t here but we were hardly alone. Someday and very soon, we needed time with just the two of us. No children asking a million questions, no staff trying hard not to appear to be eavesdropping. Just us.



Another two weeks passed with almost no privacy. I loved playing with the kids. I loved seeing Jason with them. I even loved seeing them in my diner, my second home. Jason had brought them a few times, which was always a nice surprise. Every time he came, he tried to pay for their food, but I refused to take his money. There had to be some perk to dating the owner, or owner-adjacent. Pop never made family pay, and we might not be family yet, but I considered the Webber bunch mine all the same.

Seeing Jason always made my day better and my nights longer. Each time I went home to an empty bed, I longed to have him in it. To touch him, yes, but also to hear him beside me, to smell him on my sheets.

I had just gotten home when my phone pinged. No matter how hot our sexting got, no message set me on fire as much as that one did.

Jason: How soon can you be here with a condom?

Practically running, I hurried to my bedroom and grabbed one from the new box I'd gotten hoping to have gone through several by now.

Me: Obeying the laws of traffic, about 15 minutes.

Jason: Hurry

That was it. It was enough to have me rushing to my car and driving as quickly as I felt I could get away with. My cock was rock hard with anticipation. I didn't bother parking at the curb as I usually did, but pulled into the driveway, needing to cut the distance to Jason as much as possible. My hand was raised, about to knock when the door flung open. He pulled me inside by my shirt and closed and locked the door.

Chuckling, I happily trailed after as he led me up the stairs to his bedroom. "Why the urgency?"

"Parker had his karate performance tonight and Julie took the kids out for ice cream after. They'll be back soon and I don't want to waste this opportunity."

My weeping cock was in agreement. We had been hanging on the edge, waiting for this moment for weeks. Except...there were many things we hadn't done together and I longed for all of them. I paused in the doorway.

Jason looked back when I was no longer following. "There's a lot I want with you, Nico. A. Lot. We'll get those moments, all of them. But right now, I need you to fuck me hard and fast. We'll get to the rest later."

He made a compelling point. Who was I to argue with such logic? Jason drew his shirt off and threw it at me, the invitation more than clear. I caught it and stepped inside his room, closing the door behind me, and locking it, just in case. The wicked smile he wore was magnetic, drawing my body towards him, I lost all control of it.

Jason stood at the edge of his bed and lowered his pants, looking over his shoulder to watch for my reaction. When the waistband slid over the tight globes, it revealed a small strip of black between his cheeks. Was that...

“Holy fuck!”

Jason shimmied his ass for me as he leaned on the bed with his arms straight. “I told you I didn’t want to waste any time.”

“You’re wearing a plug?”

“No prep, Nico. I need you. Right. Now.”

It was the hottest thing I’d ever seen. While I liked the prep and the build-up and couldn’t wait to trace every line of Jason’s body, knowing he was this eager for me had my blood boiling. I didn’t bother removing my shirt and barely managed to undo my zipper to free my throbbing cock. Stepping behind him, I stroked over his ass, wishing I had more time to worship every part of him. Jason was gloriously naked, save the pants around his ankles. The desperation and need made the image before me even hotter.

Pulling the condom out of the pocket of my jeans hanging off my hips, I ripped the wrapper and rolled it on. “Just a

warning. I'm not going to last long."

"I don't need you to. I just need to feel you inside of me. It's all I've been thinking about." Jason's voice was thick with need.

My fingers wrapped around the t-shaped base of the black silicone butt plug and I tugged gently, watching with fascination as his body released it. Jason pushed back and moaned, the sound rippling through me. I needed to be the one that brought those sounds out of him. I tossed the plug on the bed and centered behind him, my sheathed dick pressing against his slickened hole.

"Are you sure about this?" It might take Herculean strength to stop now, but I would if he changed his mind.

"Dang it, Nico, I'm sure."

Bracing myself with his hips, I thrust forward, sinking myself deep inside of him. Jason hummed loudly and pushed his ass back into me. He was tight and hot and so perfect. My body screamed at me to move, but I had to make sure he was ready. When Jason started rocking his body, I took the hint. It wasn't how I thought it would be for our first time. No tender exploration and lazy love-making. But driving into him, the smack of our bodies clapping together, the grunts coming from us both with the effort was exactly what we needed.

True to my word, I came fast, captured in the condom. I wrapped my arms around Jason's stomach and pulled him to a standing position, still nestled deep within him. He leaned his head back against my shoulder, back arched, his rapid

breathing matching my own. Holding him in place with one arm, I gripped his cock and stroked him until he came over my hand. With his bare back against my shirted chest, his body hugged mine, pulsing, not willing to let go. If we had time, I would have changed condoms, flipped him around, and fucked him into the bed over and over. But time was not our ally. We both breathed deeply, neither of us making a move to pull apart. I could have been content to stay nestled within him, while my arms held him against me. Jason felt so perfect.

I reached between us and held the condom in place as I regretfully pulled out of him. “Fuck, Jason. That was so hot. You felt amazing.”

He leaned his neck to the side giving me access. I scraped my teeth along his jaw and sucked lightly on his throat, remembering not to work hard enough to mark him. Jason sighed, “I don’t want to move, but we should clean up.”

“Like you said, we’ll have more time for other things.” I reminded him.

“Mmhhh. I have a lot of plans for you.” Jason managed to remove himself from my hold and kicked the pants around his ankles off before grabbing the silicone plug and heading toward the bathroom completely and wonderfully naked. I took off the condom and wrapped it in tissue so it wouldn’t be obvious before throwing it in the trash.

Jason left the bathroom door open, so I wandered in behind him and stepped up to the his-and-hers sinks to wash off the remaining evidence. Our eyes caught in the mirror. Standing

beside him here felt intimate. The idea of us sharing a bathroom was easy to imagine with him. Getting ready side-by-side, me shaving my head, him shaving his face, doing all sorts of domestic, everyday things. I wanted that with Jason, more than ever before.

A muffled knock resounded from below. Jason stashed the cleaned toy and threw on some clothes quickly. It had been a hell of a moment, but it passed. I left the vision of us behind and followed him back down the stairs. He called out when we were closer to the door, but before he opened it, he faced me.

“Will you stay? We may not get to do anything else tonight, but I’d love to have you with me.”

It wasn’t planned or I might have brought clothes and toiletries, but if being with him meant having to get up a little earlier to stop by my house, it would be worth it. I kissed his lips and nodded.

The door opened to a frenzy, especially when the kids caught sight of me and flung themselves at me. After the excited greeting, a blond woman in a business suit stepped through the doorway. I’d forgotten for a moment that with the kids, came their mom. Meeting a lover’s ex wasn’t something I looked forward to, especially not immediately after a hot hookup. But this was an entirely different situation. They were parents and Julie would always be a part of Jason’s life. It was time to pull on my big boy pants.

I held out a hand to her. “Hi, you must be Julie. I’m Nico. It’s nice to meet you.”

She shook my hand but eyed me up and down, assessing me. I felt like I was on trial and she the judge. Well, lawyer at least. “Nico.”

“Julie.” The warning in Jason’s tone clearly telling her to play nice.

“You’ve been spending time with my family. The kids seem to like you.”

“Thanks. I like them too. Parker and Emily are wonderful. You and Jason have done a great job with them.”

That seemed to soften the intent glaring slightly. Her gaze slid past me and she called out, “Bye guys, Mommy’s going home.”

The two whirlwinds ran back, hugged her, and she left. I blew out a breath of relief. The woman was intimidating, which I imagined worked well for her in the courtroom. I could even see how that would be attractive if I were into women. Thank God, I wasn’t. Jason threaded his fingers through mine.

“Thank you. She’s not always that intense. Well, she can be. Anyway, I appreciate the effort. It’ll get less weird, I hope.” Jason rambled.

“Daddy? Does Nico have to leave? Can I show him my routine?” Parker asked. He was still dressed in his gi.

“Good news, Porkchop, Nico’s staying for a sleepover.”

“Yay, sleepover.” The kids both shouted and hopped around.

“You can’t stay up all night, though, you have school tomorrow.”

“Aw, do I have ta?” Parker whined.

I bit my lip to keep from smiling, not wanting to encourage the behavior, despite the cuteness.

“Tell you what, bud. I’ll plan to sleepover on a weekend sometime and we can stay up and play. But tonight, you show me your routine and do whatever your dad says, okay?” I offered.

“Really? You mean it?” Parker’s eyes widened with hope.

“I promise.”

“Parker, we’ll be in the living room in a minute.” Jason’s voice was flat.

Once the area around us was kid-free, Jason crossed his arms over his chest. “Don’t do that.”

The tone shift had me feeling unsteady. Everything was fine two minutes ago. Hell, I could still feel the way his body squeezed around me with his release. What changed? “Don’t do what?”

“Don’t make promises to my kids if you don’t know if you can keep them.” Hurt flashed in his eyes. Hurt that lingered from a pain of the past.

I reached out and gripped his upper arms lightly. “I don’t make empty promises. Sure, things happen and plans change unexpectedly sometimes. I can’t guarantee that I can do

everything I say I will, but I'm going to try my damndest. And coming back again is an easy promise to make, as long as you're on the same page. I don't want this to be a one-and-done. I barely got a taste of you and it wasn't enough. This thing between us is good and I think it can last. But, I'm sorry if I was out of line. Next time, I'll check with you first before making plans that involve the littles."

Jason unfolded his arms and leaned into me. "Thank you for saying that. I'd appreciate the check-in and I'm sorry for being short. I've been the one to dry their tears and hold their shaking bodies at the forgotten or canceled plans. They've been hurt a lot and I don't want to see them go through that again."

I put a finger under his chin, tilting his head up. "And you've been hurt a lot too. I couldn't bear the thought of being the source of pain to any of you. But I'm not her. I get that we are still learning about each other, but I hope you know that you can trust me."

"I know in my head that I can trust you, but my heart is having a harder time catching up. Can you be patient with me while it does?" His misty eyes stared into me.

"Of course, Pie Man. Anything. And in the meantime, I will be more careful with my words." I kissed his forehead.

We made our way to the living room. Before Parker started, Jason cleared the coffee table out of the way. Parker's little face was adorably serious as he counted out his moves in a series of punches and kicks. When he was done, he was all too

happy to show me the first set of moves. Jason watched from the couch as I stood next to Parker mimicking his actions. Parker was beaming with pride and my heart was near bursting every time he grabbed one of my hands and put it in place.

After the bedtime routine, which I did with Jason upon the insistence of Parker and Emily, I was led to Jason's room at a much more casual pace than the needful rush earlier. This time when he stripped, he stayed in a t-shirt and boxers, and there was no toy hiding in his ass for my viewing pleasure. Though the view was a pleasure in a completely different way. It was relaxed and sweet. No longer fueled by the immediate need to fuck. I didn't have an undershirt on, so I was bare-chested and in my boxer briefs when I got in bed next to him.

Jason propped himself up on his elbows and leaned over me. "Thanks for answering my booty call. I debated it a few times before I sent the message, but I am so very glad I did. I definitely want to take things slower next time. But today was exactly what I needed. Although, there's something else I've spent a lot of time thinking about."

He licked my lips, parting them for him to explore and taste. "Mmm. What's that?"

"How long it's been since I've had a dick in my mouth." Jason nipped at my scruffy jaw before sliding down to rest his head on my chest and snuggled in next to me.

"You're a fucking tease, Pie Man."

"I plan to correct that problem soon. Just not tonight. Tonight, I want this, right here." He tightened his hold across

my chest. My arm wrapped around his back holding him in place.

“I plan to hold you to that. But, yes, this is perfect.”

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Warmth enveloped me. I was in a cocoon, a blissful, musky, warm cocoon. I sank into it, never wanting to emerge. When the cocoon grumbled and constricted around me, I froze. In that state between sleep and awake, confusion swept into me as I tried to figure out where I was. My blurry vision darted around. Upon seeing the familiar furniture and curtains of my bedroom, I relaxed. Except the hold on my body didn't let up, if anything it tightened.

“It's still dark, go back to sleep.” A rough, deep voice whispered against my ear. It was then I noticed what wrapped around my chest were large arms. Large, hairy arms. And the voice niggled with recognition. It had been a long time since I last woke up with a body in my bed that didn't belong to either of my kids. Even longer since it was a man whose arms held me.

My brain finally woke enough to put the pieces together. A sleepy smile formed on my lips as I realized whose hold

captured me. I pressed my back against his chest, getting my body as close to Nico's as possible. My body seemed to fit perfectly into the space of his. Nico's warm exhales across my cheek and the rhythmic movement of his chest were a lullaby far greater than it had been through the phone. Hardly any time passed before an alarm was blaring.

"Shit." Nico unpeeled himself from me, leaving my back feeling cold. I rolled onto my back to watch him sit up and check his phone. Morning light had yet to break through the windows.

"What time is it?" I asked, blinking heavily.

"It's four-thirty. I've gotta run home before going in to help open."

"Do you *have* ta?" I whined in the same tone as Parker complaining about going to school.

Nico smiled in the dark, his face illuminated by the phone's light. He leaned over and kissed me. "I'd really like to stay here in bed with you."

"So, do it. You have plenty of staff that can open." Maybe I was pushing, but it felt so nice to have a warm, hard body in my bed and I wasn't ready for it to end. "Just stay a while longer. I'll have to get up to take Parker to school anyway. Surely they can manage a couple hours without you."

Nico's fingers danced over the phone's keyboard before he set it on the side table and scooted back down next to me. "You're a hard man to say no to."

I grinned to myself as I used his body as a pillow once more. Two more precious hours passed before the next alarm, but it was worth it. In the years I spent married and wishing for more time but getting canceled dates instead of canceled meetings, it felt nice to have someone willing to adjust their schedule for me. I wouldn't have asked if I knew it could jeopardize his work. Not every job gave you the freedom to change your hours at the last minute, but Nico was in a position where he had some flexibility. As he had shown when he cooked breakfast for me while his staff continued their opening routines.

It made me feel special. *Nico* made me feel special. If it weren't time to wake up the boy child, I might have shown him how special he made me feel. *Le sigh*, it would have to wait.

“You can shower here if you'd like, then you can just grab clothes at your apartment.”

“Are you trying to get me into the shower? The very same shower you fantasized about us in?” Nico smirked.

Busted. “It might have occurred to me. Though, I'm not sure we can get away with a reenactment right now. Parker is a bear to get moving in the morning. I really need to start the process with him. I'll have to settle for imagining you naked and wet and within arm's reach.”

Nico got up and prowled around the bed, his boxer briefs did nothing to conceal his morning wood. He stopped in front of me. I was eye-level to a mouthwatering sight. As much as I

longed to pull his briefs down and run my tongue over his length, it wasn't something I could start and not want to finish. Instead, I grabbed him through the material, gripping him for a moment, before letting go.

Standing up, I felt the pleasant ache in my ass from the rapid pounding Nico had given me. The kind you couldn't get on your own. We didn't have time to stay in the afterglow or go for round two. The lingering sensation had me more than ready for a round two, desperate to maintain it for as long as possible. Roaming over the sight of the large man before me, my body reacted, as ready as he was for more than a simple touch. I wrapped my arms around his neck. "We are going to have a proper date and night together soon. I'll see if the kids can stay at my mom's house for an overnigher."

"I can wait. But I have to admit the idea of having you all to myself without any interruptions is more than appealing. Talk to your mom, and let me know when would work. I'll make arrangements at the diner." Nico squeezed my ass and pulled me into him. He kissed me once before leaving me hanging as he walked into the shower. He stripped from his boxer briefs along the way, showing off his beautiful ass before the door closed.

The temptation was quite high to call Parker off of school and let him sleep while I joined Nico in the shower. It wasn't a habit I wanted to start with Parker though. I thought of whatever I could to distract myself from the very naked man in my bathroom, trying to get my dick to relax. I finally threw

some jeans on, hoping the restriction of the material would help keep things under control.

Walking into Parker's room, I flipped on the light and prepared for the morning fight. When I first called his name and sat on his bed, bouncing to shake him, his eyes popped open, startling me.

“Good morning, Porkchop.”

“Is Nico still here?” He bolted upright.

“He is. He's taking a shower right now.”

“I thought he left and didn't say goodbye.” Parker's lip turned down.

It was really sweet how the two interacted, but I had to wonder about how it might turn out. What if things ended with Nico? Parker was so attached already. I hated to see him get crushed. Though, I might be pretty attached to the man already myself. We were a hopeless bunch.

Nico told me he was in this. A flutter of hope at the idea of it becoming something serious swirled through me. It already felt like we were moving toward serious, and we had only just begun. With the worried look on Parker's face, I couldn't crush his admiration.

“If you hurry and get ready, maybe you can help me fix breakfast for him before we have to leave. What do you think?”

Those eyes brightened and he hopped out of bed. It was the quickest he'd gotten ready since the first day of school when

he was so excited he was up and dressed at dawn.

Parker and I were in the kitchen when heavy steps sounded on the stairs. My heart matched its rhythm to the beat, thumping as loudly as Nico's feet. When he appeared, I inhaled a sharp breath. He was wearing the same clothes as yesterday, but it didn't matter. He had that flat cap of his and his slightly overgrown scruff and he was delicious. Especially having come from *my* bed and *my* shower. I wanted nothing more than to see him walk down from my room every morning. Was that too much to ask?

His eye caught mine and he winked. I felt myself being drawn to him. He was a gravitational force, a planet, and I was helplessly caught in orbit around him.

An orbit that was interrupted by a six-year-old asteroid blasting right into the surface of that planet. Nico oomphed at the impact.

"Nico! We made you breakfast."

"You did? That's very thoughtful, thank you."

Parker grabbed his hand and pulled him to the stools at the island. Nico sat where directed and Parker climbed into the chair next to him.

I placed a bowl in front of him, brushing my hand over his, before grabbing the milk and pouring it over the cereal. "I hope you don't mind some Cinnamon Toast Crunch."

"See you have the same as me." Parker held up his bowl so fast it nearly sloshed out.

“Put your bowl down, you don’t want to spill it on you or Nico.”

I faced Nico and shrugged. “It’s no fancy breakfast skillet, but Parker picked it out for you.”

He gave me a warm smile. “It’s perfect. One of my favorites. Good choice, bud.”

Parker beamed as if that was his greatest accomplishment. While we ate, I tried not to stare too intently. I didn’t want my son to notice me watching, but it was almost impossible not to when he copied every movement Nico did. If Nico took a bite, Parker did. If Nico tapped his foot, Parker did. When Nico tipped the bowl back to drink the cinnamon sugar milk at the bottom, so did my boy. It was the sweetest moment and I was trying hard to not interrupt it.

“I’m going to go get Emily up. I need to get her to the bathroom before we leave or she won’t make it ‘til we get back home.”

It was a school day and we still had a schedule, but I also wanted to leave them alone to continue their breakfast bonding.

Except Nico hopped up. He whispered to Parker that he would be right back before crossing the room to me, speaking in a hushed tone.

“Why don’t I take Parker to school? I have to head out anyway and it will give him and me a little more time together, and you and Emily don’t have to rush out.”

Conflicting thoughts blasted through my head. I loved the idea of Nico spending time with Parker. Could he survive the drop-off line at the school? It felt so domesticated, having my boyfriend help with the school routine. Not having to wake Emily for once would be nice. What kind of driver was he? That was the big one that kept repeating in my head.

As if he could read the worries dancing in my eyes, Nico brushed my hand. “I wouldn’t let anything happen to him.”

“It’s just...I haven’t driven with you yet and I don’t usually let him go with just anyone.”

Nico arched a brow. “I’m not just anyone.”

I put my hand on his chest. “I know. That’s not what I meant. I’m sorry. It’s been me on my own for so long with them. Well, not completely, but it’s hard to let go of the reins. I’ve never known a greater fear than the unknown for my kids. I do trust you, really, but it’s hard not to think of all the possibilities.”

“And would those possibilities be any less if you were at the wheel?” He prompted.

“I, uh, well, no.”

“Let me drive him. Please. I want to do something to help you out.”

“Are you sure? School drop-off can get pretty intense.”

“I’m sure.”

I sighed. “That would actually be really nice. It might even give me a few minutes to myself before I wake Sleeping Beauty. He’ll need a booster seat though. I have a spare that I use when my mom has the kids.”

A flash of concern crossed his face. “Oh. Right. Do I need special equipment for those? I haven’t used one before.”

“Nah. It’s easy. I’ll show you. But also, if this is too much or it’s too soon, I really won’t hold it against you if you change your mind.”

The concern was replaced with determination as Nico turned his hat around. He looked like he was preparing for something far more epic than driving a child to school. It was pretty dang cute. “I can do this.”

Without taking my eyes off him, I shouted, “Hey, Porkchop? What do you think about Nico driving you to school today?”

The stool he’d been sitting on slammed against the counter. A flash of movement and Parker stood between us. “Really?”

I ruffled his already messy hair. It was his permanent state no matter the cut he got. He had the cowest of cowlicks. “Yes. Really.”

“And I can go in *his* car?” It might as well have been a Christmas present for the lights gleaming in his eyes.

“If Nico says it’s okay.” I gave him one more chance to back out.

Parker wrapped his arms around Nico's leg and stared up at him. "Can I go in your car?"

With the gooey expression he wore, I knew there was no way he would say no to my son. I had to hand it to the kid, he had those puppy eyes down.

"Of course, you can, bud."

"Yay! Can we leave now?"

Nico shot me a look, the question clear. I looked at the clock. We were so far ahead of schedule than normal, it was baffling. I always made sure Parker got to school on time, but we cut it close a lot. If they left now, he would get there thirty minutes early. He might even have time to play on the playground. And maybe it would help them get through the school traffic easier too.

"That would probably be a good idea. Are you all set, Nico?"

He gave me a slight smirk. "Yeah, I'm good to go."

"Parker, go brush your teeth and get your backpack." He took off at a run. We would only have seconds at the rate he was zipping around. Seconds I wanted to make count. I fisted the front of Nico's shirt and pulled him into me. He obliged, bending his neck and meeting my mouth with his. He tasted like cinnamon and sugar. *Cinnamon swirls in every bite.* Footfalls drew closer, faster than a proper tooth brushing should have been, but I couldn't give him a hard time for

being excited to spend time with Nico. I felt the exact same way.

“Thank you for trusting me,” Nico whispered.

“And thank you for...” The hot fucking. Spending the night. Waking up with me in the morning. Being a friend to my kids. My gaze dropped to the six-year-old staring impatiently at us. “Everything.”

“Anytime.” He winked as if he heard the words I didn’t say.

“Text me when you’re done. I need to know he made it or I’ll be a nervous wreck. Not that I expect anything to happen, I just...”

Nico placed a hand on my cheek. “I know. It’s okay. I’ll talk to you soon.”

I watched my boyfriend drive away with my son and my emotions were all over the place. It was strange, unnerving, endearing, anxiety-inducing, and heart-melting. Since day one of Kindergarten, when Julie and I took Parker together, I’d done the morning drop-off routine. It was our thing. Every day the same. Even when I was sick. To have someone else do it was strange but good.

We had a routine down, for the most part, even with getting Emily up to go with us. I didn’t want to let her sleep for too long and throw off the day, but it was nice not having to wrestle them both out the door. An hour. I could give her an hour. I could give *me* an hour. It was a luxury I wasn’t used to. There was plenty of time after they went to bed typically, but

my mornings were never quiet. I decided to settle in with a cup of coffee and an ebook that hadn't gotten any attention lately since this new relationship started up.

With my focus divided between the words on the screen and the clock in the corner, I didn't retain much of the vampire romance beyond the entrancing Skyler who danced in the club as if it were a world all his own. My phone rang in my hand and I panicked, answering before the first ring finished.

“Is everything okay? Did you watch to make sure he made it inside?”

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“Parker is fine, he’s at school, but...”

“No buts.” Jason’s voice took on that firm dad tone. “What happened? He better be okay. Do I need to call the school?”

I loved that protective papa bear side of him. I’d seen that this was a really difficult step for him to take and I needed to fill him in quickly so he didn’t go ballistic. While trying to mask the sound of me running up the stairs to my apartment to quickly change clothes before leaving again, I caught him up. The drop-off at the school had taken longer than I expected.

“There are no problems with Parker at all. He is quite the chatterbox. He talked the entire time, telling me about his teacher and his friends and his projects and favorite thing to do on the playground. He’s all good.”

I could practically feel the tension ease through the phone. “Then what happened? What’s wrong?”

“Well, I don’t know how much you want people to know about you at school, but I’m afraid the word is out about us.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Parker insisted I park and walk him in. He said you always walk him to the gate.”

“What? I haven’t walked him to the gate since he got in first grade and was suddenly too old to be seen with his dad.” Disappointment mixed with surprise.

“Well, I kind of figured he was playing me, but I couldn’t say no to him. So I parked, walked him in, and he held my hand the whole way.” It was a wonderful moment. A normal, everyday task that I got to be included in and it made me feel special beyond words.

“The traitor.” Jason huffed.

“Well, it was more than that. Parker told everyone we passed that I was his dad’s boyfriend. Every eye of the velour pants-wearing moms locked on mine. There were whispers and eyebrows and the occasional weird smile that said ‘I like gay people.’ So, I don’t know how tight you are with the other parents or the school staff, but Parker announced it loud and proud. Which was incredibly sweet, by the way, but also I hope that doesn’t put you in a difficult situation.”

The only sound between us was me tying my shoes. The silence from his end had me wondering if this was all too much. Jason probably went through a lot of gossip and

whispers about his divorce. He didn't need me making his life harder.

A laugh broke the silence at last. Loud, hard, a wonderful sound. "Well, we never told him *not* to say anything. But honestly, it wouldn't have mattered if we did. There's no such thing as secrets with kids. Not that you are a secret, because you aren't. At least Julie knew first, that's all that really matters."

"You're not mad?"

"How could I be mad about my son wanting to show off the man I'm fond of?"

"I must admit, it was pretty cool. I mean I've been to a few pride parades, but I have never *been* the parade." I chuckled at the winding route Parker had taken me on, ensuring we didn't miss a single person on the way to the gate.

Jason's laughter on the other end of the phone was contagious. "Maybe we'll get you a sash next time and you better practice your wave."

"I had no idea the celebrity status I would gain from dating the pie man."

"With great pie, comes great responsibility," Jason said in a too-serious voice.

"Ha! Nerdy, but I'm so into it. Except now all I can picture is a sexy Spiderman kiss."

"Hmm, I'll keep that in mind." The flirty tone in his voice had me thinking even more about that upside-down kiss with

his mask only revealing his mouth. Yup, I was definitely picturing Jason's head hanging upside-down with his mouth open and ready. *Fuck!*

How soon could I see him again? "A Friday night would be preferable to Saturday for a date night, just throwing that out there."

"Oh? Are you getting ideas?" Jason teased.

"So. Many. Ideas."

"This week's no good, I'm afraid. But I'll see if we can plan for next Friday. All night, no munchkins."

"God, yes! You know I like your kids a lot, but I'd really like some time with you that's not rushed. I want to take my time and explore every inch of you."

"You don't have to sell me on the idea, I'm fully invested in this happening too."

I was glad for the hands-free phone call in my car, as it was already hard enough to concentrate on driving. My knuckles gripped the steering wheel as I tried to focus. "I should probably go, I'm almost to the diner anyway. Thanks, Jason. I can't wait to see you again."

"You too, have a great day."

When I parked at the diner, I took a minute to inhale and exhale deeply, trying to relax parts of me that were very much wanting to hear more of Jason's voice, with that alluring, husky tone. I'd spent enough time on the phone with him, both

during sex, and sleep, that I had no difficulty imagining the sounds he would make if we continued the conversation.

After finally feeling like I could walk into my family's diner without a raging hard-on, I headed inside. I smiled and nodded a greeting to those that looked up when I walked through the door. It was Beverly who cut me off when I tried to make my way to the office.

"Not so fast, Junior. You send out a message last minute that you're going to be late and you walk in here looking like that. Spill."

"Looking like what? Do I look bad? Is my hair messed up?" I made a show of running my hands over my slacks and branded button-up. Both of which had been hanging in my closet. I took my cap off and ran my hand over my prickly head. I definitely needed a shave, but she wouldn't have noticed or cared.

"You look rested and, for lack of a better word, satisfied." She waggled her eyebrows.

"If you're needling for info on my sex life, you won't get any." I crossed my arms over my chest, trying to look stern. Beverly was always supportive, but not sure I really wanted to talk about sex with a woman who was my second mom.

"So, there *is* a sex life? It's about damn time. You two have been dancing around each other for weeks."

"I may have stayed at Jason's house last night. And I helped take his son to school. No biggie."

She slapped my arm, “No biggie, he says. Well, I’m glad you could finally grace us with your presence.”

And I was glad to have the topic changed. “How’s it been going this morning?”

“Good, so far. Just the usual early birds, but we have had a few people asking when we’ll be serving pie next.”

“That’s great. We need them wanting more. I’m compiling all of our numbers to see what we can work out. We have four more days that were pre-arranged, and I’ll have to reassess after that.”

“It’s a solid business move if you ask me.”

“Thanks, it was really lucky that we made that connection and that the Webber Pie Company was willing to work something out with us.”

“Pretty lucky, indeed.” Beverly winked before leaving to check on a table.

At the computer, I pulled up the figures from the two days we added pie specials. On the second day we sold even more than the first, but that was because we planned for it. The first day had been a total gamble, the second more thought out. Even still, we sold out before the end of the day. I needed more time to figure out what kind of numbers we could realistically sustain. Right now, it was new and the interest was high. Would it remain if it was something we offered regularly? It wasn’t a risk to keep paying Jason to make pies for us, because it was still making us money. Though, I would

need to consult my father before I made any further decisions about it.

If Pop's place was mine, there would be no hesitation. Not when I saw the potential. That it helped a man I cared about didn't hurt either. But Pop's wasn't mine, I was merely overseeing it for now. Stuck in a limbo of being in charge but not completely. I wasn't sure I was ready for that entirely, but I didn't want to feel like I couldn't make a move on my own either.

Data. Data and stats would be my selling points. Meticulous notes and numbers were my tools. Every request for pie, every customer that left a note, every sale. It was a lot, and the number side of things was always the hardest part for me. Math was my enemy when I was in school, and mixing in letters and numbers in Algebra made me go cross-eyed.

It took me longer than it should have to get everything input properly. In fact, I spent most of the day at the computer, getting up and walking around the diner every now and then to clear my head. It was a challenging task, but it was important, and I wanted to do it right. After all, it wasn't only the diner that depended on what I was doing, it was Jason and his family too.

In the afternoon, I got a text that pulled me out of my failing concentration on the screen. I rubbed my eyes which had grown tired from putting numbers into small boxes on a spreadsheet before pulling my phone out.

Jason: I talked to my mom. We're on for next Friday. Does that work?

I leaned back in my chair and felt my lips tug up at the corners.

Me: That sounds perfect. I'll make arrangements on my end. What do you want to do? Any suggestions?

Jason: Is it weird if I said I'd like to go to the movies? I can't remember the last time I went to the theater for something that wasn't animated, and I don't like going by myself.

A dark room where we could sit side by side and touch each other without an audience? Yeah, that sounded pretty perfect.

Me: A movie sounds great, I haven't been in a while either. You pick, I don't care. I'll just be happy to be anywhere with you.

Jason: *swoon* keep saying things like that and I'll let you take me home and have your way with me after the movie.

Me: I was already planning to.

Jason: You make me sound easy. I told you already, I'm a complicated fuck.

Me: You and your dirty mouth, you better be ready to make up for that.

Jason: I'm sure you can think of something for me to do with my mouth that would make up for it.

Me: So. Many. Ideas I reiterated what I said earlier.

How far away was next Friday? It was bound to be pure torture. Torture that was going to pay off in the end. Never in my life did I anticipate a date as much as I did now, even if the wait was going to kill me.

When my phone started chiming, alerting me to an incoming video call, my dick twitched at the thought of some sexy phone time with Jason. Especially after thinking about the fun we would be having on our date. We'd had a few late-night calls or texting sessions, but hadn't done a video yet. Except I was at work, and that could get...complicated. I would have to keep things professional. I resolved to do that, even if my semi wasn't on board with the idea yet.

“Hey, Pie...” Oh! The face on my screen had messy, brown hair, big blue eyes, but was most definitely *not* Jason. My dick deflated fully. Well, that took care of that problem. “Boy.”

“Pie Boy?” Parker pulled a face before he giggled.

“Sorry, bud. I thought it was your dad. What's happening? Are you okay? Where's your dad?”

Parker looked over his shoulder and then leaned closer to the phone until all I could see was his forehead. “Daddy's in the bathroom. I learned how to spell your name. N-I-C-O.”

I couldn't help but smile at him pronouncing each letter carefully. “That's great, bud.”

“Daddy told me it was like ‘nice’, but with an O. I know how to spell nice.”

“You’re doing really good on your spelling.”

“I found your name on my dad’s phone so I could call you.”
He seemed so proud of himself, it was cute.

“That’s great, I’m glad you called me. Is there anything else you wanted to tell me?”

“Nico?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you come on Friday for a sleepover again? You said you would play with me.”

“I did say that, you’re right. And I would love to. But your dad said this week wasn’t going to work out.”

“Mommy and Grandma are busy. But you can come here.”

No babysitter, that was the problem that postponed our date night. Well, I didn’t see any reason why I couldn’t go over. Even if it meant a little more torturous *not alone* time. And I did promise him. I didn’t want to start things off by showing Jason that my promises couldn’t be trusted.

“You got it, bud. I’ll be there on Friday. I’ll have to leave early on Saturday though, ok?”

Parker beamed with excitement. “Yay! Bye.”

The call ended abruptly, making me laugh. Alright, play night with mini-me this week, and date night with his father next week. I would have liked to get more one-on-one time with Jason sooner, but I would take whatever I could get.

When he opened the door Friday night and saw me standing there, the surprise that registered on his face was telling. “Oh. You didn’t know I was coming.”

He squinted his eyes and tilted his head. “Uh, no? Should I have? Not that I mind seeing you, not one bit. I just thought we were planning for next week. I couldn’t get anyone to watch the kids tonight.”

I stepped in closer to him, enjoying how his body drifted toward me on its own. I lowered my voice in case there were little ears nearby. “I think I got played again. Your son called me and invited me to a sleepover. And I couldn’t refuse those big blue eyes staring at me.”

Understanding dawned and Jason put his hands on his hips and shook his head. “He’s been fibbing to you. I’m going to have to talk to him about that.”

I brushed my knuckles across his cheek. “Don’t be too hard on the kid, it was pretty sweet.”

“It *is* sweet that he wants to spend time with you, but the way he’s going about it isn’t. But we’ll address that another time. Besides, it’s good to see you sooner than I expected to.” Jason softened.

“You too, Pie Man.” I gave him a kiss and he leaned into me, pressing against my chest.

“Nico! You came!”

Jason sighed as he pulled back. Parker pushed his way between us and grabbed my hand.

“Of course, bud. I said I would, so I did.”

Jason watched me with wonder as if that simple sentiment was unfathomable. It reminded me how important it was to him and to his family that commitments be kept. I would do whatever I could to ensure that I kept the ones I made.

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In the quiet of the morning, I set up my booth, enjoying the process. It was the same as when I worked the pie dough or cooked the fillings. Methodical and precise. Everything had its place and it was something I could focus on and leave everything else behind. Over the last few months, my mind had been loud with worry that I tried hard to let go of while working. Now, I was caught in a dream, trying hard to hold onto each detail as I got everything in order.

Dash had just finished hanging his sign and leaned against his table, watching me until I had the last thing in place. Only then, did he wander over.

“How’s it going, Dash?”

“Me? Oh, I’m fine. Nothing new. But you, I’ve been dying to see you again, especially since I missed the last Market, and ask about your big friend.” He gave me a devilish smile. One that looked as intimidating as it did thrilling. With the tattoos on his arm and another creeping up the side of his throat, the

man looked dangerous and enticing. I had to admit I could appreciate the view, even if it was a little too much for me. What kind of response would there have been if Parker had walked *him* onto the school campus instead of Nico? Not that I really cared. Looks didn't define the man. Every interaction I'd had with him had been pleasant.

“Nico? Yeah, things are good with him.” Even saying his name made me smile.

Last night, when he came over at Parker's behest, it was a complete surprise. A very pleasant one. Nico offered to hang out with the kids and let me go out to have some time to myself. Really the only time to myself I wanted was with him. But I went to the store and got to shop without any *help* and that was nice. When I thought of all the things I could do without kids, the only thing that kept coming to mind was him.

Nico was in my house, so why was I wasting my time anywhere else? I came home to a blanket fort in the living room. The island stools were strategically placed to hold the blankets up. Nico, Parker, and Emily were inside their “secret hideout.”

Seeing that big man on the floor, underneath a drooping pink blanket had my heart doing acrobatics. I was falling for him, hard. After a fun night of being silly and playing with the kids, we all ended up sleeping on a pile of pillows and blankets on the floor of the living room. Nico left in the morning with a kiss on my forehead, while Parker and Emily were tucked against me.

“I have to say,” Dash’s voice drew me back to the present, even though I would have been content to stay on the living room floor. “It was pretty entertaining watching the whole will-they-won’t-they thing when he was here. I wish you could have seen how his eyes lit up when he realized you weren’t totally straight.”

I knew how his eyes lit up last night when I opened the door. But to know that he was already that interested in me that first day was something else. As I remembered what Nico told me about his conversation with Dash, my cheeks burned. “Nope, not straight at all. But, I’m, uh, sorry for staring. I don’t want things to be uncomfortable between us.”

“It’s totally fine. I may have, on occasion, put a little extra swagger in my movements when I knew you were watching. I don’t mind *that* kind of attention. Normally, I get it for much different reasons. So, it’s been a nice little ego boost. What’s a little harmless ogling between friends? I’ve done my share of checking you out too.” He winked.

Heat reached the tips of my ears. It was flattering and a little embarrassing, but knowing this hot, tatted man had been watching me, didn’t affect me nearly as much as Nico’s eyes on me. Dash was a friend, an attractive one, but merely a friend and would never be anything else. It was probably too soon to be feeling as attached to Nico as I was, but he was all I wanted. When I thought of being seen or touched or held or kissed, it was only him.

Dash waved his hand in front of my face drawing my attention. “You got it bad, huh?”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“I can totally see that for you. You have a type.”

My brows arched. Julie and Nico couldn't have been more different. She was petite, blond, curly, *a woman*. He was large, bald, definitely not a woman. “How so?”

“You like the strong ones.”

I opened my mouth to respond. Julie might not have been physically big or strong, but she was fierce and powerful in her own right. Nico was physically strong, but he also had a big heart. So completely different. Different personalities, different priorities, hell, different parts, but they each resonated with an internal strength too.

His words played in my head throughout the day. A day that was busier than I had in a while. Several new customers came up asking if I was the one that made pies for Pop's Diner and were eager to buy whole pies from me when I confirmed it. I hadn't really expected people to seek me out after having a slice at the diner. Knowing that Nico pointed them to the Heartcraft Market and to my booth made me feel all gooey and warm. Not only was the deal between us helping as a one-time big purchase, but he was also sending business.

I sold out for the first time since the holidays. It was strange going home empty-handed, but with pockets full. Strange but amazing. That was a couple more bills I could pay. If this kept

up, I might be able to stay above water, at least enough to catch my breath every now and then. But how long could it last? I only had a few more planned days for the diner. I didn't doubt that Nico would continue to refer customers, because that was the kind of man he was, but could I count on the continued opportunity?

I might catch up this month, but what about next month or the month after that? The high I felt at selling out quickly dropped as I faced the uncertainty of the future. I couldn't go month by month, hoping to make it. Not when I had the kids relying on me. It went right back to me needing to find work that I could rely on.

In the meantime, I had an order for the diner to fill. Nico was faithfully supporting me and I would do the same. I couldn't let tomorrow's worries drag me down when today... today was looking pretty dang good.

The week had passed with many texts, calls, and our now traditional, Wednesday diner day. Though, we waited until after Parker's lessons, so he could join us too. He didn't want to miss out on seeing Nico, or getting ice cream, I wasn't sure which one was more of a priority.

The older woman, Beverly came by our table, greeting us by name. After she said she'd grab Nico to let him know we were here, she told me, "It's really good to see your family here. You bring good energy to the place, and you make our Nico very happy."

“Thank you. He raves about this place and the way you all are close, it’s nice to feel a part of it.”

“You are. You bring these angels by anytime.”

Nico beamed when he saw us. He sat in the booth next to me, placing a kiss on my cheek. We ended up staying for dinner, it felt as much as if we were around a dining table at home as at a restaurant. For an unassuming building with rundown furniture, it felt cozy and magical in its own special way. Maybe it was the diner or maybe it was Nico, but whatever it was, I could see why the place meant so much to him. When we left, Nico walked us out and whispered in my ear about our date on Friday, leaving me more ready than ever.

Friday afternoon came and I was filled with nervous energy, pacing the house. I cleaned pretty much anything I could think of to clean, not that it would stay that way with the two tornadoes that lived in my house, but it was something to do. I even raced the kids in the yard, trying to burn off some of the anxiousness. I needed an adult night so badly, but even more, I *needed* Nico. The kids were excited about a sleepover at grandma’s, so all in all, we were a jittery mess. Nico still had our extra booster seat for Parker, so I figured I would wait for him and we would drop the kids off together. It would also give my mom a chance to meet him. Perhaps I was a little nervous about that as well.

I knew she would love him, he was easy to love. But he was the first person I’d be bringing home since Julie. And after

watching everything fall apart and the hurt we went through, I knew she would be a little over-protective too.

It was one date night, but it felt like a lot was riding on it. My kids loved him already, which made everything easier and harder at the same time. That still-present fear of them going through heartache again lingered beneath the surface. While at the same time, I could picture a future with the man. Hope and dread filled me in equal measures.

When the doorbell rang, my heart leapt in my chest. I stood in the hallway, looking at my reflection in the mirror. I wore a button-up shirt with a blue paisley print. It was something I debated over and over when I got dressed. Sweater or dress shirt? When I thought of the torture of Nico undoing each button to reveal what was hidden beneath, it sold me on the paisley. He seemed to enjoy the surprise I had for him last time, so hopefully, he would appreciate what I was wearing under my dark blue jeans.

Not wanting to keep him waiting any longer, I opened the door. Nico stood there with two small gift bags in his hands and met me with a smile that calmed every doubt and worry I had worked myself through. He wore a black flat cap that matched the black and tan plaid shirt he wore open over a black shirt. The man oozed sexiness.

“Wow! You clean up pretty well, Nico.”

His eyes trailed over me in a long, slow path. “Mmm. Not so bad yourself, Pie Man.”

“Nico!” The two little tornadoes burst between us, breaking up our staredown.

“Hi guys, I brought you something.” Nico leaned down and handed them each a bag. They both squealed and took the bags, opening them immediately.

“Bubbles!” Parker brought out a bubble dagger and Emily held up a unicorn bubble gun.

“I figured that would buy me a couple seconds to do this.” Nico grabbed my cheeks in both his hands and kissed me hard. I wanted to melt into him. Wanted to pull him into my room, lock the door, and call off the whole going out thing. Except with the kids, it wouldn’t work out like I wanted it to. Out was our best option.

“You’re a smart man,” I said dreamily when he pulled back, then turned to the kids. “Save those for grandma’s house, we need to get going.”

It was a bit chaotic, getting everyone and their things into Nico’s car. Booster seats, backpacks, toys, and an overnight bag for myself. It had taken minutes to turn his single-man car into the disaster of a dad car that mine always looked like. He didn’t seem to mind though. Nico wore a pleased expression the entire time.

Meeting my mom had gone better than I hoped. I expected her to go full-on mama bear and lecture Nico about hurting us. Instead, she drew him into a big hug and told us to be safe and have fun while making us promise to have lunch with her tomorrow. It was weird but nice. Though getting the blessing

of my mother, knowing we were planning to fuck each other's brains out all night was a little surreal. Much like Julie getting lingerie at her bridal shower. Would they give Nico lingerie if we got to that point? The thought made me smirk to myself.

“What’s going on in that cute head of yours?” Nico squeezed my thigh.

“Nothing, just thinking about weird traditions. Also...lace, lots of lace.”

“Now, I’m really curious. Tell me more.”

“Nope, sorry. You’re just going to have to use your imagination.”

“Fucking tease, you are.” Nico grinned, sliding his hand higher up my leg, stopping just before the V of my groin.

“Now who’s the tease?” It was going to be a long night. Feeling his hand on me, wishing it kept moving, wishing we could pull over, wishing for everything. I wasn’t a reckless, hormonal college kid anymore. I was a dad and couldn’t risk getting caught up in indecency charges, no matter how indecent I was ready to get.

When we made it to the restaurant, I was surprisingly grateful to have a table between us. The heat from his body beside me made it hard to think of anything else. At least now we had a barrier and we could settle ourselves down a little.

It had been two days since we had dinner together at the diner, but we were never without things to talk about. Nico wanted to know everything about me. As he said on our first

date, he wanted to peel each layer away. So when he asked about Julie, who was such a big part of my life, I was ready to share that with him too.

“Can I ask what happened? I can see you two still seem to care a lot for each other.”

“We do and we always will, but we just couldn’t do it as a married couple any longer. When we met, she was this ambitious, driven law student who knew exactly what she wanted and how she was going to get there. I never really had that passion for anything and I found it hot as hell. The thing is, she told me right from the start who she was and what she wanted. It’s easier to see now, hindsight and all. How could I begrudge her for being exactly what she said? Except, I was young and I wanted a family. I told her that I would handle everything with the kids so she could focus on her career. And I did. And she did. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to be a mother, but she didn’t want being a mother to define her. And I’d known that, but I had trouble reconciling that with what it meant in our day-to-day lives.”

Nico rubbed my hand across the table, quiet, letting me talk it out. There was so much that I had processed internally but hadn’t given voice to. I continued, “The sad fact is that no matter how much our society evolves, women in the workforce still have a harder path to forge. Julie knew that she couldn’t let them see her do any less than the men did. No days off for sick kids, no canceled meetings for childcare issues. Which was fine. The only thing I was passionate about was being a father, and I was happy to take on the role of full-

time dad. It made sense. Until it didn't. Until the stress of parenting solo, late nights, early mornings, it began to drive a wedge between us.

“Which I see now was as much on me as it was her. She was still who she told me she was, but I had a harder time seeing it. She wasn't the villain I made her out to be in my head, but our goals no longer aligned and it wasn't fair to either of us. So here we are, finding our new normal. Julie is generous with the kids, and she helps where she can, and I get to keep being the dad I always wanted to be without being weighed down by unrealistic expectations.” It had taken a while to get to that point. Once I was able to stop repeating the narrative I'd built up in my head, I started to see it for what it was.

“I'm sure that was a difficult decision to make, but it sounds like the right one. There's nothing wrong with wanting a partner that's present too.”

I shrugged. “No, but I wasn't listening to what she needed either.”

“Whatever the case, you are an incredible father, and those two are so lucky to have you. I feel fortunate to have gotten a small peek into your world. Maybe a little bit of a selfish bastard too, because I'm glad things ended with Julie. Not that you had to go through that, but that it got you here, with me. I'm probably not supposed to say that, but it's true.”

I felt one corner of my mouth pull up. “I'm glad too. I'm exactly where I want to be right now.”

Nico wrapped his fingers around my hand, squeezing as he stared at me intently. It reminded me of that younger couple the first time I went to the diner. He looked at me and made me feel like I was all there was. The restaurant could have caught fire around us and I would have been lost in the gaze that held mine.

“And you, Nico? What sordid tales do you have that make you less than the perfect man you seem to be?” There had to be some flaw to the man because so far, he checked every box and said all the right things.

“I am a bit of a slob.” Nico winced.

“A slob I can deal with, I have two kids, cleaning up messes is nothing new. What else you got?”

“I probably wouldn’t be good at helping with homework. It was tough the first time around for me and that was when I spent all day in class. Math and I don’t get along.”

I rested my head on folded hands, assessing him. His *not* offering homework help made it seem like he planned to be around for it. I liked the way that sounded. “That’s not a big deal. I got homework covered. I hope this doesn’t change the way you see me, but I kind of like numbers, they make sense to me. Back in my pre-dad days, I did accounting. I didn’t mind that part of it as much as the cubicles, walls, and office politics.”

Nico made a face like Parker when I made him eat his brussel sprouts. “Maybe you aren’t human. I don’t know if I

could see a future with some alien being that maths for fun.” He shuddered for added emphasis.

I chuckled. “I never claimed to be human.”

“I knew it, too good to be true,” Nico smirked.

I shrugged in a what-can-you-do manner. “You know, for someone who doesn’t like math, you did a great job with the numbers you presented to me. It was impressively thorough.”

“Does that turn you on, Pie Man? Do I need to spout numbers at you to get in your pants?”

I trailed the top of my shoe against his pants leg. “Maybe just one number.”

“And that would be?”

“Three point one four,” I said, holding in a smile.

Nico looked puzzled as he tried to figure out what I meant before realization hit and he let out one single laugh. “Ha! Pi. Yeah. That fits.”

“Sorry, dad jokes happen.”

“It’s okay. I guess you make up for your number weirdness by being cute. Cute goes a long way.”

“It’s nice being called cute.” I smiled as I reached across the table and placed my fingers over his. “Even though you did a great job on everything, if you need help with your accounting, I’d be happy to take a look.”

Nico stroked his thumb over my hand. “Be careful making an offer like that. I might just take you up on that.”

“Nico, I really wouldn’t mind. The offer stands.”

Much to Nico’s visible relief, we moved the conversation away from math. We talked about family, school, favorite foods, a whole gambit. It was strange to think that he’d been so close all this time and our paths had never crossed before. Except he told me about his father’s bias against Grove Hills, which trickled down to him. Fifteen minutes away and it might as well have been hours. Would we have met if I hadn’t walked into that diner?

I understood it though, sometimes the master-planned community gave me the squick. It was too name brand clothing, name brand cars, name brand coffee, like everything was a show. But I had to admit that it offered a lot for my kids and that’s what mattered. It was home, for now.

Dinner was perfect, beyond perfect. We stood in line at the theater, holding hands. I leaned against him and he let go of my hand, throwing his arm over my shoulder. Nico made me feel small in the best way. Not in the way that the old men at the office made me feel small. In the way that it felt so right. The way that I felt safe and taken care of. The way our bodies fit together like puzzle pieces. The way I was dying for those pieces to fit together again with nothing between us.

Nico bought our tickets for the newest Marvel movie I’d been dying to see and we sat in the back row as far away from anyone else as possible. I pushed the arm up, so there was no space between us, and snuggled in next to him. Again his arm went over my shoulder. When the lights went out, I couldn’t

help but run my hand over his muscled thigh. A little payback for working me up before dinner. The low hum of approval that came from Nico had me pushing higher. Nico shifted, widening his legs, giving me more room to explore.

The flash of characters set to a dramatic theme song that normally got me amped up for the movie about to start couldn't hold my attention. Not when it was fully on the man beside me whose reaction to my touch was becoming more obvious. The sharp inhale when I brushed over his hardening bulge was a sound I wished to capture in my mouth. His own theme song that had me eager to see what might come next. No one could see what my hand was doing, but as much as I wanted to probe his mouth with my tongue, I wasn't about to start making out in a theater like a horny teenager. Instead, I'd rub him off like a respectable adult.

Each time I squeezed him or brushed my hand over him, he squirmed, trying to keep from bucking in his seat. His hand played in my hair, tugging slightly when I teased him. As excited as I had been to see the new movie that the kids were not ready for, I had no comprehension of anything that had happened so far. I loved the movies, it was one of my favorite things to do before I became a parent. Normally, I would have been engrossed in the film, loving the hive reactions of the audience, the gasps, the laughter, the cheers. But now, the only thing I wanted to hear was Nico's gasps. The ones he was trying hard to keep under the radar.

Leaning in close, I whispered in his ear, "How mad would you be if we left early?"

His gaze flicked to mine, heat simmering behind them even in the dimly lit room. “How early?”

“Now-ish?”

“Fuck, yes! Let’s go.” Nico pulled his arm from around me and was about to stand when he seemed to realize his problem. “On second thought, I think I need a few minutes and you need to sit away from me.”

I chuckled to myself before quickly moving to the empty seat beside me, leaving a couple of feet between us. “Better?”

“Shut up and don’t look at me.” Even Nico’s whisper was rough and lusty. There was no pretending I was in any better shape than he was, but I still felt rather proud of myself for getting him so worked up. I’d forgotten how fun it was to wield that kind of power over another man. To create a reaction that was impossible to hide.

We sat in silence, each pretending to watch the movie and *not* watch the other. It was like holding in a sneeze. The harder you tried, the more your eyes watered and the pressure built. Keeping our hands and eyes to ourselves didn’t seem to be helping the matter at all. At least not on my end. Not moving my head, I snuck a glance out of the corner of my eye at his crotch.

“Shit. Stop that. Fuck.” Nico stood up abruptly and walked past me without saying a word, though I got an eyeful of what I’d been trying to spy.

I followed him, grinning as wide as the Cheshire cat. I had to slap a hand over my mouth to cover the laugh that fought to break free when Nico grabbed an empty popcorn bucket off the top of the trash can on the way out. His force field against prying eyes as we hurried out through the lobby. I was sporting a semi myself, but at least the restrictive material of my tight jeans helped conceal it...a little.

The brisk air hit us as we stepped outside, Nico gulped in the fresh air and froze waiting for me to catch up. When I came to his side, he grabbed my hand and twined our fingers together. The erection-gawker repellent bucket disposed of in a trash can.

He gave me a sidelong look. "Sorry, I couldn't wait for you. I almost didn't make it."

I stretched up to brush my lips against his scruffy cheek. "It's okay, I enjoyed the view from behind anyway."

Nico faced me and stroked a thumb over my jaw. "You are trouble, Pie Man."

"I tried to warn you." I shrugged nonchalantly.

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It was all I could do not to press him against the gum-riddled wall of the theater. Not to take him into my hand the way he had been doing to me. Not to go to my knees and worship his body. The thought alone had me looking skyward, forcing air in and out of my lungs.

“We need to get out of here,” I said on an exhale.

“I couldn’t agree more.” Jason’s sexy tenor voice sent shivers over my skin.

When we got in the car, Jason was giving me an impish look. I shook my head. “Don’t start anything you can’t finish.”

“Fine.” Jason huffed, though the smirk he wore said he was enjoying himself a little too much.

Tension was our companion the entire drive back to my apartment. Touching was off-limits, I was too keyed up and I didn’t know how much more I could take before exploding. We decided when we were planning our date, that we would

stay at my place so there wouldn't be any chance someone would walk in on us. Not that anyone was at Jason's house currently, but it would be harder for his mom or Julie to pop over. He told me he was going to keep his phone on and nearby though. Which I understood, I felt that way about the diner and that was just a building, not living, breathing, tiny humans that depended on me for everything.

Taking a break was a challenge for Jason, but he let his dad guard down tonight, and out came a compassionate, thoughtful, tender, playful, and flirty man. I wanted to explore all these different sides of him. One night wouldn't be enough for that. A thousand and one nights wouldn't be enough. Each one a cliffhanger to keep me waiting and ready for the new story and new adventure the next day would bring.

When we got to the steps that led up to my apartment, Jason hopped on the first step and turned around to face me. He was eye level with me now. He lifted his arms as if to rest them on my shoulders but stopped with an inch of space between us.

“Can I touch you yet?”

With the way his eyes were gleaming and the lick of his lips when my gaze dropped to them, he was begging to be kissed. I barely moved my head, but it was enough for him to drop his arms over my shoulders and bend behind my neck. As soon as my hands found their way to his waist, his mouth landed on mine. His tongue swept over, seeking entrance.

A growl rumbled in the back of my throat as I melded against him. His tongue tangled with mine, his arms tightened

around me, holding me in place. His erection rubbing against mine. I pulled back quickly, painfully peeling my body away from his.

“Nope, I was wrong. No more touching until we get inside.”

Jason let out a laugh, kissed the tip of my nose, and began climbing the steps. He managed to exaggerate each step with a sway that had his lovely ass bouncing beautifully in my direct line of sight. He stopped at the top, but I had been so caught up watching the show that I didn't stop right away and bumped into him.

Or he bumped back into me. Whatever the cause, the effect was that my dick was nestled against his ass. To torture me further, Jason rolled his pelvis back and forth creating delicious friction. Thank God we were in front of my door, or my neighbors might see a whole lot more of me than we would be comfortable with and I would have to move to another state, or maybe another country. Maybe Grove Hills.

As soon as we were inside with the door closed behind us, we crashed together. After hours, weeks, nearly a month. After so much restraint, so much control, so much waiting, we were finally free of it all.

Jason nibbled along my jaw and worked his way down my throat. Each nip of teeth had me squeezing him tighter, needing to be as close to him as I could get.

The emotional part of my brain wanted to slow things down, to savor every second. I was trying really hard to listen to *that* brain and not the one between my legs.

“Wait, Jason,” I rasped.

He drew back and met my gaze with concern. “Is everything okay?”

“It’s amazing. *You* are amazing. But we rushed things last time and I really want to take my time with you.”

Jason smirked, stepping closer to me. He reached between us, gripping my painfully hard dick. “Nico, babe. We have all night to slow things down and explore. But you and I both know you can’t hold out much longer. So how about we work backward? Fast now, slow later.”

He was right. It was why I couldn’t let him touch me any longer at the theater, or in the car, or on the stairs. I was so desperate for him that it would be over quickly. Jason didn’t wait for me to respond before lowering to his knees before me. His hands went to the button on my pants, hesitating, waiting for me to stop him. I couldn’t. Not with him looking up at me like that.

Button released. Zipper slid down. I sucked in a breath as he freed me. Jason went to take his glasses off, but I grabbed his hand to stop him.

“No. Leave them on.” Those blue eyes were framed perfectly by the glasses and gave me that sexy nerdy vibe I found so alluring.

He gave me a sly look before licking his lips and bringing his mouth to my head. A flick of his tongue. A whisper, a brush, a dance over sensitive skin.

“You’re a fucking tease,” I growled. He’d barely touched me and already I was nearly there, but I needed more.

“Mmm. Been a while. Just getting the lay of the land,” Jason said in a husky voice before running his tongue up my length.

Any witty comeback I might have had disappeared when his mouth enveloped me. The wet heat and perfect pressure had me bucking my hips. My hands went to his hair, searching for something to hold so I didn’t fall over.

Jason’s head bobbed up and down, popping off and diving back down. He hummed and purred around me in a way that had my toes curling. He took me in deeper, making my whole body go rigid.

“Fuck, Jason, I’m so close. If you want to pull off, you better do it now.”

A slight shake and grunt was his response before he hollowed his cheeks, the suction sending me over the edge and I held onto him while my vision blurred from the release. Jason stayed in place, swallowing everything I gave him. His humming around my sensitive flesh made me shiver with pleasure.

As I came down from the high and regained some control over my body, Jason pulled off. He wiped the corners of his mouth and sat back on his heels. He wore a blissful look that told me he enjoyed that as much as I did. And, fuck, I *really* enjoyed that. But it was time to return the favor because I’d

been longing to taste him for as long as I'd been wanting to see him do exactly what he'd done.

I held my hands down to him and when he grabbed them, I hauled him to his feet, smashing my mouth to his when he was standing. The tantalizing taste of me on his tongue had me ready for more.

“Jason, you felt so good. It might have been a while for you, but holy shit, you know what you're doing.”

“Like riding a bike.” Jason winked.

I tugged him against me, “I have something else for you to ride, but first...”

I gripped his ass in both hands and lifted. Jason took my cue and hopped up, his legs hooking around my waist, his arms holding onto my neck as I supported his weight. He clung to me as I carried him to my bedroom. My pants were sliding down my legs, making the effort even more challenging, but now that I had Jason in my arms, I wasn't letting go. Maybe not ever.

He licked the bottom of my ear and the space right behind it, making it hard to concentrate on each awkward step. When we got to my room, I set him down on my bed. Jason took his phone out of his pocket and put it on a side table, making sure it didn't get lost in the fray. He leaned back on his elbows and watched me as I kicked my shoes off and shimmied out of my pants that had fallen.

Jason indicated with his head towards my shirts. My hat went on top of my dresser. I shirked off my plaid long-sleeve shirt before pulling the black t-shirt over my head. Holding his gaze, I hooked my thumbs into the elastic band of the boxer briefs that had been half off already. Jason's eyes gleamed as he took me in slowly, a half-smile on his face.

“Enjoying the show?”

“Mmhmm. Even more than the movie.”

“Seems a little one-sided though, I'm naked and you have all your clothes on.” I gave him a pointed look.

Jason tilted his head. “Seems like someone should do something about that.” He continued to lay back on his elbows, completely at ease, as if he had no care in the world. The only thing distorting the calm and collected image was the tent pole in his pants.

“I think you're right.” I pounced, landing on the bed with my hands and knees on either side of him. Jason let out a surprised laugh and fell flat against the bed. My mouth lingered over his, close enough to feel his breath, to hear the change in it, to see his eyes burn with anticipation and need. When I kissed him, he melted and I with him. I could never get tired of kissing Jason. His lips were smooth and firm and they moved perfectly with my own. I wanted to devour him, to lick and taste every part of him, to know if the rest of his body felt as perfect as his lips.

With that goal set, I began my mission. To explore every inch of him. Removing his glasses, I set them on the side table

so they wouldn't get damaged. I unbuttoned the top button of his shirt, revealing the blue neck of an undershirt. I traced each bit of exposed skin. Throat, collar bone, shoulder. Another button. Jason watched me with amusement, waiting for me to catch on to a joke. There was nothing in this moment that was a joke. I'd never been more serious and set on a task than I was about getting him naked.

With the next button, I saw a peak of red on the royal blue shirt. I tilted my head, the colors unexpected on an undershirt. Maybe he just grabbed something random to wear beneath his dress shirt. I sat back on my heels, curiosity getting the best of me. I unbuttoned the next two buttons and pulled the sides of the shirt open. A loud laugh burst out of me at the sight.

“Superman? God, you are so fucking cute.”

Jason grinned broadly as he lay there with his dress shirt splayed open to reveal the Superman tee beneath. “I'll have you know the betrayal I felt internally at wearing a DC shirt to a Marvel movie was soul-deep. But you said you loved Clark Kent, so I thought I'd offer up the full experience.”

I pulled him up to a sitting position, pressing my mouth to his, while I pushed the paisley sleeves down his arms. “That is the nerdiest and hottest thing anyone has ever done for me. I'm half-tempted to have you keep that shirt on, because...hot, but not now. I'm dying to touch you and kiss you everywhere.”

“Yes. That. Now. Please.” Jason's amusement shifted back to desire.

Roaming over his body, I got one last look at him in the red and blue shirt before pushing the *S* emblem over his head. With a hand on his chest, I pushed him back down to the bed, raking my eyes over him. From cute to deliciously sexy in a matter of milliseconds. And he had that quick a transformation without even having to use a phone booth. Clark Kent had nothing on Jason Webber.

Bending down over him, I pinched his lip between my teeth before moving down and continuing the path I'd started before the surprise. I worked my way across his chest, pausing to give extra attention to his peaked nipples. He groaned and arched his back with each flick of my tongue or scrape of my teeth. So responsive to every touch. I could feast upon his chest alone, but there was so much left to discover. Inch by inch, I worked my way down. Nip, lick, brush, suck, flick. It was a slow process that had Jason keening and pushing his hips up, longing for me to reach my destination. As hurried as we'd been before, I was more than ready to savor every second, especially with Jason pleading beneath me.

“God, you are so beautiful.”

Jason gave me a sweet smile and squeezed my thigh. “You make me *feel* beautiful. That’s something I haven’t felt in a long time.”

Needing to show him just how beautiful he was in my eyes, I unwrapped the rest of him at last. With shoes pulled off his feet, and pants removed, I was left with the sight of him fully nude except for the tight material that no longer contained

him. Jason grinned even wider than before as I took in the red and blue jockstrap that matched the shirt he'd been wearing.

“Fuck, Jason. So full of surprises.”

“Well, you've been more than patient, so I figured I'd make it worth it.” Jason winked.

“More than worth it, only I'm not feeling so patient anymore.”

Some other time, I hoped to see him in shirt and jock and nothing else, but I was nearly salivating with my destination in sight. I needed him now, the torturous trail I took to get here might have been as hard on me as it was on him.

I bent over him, running my nose against the cotton, before slipping it down and freeing him. I fell upon him, drawing his length into my mouth. Jason's hands rubbed over my hairless head in a sensation that set me ablaze. His hips bucked, pumping into me as he held my head in place. I took him, and took him, until he shouted and flooded my mouth with his release. When I popped off, I placed a soft kiss on his head, before tucking him back into the jock. Jason giggled, a sweet and jingly sound that made my heart float with it.

Working my way back up, I lay beside him. Without hesitation, Jason rolled over to his side, pressing his body against mine and he rested his head on my chest. He sighed deeply, a sound that resonated with contentment and satisfaction. Both of which I felt equally.

“I really enjoyed that,” Jason said in a soft blissed-out tone.

“Mmm, me too. That is going in my spank bank for sure. You gave me a lot of great material to work with.”

“Then I can check that off the list for tonight. But there are plenty more things that need to get checked off.”

“I’ve got a list too. Though in the interest of slowing things down a little, I’m happy like this for a while too.”

Jason murmured with agreement as he played in the hair on my chest, his fingers running through it, twirling small circles. It was as intimate and soothing as it was to have him rub my smooth head. Though, I pretty much enjoyed anywhere and any way that he touched me.

“I like your apartment.”

“That’s only because we can lay here naked and there’s no kids.”

“One; I’m not fully naked. It seems you forgot something.” Jason plucked the band of his jockstrap.

“I didn’t forget, but I didn’t get to see the view from behind yet either. So, it stays on for now.”

Jason chuckled. “Okay, that’s fair. I wore it for your pleasure anyway. So you want it on or off, that’s totally up to you.”

“Oh, it’s going to come off later, that’s a promise.”

“Good answer. And that’s not the only reason I like it here. It’s simple, but also comfortable, and you.”

I did not have an eye for design and hadn't done much with the place. Simple? Yes. Comfortable? I tried. I had the basics I could get away with. Couch, TV, coffee table, bed, dressers, side tables to store all the important stuff. It wasn't much.

"Thanks, I guess. It's small, but it does the job. Nothing like your place, though."

"No, it's nice. I often wondered what it would have looked like if I had a place of my own. I never did. I went straight from having roommates in dorms, to moving in with Julie. I never got the chance to be on my own. Until now, but even then, I have Parker and Emily. Not that I regret how everything worked out, I don't at all. And my house, well, the only reason we ended up where we did was because of how well Julie was doing. She had the means to put us in a place that was close to the new schools in the area. Only now with her gone, I don't know how much longer we can stay there."

Hearing the sadness that bled through his words, I sat up and looked at him. "What do you mean?"

Jason pushed himself up beside me and scooted back against the headboard. "It's nothing. Forget I said anything."

I grabbed his chin in my hand and angled his face to meet mine. "It's not nothing. You don't have to hide things from me. We're in a relationship. I care about you, Jason. A lot. And the kids. You can talk to me about stuff."

He exhaled and rubbed a hand through his hair. "I guess that part's new to me too."

I slid my hand down his neck and squeezed his shoulder. “We’re in this together. I’m not just here because you’re a complicated, but well worth it, fuck.” I winked, rewarded by a smile. “I want to be a part of your life and not just the fun, easy parts. But I can’t help you if you don’t let me in.”

Jason leaned over until his cheek rested on my shoulder. “I know. It might take some time for me to learn to trust someone fully again, but I’ll try.”

“That’s all I ask.” I brushed a kiss on his forehead. “What’s happening with the house? How bad is it?”

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The words clung to the back of my mouth as I struggled to release them. A few things held them in. Money had often been a part of the arguments between Julie and me. Reaching the point where I no longer had a partner receptive to hearing what I had to say left a mark. No matter how much I knew that Nico wasn't anything like Julie, I was still a little bruised.

“It’s not great. Like I said, we only lived there because of Julie. A brand new home in a housing development wouldn’t have been my choice, though it seemed like it was a steal at the time. But since the divorce, I can’t seem to keep up with it.”

“What about Julie? You said she’s generous with the kids.”

“She is and she pays child support. I know she would help if I asked, but I can admit that my pride’s gotten in the way of that. I depended on her when we were married, but I don’t want to depend on her now that we aren’t. The kids are taken

care of, that's what matters the most. I don't know. I've been trying to find a job, but now I have a big gap in my resume from being at home with them. And even if I didn't, I'm not sure I could go back to working out of the home. Not while Emily isn't in school yet." I put my head in my hands. "I might have to look for a smaller place, one that I can afford comfortably. I just hate the idea of uprooting them after all the changes they've had already."

Saying it out loud made everything more real. I could smile and laugh and pretend everything was fine all day long, while inside the worry ate away at me. But now it wasn't tucked below the surface anymore. It was bubbling up, and at a time when I wanted nothing but to enjoy my kid-free night with a sexy man I liked, a lot. More than I should already, which might worry me, but I had enough other worries to contend with.

Nico grabbed me and hauled me onto his lap until I straddled him and he held me to his chest. I laid my head on his shoulder, burrowing into his strong body. He rubbed circles on my back. "You're not alone anymore, Jason. You don't have to handle things by yourself."

"Sometimes I feel like everyone expects me to be this"—I pointed at the blue discarded shirt on the floor—"Super Dad that can do everything."

He kissed the top of my head. "You *are* a Super Dad, but that doesn't mean you have to do everything. Even

superheroes have sidekicks and get help sometimes. And you have me now. How can I help?”

I sat up and offered him a wistful smile. “Are you offering to be my sidekick?”

Nico brushed his lips against mine. “I’m whatever you need me to be. If being your sidekick means I get to be a part of your world and catch a glimpse of you in action, I’m in. Call me *hero support*.”

I quirked my lips to the side. As nice as that sounded, I didn’t want someone’s existence to be waiting to follow my lead. I wanted someone who was there at my side, to be with me not behind me. “You know, on second thought, I don’t think I want a sidekick. I’d rather have a partner.”

“I like the sound of that. The two of us together, kicking ass and taking names.”

“I don’t know if I do a lot of kicking ass anymore. It’s more like dressing up and paying bills.”

“Then we’ll do that together too.”

“Thank you, Nico. That’s...hard for me. I don’t want it to seem like I have to rely on someone.”

“I *want* to be someone you rely on. Helping you is no burden, it would be my joy. I’m not well-off, but I think the two of us together can figure something out. And you know what’s hard for me?”

I arched my brow, curious to know what he was dealing with. He didn’t answer right away, instead, he slid his hands

down my back, over the elastic band, rounding over my cheeks, squeezing them. Nico pulled me forward, my bare ass hugging his naked dick. I rolled my hips and let my fingers roam over his chest, humming in the pleasure that touching him and feeling him gave me.

His hand found my cotton-covered cock, stroking me through the material. He smirked with satisfaction, “That’s what’s hard for me.”

“Just for you,” I said as I pushed into his hand. It was a distraction. A welcome one. He heard me, really listened, offered support, and now he was helping me get my mind off it. I was so ready to focus on him.

“I think you need to turn around, let me get a look at you.”

I liked the sound of that. I’d been waiting, not too patiently, for Nico to get the full effect of the jock I wore for him. I kissed him hard, thrusting my tongue into his mouth, before pulling away quickly. He followed my retreat as if magnetically drawn to me, trying to catch my mouth once more. But I didn’t give in. I winked before pulling one leg over him, turning, and sliding the other leg back. I now sat on his lap, facing away from him. He pushed on my back slightly until I was leaning forward on my hands, baring myself to him. Nico traced his fingers over the straps, rubbing and squeezing my ass. He shifted beneath me until he was leaning forward and bit the soft flesh enough to make me squeak. The sting was a surprise, but not an unpleasant one. I pushed back against him and he rubbed out the spot he bit.

“Fuck, you are so sexy,” Nico growled.

I wiggled my butt for him, teasing him and showing him I was ready for more.

“The first bite might surprise you. The second might give you pause,” Nico said before he nipped me once more on the other cheek. I didn’t know what he was talking about, but he was driving me wild.

“The third bite,” Nico teased me with his breath blowing over me. “is where the magic happens.” He scraped his teeth slightly harder on my left ass cheek, causing me to squirm and moan. I recognized my own words that he repeated back to me when I gave him that first pie. *Adventurous indeed*, I smiled to myself.

“Stay here,” Nico demanded, before turning beneath me to reach the side table drawer. I stayed posed on my hands and knees as he rifled around in the drawer. The vulnerable position had me aching and leaking, needing so much more.

Looking over my shoulder to see what he was getting, I saw the box of condoms and bottle of lube in his hands. The last time was fast, we hadn’t had time to discuss anything. It was amazing, but not what I really wanted. “Nico, I want to feel you with nothing between us. Can we do that?”

“I, uh, yeah. That would be fucking amazing. But are we in the clear for that?”

“Julie and I tested after the Chaddest of cheaters and since then I’ve only been with her, and you.”

“It’s been a long time for me, but I always used condoms with my last partner. I was negative before that.”

That was all I needed to hear. I sat back and pressed against him, my back flush with his chest. Circling my hips in a teasing motion, I tilted my head, giving him access. Nico sucked against the side of his neck, careful not to leave a mark. Not like the ones he surely left on my ass. It was enough to drive a man to the brink. “Please, Nico.”

“Mmm, I love it when you say my name like that.” Next came the sound of the lid for the lube, building up the anticipation. While Nico kissed my neck, I lifted myself enough to give him room. A cool, wet finger brushed against my hole, causing a gasp to sneak out of me.

“Are you okay?” Nico paused his movement.

“Shoot, yes. Just keep going.”

Nico’s warm breath whispered against my neck as he chuckled. He continued to tease the outside before plunging in. I arched against him, letting my head fall back. He pumped in and out of me, loosening me. He added another finger as he stretched me further. Last time, I’d prepped myself, not wanting anything to delay getting to feel him inside of me. This time, I both wanted it to move forward until he could fill me, and to take our time, letting him explore and unravel me. I didn’t know how much more I could take, though.

When he added a third finger and brushed against the spot that sent bolts straight to my dick, I sucked in a sharp breath. “Fuck, Nico. That feels so good.”

“Should I keep going, or are you ready for me?”

“I’m ready. I’m so fucking ready,” I panted.

Nico’s mouth locked onto my shoulder, another bite, not hard but enough to make my whole body sing, so many sensations at once. He carefully withdrew his fingers and gripped himself. I lifted my hips and maneuvered until I felt his tip press against me. He held his cock while I sank slowly down onto him. The burn and stretch blissfully overwhelming as I seated fully on him. Nico’s arms wrapped around my waist, holding me in place. The two of us breathed together as my body adjusted to his.

A moment later, I began to move. I rocked my hips back and forth, feeling his length slide in and out of me, hitting all those places that hadn’t been touched in far too long. It was slow at first, until it couldn’t be any longer. I bounced up and down on him. The slap of my ass against his muscled thighs, our grunts, and moans mixed together for a sensual symphony that echoed around his apartment. With no kids to worry about, I let myself be loud, to express myself at full volume, and not hold back. That’s what tonight was for; no holding back.

Nico pulled on my throat enough to lean me back so he could capture my mouth with his. The movement of our bodies made the kiss sloppy and toothy, but it didn’t matter. We were both too caught up in it all, too carried away in the moment with each other.

“You feel so good, Jason.” Nico breathed my name in my ear.

“You do too. Touch me, please, Nico. I’m close.” With the pressure and fullness of him, and the way his chest felt against my back, the way his breathy moans sounded, I was practically there. It wouldn’t take much.

Nico reached around me, pushing the fabric out of the way to grip my cock, and pumped to the rhythm I set. It was so much all at once. Every cell was firing, blazing, and when his thumb swept across the aching head, I came with a shout.

“Fuck, Jason.” Nico groaned and dropped his head against my neck and I felt the warmth of his release inside me. His arms wrapped around my waist, pinning me to him as we came down, trying to catch our breath. My thighs quivered at the effort of being used in a way they hadn’t in a long time. I wanted to stay in his embrace, with him nestled inside me, bound together, but I had to move.

Messy and spent, I lifted myself off him and flopped to the side, landing on my back. Enjoying the pleasant ache in my muscles and my perfectly used ass. Nico bent over me and kissed me softly. “So beautiful. You stay right there. I’ll be back.”

I felt the bed shift as he got up. He walked completely naked out of his bedroom and a light flicked on in the hall. How long had it been since I was able to walk outside of my bedroom naked and not have to worry about covering up? Maybe when Parker was an infant and too little to care. Those

days were gone, but for now, I got to enjoy this little hideaway with Nico. The luxury of not having to wear clothes was almost like a vacation, staying somewhere in a fancy hotel, instead of in Nico's simple apartment. I didn't need the hotel though, I just needed him.

Nico came back a moment later with a damp washcloth. My body was too worn to move, I was limp when he slid the wrecked jock strap off my legs. He carefully and tenderly manipulated my body while he cleaned me up. If I wasn't already falling for the man, I would have with the sweet and tender way he handled me.

I spent almost every hour of my day taking care of the littles. Every hour of every day. It was really nice having someone take care of me for once. The bed dipped with Nico's weight as he lay on his side. He placed his hand on my bare hip and gave a slight tug. I rolled to my side, wiggling until I was the little spoon in his big spoon embrace.

The warmth of his body and how safe and at home I felt with him had my eyes closing. As I was drifting off, I felt a kiss against my cheek and whispered words. I didn't know if I was dreaming or awake, but I thought I heard him say, "I love you, Jason."

Sleep found me quickly and swallowed me deeply. That feeling where you sink into your bed and don't ever want to climb out. Enveloped by a weight that held you under and let reality slip by without a concern. My nights of late had been more tumultuous than in the past. The worries of each day that

seemed to follow me like an unwanted passenger into sleep. But I felt none of that. I was swept away to a serene and warm place that was somewhere far removed from bills and jobs.

A notification sounded that stirred me and pulled me from the other realm that I was wrapped in. Forcing my eyes open was a feat of strength as I fought the pull that wanted to keep me deep in slumber. Until I realized I wasn't at home and neither were my kids. I untangled myself from the ropes that bound me and sat up, blinking hard as I swept my eyes around for my phone. It was right where I left it, on Nico's side table. Nico, who slept with his mouth open wide, his arms flopped to his side, from where I had peeled myself away. My lips stretched wide at the sight. He was striking, even when sleeping. Maybe even more so with how relaxed he was.

Not wanting to disturb him, I eased out of bed as carefully as possible and walked around it to check my phone. When I saw the missed text from my mom, my heart started racing. Was someone sick or hurt? No, she would have called for that. Before I could panic myself any further, I clicked on the text.

Mom: Good morning, Jase. Everything is fine. I hope you're enjoying yourself. The kids just wanted to video chat, so I thought I'd see if you were up yet.

I looked at the clock in the corner and it was after nine. I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept this late. Not that it was late by normal standards, but it was when you had a school schedule during the week and a three-year-old who

somehow was hard to wake when we had to take her brother to school, but woke up even earlier on weekends.

Knowing she would see that I read her text, I had to message her back before she called and I wasn't ready.

Me: Just getting up, give me a few minutes and I'll call.

A thumbs-up emoji was the only response. I set my phone down and went to the bathroom to answer nature's call. All of my muscles twinged slightly, a reminder of the exertion from last night. When I came back to the room, our clothes were strewn about on the floor. I'd been too preoccupied when we got here that I hadn't had the foresight to grab my bag from Nico's car. The only clothes I had in his apartment were the ones I'd worn last night. I could have thrown my jeans and dress shirt back on, but I wasn't ready to be that constricted again.

Nico snored once, loudly, and I glanced back at him. Part of me was wishing I was still wrapped in his big arms. I glanced around the room and spotted a hoodie hanging off his dresser. I hesitated for a moment before putting it on. It was huge on me, but it smelled like Nico. I rolled the sleeves until they were a manageable length.

I chanced a look at him, still sound asleep, before carefully opening his drawers. When I found pajama pants, I grabbed a pair with a drawstring and put them on, cinching them as tight as I could, and rolled the waist so I didn't trip on the pant legs. I was sure I looked ridiculous, but I didn't care. It made me feel closer to him even as I put distance between us. With my

phone in hand and glasses on, I went out to the living room and sat on the couch before starting the video call.

My mom answered and when she took in my disheveled appearance and clothes that were clearly too big for me, she smiled. “Looks like you had a fun date night.”

I tried to pat my hair down, not sure how wild it looked. “We did. Thanks for watching the munchkins. Did they do okay for you?”

“They were great, no worries here. They are just missing you a little this morning.”

My dad guilt flared up for a moment at hearing that they missed me, but I tried to remind myself that it was okay for me to have time to myself. To have time with someone. But I could use a kid fix too.

“Can you put them on?” I asked.

“Sure thing, Jase. Hold on. Parker! Emily! Your dad’s on the phone,” she yelled.

The camera shook as Parker grabbed the phone and yanked it out of Emily’s reach. Lulu kept trying to grab for it, whining.

“Good morning. Lulu, let your brother hold the phone, so you can both see,” I said, trying to interrupt the battle royale that was about to happen.

“See, I told you.” Parker stuck his tongue out.

“Parker, be nice to your sister.” I sighed. So much for the peaceful and tranquil morning.

“Daddy, Daddy. We helped Grandma make cookies.” Emily jumped up, trying to see herself on the screen.

“Oh? You did? What kind did you make?”

“We made unicorn cookies.”

“Unicorn cookies? That sounds fun. What did they taste like?”

“They tasted like rainbows.” Her blond curls bounced with each excited movement.

“We made different colored dough and added sprinkles,” Parker explained.

“Yum, I hope you guys saved me some.”

I heard footsteps sound behind me and I couldn't stop the smile that pulled at my lips at the reminder of where I was and who I was with. I only hoped Nico wasn't walking out in the buff, I angled my phone upwards just in case.

“Good morning, Pie Man.” Nico's voice was gruff and thick with sleep. The sound of it rippled through me with pleasure. He was wearing shorts and a t-shirt, which was both a relief that he wouldn't be naked on camera and a disappointment that I no longer got to see all of him. He stepped behind the couch, draping his arms over my shoulders, and kissed my cheek.

I held up my phone so he could see it and the two sets of eyes that watched us. “Say hi.”

“Good morning, you two.” Nico smiled warmly.

“Hi, Nico!” They both exclaimed. Their excitement to see him never seemed to wane. When I got on the phone, I was greeted by fighting, and he got dead-stop full attention. It didn’t bother me though. I loved how they reacted to him, it warmed my heart.

“Dad, can you give the phone to Nico, I want to talk to him,” Parker pleaded. I gave Nico a questioning look, and he wordlessly took my phone from me.

“Hey, bud, what have you guys been doing?”

Just like that, I was replaced. Nico listened as he got the coffee maker, and I overheard parts of their conversation about ninjas and the likelihood of them attacking. Emily’s voice came through the phone and she asked to show him Grandma’s house. Completely content, I watched as the man I definitely more than liked held his own in a conversation with my kids. On a morning when we could have had time to ourselves and stayed naked in bed, he still gave them attention. When he reminded them that we would be coming over later and they could show him everything in person, they cheered. I got the phone back long enough to tell them I loved them and would see them soon.

Nico brought me a cup of coffee and sat beside me on the couch with his own mug in hand. His eyes roamed over me and he smiled over the brim of his mug. “You’re wearing my clothes.”

“I hope you don’t mind. I forgot to bring my things in and I didn’t want to put on my clothes from yesterday.”

“I don’t mind one single bit. Seeing you in them is pretty fucking hot.”

I scooted closer to him until I could hook my legs over his lap. He held his mug in one hand and his other rubbed over my shins. It was domestic, easy, and perfect. I wanted hundreds more mornings just like this one.

“You really ready to have lunch with my mom?”

“I promised I would be there, didn’t I? Remember, I don’t make empty promises.”

“I know. It’s just, that’s a big step, right?”

Nico took a drink of coffee before setting it down. Both of his hands went inside the pant legs and traced up my thighs. “It is a big step, and you know what? Maybe I’m not quite ready.”

“What?” I was trying to give him an out, but I didn’t expect the sudden shift.

“Mmm, I think we both need to shower and do a long-awaited re-enactment.”

Oh. That was an idea I could absolutely get on board with.

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Showering with Jason was even better than the fantasy version. We stayed in until the hot water ran out. Which wasn't as long as I would have liked with my crappy water heater. But long enough to enjoy his wet, soapy body and hear his moans and the sounds of us echoing off the tiles.

I would have liked to see him in my clothes again, but since we were going to his mom's house, I figured he would prefer to dress in his own. While he toweled off, I threw something on and ran out to my car to grab his things. When I returned, I watched with fascination as he carefully styled his hair in that way that I loved. I rather enjoyed the natural bedhead look he was sporting earlier as well, knowing his usual perfectly mussed hair was even more mussed from the time we spent in bed. I would want to see him that way every single day. To wake up to him, sleepy, wild-haired, and wearing my clothes.

Before we left, we collected all the discarded clothes and made the bed, leaving no trace of what we'd done. None

except for the bruises I saw on the back of his shoulder and his lovely ass. And the scent of sex that lingered in my bed. Knowing I would come home later and be able to smell him in my bed delighted me to no end. It would have to suffice at least until I could wake up beside him once more.

I met Jason's mom briefly the day before when we dropped off the kids. But now I would be in her condo, having a meal with her. What kind of interrogation was to be expected? Jason made it clear that she accepted him and whoever he was with. That she'd not been surprised when he called from college to say he had a boyfriend. She might have been a little surprised when Jason married a woman.

Luckily, the kids would be there, so it couldn't get too intense. We stood outside her door and Jason pulled me in for a quick kiss. "Thank you for doing this."

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

The door opened and I was greeted with a hug from Jason's mom. She had his brown hair, though it was streaked with gray. It was a beautiful look on her. Before we could talk for very long, Parker and Emily grabbed me. Emily started pulling my hand.

"Come on, Nico. I want to show you my toys."

I shrugged and said over my shoulder, "Looks like I'm getting the tour, I'll catch up with you soon."

Jason and his mom both chuckled as they waved to me. I was taken into every room where each of them had a story to

share about something they did or a toy they had there that they didn't have at home. When we ended up in a room that had been set up for the kids with bunk beds, a doll house, and a play kitchen, Emily directed me to sit on the floor.

“You're too big for my chair, Nico.” She said as she pointed to the pink toddler-sized chair. I would break it if I tried to sit on it, or break myself. Either way, it would have ended badly.

“Do you want to have a tea party?” She asked in that cute little voice of hers.

“Sure! I love tea.”

“Can you get the tea set down, Parker?”

“Fine, but I want to play too.” He crossed his arms, trying to look stern. It was so stinking cute.

“Yay! Tea party!” Emily squealed.

Ten minutes later, I glanced up to see Jason leaning against the doorframe, watching us. I sat cross-legged on the floor, with the small table in front of me. Emily to one side, Parker to the other. Plates with fake food and tiny plastic tea cups set out in front of us. When his eyes caught the tiara on my bald head, he bit his lip, trying to hold in a smile.

“Daddy, do you want to come play with us?”

“I'd love to.” Jason pushed off of the wall and took a spot opposite me. Our knees hit under the table that we were very much too big for. He bumped my knee one more time, intentionally, giving me a wink at the same time.

It wasn't the meal I was planning for when we arrived, but it was the meal I wanted. Plastic food and all. We stayed there and played until his mom called us all out for lunch.

"Aw, man," the kids both whined.

"Come on, guys, playtime is over."

"Aw, man," I echoed, Jason snorted with amusement.

All in all, we had a nice time. His mom was fairly easygoing. Protective of Jason, which was understandable after everything he went through with the divorce. By the end of our visit, she seemed to have made up her mind about me.

When we were leaving, she pulled me aside and lowered her voice. "He's already been hurt a lot."

"I know."

"The kids too."

"I'm really sorry for everything he went through, that they all went through. I care a lot about your son and your grandkids. I'd really like to be a part of their lives."

She nodded. "I can see that. You're a good man, Nico. But their hearts are in your hands, hold them and keep them well."

"I'll do whatever is in my power to do so."

"It's been a pleasure, Nico. I hope to be seeing a lot more of you."

I leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Likewise."

We loaded up the kids in my car and drove home. Jason's hand rested on my leg, not sexually, but merely keeping us

connected. To touch me and know that I was there with him. I loved how it felt with him. How he could be fun and flirty and drive me absolutely wild, and how he could touch me, making me feel grounded and at peace.

I spent the rest of the day with them, even ordering pizza for dinner, much to the delight of the kids. When it came time to get them to bed, Parker insisted I read to him, so we split up. Jason took Emily and I went with Parker. He patted his bed for me to sit beside him and picked out his favorite book about dragon farts.

We were both giggling as I read through the book until he leaned against me, so he could see the book better. Or so he said. He seemed to tuck into my side in a way that had my heart about to burst out of my chest. I really liked the little guy and I liked that he wanted me around. That they both did. Dating a man with children who felt indifferent or even disliked me would have made it so much harder. Though, if it was someone I loved, like Jason, I would have put in the work.

The word came easily in my head. Easier than I expected, though it had been piecing itself together for some time. I couldn't pinpoint an exact moment in time that I realized it, but every minute spent in his presence had it falling into place.

I'd said it last night as he lay in my arms. Actually released the words out into the world. It wasn't the first time I'd spoken them, but it was the first time I truly meant it. The loves I thought I had in the past were dreams and wishes. What I had

with Jason was so much more real than that. A dream and a wish that was tangible and present.

Jason didn't say it back, but his body answered in a way that I wasn't sure he even noticed. When I whispered the words in his ear, he made a soft, contented sigh and melted against my body.

We'd spent the whole day together and he never brought it up, neither did I. I wasn't going to hide the way he made me feel, but I didn't want him to feel pressured either.

Without thinking, I pressed a kiss to Parker's head and ruffled his hair. "Goodnight, bud."

"Goodnight, Daddy." His eyes rounded and his cheeks pinked, just like his father's. "I mean, Nico."

I gave him a reassuring smile, not wanting him to feel embarrassed. "It's okay, Parker. Thanks for sharing your book with me. It was really fun."

He shrunk down into his blanket, his voice small when he spoke again. "Thanks, Nico."

I passed Jason in the hall, our hands sliding across each other's as we swapped places. He to Parker's room and me to Emily's. It was a dance we didn't plan, spontaneously choreographed. I didn't have to go in, and I hoped I wouldn't bother her, but after that sweet moment with Parker, I was hoping to hold onto that feeling a little longer.

When he accidentally called me *Daddy*, it did funny things to my chest. It was a title I'd only ever dreamed of having, one

that was offered by grown men, not tiny children that even for a moment thought of me as a father. I wanted that. So badly. It was a hole inside of me that I thought would remain empty. But Parker and Emily were filling it, one shovelful at a time.

Emily was sprawled out sideways, clutching her stuffed kitty. It was practically a DEFCON situation when we were leaving Jason's mom's house and *Kitty* didn't make it in the car. In all the time I'd spent with Jason's kids, I had yet to see them truly upset but poor Emily fell to pieces over missing her cat. It was enough to wrench my heart out. I would buy ten kitties if it helped. Luckily, it was over quickly when his mom ran the ragged cat out to the car. Jason said she always slept with it. He also said she passed out pretty quickly. With the way she was positioned, it seemed she was out already.

Still, I couldn't stop myself from crossing the room quietly and placing a kiss on her forehead. She didn't even stir. Emily was this tiny little whirlwind with wild curls, but now, sleeping soundly, she was the most precious little angel.

I walked downstairs and pulled two beers out of Jason's fridge, sitting at the island counter while I waited. It wasn't long before he descended and met my gaze with a wide smile. Jason came over, sitting on the stool next to mine, and grabbed a beer. We tapped bottles and each took a drink.

"Today was a pretty great day," He said with a smile.

"It really was."

"I'm sorry I made you buy tickets for a movie we didn't watch."

I knocked my knee against his. “I’m not. That was the best movie I never saw.”

“It was pretty great, huh?” Jason smirked.

I set my beer down and pulled his hips closer to me, my legs closing him in. “You are an incredible man, Jason Webber. Sexy, fun, caring, giving.”

Jason threw his arms over my shoulders. “You’re not so bad yourself, Nico Leone. I have to say, seeing you in a tiara earlier was the cutest fucking thing I’ve ever seen.”

I brushed my thumb over his lip. “How is it that you are so careful with your shoots and dangs, but you have no problem saying things like that?”

“Some things don’t come up around my kids and I haven’t had to be as careful. Others I’ve been intentional about changing my habits and now those are hard to break.”

“I like it, I never know what’s going to come out of your mouth.” A mouth I stared at, remembering how it felt wrapped around my cock.

“Or come in it.” Jason winked.

“Damn.” I grabbed his neck and pulled him towards me, kissing him deeply. I could kiss him all night, every night, and never tire of how perfectly his mouth danced with mine. But I pulled back.

“I’d better go before I won’t want to.”

“So don’t go.”

I exhaled. “I have to get up early tomorrow, Sunday morning rush.”

“I won’t stop you this time. Get up and go to work, just stay with me.” He pleaded with big eyes.

“Fuck, Jason, how can I possibly leave now?”

“You can’t. It’s impossible.” He grinned. I just got played, but I wasn’t mad about it at all.

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We didn't sleep naked as we had the night before, and I had the bedroom door open a crack. Yet, it was somehow just as intimate, maybe even more so. Nico playing with my kids and helping at bedtime made everything feel more official. He told me he was in this and I told him I wanted a partner. It felt like I had one. One to fill my bed and share the nights, one to talk out the hard stuff, one to help with the kids.

When I was the spoon tucked into Nico again, he brushed his lips on my cheek, just like he had the night before. The words I thought I dreamt came back to me. I waited to see if he would say it again, wanting to know that I hadn't made it up. But he didn't. I lay there in the dark, enveloped by his body heat and his scent. Even if he hadn't said it, if it was merely in my dream, I knew what I felt.

Something I thought I wouldn't feel again, not so soon anyway. I knew the hurt it could bring, I knew there was no

certainty that things would always feel like they did now. But I also knew that what I had with Nico was worlds apart from what I had with Julie. I wasn't young and immature and full of wishing that things would be different when we had a family. Nico was a couple years older than me, old enough to know what he wanted in life. He stepped right into my reality and embraced all of it. The good, the bad, the cute, the complicated. He didn't want to change me, nor I him. Nico wanted to support me if I let him. I *wanted* to let him, was working on it anyway. I twined my fingers with his, holding them in front of my chest. "I love you, Nico."

"Mmm." He purred in my ear and hugged me tighter to him. "I love you, too."

I was woken by a sweet kiss and a gentle brush of his fingers on my cheek and he was gone. Though he left quickly, I stayed in bed with a contented smile on my face, imagining waking every morning in the same way. Nico had early mornings, it wasn't great, but I could get used to it, especially with a tender goodbye like that. I curled onto his side of the bed. I'd been in this bed alone for months, and yet it already felt as if he had a side. It smelled like him already. I grabbed his pillow and clutched it to my chest, letting his scent infuse into me and send me back to sleep.

My next alarm came two hours later in the form of two small children jumping on my bed. I sat up with a playful growl and wrestled them both on the soft mattress until they were giggling hysterically.

The contentment I felt with Nico in my bed continued but shifted with these two bouncing around. When they asked for Sunday morning pancakes, I got up feeling lighter than ever. I floated above the floor, as I walked to the kitchen, the munchkins in tow.

My phone pinged and I saw a text from Nico. My cheeks ached from the wide smile I couldn't contain.

Nico: Good morning, Pie Man. You looked so cute, you were hard to leave. I made plans for later. Do you think you're up to meeting the Leones?

It was my turn to meet the family, a thought that had butterflies swarming inside of me. The last time I'd done that was when Julie and I announced our engagement. This was good though. Nico's family was important to him and I really wanted to meet the people that made the incredible man I had fallen for.

Me: Yeah, I think so. What about the kids?

Nico: Bring them too, they are looking forward to meeting all of you. And just so you're not ambushed. I have a proposal for you.

My smile dropped and my belly tightened. The word proposal blared at me. The three dots popped up, telling me he was writing something. My mouth felt dry and my vision blurred. I wasn't ready for a...proposal.

Nico: Shit! That's not what I meant. A business proposal. Business. (sweating emoji)

A breath whooshed out of me with relief. I loved Nico, I had no doubt about that. And hearing him say it again to me, made my heart explode. Marriage, though? I'd just gotten out of one and it was as cordial as it could be, but it still tore me apart. I wasn't ready to go through that again. Not that it would end with Nico, but I wasn't in the right place for that yet.

Me: Thanks for the warning, and the heart attack.

Nico: Shit, so sorry. Does it make it weird now if I ended by saying, I love you?

That goofy smile came back to my face. I forgot how fun and exciting the new love phase was. And how amazing it felt to be the one someone else clung to.

Me: I will never not want to hear that. And I love you, Nico. Let me know when and where, we'll be there.



Nico

As soon as I left Jason's presence, what he shared with me while he sat in my lap in my apartment swirled around in my head. How broken he sounded, how lost he seemed, even though we were able to set it aside and enjoy each other, it haunted me. I hated to think of him worrying over money, or the possibility of having to move and uproot the kids. I hated that he had been carrying that weight all alone for so long. I knew now and I wanted to do something about it.

The thing was, I actually *could*, I hoped. I knew not every problem had a solution, or could be resolved, but we would be there for each other to wade through those times. I wanted to hold Jason and his family up, to carry them through the mud and set their feet on solid ground once more. But I wasn't their savior, and Jason didn't *want* a savior, he wanted a partner. I could be a partner. I could offer him something that would require a lot of work on his end, but that would be mutually beneficial. Had he been anyone else, it would have been a smart business decision anyway. Knowing it would help ease his worry and stress made it even better.

My parents were planning to come in and check on everything later. I was sure Pop was irritating my mom at home, so it got them out of the house. It also helped appease the controlling nature in my dad. I knew it was hard for him to not have his hand in every pot like he used to. I asked them to

stay for dinner and that I wanted to introduce them to some special people.

Maybe it would have been better to do it at home, but there was the...proposal. *Fuckin' A*. I had to get that word out of my head. I needed to bring Jason and Pop together and see if I could get us all on the same page. The diner was the best place to do that. It would make it feel more official. As official as something could be when I was introducing the man I loved to my parents.

I wasn't even nervous about it. Not really. I knew they would love Jason and his kids, how could anyone not? And Pop, he tended to grow on people, like a fungus. He would be a harder sell when it came to decisions that affected his diner than his son. Not that that was a bad thing, but he trusted me with my own life, he was *learning* to trust me with his baby. It wasn't personal, though. He wouldn't have let anyone else handle the place and I was honored by that.

My parents arrived first, I planned it that way. They would have time to catch up with staff and customers so that when Jason's family arrived, they would be able to give their focus. An hour later, I heard the bells jingle on the door and I looked up. When I saw Jason, my heart leapt wildly. He met my gaze with the most beautiful, electric smile. He could light up Vegas Boulevard during a blackout with that smile.

Parker and Emily ran over to me and I scooped up the little girl. She threw her arms around my neck and squeezed tight. I ruffled Parker's hair and hugged him to my side. These two

were just as illuminating. The energy they brought and the way they were always happy to see me made me feel like the luckiest man alive. Jason walked over and gave me a quick kiss, with his kids squished between us.

When he stepped back, I caught my mom staring wide-eyed at us. Her hands were clasped in front of her mouth. I indicated with my head for her to come closer. She stepped slowly as if not to startle anyone.

“Mom, I’d like you to meet Jason Webber.” She grabbed him and pulled him into a squishy hug.

“And these two are Parker and Emily.”

“Oh my precious dears. Look at you, you’re adorable. I don’t care what your dad or Nico say, you can have all the ice cream you want. You don’t even have to eat your vegetables.”

“Yay!” They cheered.

“Mom,” I bit out.

“Oh, hush. Those faces. I’m sorry but you were never that cute as a kid. How could I not want to spoil them rotten?”

“Thanks, feeling the love here,” I said in a flat tone.

Jason chuckled and I was ignored as she swept them away to pick out toppings for their ice cream. He leaned into me. “Looks like I lost the battle already.”

“What battle is that, exactly?”

“The battle over getting them to eat. I mean they are both pretty good eaters in general, but Parker heard someone yuck

their veggies at school, so now it's not cool to like green things."

"Yeah, sorry. My mom is sort of a force."

"She's sweet. I like her."

"So you're the son of a bitch that's been stealing all my son's time, huh?" A gruff voice sounded behind us.

"And that would be Pop," I whispered. "Don't worry, he's all bark."

I turned Jason around and we were met by my father wearing a shit-eating grin.

Jason stuck his hand out, "Yeah, I guess that would be me. Nice to meet you, sir."

Pop stared at the hand as if it were alien. "Fuck off with that. We don't shake hands, not for family."

At that, he took Jason's outstretched hand and pulled him close to swallow him in a big bear hug. I'd introduced a couple of guys to him in the past, but there was usually more of an assessment. Yet here he was calling Jason family upon the first meeting, which did something to me. At first, I'd been close-lipped about him, but as we spent more time together and I realized how much he meant to me, I couldn't hide how deep my feelings ran when I saw my parents. They must have known that this one was different too.

When my mom brought the kids back, they were introduced to Pop. Never in my entire life would I expect my cussing, grumpy, Navy dad to go all soft and gooey over two little kids.

He even managed to watch his language as he struck up conversations with each of them. It was heartwarming to see. My parents had not so subtly hinted at grandkids for years. And now, I pictured them loving on Jason's kids as if they were their own.

I squeezed Jason to my side as we watched them and kissed the top of his head. "Have I told you lately that I love you?"

"Not in person." Jason smiled. I bent my head down and kissed him, just a peck.

Dinner was rowdy, a much different feel than it had been with Jason's mom. Pop was teaching Parker and Emily how to make straw paper worms and how to stack the forks and spoons to make a tower. All those things I spent hours doing as a kid sitting in a diner booth while I worked on homework. I grew up in this building, and here they were getting to experience some of the things I did.

"Pop's a bad influence. I'm sorry for whatever habits the munchkins might pick up from him."

Jason nudged me in the side. "You didn't turn out so bad. So if they end up anything like you, I'd consider myself lucky."

I stared at him in awe, wishing we were somewhere private where I could kiss him to my heart's content. Though I didn't think my heart would ever be content, I would never reach a point of having enough of him.

Pop interrupted our enchanted gaze. "Excuse me. I am *not* a bad influence. Besides, these two are bound to turn out way

better than you, they have Jason to thank for that.”

“That’s true. He’s a *Super Dad*.” I winked at Jason whose cheeks pinked at the attention.

Once we were done, I asked if my mom could watch the kids for a bit while the three of us talked. I would have included her in the conversation, but it would be harder to go through all the details with the littles getting bored. Besides, the look of pure joy on her face told me she was more than happy to stay with them.

With Pop and Jason following me, I led them to the office where I had already brought in an extra chair to prepare for this.

Once I closed the door, Pop crossed his arms over his chest, preparing to go on the defensive. We didn’t do closed-door meetings a lot. Jason’s eyes bounced back and forth between me and my father. I hadn’t told them what this was about, but I hoped that soon we would all be on the same page.

“As you both know, we ran a sort of trial period featuring Webber Pie Company pies as dessert specials.”

Jason relaxed visibly as he realized this was pie-related. My father uncrossed his arms and leaned forward a little.

“I ran the figures from the days that we offered the pies. First off, I think it’s hard to get a full idea of what we could do on a regular basis, with so few times that these products were on the menu.”

Jason's brow arched and he mouthed *regular basis*? I gave a slight nod but pressed forward. "Even without a longer period of time to test it, I believe it would be a sound financial decision to pursue a continued partnership with Webber Pie Company. The demand for desserts is there, we've seen it in our sales of shakes and sundaes and it is my belief that with the added revenue of offering pies on our menu, we would be able to set aside funds for a renovation."

My dad started to object, but I held up a hand. "I'm not looking to change what you've done, Pop. But I think it is a disservice to the labor of love you have here to let it fall apart. I want to maintain its charm, but modernize it and replace the old, worn-down elements. People love it here and for good reason. But we need to make it more inviting and not just sell it to the loyal customers that already know to look past the first impressions."

Pop seemed to pause, refraining from immediately shooting the idea down. "And you think pie can do that?"

I handed him the sales reports and figures that I'd been compiling. "I know it can."

He skimmed through the numbers looking at the bottom line. "Well, I'll be damned."

I toed Jason's shoe, drawing his attention, and offered him a furtive smile. "Having a partnership with Webber Pies would be a big asset for Pop's Diner. We are interested in offering you a contract for your services. It wouldn't be exclusive, meaning you would be free to sell your products anywhere,

but we would want to secure a specified amount of pies weekly. Is that something you might be interested in?”

I hoped that phrasing it in a way that showed how much it would help the diner wouldn't make it feel like a handout. Because it wasn't. He earned the work and the opportunity. Jason was talented and created solid products that sold all on their own. This was merely a chance to give him a place to showcase it and to offer a regular paycheck.

His jaw fell open as he took in the offer before he sat up straight and adjusted his shirt. “Yeah, um, yes. I am very much interested in a continued partnership with Pop's Diner. What...” He cleared his throat. “What kind of quantities are we talking here?”

I handed him a contract that highlighted the number of pies per week as well as what we would pay for him. It was a big investment on our end, but no more than we paid for meat or dairy or any of the other products we purchased regularly. And this was an item that required no further manpower on our end, except to slice or add ice cream. So the cost of labor was worth it.

I handed a copy of the same paper to Pop. They both took their time to read through all the fine print. I'd already started it before my weekend with Jason, this was my end goal when I first hired him. It was tedious and challenging and I copied other supplier contracts we had to try to get the language right.

The quiet in the small office had my heart climbing my throat. Pop could say no. He still maintained the final say on

everything for the diner. Jason could decide it was too much. It wasn't a guarantee, but I hoped it would work out.

Pop was the one to break the silence. I braced myself, knowing that whatever he said would change everything for good or bad.

“This is really impressive. You put all this together, Junior?”

I took my cap off and rubbed my head. “Yes, sir. It was quite a feat. Numbers tend to jump around the page when I look at them too long, but I wanted to do this right.”

“I'd like to make a small addendum to this contract.”

I took a deep breath, my muscles tensing. “Okay. What is that?”

“I'd like to add that one extra pie be made and set aside for the owner of Pop's per week, for...quality control purposes.”

I found myself grinning and Jason let out a laugh. “I think that can be arranged. Does the owner of Pop's have a preference?”

“I want whatever the fuck kind of voodoo you put in that first pie Junior brought us.”

Jason met my gaze with a smile. “That would be the green chile, cheese, and apple. Okay, Mr. Leone. You got yourself a deal. Would this be a hand-shaking situation?”

He offered his hand once again with a smirk. Pop barked out a laugh. “This one time, but you're still family, and don't

you ever call me Mr. Leone. You call me Pop like everyone else.”

They shook hands. “Alright, Pop.”

“So does this mean you’re in, Mr. Webber?” I asked, just making sure I wasn’t getting ahead of myself.

“Yeah. I’m in. Thank you, both of you. It’s an honor to partner with Pop’s Diner.”

Breaking the slightly more formal business mode, I pulled Jason up to standing and captured his mouth in a kiss. “Glad to have you on board.”

“I ain’t sealing this deal with a kiss, that’s on you two,” Pop said as he stood and slapped us both on the back.

I smiled against Jason’s lips before Pop cleared his throat. We broke apart and he asked Jason to step out and give us a moment.

Once he left the office, Pop clapped his hand on my shoulder. “You done good, Son.”

“Yeah? With Jason or with the diner?”

“Both of them, kid. You got a good man there, and you’ve done a great job leading in my absence. It hasn’t always been easy for me to let someone else take control.”

“You don’t say.”

“Shut it. I’m trying to be nice here.”

I smirked, “I know, that’s a big effort for you.”

“What I’m trying to say, if you can not be a little shit for a minute, is that I like what I know and it’s hard to see beyond that. But you have a vision for this place, just like I did when I started. I admire it and respect it, even if I can’t always see it. I’m proud of you, Nico. There’s no other hands I’d rather leave this place in.”

“Thanks, Pop. That means a lot to me, and so does this place. I grew up here, I just want to see it stay standing and be there for the next generation.”

“Speaking of the next generation, those kids seem to adore you.”

Emily and Parker were the sweetest bonus to a man I loved, he was a part of them and yet they were their own little people. To get to be in their lives was truly a gift. “Thanks, I think they are really special.”

Pop pointed at my chest with a serious look on his face. “Don’t fuck it up.”

“I’m going to do everything in my power not to.”

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With the contract signed, I spent the rest of the evening with his parents in a daze. It was hard to believe it was real. I knew that Nico believed in me, but to know that he would go that far to make this official, looping in his father as well, it was incredible. It was also the chance I'd been hoping for. If I could provide the diner with the pies they needed regularly and still sell on my own, it might be enough to keep my head above water.

I enjoyed watching the Leones interact. Pop gave Nico shit and he gave it right back. He and Nico were more alike than I think either of them would admit. Nico was a little taller, Pop a little rounder, both bald with scruffy beards, and they shared some of the same mannerisms. It was interesting to watch. Mitchie was a curvy woman who gave really good hugs and somehow kept the two men in her life in line. She was a character.

Nico's family was fun and boisterous, I could easily picture many more family dinners with them. The kids seemed to be taken with them too, but it was getting late. "Well, I hate to leave, but it's a school night. I think we should get going."

Everyone stood up and offered their goodbyes. Nico stood with his parents and I wondered if it would be too forward to ask him to come over right in front of them. Luckily, Parker took care of that for me.

"Nico, can you read to me again tonight?"

Nico's eyes radiated with delight. "Sure thing, bud. I'll just need to swing by my place to pick up a few things. Unless you want to share some pajamas with me."

Parker giggled. "They wouldn't fit you, you're huge."

I liked that Nico assumed he was going to stay if he came for the bedtime routine. It was a great assumption. I wanted him to stay.

He looked back at his dad questioningly. "Get outta here. Your mom and I will keep an eye on things. It'll be good for me anyway."

"Thanks, Pop. I'll talk to you guys soon." He hugged his parents and walked out with us.

Nico helped me get the kids loaded up and once the car doors were closed, I grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him down for the kiss I wanted in his office. "Remind me to thank you properly later."

“You have nothing to thank me for, I should be the one thanking you. Having your pies on our menu is going to help us a lot.”

“With all that work you did, it seems like you don’t really need my help on the accounting side of things.” Making pies was easy for me. Having a place to sell them was huge. I wished I could do more for Nico and the diner with as much as he had done for me.

“Honestly, that tested me to the limits, but it was a labor of love and I was happy to do it. But as for the day-to-day? I would actually love it if you’d be willing to take a look.” Nico’s expression was hopeful.

“Really? Heck yeah, I’d be happy to.” If I could do anything to save him the stress or headache, I would be glad to. It would make me feel like I was contributing even more too.

“All this gratitude between us, maybe we can mutually thank each other,” Nico suggested.

“Mmm, sounds perfect.”

Nico pecked one more kiss before heading off to his car. He made it to our house about an hour after we did. I was starting to wonder where he went. He came in already dressed in pajama pants and a black t-shirt. “Sorry, I wanted to shave.”

I glanced at his scruff, which maybe was trimmed but didn’t look much different. Nico took his cap off and leaned his head down. I ran a hand over his perfectly smooth head, loving the purr in the back of his throat at my touch.

“I didn’t miss bedtime, did I?”

“Nope, the kids have been bouncing off the walls after all the sugar your parents fed them. But they are finally winding down.”

“Okay, good.” Nico kissed me once before walking past me with a backpack that he dropped on the couch. It was a simple thing, a backpack, but it was his and it was casually thrown in my place as if it were his own. The thought made me smile. As did being blown off by my boyfriend so he could do the bedtime routine with my son. He didn’t even look back before telling Parker to pick a book as they headed up the stairs.

With the kids tucked in by both of us, swapping like we had the night before, Nico sent me to my room as he went to grab his backpack. When he came in, he closed and locked the door behind him. Curiosity and excitement flitted through me as I wondered what mysterious things he kept in his bag. When he pulled out a hoodie and a pair of pajama pants, I was bewildered.

“You’re already wearing jammies.”

“Great observation skills, Pie Man. These aren’t for me.” He threw the clothes at me. Instinctively, I took the hoodie, the same one I’d worn at his apartment, and brought it to my nose, inhaling his scent on them.

Nico came over and kneeled on the bed before me. “I really liked seeing you in my clothes. It was sexy as hell.”

He could have brought supplies, toys, any number of things that excited me, but this was way better. It was intimate and homey. I was about to pull my shirt off and put the hoodie on, but he stopped me.

“Not yet. Those are for later. We have other business to attend to first.”

“Oh? Does it involve some thanking?”

“So much.” Nico grinned and pushed me back into the bed, crawling on top of me.

“Parker might not be fully asleep yet,” I said, trying to remember not to get too carried away.

“Then you better practice being quiet.” Nico bent over me and kissed me, his tongue sweeping into my mouth, tangling with my own, swallowing the groan that worked up my throat.

It wasn't long before we were both naked and he held his strong body over mine. With my leg hooked over his shoulder, he pressed into me, devouring each sound I made in a kiss. He made love to me, slow and deep until we both were panting and satisfied. He collapsed on top of me, my release sticky between us, but I reveled in the weight of him. How perfectly he felt.

He stayed. That night, the next. Little by little, he brought more of his things over so he wouldn't have to keep running home. Our bedtime routine was solid, we each took time with Emily and Parker. Once the kids were in bed, the rest of the evenings were for us. Sometimes I was busy in the kitchen,

working on crusts or fillings, sometimes he helped. But every day was ended together, with Nico in my bed, *our* bed.

Nico took Parker to school half the time, letting me enjoy the morning a little longer. I brought the kids to the diner with me to make deliveries and spend some time on their accounting a couple times a week. Pop even made a triumphant return. A minimal triumphant return. He was restricted under Mitchie's orders not to work more than two days a week, but it gave Nico regular time off as well, which worked out great for us. Nico sometimes watched the kids while I worked Heartcraft or he came with me and I would put him to work.

I didn't depend on my sales at Heartcraft as much as I once did, not with the regular work I did for Pop's. But it was important to me. I had my regulars and I had my friends, like Dash and the other vendors. It also helped give me a cushion to fall back on, so I wouldn't face the same situation I'd been in before Nico came into my life.

We planned date nights, and either his parents or my mom would take turns with the kids. Julie did when she could as well. She even came to dinner at our place on occasion. It was awkward at first, but she and Nico grew more comfortable with each other. The rest of our nights were spent with just the four of us. The kids expected that Nico would be there nearly every night when they went to bed. It became a part of the day that Nico cherished. Our life together was a dance, one that we were still learning the steps to, but we were finding our groove, he and I together.

We were all snuggled up in our pajamas on the couch, watching a movie. Emily was in Nico's lap, holding her kitty, trying not to fall asleep. I was tucked against his side, wearing his hoodie and pants that had become mine, and Parker leaned against me. I grabbed my phone and snuck a selfie with all of us, capturing the perfection of the moment. A moment I didn't want to end.

I brushed my hand over Nico's arm and when he looked at me with a smile, I whispered. "Stay, Nico."

He gave me a puzzled look. "I was already planning to."

I shook my head slightly. "No. Not just tonight. Stay with me, Nico. With us. Move in with us." He practically lived with us full-time anyway, but I wanted this to be his home as much as it was mine.

He beamed brightly and leaned over to kiss my head. "Abso-fucking-lutely."

"Oooo." Of course, the kids managed to hear that above everything else.

"Guess you better start saying some nice things to make up for that." I winked.

"I have a list ready to go, but some I'll have to wait and say later when we're alone."



My hands were sweating profusely. Everything was sweating profusely. I held off putting on my jacket as long as I could, but now I was glad to have it cover up the damp material of my collared shirt beneath. I shook out my hands and bounced from foot to foot.

“Calm down, Son. You’re making me nervous just looking at you. You know what his answer will be, this is a cakewalk, or *pie* walk.” My dad guffawed.

“I know. But part of me still wonders after everything he went through if he’s going to change his mind.”

“Listen. However today ends, the man is completely smitten with you. That’s not going to change.”

I knew he was right, but getting my mind and my heart to line up was a challenge. I read through my scribbled writing, practicing it in my head.

“Come on, it’s time.”

I bounced on my feet. Okay, I could do this. I followed him through the door and stepped outside into the garden area. All of our friends and family were seated, waiting for us. Emily was brought out by Julie. We weren't sure how she would react to the news of our engagement, but she was supportive. That she offered to help get the kids ready for the big day was an unexpected but very welcomed surprise. Our eyes caught for a moment and I mouthed, *thank you*. She nodded with a smile before whispering to her daughter, pointing at me, and left to take her seat.

When Emily saw me, she ran over, leaving a trail of flower petals in her wake. "Nico!"

Emily was absolutely adorable in her frilly cream-colored dress with a burgundy bow around the middle and a matching bow in her hair. She carried a basket full of burgundy petals.

"Lulu, you look like a little princess. You're beautiful." I scooped her up and twirled her around before settling her on my hip. After living with the Webbers, I had taken to calling her the nickname Jason always used.

She rubbed her hand on my trimmed beard. "You look handsome, like a king."

"Thank you, Emily." I kissed her head and set her down.

Air knocked out of me when Jason sauntered up to me, Parker holding his hand. He wore a navy suit that matched my own with burgundy flowers pinned to his lapel. The same color that he used to represent his company. He was breathtaking. His hair reached new heights in a way that had

me itching to stroke my fingers through it. The way he looked at me made me feel like I was the luckiest man alive. For every time he asked me to stay, from that first moment at Heartcraft, and every one after, I never had any choice but to do exactly that.

Emily gave him a hug and he nodded his head toward the aisle. “You know what to do, right, Lulu?”

She bobbed her head excitedly. The music began and she was given the cue to walk down the aisle. She took her job as flower girl seriously and threw petals about with intention, making sure they coated the aisle well.

Jason chuckled. “She was born for this. R.I.P. to all the flowers in our neighborhood that met an untimely death for her to do flower girl practice.”

“I love it, she’s got your enthusiasm.”

Jason slid a glance to me and gave me a warm smile, before whispering, “Porkchop, you’re up.”

Parker wore a burgundy suit, looking like a dapper young man. At seven now, he was a big kid and looked rather proud of himself. I gave him a fistbump, sending him on his way. He walked, holding the pillow up as a presentation for all to see. Proud of the responsibility that he’d been given.

Jason and I were alone. I stared down at him, marveling in his presence. “You look so beautiful.”

Jason smiled radiantly. His eyes gleamed with mischief as he loosened his tie to reveal the hint of a royal blue shirt

beneath. My heart raced as I remembered the last time he'd worn something blue. The Superman shirt and the matching jock strap.

"Fuck me," I breathed.

"Mmm, I plan to. And you, Nico Leone, are one handsome devil."

I straightened his tie, thrilled by the thought of what he was wearing for me, equally excited for Jason to see the wedding night surprise I had for him. I was desperate to kiss him, to close the distance between us, but he must have seen my intentions. He held a finger to my lips. "Not yet."

"Damn. Okay. Are you ready?"

Jason smiled broadly, "Could not be more ready."

He slid his arm in mine, standing at my side. I bumped his hip and said, "Lead the way, Pie Man."

The music changed and everyone stood to watch us. We made the decision to walk up together. It only felt right to have him by my side as we took this step together. We walked slowly arm-in-arm as we made our way to the front. Emily stood on one side and Parker on the other. The officiant in between. We took our places and faced each other.

"Please be seated."

I felt my hands clamming up again, but staring into Jason's eyes, everything else but him disappeared. He was here, with me, and nothing in his expression said he had any doubts whatsoever.

It had been a year since he came into my life. He wasn't ready for this then, he'd made that clear. But we were here now and the time was right. The tension I had been carrying all morning began to slip away.

When it came time to do the vows, I pulled out my folded and refolded paper from my pocket. My eyes were too misty to see it clearly, too overwhelmed with the enormity of it all, so I tucked it away once more.

“Jason Webber. I will be eternally grateful that you walked into the diner that day. You took my breath away when I first saw you and every day since. Not a day goes by that I don't love you more than the one before. It may have started with pie, but it ended with the promise of something I only dreamed of. I know you told me once not to make promises I couldn't keep. But I'm here to make promises that I *can* keep, that would be easy for me to do so.” I cleared my throat, trying to force my heart back down to my chest. “Excuse me, Jason, this part isn't for you.”

He gave me a puzzled look as I stepped away from him. I knelt in front of Emily. I wasn't entering a commitment with only one person, but with his kids, and I needed them to know that they could count on me too. She might not fully understand my words, but I needed to say them and needed Jason to hear them.

“Emily Webber, I promise to always protect you from monsters and to attend tea parties. But I also promise to love

you always because you are in my heart and there's nothing that will ever change that."

I opened my arms and she hugged me, squeezing around my neck. "I love you Daddy Nico."

My eyes misted heavily. This little girl was cemented into me, as much a part of me as her father, and her brother. I stood up and crossed over to where Parker stood and knelt before him.

"Parker Webber, I promise to always practice karate with you, or whatever hobby you take up, and to read stories with you as long as you let me. And I promise to love you always because you are in my heart and there's nothing that will ever change that. Nothing."

He hugged me too and whispered. "I'm glad you're marrying my dad."

Gah! I needed to keep it together, I wasn't done yet. I ruffled his hair and took my place in front of his father once more. I grabbed Jason's hands in mine, tears welling up in the corner of his eyes as he looked at me full of affection. I blew out a deep breath.

"And you, Pie Man. Wow, I can't believe I get to stand here with you. I'm the luckiest man in the world that you welcomed me in and gave me space in your world. That I not only got to see the funny and wonderful human that you are, but that I got to watch you with your kids and be a part of that. I will love you always, Jason Webber, you are in my heart and nothing will ever change that."

Jason squeezed my hands tightly. “Wow, I can’t even form words right now. I’m so grateful that you sought me out, that you were lured in by my pies and took a chance on a complicated...thing.” I grinned at the word he held back from saying. *My complicated fuck.* “That you jumped into the deep end with both feet, ready to take on every difficulty that dating a man with kids brought. I count myself blessed for every day that I’ve gotten to spend with you and even more so for the partner I found in you. One who is at my side, not ahead of me or behind me. One who I am proud to tackle life with through the good and the bad. I can’t top what you said, but I can spend every day of the rest of our lives showing you how much I love you and how very thankful I am to have you in our lives.”

A moment later, Parker offered the rings that were tied to the pillow he held. We slid our rings onto each other’s fingers offering the vows that came with them.

“I present to you Mr. and Mr. Webber-Leone. You may now kiss your husband.”

I grabbed Jason’s cheeks and poured every promise spoken and unspoken into him to the cheers of all of our loved ones. For every time that he asked me to stay. For every time that I did. He was mine, we were a family, together forever.

“A reception will follow at the newly renovated Pop’s Diner.”

Thank you for reading Pies & Promises- you can read a bonus scene of Jason and Nico's wedding night here- The Wedding Night

Want to know more about Dash, the tattooed meat-maker at the Heartcraft Market? Read his story in Meats & Memories <https://mybook.to/meatsandmemories>

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About the Author

Duckie Mack writes sweet with heat MM romance. She also writes YA LGBTQ fantasy romance as Debbie McQueen.

She loves reading and writing stories that show love isn't defined by gender.

Duckie loves adorkable characters, sweet and cute love stories with fun heat, and is a sucker for an HEA.

She lives in Southern California with her family, 2 dogs, and 3 cats, and loves going to pride events to give out free hugs.

Duckie Mack loves to connect with readers follow her on social media, subscribe to her newsletter, or see what else she has going on here-<https://linktr.ee/authorduckiemack>

[OceanofPDF.com](https://linktr.ee/authorduckiemack)

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