



WHAT HE

FINDS

DESIRES: NEW BEGINNINGS

E.M. DENNING

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DESIRES: NEW BEGINNINGS #2

E.M. DENNING

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QUENTIN

QUENTIN CARRUTHERS LEANED back in his chair and slowly turned to look out the window. It was too nice a day to be trapped behind a desk, but he had work to do. “I know you’re paid well at your current employer. Remember who set you up with that interview. But I’m absolutely certain this new company is a better fit.” Quentin worked as a recruiter, and he was damn good at his job.

“I do like the idea of a better balance between work and life.”

Quentin spun a pen in his fingers as he talked. “The salary is fifteen percent more than you’re earning right now, plus the benefits package is superior. Paid time off. Four-day work weeks, which is basically unheard of.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll take the interview. Send me the details and I’ll make it happen.”

“They’re already in your inbox.” Quentin grinned.

“Someone was confident.”

“I know the relocation might be an issue for you, but they’re willing to pay moving expenses for the right candidate.” Quentin’s stomach rumbled, and he eyed the time. “But I should let you go. Eat lunch, look at my email, make good decisions.”

Laughter rang through the phone. “And by that, you mean do what you say.”

“Now you’re catching on.” Quentin glanced at the clock again. “Okay, I have to get going. I have another meeting.”

Quentin stood and headed to the elevators. He tucked his phone away and rode down to the bottom floor, and hoped that he wasn’t too late. The ground floor of the building he worked in housed a couple of restaurants, but it was the kiosk Quentin made a beeline for.

They served several specialty coffees, but also homemade desserts and sandwiches. They had a different menu for every day of the week, and Thursday’s menu was Quentin’s favorite. He tried to get down earlier than he had today, but he really wanted to make that call and get his client to take the interview.

He swore a little when he realized there was no way he was getting his sandwich. The line was longer than usual, too, and if it went too long, Quentin would have to take his food up to his office and eat at his desk when he far preferred to find a spot in the courtyard to eat. Sometimes he walked down the street and had lunch with Kelly, his ex-husband and best friend, but today Quentin knew Kelly would be swamped.

The line inched forward when someone swore and left the line. Near the front of the line, a familiar person came into view and Quentin couldn’t help but smile. Toby Harris worked one floor under Quentin, and he was cute as a button with his trim little body and his floppy dark hair.

As if Toby sensed himself being stared at, he turned. Quentin shot him a friendly smile and nodded at him. Toby waved. The line moved again, and Quentin watched Toby turn and move to make his order. Quentin liked Toby. They’d so far only shared random conversations in the kiosk queue, and sometimes they shared an elevator, but he seemed nice.

Pulling out his phone, Quentin busied himself reading a couple of emails while waiting for the line to move up.

“Quentin?”

Quentin looked up and saw Toby standing there with two coffees on a drink tray and two bags. “Hey, Toby.”

“I saw they were almost out of that sandwich you always get, so I got you the last one.” Toby handed Quentin the bag and turned the drink tray toward him. “And that’s your extra-large, two sugar, no milk, dark roast with a shot of hazelnut.”

Quentin felt a little dumbstruck as he took the offered items. “Thank you. That’s unexpected.” His brain finally came back online, and he stepped out of the line. “Do you have time to eat with me, or do you need to get back?” Quentin asked.

“I have time.” Toby blushed a little. Obviously, Toby liked him. But he wasn’t thirty yet and Quentin wasn’t sure he wanted to date someone who was still in their twenties.

It was a shitty excuse and Quentin knew it. There was nothing wrong with Toby or his age. The problem was that Quentin’s marriage ending rocked everything he thought he knew about himself. Quentin shook the cobwebs out of his brain. Kelly was happy and had moved on with someone far better suited to him than Quentin ever was, and he was happy for them both. Even if it drove home exactly how lonely he was.

“Are you okay?” Toby asked and Quentin looked at him as they entered the courtyard.

When the sun hits your hair just right, you can see the red in it. Quentin wanted to say. Instead of answering Toby’s question, he said, “Thanks again for buying me lunch. I thought for sure I wasn’t going to get to the front of the line in time.”

Toby motioned to a bench out of the way of foot traffic. “It was no big deal. You always hold the elevator for me. It was nice to do something for you.”

Quentin furrowed his brows. “Do I?”

Toby’s laugh was light, almost musical, and Quentin wasn’t sure he’d heard it before. “You do. I don’t feel special or anything, you hold it for everyone. But I know on Thursdays you’re down here lining up to get the reuben on rye, because they only serve them on Thursdays. Usually, you’re here before me, though.”

“You know a lot about me, Toby.” Quentin sat down. He set his coffee next to him, then opened the bag with his food in it. He carefully unwrapped one half of his sandwich. “Tell me something about yourself. Other than the fact that you have amazing observational skills.”

“I can tell someone to go fuck themselves in four different languages. Five if you count business professional. Six if you count pig Latin.”

Quentin choked on his sandwich. “That’s a handy skill to have. Where’d you learn that?”

Toby shrugged and finished chewing before he answered. The speed at which Toby ate surprised Quentin. In the time it had taken Quentin to eat a bite, and choke on it, and recover, Toby had powered through half of his sandwich.

“My college roommate was a language whiz. His parents are stupid rich and travel a lot for work. College was the first time he’d lived in the same place for that long. He tried to complain about it, but I think he liked it more than he let on. I think he liked the routine of it. He taught me all kinds of things, but only the really fun words stuck.”

“Do you always answer questions about yourself with answers detailing someone else?” Quentin eased the blow of his question by gently nudging Toby’s shoe with his own. He smiled at him too, but he saw the rather sad look on Toby’s face and felt like the world’s largest asshole. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I don’t feel like I’m a very interesting person, that’s all.” Toby’s shoulders dropped as he physically deflated.

Quentin sighed. “I was really enjoying this sandwich and then I went and stuffed my foot in my mouth.”

“The hazelnut in your coffee should cancel the toe jam flavor.”

“I do not have toe jam,” Quentin pretended to be insulted. “For the record, the most interesting thing about me is that I’m still friends with my ex-husband.”

“That’s because you’re a nice person.”

“You don’t know me that well then,” Quentin joked.

“You’re not going to convince me you’re a bad person, Quentin.”

“Because I hold the elevator for you.”

Toby looked at him. His expression was strange and maybe if they knew each other better, Quentin would’ve been able to read it. As it was, he couldn’t tell what Toby was thinking.

“Because you don’t treat me like I’m a child because I’m short.”

“Well, that’s because height isn’t an accomplishment. You’re not tall, but you’re not a child.”

“And that’s why your ex-husband is still your friend.”

“I suppose I have some redeeming qualities.” Quentin took a bite of his sandwich, aware that the time he had left with Toby didn’t feel like nearly enough. It was why, stupidly, he felt compelled to make sure it wasn’t the last time they had lunch together. “I have a meeting I need to get prepared for, but I’m buying next time.”

When Quentin extended the invitation, Toby’s face lit up. Toby was handsome to begin with, but when he smiled, he went from good looking to absolutely, devastatingly gorgeous.

Seeing the smile on Toby’s face made Quentin want to see it more often. Like he’d suddenly become an addict and Toby’s beaming grin was his new drug of choice.

“Next week?” Quentin asked. Setting a lunch date for the next day seemed a tad desperate.

“Yeah. Okay.” Toby nodded. “See you... well, probably tomorrow, but next week for sure. What day?”

“Well, I suppose whatever day works fine. I have lunch with Kelly about once a week, but we usually do Wednesdays. Let’s exchange numbers. Then I can text you and see if you’re free.”

“I’m always free at lunch. My boss doesn’t let people work through their break, unless it’s him.”

“He’s a good boss, then.” Quentin handed his phone to Toby. “Send yourself a text, so I have your number.”

Quentin watched Toby’s nimble fingers tap away a quick message before handing the phone back to him.

“Thanks again for lunch.” Quentin slid his phone away and gathered his trash off the bench. He’d devoured his sandwich, but he still had half his coffee. The coffee Toby had known just exactly how to order for him. “Are you heading up now? I could hold the elevator for you.”

Toby looked almost shy and Quentin hoped he hadn’t made him uncomfortable. Was he actually trying to flirt with Toby, or was he just losing his mind? Toby was a pretty face and a nice guy. To be honest, Quentin could do a lot worse. But, as Quentin had learned from the way things between him and Kelly had dissolved, cute was fine for a date, but Quentin wanted to build a life with someone. Cute might not cut it if their personalities didn’t match.

Toby could be the hottest, nicest, most single person in the building, but unless he had the potential to be what Quentin needed, there was no point in pursuing anything. Except everyone needed friends, right?

Toby could be a friend. Hell, he’d bought Quentin lunch. He hadn’t proposed marriage. For all Quentin knew, Toby wasn’t interested. He might not even be Toby’s type.

“Are you okay?” Toby asked, snapping Quentin out of his spiral.

“Sorry.” Quentin stifled a self-deprecating comment. “I’m not sure,” he said instead. “I have a lot on my mind today, that’s all.”

Toby nodded, and they quietly headed for the elevators, with Toby falling into step next to Quentin. It didn’t escape Quentin’s attention that Toby was the perfect height. Tucked in next to Quentin, his head probably wouldn’t come past Quentin’s chin. He was smaller, sure, but that only meant it

would be easier to... *nope*. He couldn't think those thoughts in public when he was just about to step onto an elevator. Besides, if Toby was going to be his friend, Quentin should at least attempt to stop perving on him.

His resolve lasted until they stepped into the elevator and Quentin had to stand shoulder to shoulder with him. Toby smelled like an impossible combination of coffee and freshly fallen rain and, given the chance, Quentin knew he'd happily drown in it.

When they stopped at Toby's floor, Quentin barely resisted the urge to get off on the wrong floor and walk Toby back to his desk. Instead, he bid Toby a fond goodbye, thanking him for the lunch. He watched Toby smile, not as big, but just as devastating, before Quentin finally had to relent and let the elevator doors slide shut.

By the time he got back to his office, he felt like an absolute fool. A lonely old idiot who got all knotted up by the first pretty face to show a modicum of interest. Quentin dropped into his chair and considered the fact that he might, in fact, be too lonely for his own good.

The idea of trying to find someone to fit that empty space in his life was too daunting to entertain, so he didn't. He went back to his work and shoved Toby firmly into the—friend he sometimes has lunch with—category and put everything else out of his mind.

TOBY

IT WASN'T A DATE. Toby had to remind himself of that over and over. It was Quentin being nice and agreeing to eat with him again. That wasn't a date. But they'd traded phone numbers, which made Toby happier than it should've. He held in his excitement until he stepped into the bathroom down the hall from his office. Once safely tucked away out of sight, he let himself physically react.

He didn't jump up and down, though he desperately wanted to. He did, however, stifle an excited squeak. After a few deep breaths, Toby washed his hands to make it look like he'd come in there to do something other than freak out. Nope, nothing to see here. Toby was totally normal.

He returned to his desk and spent the rest of the day walking on clouds. He couldn't believe his luck. Even if he'd planned to do something as smooth as buying Quentin lunch because the kiosk was almost out of his favorite thing, it wouldn't have gone so smoothly.

Toby didn't have game. What he had were keen observation skills and extra money because he didn't have a social life either. That thought was depressing, and he shoved it aside to focus on the positive. He'd eaten lunch with hot-elevator-holder, Quentin. Ever since Toby had started this job eight months ago, he'd been obsessed with Quentin.

Not scary obsessed like kidnap him and lock him in a room or anything, but just enough to pay attention to his coffee order. He was weird, not crazy. Besides, someone his height

could hardly expect to overpower someone like Quentin. The man was a head taller than him, for crying out loud.

Toby took a deep breath and went back to work. He had to keep his feet on the ground, but it was so hard when Quentin was smart and gorgeous and nice. Toby knew he sometimes let his imagination get the best of him. His history with men was not great, to put it lightly. He had a tendency to put the cart before the horse a lot. So, Toby reminded himself again this was not a date.

At best, Quentin was a new friend. At worst, they had a nice lunch together and Quentin would avoid him in the future. Toby couldn't count the number of times he'd been ghosted by people, romantically and otherwise. Pushing thirty now, he thought he'd have gotten used to being forgettable, but it still stung.

Men generally only wanted him for one thing, which was fine. Toby was a man. Sex was awesome. One-night stands were great. But he was tired of feeling like he was disposable. He wanted to meet someone who wanted to keep him. That wasn't too much to ask, or so he thought.

Or maybe it was, Toby frowned. There were things he wanted that he'd never let anyone know about. Well, not since his first boyfriend in college. Toby had asked for things, and Ron had willingly given them. At first. But then Toby got greedy and, not for the first time in his life, Toby had been told he was too much.

It had started small. A spanking. A bit of light bondage. But then Toby wanted more than casual bedroom stuff. He wanted to sit at Ron's feet and call him Sir. Sure, Ron didn't mind the part where Toby also wanted to bring him coffee and suck his cock and service him in other ways. Ron liked the benefits, but he didn't want the responsibility. He didn't want Toby to call him Sir, or kneel, or wear a collar.

Sometimes Toby didn't know who to be madder at, Ron for being mean when he'd broken up with Toby, or himself for asking for too much. Maybe if he hadn't pushed so hard, they could've made it work.

Other Times, Toby saw that he and Ron never would've worked in the long run. But that thought was depressing. He was beginning to think no one would ever want something long term with him.

By the time Toby got off work, his mood had done a complete one-eighty from the elation he'd experienced earlier in the day. At least he hadn't run into Quentin on his way out the building. Toby wasn't sure he could stand running into him, feeling as low as he did. Suspecting that Quentin would probably be like everyone else and ghost him.

On the bus home, Toby stuffed his earbuds in and stared out the window. He opted for music instead of the audio book he'd been listening to. It was all he could do not to pull out his phone and delete Quentin's number. He also warred with the thought of sending him a text to gauge his level of interest.

Toby did neither. Deleting the number sounded impulsive and stupid. Texting Quentin would make him feel small and desperate. Instead, Toby went home to his shoebox apartment and changed out of his work clothes and climbed into the shower.

The bathroom was one of Toby's favorite things about his apartment. He might not be much for interior design, but he loved gadgets. He had an LED light system in the bathroom that pulsed and changed color with the music. He linked his phone and started his playlist. By the time he was done, he felt better about most things.

Toby's mom often called him her water baby when he was growing up. There wasn't much in life that could go wrong that a shower or a bath couldn't cure. Swimming was the only athletic Toby was any good at, too. Team sports weren't his thing. Even if he hadn't been the shortest kid in every class growing up, and therefore was the last to be picked, he still didn't have the natural physical ability that would make him want to try harder to improve.

After microwaving leftovers from the night before, Toby turned on the TV and ate. He checked the time and decided to call his friend, Dylan. A lot of people would say Dylan wasn't

a real friend because they'd never actually met, but they were full of shit. You didn't have to be in the same location to be someone's friend. Dylan lived in London, but he had the luxury of being his own boss and was a raging insomniac who kept the oddest of hours.

On more than one occasion, he'd assured Toby that because every time was a bad time to call, Toby might as well call whenever he liked, because it was all the same to Dylan.

The screen lit up as the call connected and Dylan's face came into view. A smoke hung from the corner of his mouth, and he took a drag, then lifted his hand and moved the smoke out of view.

"Hello Toby," Dylan said. Toby automatically smiled at the familiar sound of the posh accent. He'd complimented Dylan on it so many times that his friend had threatened to never speak again if he didn't shut up about it.

"Hey, Dylan."

"Uh oh. What's wrong?" Dylan's face got larger on the screen, like he'd leaned in close.

"Nothing."

"And I'm the Queen."

"Okay," Toby sighed. "Remember Quentin."

"The bloke who holds the lift?"

"I bought him lunch today. We ate in the courtyard together and it was honestly amazing."

Dylan frowned and took another drag of his smoke before putting it out. "Yeah, I can see why that would make you look so fucking tragic, Toby. A nice lunch with a man you've been drooling over since you stepped foot in that building. Absolutely devastated by your rotten luck."

"We traded numbers."

Dylan gasped and put his hand to his cheek. "That absolute fuckwit. How dare he?" Dylan moved his hand off his face. "What a horrible day. Lunch with a good-looking man who

you've said you fancy. What's really got you looking like that?"

Toby sighed. Leave it to Dylan to point out how ridiculous Toby could be.

"He's going to ghost me."

"Then he's not worth riding in the same lift or breathing the same air as you. Really, Toby, you've got to give yourself a little more credit. You've already written him off before he can even try to get to know you."

"I haven't."

Dylan rolled his eyes. "You have. You've done it before. Not saying you always do it, or that you haven't learned it from people treating you poorly, but this guy, you've said over and over again how nice he is."

"Yeah?" Toby wrinkled his forehead. "So?"

"Do nice people ask for your number expressly for the purpose of ghosting you?"

"Well... no."

"So he's either not nice, and you were wrong about him to begin with, or he is nice and you're pre-rejecting yourself because you're sure he's going to reject you, eventually."

Toby slumped back on the couch. "I hate it when you're right."

"You love it when I'm right or you wouldn't call me just to be told that you're wrong all the time. Tell me more about your bloke."

"He's not my anything."

"Yet," Dylan said, sparking another smoke. "Wait and see. I've got a good feeling about this one."

It was Toby's turn to roll his eyes. "That's what you say every time."

"Well, if I say it often enough, I'm bound to be right eventually." Dylan laughed until he coughed.

“If you didn’t smoke, you know...” Toby started, but Dylan burned him a filthy look.

“Oi. Don’t start with me.” Dylan said, but he stubbed his smoke out. “Did I tell you about the other night at the pub?”

“You haven’t.” Toby snuggled down and listened to Dylan chat about his latest adventure. By the time he got off the phone, he was feeling much better about everything. Maybe Dylan was right. It was entirely possible Quentin had meant what he’d said when he’d asked Toby to have lunch with him again sometime. Just because other people ghosted him, that didn’t mean that everyone would.

Toby’s good mood carried over into the next morning. He walked into the building and was waiting for the elevator when his phone buzzed. He pulled it out of his pocket and glanced at the screen.

Usually, his message apps weren’t very active, but he had several messages on one. He opened them up and started to read.

The world tilted when he read the words, *‘you don’t know me, but I was a friend of Ron’s’*. Tragic loss. Gone so young. Nothing made sense to Toby, who suddenly couldn’t breathe. Or speak. Or move. He was aware of life going on around him, but he couldn’t tear his eyes away from his phone where he clicked the screenshot provided to him and read the post for himself.

“Toby? Toby? What’s wrong?”

Toby looked up and saw Quentin standing there. He blinked at him, tears pricking his eyes.

“Come here,” Quentin said, instead of waiting for an answer. He whisked Toby away from the morning crowd and into the courtyard. It was chilly that morning and there weren’t many people around.

Then, magically, Quentin swept him into a crushing hug. One so strong it was like he was hugging Toby back together. That didn’t stop his tears, though. They came harder. He cried harder when he thought he might not be allowed to cry over

someone he hadn't spoken to in years. What right did he have to be so upset, anyway? But he'd been thinking of him recently and it seemed wrong that he was suddenly gone.

It felt like forever before Toby got himself somewhat under control. "Sorry. I just... he was important to me. A long time ago." Toby shook his head, realizing he wasn't making sense. "Work. I have to get to work."

"Toby, maybe you should take the day off." Quentin brushed a tear off Toby's face with his thumb.

Toby shook his head. "If I don't go to work, then I'll just be alone all day with this. And..." Toby sucked in a deep breath and tried to hold himself together.

"I'll stay with you today."

"You don't have to."

"I know," Quentin said. "But I will."

QUENTIN

QUENTIN HADN'T BEEN WAITING for Toby. He just happened to be downstairs, killing time before he had to go upstairs to work. It wasn't like he spent half of last night talking himself out of texting Toby. Or jerking off over him in the shower, which seemed extremely inappropriate to think about when he kept his arm around Toby and rubbed his back.

"Call your boss."

"They'll be short staffed." Toby's hands trembled.

"You work for Mitch Williams?"

Toby nodded.

"Mitch is a decent guy. He won't be mad. You're not their only employee. They can manage for a day."

Toby sucked in a deep breath but didn't move to make the call.

"Tell you what. I'll make my calls while you make yours. Then we can get out of here."

Quentin pulled his phone out and within a few minutes had cleared his entire day. He bumped most of his appointments over to early next week, which would leave him stuck at his desk a lot, but he'd manage.

"Your turn, Toby."

Toby tapped the call button and in a few seconds, it connected. Quentin sat close enough that he could hear both

sides of the conversation. Mitch was nothing but kind, extending his condolences and making sure Toby was okay.

“Where are you? Do you need anything?” Mitch asked. “I can have a car take you wherever you need to go.”

“No, that’s fine. I’ll be okay. Um... a friend is with me. Thanks for understanding. I’ll be back on Monday for sure.”

“Take the week if you need.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Toby said in an almost frantic voice. “I’ll be here. There. At work.”

“Okay Toby. See you Monday. Sorry again about your friend.”

“Thanks.” Toby’s voice cracked, and he ended the call.

“Have you eaten?” Quentin asked.

Toby shook his head. “Don’t know if I can right now.”

“Well, let’s go find out. We can get some takeout and I’ll take you home and get you settled.”

Toby looked down at his hands, which were folded neatly in his lap, gently cradling his phone. “Ron was my college boyfriend. We haven’t spoken since the breakup. I shouldn’t be this sad.”

“Says who?”

“We ended badly.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re not allowed to feel anything about his passing. Did you want to tell me about him over breakfast, or did you want a distraction? I’m good with either.”

Toby’s laugh was wry and nothing like the lyrical one he’d gifted Quentin with the day before. “I don’t know what I want. I don’t even know why I’m this upset.” Toby raked a hand down his face. He looked uncomfortable and unsettled and Quentin decided it was time to take matters into his own hands.

He thought of Kelly, then. Kelly, who would've fought tooth and nail the minute he suspected Quentin might even want to hint at taking over. It made him hesitate, but then Toby sniffled, and Quentin made up his mind.

"Breakfast and distraction it is." Quentin urged Toby to his feet and kept his arm wrapped around him. For moral support only. Not because Toby was lean and warm and felt good tucked into Quentin's side. Quentin was a lot of things, but he wasn't that kind of asshole. One who would take advantage of someone who was clearly emotionally vulnerable.

He steered Toby out of the building and down to the parking garage. "Are you parked nearby? Should we come back later for your car?"

Toby shook his head. "I take the bus. I have a car, but parking is expensive."

"I feel that in my soul." Quentin unlocked his car and pulled the passenger door open for Toby. He circled around to the driver's side and climbed in behind the wheel. Quentin didn't know many suitable places to take someone who he wasn't planning to fuck.

The club was closed this early in the morning, but even if it weren't, that was hardly somewhere he could take Toby. Nope. He wouldn't let his brain even entertain that thought.

"How do you feel about pancakes?"

"Waffles are superior. They have built in syrup cups."

"Then I know just the place." Quentin backed out of his space and drove to the diner. He let Toby fiddle with the satellite radio until he found something he found suitable. Quentin focused on the drive and the way Toby seemed unnaturally quiet. He'd been such a delight to talk to only yesterday. Thinking of those things kept Quentin from second guessing his decision to take the day off and look after his new friend.

Though Quentin still loved Kelly, he hadn't been in love with him in a long time, but despite that, getting Kelly's voice out of his head had been impossible. Times like this were what

made it the loudest. He'd always thought that compromise could fix what went wrong between them, but when he'd thought about it from a rational point of view, he realized they just didn't work. They didn't fit. So, it would be especially nice, Quentin thought, if the voice in his head would shut the entire fuck up.

Quentin pulled into a parking lot and found a space. As they walked to the front door of the restaurant, Toby looked around and stopped.

"There's a lot of cop cars here."

"I know. I have a friend who eats here all the time. I don't know if he's here today, but he'd take your side in the waffle versus pancake debate if he is."

"I like him already," Toby said as they stepped into the diner.

Quentin scanned the room but didn't see him. "Well, you're not in luck today." Quentin put his hand on Toby's lower back and steered him toward a booth, away from the bustle of the kitchen.

Quentin took the seat opposite Toby and ordered a round of coffee for them when the waitress appeared with menus, which Quentin promptly refused.

"Two coffees. One waffle stack with bacon and one pancake stack with sausages."

She scribbled the order down and promised to be right back with the coffee.

"I hope you don't mind me ordering for you. I don't even know if you eat bacon."

Toby grabbed a napkin and twisted it. "It's okay. I'll eat anything."

"But do you like bacon? Being willing to eat something doesn't mean you like it."

"I like bacon." Toby continued to twist the napkin around. "You said your friend comes here a lot? Is he a cop, too?"

“He is.”

“How did you meet a cop?”

“You know, the usual way. Broke a few laws. Robbed a couple banks.”

Toby gave him a skeptical look. “You did not.”

“Nick and I met at a party,” Quentin hedged. While he wasn’t shy about sharing his interests, he didn’t want to out Nick to anyone. “We share similar interests.” The waitress had amazing timing and arrived with the coffee before Toby could ask more questions.

Quentin stirred two sugars into his coffee and watched carefully as Toby made his. One cream, one sugar. Quentin promised to remember it for the future.

“Ron and I met at the LGBT club in college.” Toby offered. He didn’t look up from his coffee. He didn’t drink it either, but he wrapped his hands around the mug. “I’m not the greatest at making friends, but Ron just walked up to me, started talking, and that was the end of it. Everyone liked him. But he chose me, you know. Out of everyone he could’ve had.” Toby sniffled. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. Tell me more about him if you want.”

Toby took a sip of his coffee. “There’s not a lot to tell. We were together for most of the school year but broke up before finals. I almost bombed. It... he just ended it. For a lot of reasons.” Toby hastily wiped a tear off his cheek. “I shouldn’t be sad about this. I should be at work making sure things are alphabetized and the right things get filed in the right places and that Mitch doesn’t absolutely destroy my carefully configured system in the eight hours he’s going to be there unsupervised.”

Quentin laughed. “Surely he’s not that bad.”

“Worse. And he’s a lawyer, so he thinks he knows everything. Insufferable man,” Toby said affectionately. His comment made it clear that Toby liked his boss.

The food arrived and Toby's eyes bulged out of his head. "Holy shit. I can't eat all that." He gawked at the waffle stack that was set in front of him. Three waffles deep, with layers of butter and syrup in between, topped with whipped cream, more syrup, and fresh berries. Four thick-cut slices of crispy bacon sat off to the side. Quentin's plate looked much the same, except with pancakes and sausages. The rest was identical.

"I can't eat all this." Toby stared at the food. "I don't even know if I'm hungry."

"Start with a piece of bacon. The salt will get your mouth watering. And if you don't eat any of it, that's fine too."

Toby took a deep breath and picked up a slice of bacon with his fingers. Quentin watched the delicate way he brought it to his mouth and bit off a piece. Toby let out a happy sigh. "That's really good."

"Told you." Quentin picked up his fork and cut a triangle off his pancake stack. "Try the waffles." Waffles wouldn't fix anything, Quentin knew that. But they wouldn't hurt anything either.

Now that Toby had time to absorb the news, he seemed steadier on his feet about it. And with every bite of food, his complexion improved.

They ate quietly. Toby tucked into his food despite his earlier protests about not knowing if he could eat. Though, he did only make it through half his waffle stack before he groaned in misery and shoved it aside.

"Better?" Quentin asked.

Toby nodded. "Yeah. Thank you. I don't normally lose it in public like that. God," Toby paled. "I lost my shit in public. In front of everyone. I can't show my face there ever again."

"Lucky for you, almost everyone was too preoccupied to have noticed before I whisked you off to the side."

"But you noticed?"

“I did.” It was embarrassing and inappropriate, but he wanted to admit to Toby that he’d been waiting for him, and that’s why he noticed him.

“Thank you.” Toby looked like he blushed.

“I’ll settle the bill and then we can get out of here.”

“I’m really feeling a lot better now, Quentin.”

“Good, but I’m still not taking you back to work.”

Toby looked annoyed, but not really. Like he knew he should be annoyed, so he was pretending to be, but was secretly glad.

“Did you kidnap me?” Toby asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Fair and square,” Quentin nodded. “Besides, when the waffles hit bottom, you’re probably going to do what I did after my first waffle stack.”

“What’s that?”

“I fell asleep. Out like a light. Slept half the day away. Those waffles are dangerous.”

“I will not fall asleep,” Toby rolled his eyes as he protested. “I haven’t napped since kindergarten.”

“If you say so.”

Toby made it eight blocks before the first yawn hit. By ten blocks, his eyes were drooping shut, and by the time Quentin reached the park, Toby was sleeping quietly in the passenger seat. He rolled his window down a crack and killed the engine.

Toby hadn’t seemed very keen on going home and being alone, and he didn’t want to bring Toby back to his house in case it made him uncomfortable. Instead, Quentin decided that the park would be a nice place to go.

While Toby slept, Quentin opened his phone and read. And if the book he was reading was a romance, so what? And if he was imagining Toby as the devoted submissive to the dead-sexy Dominant, no one would ever know.

TOBY

TOBY WOKE UP, and for a minute, he didn't have any idea where he was. He didn't think he was out very long, but apparently at sometime during his short nap he'd been transported to Narnia or some shit.

He sat up straighter and blinked his vision into focus. His cheeks heated when he realized where he was and who he was with, and then the bottom dropped out of his stomach when he remembered why.

“How long was I out?”

“Only about twenty minutes.”

Toby wiped a hand down his face and shifted in his seat. “I'm so embarrassed.”

“Don't be. The emotional shock wearing off, plus the sugar from the syrup, the salty bacon—it's like a sleeping pill. How do you feel?”

Toby thought for a second before answering. “I'm... better. Okay. I should reach out to Ron's family. He took me home for Christmas once. His parents are great people.” He forced himself to look over at Quentin, who had loosened his tie at some point, making him appear even sexier than ever. It wasn't fair. “I can't thank you enough for what you did this morning.”

“It's fine, Toby. It's what friends do.”

Friends. Right. Of course, just friends. It was fine. Toby hadn't expected more, but he'd hoped. Quentin had been so

nice that it was easy to think that maybe he'd be lucky enough to interest Quentin in other ways.

But being friends was nice. Not that Toby had many. "I should let you get back to your day. Uh," Toby glanced around to get his bearings. "Is there a bus stop nearby?"

Quentin gave him a strange look. "I can take you home, Toby. I don't mind."

Toby would look like an ass if he said no, so he nodded. "Do you know Enemark Avenue?"

"I do, actually." Quentin started the car. "Did you need to stop anywhere first?"

Toby shook his head. "I'm good, thanks." He wanted to be home, under a pile of blankets, with something stupid on the television to distract him. He wanted to call Dylan. For some reason, he thought hearing his no-nonsense friend tell him to get the fuck over himself would help.

Being so close to Quentin all morning had been a sweet kind of torture. Every time Toby convinced himself that Quentin couldn't be perfect, he went and did something else that made Toby like him even more. The entire morning had been a shit show, but Quentin had somehow made the horrible day tolerable.

Because it's what friends did. Toby sighed and instantly became aware of Quentin's gaze on him.

"You okay?"

"Just sad." It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the whole truth. Sure, Toby was still upset about Ron, but now he felt heartless because his stupid heart ached over Quentin stuffing him into the friend category. What kind of person let themselves care about that on a day like this? A bad one, that's what. Toby frowned all the way home.

Quentin pulled into a visitor parking space at the front of the building and killed the engine. "Are you absolutely sure you're okay?"

Toby sucked in a deep breath. “I won’t insult your intelligence by telling you I’m fine, but I’m fine enough. Thanks again, Quentin. Today... well... it sucked, but what you did means a lot. Thank you.”

Toby unfastened his seatbelt and reached for the door handle.

“Are we still on for lunch next week?” Quentin asked, to Toby’s surprise.

“I’d like that. But I’m buying.”

When Quentin was amused, one side of his mouth curled up a little higher than the other, and that’s the look he gave Toby. “Okay. It’s a date, then.”

The car suddenly lacked oxygen and Toby opened the door. “Okay, great. See you Monday.” Toby tried to contain himself and his excitement until he remembered that those words likely didn’t mean what Toby wanted them to mean. Quentin didn’t mean a date-date. It was an expression. It was a lunch date because Toby was a convenient person to eat with.

Toby closed the door of Quentin’s car and made a beeline for the door of his building. He unlocked it with the fob on his keyring and stepped inside. He turned and saw that Quentin had waited for him to be in the building before leaving.

He really was too good to be true. Toby sighed and went through the next door, checked his mail, then took the elevator up to his floor. He’d barely stepped foot into his apartment when his phone buzzed. If it were anyone else, he’d have ignored it, but it was his boss.

“Hi, Mitch.” Toby tossed his keys on the counter and toed out of his shoes. He tugged his tie loose, something he should’ve done hours ago, and looked at the time. He half hoped Mitch would ask him to come back into work just so he had something to do.

“Hey, I just wanted to check in with you and make sure you’re okay.”

Toby smiled. He could hear the sincerity in Mitch’s voice, but also the not-so-thinly veiled panic. “I’m fine, Mitch. I’m

feeling a lot better. In fact, if you really need me, I can catch an Uber to the office.”

“No, that’s not necessary. I’m not entirely useless, Toby. I managed before I hired you.”

“Barely,” Toby laughed.

“Anyway,” Mitch said, a hint of laughter in his voice. “I just need to know where the Cameron file is. And you’ll be here Monday?”

“I’ll be there. I swear.” Toby revealed the top secret location of the Cameron file, which was on Mitch’s desk where Toby had put it last night in preparation for the day. He doubted Mitch had actually been unable to find it but had just used it as an excuse to check on Toby.

“You’re going to be late if you don’t get going,” Toby said.

“Right, right. Anyway, I’m sorry about your loss, Toby. If you need anything, let me know.”

“I will. Thanks.” Toby ended the call and sank down onto his couch. He flopped onto his side and stared out at his balcony. He unlocked his phone and opened the message that he’d received earlier about Ron. God, he’d been so young. According to the message, Ron had been working out in the gym. He’d been fine one minute, and dead the next. Aneurysm.

Toby bit back a string of obscenities and searched the internet for Ron’s parent’s phone number. He’d wanted to call and extend his condolences over the phone, but after an hour of searching and coming up empty, he settled for logging onto social media and tracking them down that way.

A private message was better than nothing, but everything he thought to say sounded stupid. There simply weren’t good words for something like this, and that’s what Toby said in the message, along with the standard messages people expected to get when they lost a loved one.

Toby was ten seconds from bursting into a fresh batch of tears when his phone buzzed again. This time it was Quentin.

Toby swiped to answer.

“Hey, so, your wallet. At some point, it fell out of your pocket.”

“Oh, shit.”

“I’m outside your building. I can run it up to you.”

Toby didn’t feel up to making the trek all the way downstairs again. “I’m unit four-eleven.”

“I’ll be right up.” The call ended and Toby got up and buzzed Quentin into the building. He got a drink of water and stared at his front door.

When Quentin knocked a minute later, Toby unlocked the door and opened it.

“I can’t believe I didn’t notice that it fell out of my pocket. Thanks for going to the trouble to return it to me. Getting to work with no money and no bus pass and no driver’s license would’ve been an adventure.” Toby took the wallet.

“I don’t mind. I like driving and I don’t get to do enough of it.” Quentin looked at Toby with concern. “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay. I just messaged Ron’s parents.” Toby realized they were still lurking in his doorway. “I should let you get back to your day. Thanks for bringing this.” Toby slid his wallet into his pocket.

“Right. Okay.” Quentin raked a hand through his hair and took a step back. “If you need anything, you have my number.”

Had they only just exchanged numbers the day before? Time was weird, Toby thought. With a final awkward goodbye, Quentin left, and Toby closed his door. He shook the cobwebs out of his head and stepped away from the door. The whole day had been weird, and he just wanted it to be over.

Stripping his tie off, Toby padded to the bathroom and peeled his clothes off. He sort of wished he’d have invited Quentin inside. Maybe Toby would have convinced him to be more than friends.

He filled the tub with water and bubbles and sank into the hot water. A cool, blue light bathed the room. The warm water helped ease some of the tension in his muscles. Toby closed his eyes and tried not to think about anything, but visions of the day kept coming back to him. Ones mostly involving Quentin.

Being held by him had been nothing short of amazing. Toby felt sad though, that it was under circumstances that hadn't allowed him to fully appreciate the feeling of being held by him.

Quentin gave amazing hugs. Toby's hand skimmed down his chest. He wondered what else Quentin was good at?

Toby forced his hand to retreat. He shouldn't jack off in the bath. Not after the news he got. Not after Quentin had shoved him firmly into the friendzone. Was it wrong to jerk off to someone who'd friendzoned you? Toby's cock didn't think so. Of course, it didn't. His stupid dick didn't have a conscience, and it was hard now, pulsing along to the beat of his heart, begging him for release.

Toby's fingertips danced down his sternum. He flattened his hand against his stomach. Water wasn't the ideal lube, but it was good enough. Toby wrapped his hand around his cock and stroked.

Starting off slow, he let himself try to think about what it would be like if it was Quentin's hand on him. Quentin had big hands. Hands that looked strong and capable. Toby bit his lower lip and water sloshed around as he picked up his pace. His other hand trailed lower, cupping his balls.

He spread his legs as far apart as the tub would allow and gently tugged on his balls. Fuck. Toby increased his pace, biting his lower lip, trying to be quiet, though there was no one to hear him, anyway. He was so close. Close enough that he could only whisper Quentin's name once before he was coming all over his chin and his chest.

Fuck. Toby wasn't sure if he could ever look Quentin in the eyes after that, but he'd be lying if he said it was the last time he'd jerk off to visions of Quentin. He was practically

everything Toby ever wanted. If he'd expected his orgasm to put him in a good mood, the reality of it had the opposite effect. The truth was Toby was lucky that Quentin wanted to be his friend and he absolutely shouldn't fuck it up by wanting more.

Guys like Toby didn't get guys like Quentin.

QUENTIN

QUENTIN COULDN'T GET Toby off his mind. When he'd returned to deliver Toby his misplaced wallet, he had felt torn between wanting to kiss him and wanting to be a decent person. Toby's day had been hard, making him emotionally vulnerable and Quentin didn't want to take advantage of that. But a different part of him that wasn't such a decent person absolutely did.

It had been a long time since Quentin had been interested in anyone. Sure, he'd hooked up with men since the divorce, but they'd been unimportant to Quentin. He didn't remember half of their names. Hook up apps had been his friend in the early days of the divorce, but the novelty had quickly worn off and none of the men had been half as memorable as Toby.

Trying to get Toby off his mind, Quentin put in a call to Nick. As luck would have it, Nick was off duty and available, so long as Quentin wanted to run the steps with him. The steps were a series of stairs that connected the upper and lower portion of a sprawling park slash nature preserve just outside town. There were one hundred stairs and people loved to go there and run them. Demented people like Nick, who was already running up the hundred stairs to the top where Quentin stood.

"This is cruel and unusual punishment." Quentin already dreaded how his legs were going to feel tomorrow.

When Nick got closer, he gave Quentin a clap on the shoulder. "It'll be nice to have someone to suffer with. Rory and Andrew refuse to come with me." Rory and Andrew were

Nick's boyfriends. They'd been together for years now and while their relationship might look unorthodox to many people, the three of them worked well together.

"Because they're smarter than I am, clearly."

Nick motioned to the stairs. "What goes up must go down." Nick waited until Quentin fell into step next to him. "So, what's up?"

"I met someone. I think."

"You think you met someone? You're not sure? Are you waiting for a proper introduction or something?" Nick nudged Quentin with his elbow.

"He works for a lawyer in my building. I like him. He's cute and nice and there's something about him that makes me feel good just by being with him." Quentin exhaled.

"But?"

"But I don't know what to do about it."

Nick paused and looked at him. "Why?"

"Things with Kelly were... they were great, but I'd always thought we were perfect for each other. And seeing him with Sterling really drove home how wrong Kelly was for me. I don't want to be with someone who feels they need to make the kinds of compromises Kelly felt he had to make." Quentin couldn't regret their marriage, but he regretted not noticing sooner just how much Kelly had given of himself. Kelly even gave things that weren't in him to give.

"There's nothing you can do about what went down with Kelly. You can only make better decisions moving forward."

"You sound like Rory."

"Thanks," Nick said.

Quentin loved the way Nick's expression softened at the mere mention of his boyfriend.

"Well, what's the deal? Are you just gun-shy about asking him out because of Kelly?"

Unfortunately for Quentin, the question came as they reached the bottom of the stairs. They turned around and Quentin let his eyes travel up the several flights of stairs.

“Why did I agree to this?” Quentin asked.

Nick clapped him on the back. “Last one to the top buys the beer.” Nick said before taking off, leaving Quentin in his dust.

There was no way Quentin was going to run one hundred stairs. At best, he managed a brisk pace. By the time he got to the top, his chest heaved and his legs ached. He was positive that his ass didn’t use to have that many muscles in it.

“That...” He paused to suck in more air. “Was torture.”

“I know.” Nick didn’t seem affected hardly at all. He slung an arm around Quentin’s shoulders and steered him back down. “I’ve known you for a while now, Quentin, and I’d like to think I know you well enough to be honest with you.”

Quentin gave Nick some serious side-eye. “You’re about to say something I won’t like, aren’t you?”

Nick wobbled his hand in a so-so gesture. “Maybe?”

Quentin took a deep breath. “Lay it on me.”

“It’s by no means a bad thing, but you convinced yourself early on that Kelly was the one. Committing to a partner isn’t a bad thing, but you should make sure you’re in it for the right reasons. Do you like Toby for who he is, or do you like the idea of him?”

Quentin let his hand trail down the railing as they continued their way down the stairs. “I like him.” But Quentin had pictured Toby in roles he didn’t know if Toby wanted to fill or not. It was just that taking care of him had felt so nice and Quentin had felt flutters in his stomach when he’d held Toby in his arms. He fit next to Quentin like he’d been specially made just for him.

“And when you first dated Kelly, did you like him for him, or for what he was like as a submissive?”

Anger swelled up in Quentin, and he came to a grinding halt. Nick stopped after a couple steps and looked back at him, unaffected by the rage Quentin could feel building inside himself.

“What are you getting at?” Quentin gripped the railing. “Of course, I liked Kelly for who he was. I wouldn’t have dated him otherwise. I certainly wouldn’t have married him. Kink will only get a relationship so far, it seems. Hell, half the men I’ve hooked up with since were excellent submissives, but there was nothing more to it than that. No passion. No mutual interests. No spark.”

Nick smirked at Quentin’s outburst. “Then, if you like Toby more than you’ve liked the other men you’ve dated, and you recognize that a relationship can’t exist solely because the sex is good and the kinks are compatible, then why the hell are you whining to me about not being sure about Toby?”

Quentin’s anger faded so suddenly that it made him feel stupid for getting mad to begin with. He sighed as they reached the bottom and turned around. Quentin’s legs already hated him from the first trip up the steps.

“I’m scared, I guess. I thought Kelly was it. We were perfect, or so I thought, but I wanted too much from him. And it has me freaked out about asking too much of Toby.”

“So instead of asking for anything, you’ll ask for nothing? Sure, makes sense.” Nick scoffed and started up the steps, this time at a walking pace so Quentin could keep up.

“You know,” Quentin said, starting after Nick. “I’m not sure I like you very much.”

“Too bad. You’re stuck with me.”

“I suppose I could do worse.”

“I know you’re nervous, but what’s the worst that could happen by asking him out? Maybe you go out a couple times and you find out you’re better off as friends. Maybe it doesn’t work. Then you lick your wounds and move on. Best case scenario, I show up to your wedding and get to say I told you so.”

Quentin scowled. “Probably not having another one of those.”

“Right, yes, of course.” Nick agreed far too easily. “Because you had one marriage end, therefore your next marriage is doomed, too. I forgot you were a raging perfectionist.” Nick gently bumped his shoulder against Quentin’s. “Don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater.”

“That’s a horrible saying, for the record.”

“It is, so stop doing it.”

“The next time I need advice, I’m calling Rory.”

Nick laughed. “Where do you think I get most of my good advice from? It’s mostly things Rory has said to me and other people over the years. I absorb his every word like a sponge.”

“I find your level of devotion to him sickening.”

“No you don’t.”

“You’re right,” Quentin trudged up the stairs. The second time was definitely not the charm, and there wouldn’t be a third time. Quentin would revolt. “The three of you are honestly relationship goals.”

When they got to the top for the second time, Quentin bent over and braced his hands on his knees. “That was torture. Zero out of ten. Not doing that again.” He craned his neck to look at Nick. “And you do this for fun?”

Nick laughed—the bastard—and clapped Quentin on the back. “I have two men to keep up with and criminals to chase. Both things require stamina.”

Quentin shook his head and straightened up. “I suddenly feel very fucking old. I can’t believe I came all the way and went up all those steps for you to tell me to ask him out if I like him, basically. This could’ve been a phone conversation.”

“You came all this way because sometimes you need to hear that your friends want you to be happy. If you think Toby will make you happy, then go for it. And Quentin, don’t worry so much about what went down with Kelly. The both of you tried your best, and you’re still friends, which is an amazing

accomplishment. Most people who break up say they'll be friends, but they never make that transition."

"Kelly was worth keeping around."

Nick stepped in closer and regarded Quentin with suspicion. "Are you still in love with him?"

"In love with? No." The answer came easily enough because it wasn't something he hadn't thought of before. Losing his marriage existed like a hole in his life. Like when you got a tooth pulled and wanted to poke at that empty spot to see if it was still tender or not, or when you got a bruise and poked it to see if it hurt.

The sting had left a long time ago and all that remained now were fond memories.

"I love him like a friend, like someone I used to love. If that makes sense. But no, I'm not actively in love with him or pining for him, in case you were curious."

Nick nodded. "Where are you going to take him for your date?"

"I hadn't thought that far ahead."

"Well, you should. That way you can show him all the thought you put into asking him. Show him you're serious and he'll be more apt to say yes. Though, if he's paying close enough attention to you that he knows what you eat, then I'd say it's a sure thing."

"There's a new ramen place down the street from the butterfly farm."

"There you go. Dinner and insects."

"I don't even know if he likes butterflies."

"Quentin, don't overthink it. If he likes you, he'll enjoy spending time with you, and by default he'll like the butterflies. Often, it's not what we do, but who we do it with that matters."

Quentin's nerves faded a little. "Have I told you lately that you're a good friend?"

“No, but you should tell me that more often. My ego gets off on hearing it.”

Quentin and Nick chatted until it was time for Nick to get home to his men. Quentin watched his friend drive away, not at all jealous that he had two men to go home to. Still, that fact made up Quentin’s mind. First thing Monday morning, he would ask Toby to have dinner with him.

TOBY

TOBY WASN'T AVOIDING QUENTIN. He'd missed Friday because of Ron's sudden passing, so showing up to work early on Monday was the logical thing to do. And so was working through lunch. And staying until he was sure Quentin had left for the day, at which point, Mitch appeared at Toby's desk like a six foot four thundercloud.

"Toby, that's enough for the day. Go home."

Toby looked up at Mitch and he motioned to the stack of files. "I just have to put these away."

"Tomorrow. You're the best assistant I've ever had, and I will not let you burn yourself out because you missed one day of work. Your job is secure if that's what you're worried about. I don't want this to become a habit, Toby."

He nodded. "I didn't want to get behind," he supplied somewhat lamely.

"If I'm putting too much on your shoulders, you need to let me know and I can hire some additional help."

"No." Toby blurted. He looked around, hoping he hadn't disturbed anyone else, but they'd all gone home. He and Mitch were the only ones left.

"Are you okay? I know you lost someone; do you need more time off?"

Toby took a deep breath. "My college boyfriend, he's the one who died." Toby frowned. "It's weird to grieve someone you already lost. But I'm okay."

He'd spent the weekend feeling guilty about fretting more about having feelings for Quentin that were unrequited than he did over Ron's passing. Ron's passing had been a shock, but even now the thing Toby remembered the most about the moment he found out was how wonderful it felt to have Quentin's arms around him. He'd felt so peaceful. Protected. He itched to feel that again.

Mitch's phone chimed, and he glanced at the screen before silencing it and tucking it away again. "We all cope in different ways, Toby, but I won't let you bury yourself in work. Understood?"

"I get it." It warmed Toby to think that Mitch cared about him enough to worry about his long-term wellbeing. But he also said Toby was the best assistant he'd ever had, and he probably just wanted to protect him from burning himself out because he didn't have to train a new one.

"I'll walk you out." Mitch motioned for Toby to get up and follow him. "Did you need anything before we head down?"

Toby gave his desk a quick once over and shook his head. He closed his laptop and shoved it in his bag, then slung it over his shoulder. Toby walked down the block and grabbed a baked macaroni and a salad from the deli around the corner before taking the bus home.

His phone buzzed in his pocket for half the day, but he'd ignored it successfully by throwing himself into his work. Now that he was home, however, his phone was silent, and Toby glared at it because it was.

He tossed the macaroni into the oven to heat and stood at the counter, eating his salad while it warmed. His phone sat on the counter, mocking him with the way it lay silent. He set his salad down and grabbed his phone and scrolled through the messages. There were a couple from Dylan, mostly stupid memes he saw and thought would make Toby laugh. The rest were from Quentin. Worrying about him.

Toby's hands shook as he texted Quentin back. He should've known someone like Quentin would worry about him. It made him feel like a shoe for ignoring him all day. And

for what? Because Quentin wanted to be his friend? Toby scoffed at himself.

“Sure, Toby, because your social calendar is so full you can afford to just blow people off.”

Toby: Sorry about today. I’m okay. Thanks for worrying about me. I was just feeling behind after missing work Friday. But thanks again for looking out for me.

He looked at the text after he sent it and grimaced a bit. Where most people would’ve probably just texted something like ‘sup? Toby felt the need to drop a monologue. His heart hammered when he saw the three gray dots bounce.

He set his phone down and walked away. After he checked on his dinner, he returned to a text.

Quentin: I’m glad you’re okay. Maybe we can have lunch tomorrow? Unless Mitch is keeping you chained to your desk? Do I need to bring bolt cutters?

Toby scoffed quietly. That Quentin left more than a three word response lifted Toby’s spirits. There was nothing worse than typing out several sentences to receive a handful of letters or an emoji in return. It made it hard for Toby to read people’s intentions if all they sent him was the letter k or a smiley face.

Toby: No bolt cutters necessary. Mitch won’t let me work too hard. But lunch would be nice. My treat. No argument.

Quentin: Your treat tomorrow, but my treat when I take you for dinner this weekend.

Toby stared at the screen. He read the text several times, trying to figure out if Quentin was serious. Was it a friend’s thing? Was it a date? Toby could barely breathe, and he nearly threw his phone when it buzzed in his hand with Quentin’s name flashing up across the screen.

He swiped to answer. “Hello?”

“Hi Toby.” Quentin cleared his throat. It occurred to Toby that Quentin might also be nervous and strangely, it was that thought that helped Toby settle. “I should’ve called and asked

you properly to begin with. I'd like to take you to dinner this weekend, if you're free."

"Dinner?" Toby asked. "Like... on a date?"

"Yes, Toby. A date." Toby heard the smile in Quentin's voice. "Dinner and I have something else planned if you have no objections to butterflies."

"Butterflies?" Toby repeated. "Who would object to butterflies?"

"Heathens, that's who." Quentin exhaled and Toby's timer beeped. He put Quentin on speaker phone.

"Sorry, just have to get my dinner out of the oven before it burns." The oven door screeched when he opened it, as it always did. It made the same horrible grinding screech when he closed it. He turned the oven off and peeled the cover off his dinner so it could cool for a few minutes.

"I should let you eat your dinner." Quentin said, but Toby didn't want to let Quentin end the conversation already.

"What does someone wear on a date involving butterflies?"

"Well, the restaurant I want to take you to isn't too fancy. You won't need a jacket or tie or anything. Wear whatever you're comfortable in."

Toby bit back a silly remark about how he couldn't go around naked. He didn't want Quentin to think he wasn't taking this date seriously. He'd prefer some more detailed directions, but he could work with comfortable-but-not-fancy. That was most of his wardrobe.

"What will you be wearing? That will help me know what to pick."

If Quentin thought his question was odd, he said nothing. "I hadn't thought that far ahead. Probably my nicest pair of dark jeans and a shirt that I don't wear to the office or the gym, which leaves about four choices."

"Your closet sounds like mine. I have three looks. Most of my stuff is for work, but I have a few everyday pieces and a

handful of stuff I say I wear to the gym, except that I don't go to the gym. So mostly they get worn around here when I'm feeling extra lazy, or when the air conditioner goes on the fritz."

Toby poked a fork into his macaroni and cheese. As he brought it up to his mouth, the stringy cheese clung to the main dish. He popped the forkful into his mouth and winced at the heat.

"Do you go to the gym, Quentin? Or do you pretend like me?"

Quentin laughed. "I met with a friend this weekend and we ran the steps out at the nature preserve just outside town. Well, he ran them. I ate his dust."

"Stairs are evil. That's why I take the elevator."

"A-fucking-men to that."

"You must really enjoy hanging out with him if you were willing to torture yourself to do it."

"Yeah, well, he's a good guy. Plus, I wanted his advice about something. You see— there's this guy I'm interested in, and I wanted to know if I should ask him out."

Toby's face heated at Quentin's simple admission. "I bet your friend gave you amazing advice."

"He did. Oh, can you hang on for a second?" Toby heard a doorbell in the background, then a second voice.

"Sorry about that," Quentin said. "My dinner arrived."

"What's on the menu at your house? I grabbed baked macaroni and cheese and a sloppy Cesar from the deli?"

"A what?" Quentin asked.

"A sloppy Cesar. It's just a Cesar salad with extra dressing. The lettuce practically swims. It's amazing."

"That sounds delicious, actually."

"The dressing is the whole point of a Cesar salad. Without it, it's just lettuce, croutons, and sadness."

Quentin laughed. “Okay, now I need to try a sloppy Cesar.”

“Tomorrow, I’ll take you there for lunch. Bring breath mints, they’re on a first name basis with garlic.”

“It’s a date.” Quentin had a way of knocking Toby off center with the simplest of phrases.

Toby forced himself to take a deep breath. “It’s a date, then. Tomorrow. I’ll meet you at the elevators at lunch.”

“And in the morning, too, I hope? If you’re going to be early again, I hope it’s so we can have a coffee together.”

“You’re going to get so tired of me.” Toby’s laugh was more self-deprecating than humorous, but it died when Quentin spoke.

“I won’t get tired of you, Toby. I want to get to know you better. That’s the opposite thing entirely.”

“I—thank you.” Toby eyed his macaroni. He felt too happy to eat suddenly, almost like Quentin had filled him up with joy.

“I need to eat before my food gets cold, and so do you, but I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay. Yes. Uh, I’ll come early, and we can have a coffee. I’d like that.”

“Me too, Goodnight, Toby.”

“Goodnight, Quentin.”

Toby stared at the screen for a second. Then he let out a happy little squeak and his whole body shuddered with unrestrained joy. He wrapped himself up in a hug because it felt like he was going to fly apart, he was so excited.

After a few deep breaths, Toby got his elation under control and his hunger returned with full force. He ate his macaroni standing up at the kitchen counter, then he went to his closet and started planning his outfits for tomorrow and his date. His date with Quentin. He almost couldn’t believe it was real. He pulled his phone out to read the text several times

before it sank in that it was real. Quentin was interested in him as more than a friend. It was more than he'd ever hoped for.

QUENTIN

QUENTIN SOMEHOW AVOIDED Kelly until Friday. Tuesday, he had lunch with Toby. Then again, on Wednesday. Then again, on Thursday. They didn't talk about their upcoming date on Saturday, but they talked about a lot of things. How Toby hated corn on the cob but liked corn off the cob and how he was always too cold in the winter. Every tidbit of information Toby gifted him with, Quentin hoarded away.

It was weird to eat lunch without Toby, but he'd insisted Quentin keep his date with Kelly. Toby promised he didn't mind eating alone and patted Quentin on the arm before shooing him away.

The urge to kiss Toby grew by the day. It had started out as an inkling. A hint of something he might want, but every time he saw him, it fed the monster that wanted to devour Toby whole. They hadn't been on their date yet, and Quentin admonished himself for putting the cart before the horse. For wanting things, he wasn't sure he should. At least not yet.

Because Quentin couldn't look at Toby without wondering what he'd look like on his knees. He couldn't touch him without wanting to slide his fingers into Toby's hair or skim his hand down Toby's bare skin. He hadn't tasted him yet, but was already addicted.

Had it been this way with Kelly? Had he gotten so wrapped up in him that he missed the forest for the trees? Things felt different with Toby already, however. Maybe? He was still turning that question over in his mind when he

slipped into the diner and dropped into the seat across from Kelly.

His ex-husband was an attractive man and when he was happy, he bloomed. Kelly and Sterling were perfect for each other to the point of nausea. That was unfair of Quentin to think, and he realized it came from a place of jealousy. He also couldn't quite shake the guilt he felt about how things between them had gone so wrong for Kelly.

Kelly shot him a knowing gaze as he nudged Quentin's coffee toward him. "I got you a coffee."

"Thanks." Quentin doctored it the way he liked it. He didn't really enjoy most restaurant coffee. It was too weak or too bitter or not hot enough. He also had the rather uncharitable thought that Toby had gotten Quentin's coffee order exactly perfect, and Kelly had never done that for him.

Quentin stirred his coffee and purposely didn't look Kelly in the eyes. "When you first met Sterling, did you make a bunch of stupid comparisons in your head?"

"Truthfully?"

Quentin wrapped his hands around his coffee cup and let the heat seep through the ceramic. "Yes. I want you to answer truthfully."

"Of course, I did. I tried not to. Sterling isn't you, and no offense, but that was sort of the appeal. Sorry."

Quentin nodded. "No apology necessary, Kelly."

"Is there a reason you're asking?"

Quentin finally raised his gaze, and he looked at Kelly. He wanted to see his reaction. Not because he thought Kelly would be sad or jealous, but he wanted to see what he thought, regardless. And Kelly was shit at schooling his face.

"I have a date tomorrow."

Kelly grinned ear to ear, probably the biggest smile he'd given Quentin since long before the divorce. "That's awesome? Who's the lucky guy?"

“He works in my office building. We’ve been spending a lot of time together.” Quentin left out the part about Toby, knowing his favorite food and his coffee order and the part where Quentin had held him close and let him cry against his chest. “Honestly, if he hadn’t insisted I keep my weekly lunch date with you, I probably would’ve bailed on you today.”

“Ouch.” Kelly laughed, and he didn’t seem all that upset by Quentin’s casual confession.

“You’re not upset?”

“Why would I be upset that you found someone to be interested enough in that you’d put them before your ex-husband? Quentin, that’s a good thing. Not saying it as permission to cut me out of your life, but you shouldn’t feel bad for finding someone who makes you want to spend time with them.”

They ordered their lunch, and Kelly circled back to Quentin’s earlier comment.

“It’s natural to compare things, Quentin. It’s not abnormal to put one experience next to another and see where the differences are.”

“He drives me crazy. I want things I haven’t wanted in a long time. But...” Quentin paused, unsure how much he wanted to reveal of himself to Kelly.

“But what?”

Quentin shook his head. “Nothing. I’m nervous, that’s all. I think I’m overthinking everything.” He looked up and saw a sappy smile on Kelly’s face. “What?”

“You’re so into this guy. It’s nice. That’s all.”

Quentin huffed in annoyance that he was so easily read, but Kelly wasn’t wrong. “Yeah, yeah. Now I just have to not fuck everything up. Easier said than done.”

Kelly was quiet for a long minute. The waiter came and left, leaving their lunch and scurrying away.

“I thought we’d been over this, but apparently you need to hear it again. You did nothing wrong. Our relationship failed

because we weren't as compatible as we wanted to be. Sometimes things don't work and there's no one to point a finger at and blame, and that can be hard to reconcile, but it's the truth."

In lieu of responding to Kelly, Quentin picked up his reuben and took a bite.

"Don't blame yourself for things we both did wrong. Go on the date, relax, be yourself and just... see where it goes."

"Be myself? That's... he doesn't even know who I am. Not all of me. I told him about my failed marriage, but not why it failed. He doesn't even know I'm a Dom."

"So, tell him." Kelly shrugged as if his suggestion wasn't preposterous.

"What?"

"Tell him. Why keep it a secret? If you want to get serious about this person, then you deserve to give yourself a chance to be real with them so you can know if you want to get serious with them."

"You want me to just blurt it out? Hi, Toby, you look amazing, by the way, I'm a kinky Dom and I want to tie you up and do wonderful and horrible things to you."

"Pretty much." Kelly stabbed his fork into his noodles. "Toby is a cute name. Does the name match the person?"

Quentin grinned as he thought of Toby. "Yeah, the name matches. He's not as tall as I am. He's quite a bit shorter, actually. Floppy brown hair, sweet smile, soulful eyes."

"Someone's smitten."

"Speaking of smitten, how are things with you and Sterling?"

"They're really good. Amazing, actually." Kelly didn't elaborate and Quentin wasn't sure he wanted him to. While they'd remained friends after the divorce, this was new territory for them. Quentin wasn't in love with Kelly anymore, but that didn't mean he wanted to do a deep dive into Kelly's personal life.

They stuck to safer topics for the rest of lunch, things like their jobs and the weather. When they were done, and the bill was paid they stepped out into the street and Kelly produced a red sucker from his pocket. He never went anywhere without them.

He tore the plastic off and popped the sucker into his mouth. “Don’t get in your own way. If you want him, tell him that. If you want specific things with him, he deserves the opportunity to decide for himself. Same time next week?” Kelly asked.

“Yeah. Same time next week.”

“Okay, see you then and you can tell me all about your amazing date.” Kelly gave Quentin a friendly pat on the shoulder before he turned and walked away.

When Quentin arrived back at his building, the lunch rush was over, and most people had returned to their offices. Except for Toby, who waited by the elevators. His face lit up when he saw Quentin. Toby’s beaming smile did strange and wonderful things to Quentin’s insides.

Toby made him feel warm and when he looked at him and smiled for no reason, simply that Quentin was near, it made Quentin crazy. He wanted to back Toby against the wall and kiss him senseless.

Quentin strode over and pressed the button to call the elevator. “Going my way?”

“Of course. How was lunch?” Toby asked.

“The food was good, the company was all right, but could’ve been better.” Quentin looked at Toby when he said it, driving his point across. It was on the tip of his tongue to confess that he didn’t want to wait another minute to kiss Toby or wait until tomorrow to take him out on a real date, but the elevator arrived and Quentin settled for ushering Toby inside ahead of him.

“I’m looking forward to tomorrow.” Quentin told him once they were alone in the elevator, which was a miracle itself.

“Me too. I looked up the butterfly farm you mentioned, and I’ve never been more excited about a bunch of insects.”

“It’s one of those things that I always wanted to do, but never got around to doing.”

“Like a bucket list?” Toby asked.

“Not really. Well, sort of? You know how it goes. You’re an adult with adult responsibilities, but this really cool thing opens and you want to go, but you never make time for it for some reason or another.”

Toby nodded and let out a soft hum, like he understood exactly what Quentin was talking about, and maybe also what he was feeling.

“I get it.” The elevator came to a stop at Toby’s floor and the doors whooshed open. Toby shot him a shy smile and stepped through them. Quentin held the elevator doors open.

“Can I give you a ride home tonight?” Quentin asked.

“It’s probably out of your way.”

“I wouldn’t ask if I minded.”

Toby mulled it over briefly, biting his lower lip before he finally nodded. “Okay. I’d like that. Thank you.” He turned his head as Mitch strode past. “I have to get back to work.”

“See you at five,” he promised, and stepped back. He kept his gaze pinned to Toby until the elevator doors shut and stole him from view.

Back in his office, Quentin threw himself into his work, which mostly consisted of never ending emails. Quentin liked to tell himself that his job meant something, that he made a difference in people’s lives by finding them better jobs. It made him feel needed, and he liked that feeling. But nothing compared to the feeling of Toby in his arms.

Toby was strong and independent, but he looked at Quentin like he needed him. It might’ve been Quentin’s imagination, or his unrestrained hope breaking through his loneliness, but he didn’t think so. Toby felt too right for Quentin to be wrong about him.

The rest of the day crawled and by the time five o'clock rolled around, Quentin was itching to see Toby again. He loosened his tie and raked a hand through his hair and waited for the elevator to slide down to the lobby, where he planned to meet Toby.

The doors opened and Quentin stepped out and into the sunshine. That's what it felt like every time he was near Toby. He saw Toby before Toby saw him, which gave him a moment to admire and appreciate undetected.

God, how was one person so perfectly attractive? Quentin stepped closer and Toby turned to look at him. His bright smile immediately melted Quentin. He stepped in close, closer than he'd been in days. Unable to quell the urge any longer, Quentin leaned in.

“I'd really like to kiss you, Toby.”

Toby let out a breathy, nervous laugh and closed the last of the distance. He brought his mouth near Quentin's but didn't quite make contact. “I'd really like to be kissed by you.”

TOBY

TIME CRAWLED, and the world around him dropped away. It felt like he'd landed in a movie scene. The hair on Toby's arms stood on end, and he turned to see Quentin staring at him. He strode toward him purposefully, handsome as hell, slightly ruffled in that thank-god-it's-Friday way with his loosened tie and mussed up hair.

And now they hovered in that near-kiss state of abundant apprehension and pre-kiss tension. Forward was the only clear direction, but even after Quentin gained permission, he lingered there, not quite touching.

The first thing Toby noticed was that Quentin stepped closer. Warmth surrounded him when Quentin slid an arm around his waist, then a hand cupped Toby's cheek. It was smoother than Toby expected, and he didn't have time to think of why before Quentin's mouth brushed against his.

Toby sighed like he'd been waiting for that kiss his whole life. It was soft, but so sweet it made Toby ache. He could feel how hesitant and careful Quentin was with him. Was he afraid of spooking Toby, or himself?

The next brush of Quentin's lips was more confident, and Toby heard him growl a little before he pulled away, the air charged with reluctance.

"I've wanted to do that for a week." Quentin said, taking all the air out of Toby's lungs.

"Why didn't you?" Toby sighed and let Quentin's hand settle on his lower back as he led him out of the lobby.

“It seemed inappropriate. You were sad and vulnerable, and as tempting as it was, I didn’t want to feel like I was taking advantage of you.”

Toby let out a breath. “I kind of wish you would’ve. In a way. It would’ve been a nice distraction.” Toby glanced up at Quentin as they headed for the parking garage and Quentin’s car. “You had all week. We’ve seen each other every day. Why did you wait so long to kiss me?”

Quentin’s answering smile was almost sheepish. “I don’t have a good answer for that, but it was definitely worth the wait.”

Toby blushed and looked away. The ride to his apartment was quiet, like they both had so much they wanted to say but didn’t know how yet. It made the silence heavy, but not awkward. By the time they pulled into the parking lot at Toby’s building and Quentin pulled into one of the visitor spaces, Toby vibrated with anticipation.

Quentin turned the engine off and unbuckled his seat belt. “I can’t stay, but I’ll walk you up.”

Toby tried not to be disappointed that Quentin couldn’t stay, but it felt awesome that he would walk Toby up to his door. It made him feel important. Special. No one had ever done that for Toby. He couldn’t keep the smile from his face as Quentin followed him to the front door of his apartment. Quentin slightly crowded him as he unlocked the door.

Toby burned. He wanted to kiss Quentin so bad. He’d invite him in if Quentin hadn’t said he couldn’t stay. Instead, he turned and leaned against his unlocked door and let Quentin crowd him a little more. He loved how the proximity let the heat from Quentin’s body soak into his.

He tilted his head back and Quentin moved in. Shivers danced up Toby’s spine when Quentin’s mouth descended on his. Teeth captured his lower lip and Quentin tugged gently. Toby whined, his cock instantly and impossibly hard.

Unable to help himself, he clutched a handful of Quentin’s blazer in one hand and opened himself to the kiss. Giving

himself over to Quentin was effortless and fucking hot. The minute Quentin caught on that Toby would follow his lead, the passion between them exploded.

Quentin pinned him to the door. Suddenly, his hands were everywhere, running up Toby's arms, then cupping his face as Quentin's tongue sought Toby's. Toby made a sound that wasn't suitable for public consumption and Quentin pulled away. He rested his forehead against Toby's for a moment, then kissed him again. This one was sweeter and softer, but it still made him ache to beg Quentin to come inside.

"I have to go." Quentin said as he stole another kiss.

It almost hurt when Quentin pulled away and put an almost respectable amount of distance between them. Toby let his head drop back and thump against the door.

"Can I call you later?" He asked at the risk of sounding needy, but if he didn't ask, he knew he'd worry about it all night. He'd drive himself crazy, wondering if it was acceptable or not.

"I hope you do." Quentin answered. Toby was comforted by the fact that Quentin didn't look like he really wanted to go.

Toby reached for him. Tentatively, he hooked his pinky finger around Quentin's index finger. He looked up at the taller man, loving that Quentin towered over him, like he could protect him. Shield him.

Toby hooked his finger around Quentin's a little more. "Are you sure you have to go?" He felt like Quentin could read him like an open book. He felt fairly sure it wasn't hard to tell how much Toby wanted Quentin to come inside.

Quentin brought Toby's hand up to his mouth, and he kissed Toby's hand. "Tomorrow, Toby."

Toby sighed when Quentin kissed his hand again, then stepped in close, reaching. Quentin turned the doorknob and pushed his door open.

Toby's heart pounded and his chest felt tight with some sort of strange emotion. It vanished when Quentin kissed him

again, soft and brief. It lingered for a moment and Toby drank in all of Quentin that he could.

“Goodnight, Toby.”

“Goodnight, Quentin.”

Toby stayed in that spot until Quentin disappeared into the elevator. He slipped into his apartment and shut the door, locking it behind him. His cock throbbed in his pants. He meant only to press the heel of his hand into the base of his dick to kill his erection, but the pressure felt too good. He stroked himself through his jeans.

Toby pressed his forehead against the door and stroked himself again. He practically ripped his pants open and dragged his cock out. His free hand went up and he touched his lips, remembering the way Quentin had kissed him and the way he'd said tomorrow, like that was the day he was going to make all of Toby's dreams come true.

Toby kept his hand to his mouth, trying to keep the feeling of Quentin's lips alive in his memory and on his skin for as long as possible. His other hand stroked his dick. Dry and rough wasn't usually his thing, but it felt like it had been forever since he'd had more than a passing urge to jerk off.

He bit back a whimper and screwed his eyes shut as he continued to stroke. He swiped his thumb over the head, smearing a bead of precum. It made him shiver and shake. His legs threatened to give out. Toby's hips thrust of their own accord, chasing that elusive orgasm. God, he felt needy, desperate, and dirty. Quentin probably wasn't in his car yet and Toby was about to come all over his front fucking door.

If Quentin came back, he'd catch Toby with his dick out. Quentin knocking on the door and Toby answering, looking rumpled and covered in his own cum. That was the thought that tipped him over the edge.

Toby muffled his cries with his hand as he came streaking cum all over the inside of his door. He didn't know how long he stood there, whether it was five seconds or five minutes, but he didn't move until his breathing was under control again. He

tucked his cock back in his pants and frowned at the mess he made of his door.

The kiss had filled Toby up to the brim, but the orgasm had emptied him right back out again. After he washed his hands and cleaned the cum off his door, Toby stripped naked and had a shower. He dressed in a pair of sweats and a hoodie. He ordered dinner, paced his apartment and watched the clock, waiting for an appropriate amount of time to pass.

If he called too early, he'd look pathetic. And while he might feel that way sometimes, that was his secret, and he liked to at least pretend that other people didn't see him that way. Quentin hadn't kissed him like he'd thought him to be pathetic. No. Quentin had kissed him like he'd wanted to come inside and keep kissing him.

Toby sighed and stared down at the tent in his pants. Apparently, one orgasm wasn't enough to make his dick behave. It had been awhile since a hand that wasn't his touched his cock. Toby groaned and started alphabetizing files in his head to kill his erection.

When Toby's phone alerted him that his food was near, he went down to the lobby to meet the delivery driver. Ten minutes later, he was sitting on his couch eating what amounted to gourmet chicken nuggets, bites of baked chicken breast covered in sauce and bacon. The salad he ordered with it went into the fridge for later, but he devoured the cheesy garlic bread he ordered.

Why bother being an adult if you couldn't eat like a kid? Toby nearly jumped out of his skin when his phone buzzed. His brain scrambled a bit when he saw Quentin's name on the screen.

He answered before he could talk himself into a fit of anxiety about why Quentin was calling him.

"Hello?" Toby put Quentin on speaker.

"Hello, Toby. I know I said you could call, but I couldn't wait. You're addicting."

"I—I don't know what to say to that."

“I hope you don’t mind if I eat while we talk. My dinner just arrived.”

“That’s fine. I’m just finishing mine.”

“What did you have?” Whenever Quentin asked a question, he always sounded like he actually wanted to know the answer. Toby never got the impression that he was asking things just to fill the silence with nonsense. It made Toby feel good to think that Quentin wanted to know him.

“Cheesy bread and fancy chicken nuggets. It’s chicken breast cut into pieces, drenched in barbeque sauce and sprinkled with bacon on top.”

“That sounds amazing.”

“We’ll order from there the next time you’re here. If you have time to stay, that is.”

“I had time, Toby, but you are far too great a temptation. If I came inside, I was probably going to do a lot more than kiss you.”

Toby moaned. “I wish you would’ve given in to temptation, Quentin. I waited all week for you to kiss me.” He stopped himself from saying more by biting his lip.

“I want to at least get through the first date before anything more happens between us, Toby.”

“So, you’d be open to sex on the first date?” Toby clapped his hand over his mouth, but Quentin laughed.

“That’s why I didn’t come in. I wanted so much more than that kiss in your hallway.”

“I can’t wait to see you again.”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow is so far away.”

“You’re worth waiting for, Toby.”

Toby swooned.

QUENTIN

THE HOURS in between dropping Toby off and picking him up stretched Quentin's patience thin. They both seemed eager to see one another, because suddenly a dinner date became a date for lunch and then a trip to the butterfly farm, and maybe dinner after.

If Quentin was lucky, maybe he could convince Toby to come home with him. If the way Toby undressed Quentin with his eyes was any indication, they might not make it until evening before he caved and hauled Toby off into a dark, private corner to finish what he started.

Quentin picked Toby up at his apartment and they ate lunch at a little bistro Quentin liked. It wasn't somewhere he usually took a date, not that he had many dates. Most of his post-divorce interactions had been less romantic and more transactional.

Toby seemed slightly subdued when Quentin picked him up.

"Are you okay?" Quentin asked once they sat at the table and placed their order. Quentin reached across the table and put his hand on Toby's.

"Ron's family reached out to invite me to his celebration of life. They're waiting until next month to do it because his family is sort of scattered all over the place."

"Do you want to go?"

Toby shrugged. "We were together so long ago. We weren't even friends by the time it ended."

“Did things end badly?”

Toby bit his lip. “This is hardly a good first date conversation. I feel like I’m screwing up.”

Quentin squeezed Toby’s hand. “I promise you’re not. Besides, we had lunch together four times last week. This is date number five.”

“Date number five?” Toby shook his head, but his smile gave away his happiness. “It’s still not great date conversation.”

“Says who? I like talking to you. Tell me about Ron.”

“Ron was... Ron. He was quiet, bookish, and that’s why I liked him. Everyone in college was so loud and large and intense, but Ron existed in a more laid back way. He got excited about things like Ancient Egypt.”

“Was he the person who taught you how to say colorful things in different languages?”

“He was.” Toby went quiet and when their server appeared, Quentin ordered for both of them without thinking.

“Sorry. I should’ve asked what you wanted.” Quentin tried to quell the doubt and the panic that swelled in him. He’d told himself that he wouldn’t take over like this. He swallowed a thick lump of anxiety and looked at Toby.

“It’s okay.” Pink slashed his cheeks. “I don’t mind. It’s... chivalrous, you know. The whole door-opening, order your dinner for you, thing. It’s nice to not have to make every decision sometimes.” Toby clamped his mouth shut, like he’d been on the verge of saying too much.

Interesting.

Quentin didn’t buy into the whole stereotype of being able to know if someone was dominant or submissive just by looking at them. Mostly because he knew from experience, people weren’t always as they presented themselves.

But sometimes the things people said gave them away. Hope bloomed in Quentin at Toby’s throwaway remark.

“And then there are those of us who don’t mind making decisions for ourselves and those close to us.”

Toby’s eyes widened and his chest heaved. Quentin felt unbearably bold. It might be a huge mistake, but he didn’t feel like it would be. It felt right in a way he couldn’t describe. They might not know each other well, but they’d built a rapport over the past week and Quentin felt confident that he could reveal himself without turning Toby away.

Quentin took a sip of his ice water and licked the moisture off his lips. Toby’s gaze stuck to him. “Toby, I’d like to tell you something.”

“I’m listening.”

Quentin traced his finger through the condensation on his water glass before pulling his hand away. He took a deep breath and steadied himself. There was always a moment of fear when Quentin revealed his proclivities to someone new, which wasn’t often now because most people he met who might need to know, he met through the lifestyle.

“Are you familiar with a club here in town? Desires?”

Toby’s cheeks burned bright red. “Yeah. I... ah, fuck. I wanted to join, but I’ve never worked up the courage.”

Bingo. Quentin contained a happy dance. His smile, however, couldn’t be stopped, and he grinned ear to ear. “Would you be interested in going there someday as my guest?”

“Do you have a membership?” Toby asked. The redness of his face faded, and he leaned closer to Quentin, as if the revelation that Quentin was involved in the lifestyle was a magnet to him.

“I do. As a Dom. If it’s not something you want from me, we never have to speak of this again.”

“No. I want it.” Toby cleared his throat. “I mean, I’d like to know more about you, Quentin. Ron, ah, sometimes in college we’d experiment. I’m not experienced with any of it, but I’m not a complete kink-virgin.” Toby wrinkled his brow. “Is that a thing?”

A weight lifted off Quentin's shoulders. He didn't want to lay it on too thick or get too ahead of himself, but for the first time in years, Quentin felt something bright inside himself. Excitement buzzed through him. There were so many things he wanted. Even now the list grew. But there was that shred of careful hope that he tried to protect himself from, but it was pointless.

There was no protecting himself from this. Not since that first moment he had swept Toby into his arms, or maybe before that even, when Toby had bought him lunch.

"Were you and your ex... I mean, did you?"

He took pity on the way Toby stumbled over his words. He thought it endearing, the way he was both timid and eager.

"You can ask me anything, Toby," Quentin assured him.

"Were you his Dom?"

"Yes. It's how we met. At first it was just casual play," Quentin took a drink and weighed his words. He wanted to be open with Toby without scaring him away. "It wasn't casual for long. Things between us moved quickly. Maybe too quickly. What about you and Ron? You said the two of you experimented? Was he your Dom?"

Toby shook his head, looking almost sad, but Quentin supposed that was to be expected given the circumstances.

"I wanted that, but he wasn't comfortable with a lot of it. He liked the kink, but only in the bedroom and only sometimes. I was too much for him, I suppose."

The similarity had Quentin momentarily speechless. Their lunch arrived and Toby's eyes lit up at the sight of his food. "This looks amazing."

"Everything here is excellent." Quentin let the conversation drift away from their current topic, but he couldn't stop thinking about it. It was almost too good to be true. Toby was sweet and earnest and sometimes a little sad, Quentin thought.

As if he knew Quentin's resolve was wearing thin, Toby moaned around the first bite of his food. It was a sound Quentin wanted to hear a million more times, preferably with Toby naked and kneeling. He shifted in his seat and Toby shot him a shy, but knowing look.

It was hard to imagine what kind of submissive Toby would be. Quentin did his best to keep himself from going down that path. He wanted to discover Toby naturally with no preconceived ideas between them to muddy the waters.

"It's been years since I dated someone who wasn't in the lifestyle." Quentin said. "What I'm trying to say, I suppose, is that I'm interested in you Toby and I'd very much like to see where this goes, but if you're not interested in the lifestyle, I think that friends who eat lunch together would have be as far as we go."

Quentin felt sick with anticipation and anxiety as he waited for Toby to digest the meaning of his words and respond to them. It was easier to meet kinky people in kinky situations. In a club setting, approaching someone was far simpler. You knew if they were interested in being approached. You might not know their exact likes and dislikes, but finding out was half the fun.

In the world outside of clubs and munches, it was harder to find someone who might fit. There was always that fear that if you revealed yourself to them, that they'd recoil. So far that hadn't happened with Toby. Quentin's battered heart clung to hope, but also used it as a shield.

"I'd like that." Toby answered finally and Quentin exhaled. "After things ended with Ron, I took that as a sign that it wasn't really meant to be, you know. So, I haven't explored that side of myself in a long time. But I want to. With you."

God. Could Toby be any more perfect? Quentin dashed that thought immediately. Perfection was a curse, not a blessing. No one was perfect, and it was best if Quentin did his best to keep his expectations realistic. But if perfection could

exist in a person, it would be Toby with his bright smiles and his soft heart.

“After we visit the butterfly farm, would you like to come back to my place so we can discuss things where we have more privacy?” Nerves he hadn’t felt since he’d been unfathomably younger jittered through him as he begged the universe to make Toby say yes.

“I’d like that.”

They shared a moment between them that was charged with electricity and hope. Quentin’s skin felt tight. His entire body sang with how light he suddenly felt. Underneath the table, Quentin slid his foot closer to Toby’s. He gently pressed his foot against Toby’s, who returned the subtle gesture.

By the time they arrived at the butterfly farm, Quentin’s tangled nerves had settled into something calmer. It helped that Toby glued himself to Quentin’s side. He’d been the one to slip his hand into Quentin’s when they first stepped out of the car. His one bold act cemented something between them. All the hypotheticals in Quentin’s mind became eventualities instead of what-ifs. It wasn’t a matter of maybe, now it was certain. It might not happen that day, but Toby would kneel for him sooner or later.

They didn’t talk about that, though. Instead, they meandered through the enclosed space and admired the greenery. They stopped and read all the plaques and learned about the delicate insects.

“What made you want to bring me here?” Toby asked at one point. “It’s amazing, but admittedly, a little unexpected.”

Quentin watched a butterfly land nearby. It fluttered its wings, stretching them wide before pulling them close together. It repeated this a few times before it seemed to settle.

“Life is full of beautiful things we don’t make time for.” Quentin answered, tightening his grip on Toby’s hand. Toby’s invested gaze made Quentin feel a little bare and a lot vulnerable. Instead of recoiling from that unfamiliar feeling,

he leaned into it and hoped that it would be like a butterfly coming out of a cocoon—a bit of discomfort in hopes of making something extraordinary.

TOBY

WALKING into Quentin's condo for the first time felt monumental. For one, Toby never thought he'd get here. He'd resigned himself to life in the friendzone, which wasn't a bad place to be. He didn't have a lot of friends. Besides, Quentin was his friend, but also hopefully much more.

Toby took a deep breath and tried not to visibly vibrate. Equal parts nervous and excited, it was hard to keep himself contained.

"I think all I have to drink is some horrendously old and terrible vodka, but I have coffee, water, and several kinds of tea."

"Tea sounds nice. I never would've taken you for a tea drinker." Toby said as he toed out of his shoes and followed Quentin into the kitchen. Quentin lived on the fourth floor of an older building. It was clear the space had been renovated in recent years. It wasn't overly extravagant, and it made Toby feel a little better. Luxury made Toby feel weird and uncomfortable, like he was soiling nice things by existing near them.

"Nick's boyfriend, Rory has the largest tea collection I've ever seen. He's a bad influence." Quentin filled a kettle and plugged it in. He pulled two mugs out of the cabinet and set them on the counter. "Black or herbal?"

"Um... you decide." Toby bit his lip and tucked his hands in his pockets. He watched Quentin rummage around in his cupboard.

“Are you allergic to anything?” Quentin asked as he looked over several boxes.

“Not that I know of.”

Quentin put all the boxes back except for one. “This one tastes like strawberries and cream.” He slid his gaze over to Toby, seeking approval, but all Toby could think about was what Quentin’s mouth would taste like after he drank it.

“That sounds nice.” Toby cleared his throat and cursed himself for being so awkward.

With the kettle started and the tea chosen, Quentin finally reached for Toby. He held his hand out and waited for Toby to take it. Toby pulled his hand out of his pocket and put it in Quentin’s.

Quentin pulled Toby into his arms and Toby stared up at him. Quentin took advantage of the angle and stole a kiss. The tender dusting of Quentin’s mouth against his made him instantly ache for more, for things he couldn’t put a name to. He shook with want and a little apprehension.

Having shut the door on the things he wanted long ago, it was terrifying to have that door sit ajar now. Quentin kissed him again, and a hand skimmed down Toby’s back.

“We need to talk before this goes further,” Quentin said, but brushed his mouth against Toby’s anyway.

Toby nodded but didn’t speak. He far preferred having Quentin lead the conversation. Besides, it was impossible to think when Quentin’s hand roamed lower, stopping at the top of his ass. If only he’d go a little lower.

“When was the last time you were tested?” Quentin asked.

Toby should’ve expected the question, but it threw him for a minute. “Uh, it’s... not recently.”

“We’ll both get that taken care of next week, then.” Quentin’s hand dipped lower. It was unfair how much Toby wanted Quentin. Warmth and want thrummed through him and he was pretty sure that Quentin could tell exactly how keyed up he already was.

“Okay. Next week.” Toby would’ve been game to go right then, but he’d have to wait. The kettle boiled and clicked off automatically and Quentin moved away to pour the water. He left the tea steeping and returned to Toby, pulling him close again.

“I’d like to discuss limits. Let’s start with hard limits. What are things you are absolutely not into? Actually, hang on.” Quentin left the room so abruptly that Toby barely had a chance to realize he was gone before he returned with a pen and a piece of paper.

“Read this sheet. Cross out anything that’s a hard limit. Circle things you’re into. Anything you leave blank, we’ll consider a soft limit until we can explore it together.”

Toby’s hand shook as he took the paper and the pen from Quentin. They were really doing this. It felt surreal, like he’d walked onto the set of a movie and got thrust into the role of the timid submissive.

“Have a seat wherever you’re comfortable. I’ll bring our tea.”

Toby nodded and glanced around, eventually deciding on the living room. Quentin had oversized furniture, and his couch looked especially comfortable. Toby took a seat near one end. He put the sheet of paper on the coffee table and started reading. He read it through once before he made any marks on the paper.

Quentin sat next to him, unfortunately leaving space between them. Despite his best intentions, Toby felt clingy already. No wonder Ron hadn’t wanted him. Toby’s hand shook, and he put the pen down.

“The tea is cool enough if you’d like to try it. I don’t put sugar in this one. I find it’s sweet enough on its own, but if you’d like, I can put some in yours.”

Toby took a breath and braved picking up the mug with his shaking hands. But drinking tea wasn’t as nerve-wracking as a limit list and his hands stopped trembling long enough for him to sample the tea. It was sweet, but not overwhelming.

“Holy shit,” Toby said before taking a second sip. “This is amazing.”

“I’m glad you approve. It’s my favorite.”

Toby took a third sip and tried to keep his mind on the task at hand, but all he could think about was that his mouth tasted like Quentin’s favorite tea. Toby took a deep breath and put his tea to the side, then he went down the list and crossed off the things that scared him or turned him off. His list of hard limits was short. After he canceled out knife and blood play, scat, and whips, he wasn’t sure what else he wouldn’t like, so he moved onto things he would.

Reading over all the possible things they could do together made Toby’s cock impossibly hard. He shifted in his seat and, at one point, he blushed as he readjusted himself. A not so sneaky glance at Quentin reassured him he wasn’t the only one affected by this. Toby tore his gaze away from the prominent bulge in Quentin’s pants and finished circling things.

Toby read the list over again and tried to remain calm and confident. He’d confessed to Quentin about not having a lot of experience, but until he saw it so plainly in front of him, he hadn’t realized how little experience he actually had.

“May I?” Quentin reached for the list but waited for Toby to give it to him.

Once it was out of his hands, Toby felt a lot better about it. He drank his tea while Quentin read the list.

“Hard limits. Scat, knives, blood, whips. Is there anything else that doesn’t particularly interest you?”

Toby shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“That’s fine.” Quentin took a drink of his tea. “The items you have circled, are they things you’ve done and know you like, or are they also things you’re the most into exploring?”

“I like being restrained.” Toby’s arousal pulsed through him, making it hard to think. “Ron tied me up a few times, but he never felt comfortable like... holding me down, pinning me.” Toby imagined Quentin on top of him, forcing his hands above his head, pinning them to the mattress. Or backing him

up against a wall and caging him there. “He spanked me a few times, but mostly he didn’t enjoy feeling mean. So, I stopped asking him. Are there things you don’t want to do?” Toby asked.

“I have similar limits. But I also don’t do breath play.”

Toby nodded. “You can cross that off the list. I don’t want to do things you don’t want to do.”

Quentin seemed pleased, and he struck it off the list with a slash of the pen. “This list still has quite a lot of things remaining that we can explore together, but tell me, Toby, what do you want most? What’s the first thing that comes to your mind? The first thing you want to do, if given a choice.”

Toby’s brain froze. Nothing would come to his mind. It was like being put on the spot wiped every thought from his head. He didn’t want to say he didn’t know, but he couldn’t keep sitting there saying nothing. He didn’t realize he’d worked himself up until Quentin’s hands were on him. One hand sat on his shoulder, a comforting weight to ground him. The other cupped his cheek.

“Toby, look at me,” Quentin commanded.

Toby snapped his gaze to Quentin.

“That’s a good boy,” Quentin said. Stupidly, Toby wanted to tear up at the words, but Quentin squeezed his shoulder a little. “You don’t want that decision, do you?”

Toby shook his head. “I don’t like choices. They make me afraid of picking the wrong thing. I order the same things at the same restaurants when I go out because I know they’re good choices.”

“And when I give you too many choices, does it make you panic?”

Toby nodded. Disappointing Quentin was the last thing Toby wanted to do. How could he choose one thing he wanted first when he wanted it all? What if he chose something Quentin found boring?

“First rule, Toby. Words only. Does it panic when I ask you to choose?”

“Yes,” Toby swallowed a bundle of nerves. “Yes, Sir.”

“Thank you, Toby.” Quentin inched closer. “And while we’re on the subject of words, you need a safeword. You’ll never, ever, be in trouble for using it. No matter the reason.”

“Red is fine. It’s familiar, and I don’t have to worry about remembering it.”

“Red it is. Sometimes I might stop to check in and you can use green if you’re good, or yellow if you need a minute, or need to discuss something. Okay?”

“Okay.” Toby took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. His entire body felt like one giant nerve connected to the unrelenting erection between his legs.

“Toby?” Quentin’s thumb stroked over Toby’s cheek, and he leaned into the touch like an affection-starved animal. “Would you like to play tonight? Or do you need time to think about things before we go forward?”

Toby shook his head. “No time. Please, don’t let me think about anything.” Toby managed a laugh that didn’t sound like it came from a desperate, crazy person.

Toby let out an indignant squeak when Quentin pulled him into his lap. The move was effortless, and being manhandled was definitely something he could get used to. Even though he was the one straddling Quentin, powerful hands gripped Toby’s hips, making him feel like he couldn’t get away.

“Once we’re tested, I’m going to ravage you,” Quentin’s grip tightened, and he pulled Toby closer, grinding their erections together. Toby whimpered at the sensation. “I want to taste every inch of you.”

“Yes,” Toby put his hands on Quentin’s chest. A wicked grin crossed Quentin’s face.

Then suddenly Toby was on his back underneath Quentin, pinned to the oversized couch by Quentin’s larger form. Toby

could've come right then, embarrassing himself. His cheeks heated at the thought.

“Someday, Toby, I’m going to make you ask me for what you want, but not tonight. Tonight, I want you to relax and let me drive.”

“Yes, Sir.” Toby went pliant and limp beneath Quentin, all except his raging hard dick which strained against his pants.

Approval flashed across Quentin’s face, then he leaned down and crushed his mouth against Toby’s. He rocked his body, grinding their cocks together and Toby was blissfully helpless to do anything but let him.

QUENTIN

QUENTIN GROWLED and kissed Toby harder. Toby fit under him as if created to be there. He slid his hand up Toby's side, sliding under his shirt. Toby moaned and arched into Quentin.

He kissed a trail to Toby's neck and buried his face there. Toby, pliant and willing, tilted his head to give him better access. He felt like he'd slid down a rabbit hole into an alternate universe where things felt oddly perfect.

Quentin latched on and contemplated sucking up a bruise, letting the world know Toby was taken. Toby writhed at the sensation and Quentin stopped. He gently scraped his teeth over Toby's skin. Another wanton wriggle let him know just how much Toby enjoyed the feeling of Quentin's teeth on his skin.

"How still do you think you can be?" Quentin asked. His guess was that Toby couldn't stay still at all. He was kind of counting on that. "Do you think you can stay still for me?" Quentin asked again. This time he dragged his hand up Toby's side and skimmed across Toby's nipple with his thumb. Toby flinched and let out a soft sound of distress.

"I don't know." Toby pinched his eyes shut.

Quentin leaned in to nip at Toby's neck again. "Let's find out, shall we?"

Toby nodded and Quentin went still. He heard Toby suck in a breath. "Yes, Sir."

“It’s been a long time since someone calling me ‘Sir’ made me want to strip them bare the way I want to when you say it.”

Toby whimpered. Maybe it was the words Quentin used, or maybe it was the way Quentin teased Toby’s nipple again.

“I’d love to strip you naked.” Quentin said, smiling at the little noise Toby made. He never imagined such addictive sounds would come out of him, but now that he’d heard a sample, he wanted to feast on them.

“You can. You can do anything.” Toby said. Quentin smiled at the way he fought to stay still, his body tight as Quentin gently stroked his thumb back and forth across Toby’s nipple.

“We still haven’t discussed what’s going to happen to you if you don’t stay still.”

Toby gasped. “Am I... are you going to punish me, Sir?”

Quentin pulled back so he could look Toby in the eyes. “Do you need a spanking, Toby? Is that what you’re trying to say?” Quentin felt Toby tremble beneath him, but he didn’t know Toby well enough yet to know if it was desire or something else.

“I mean... that’s the deal, right?” Toby bit his lip. “You tell me what to do, and if I don’t, there’s a consequence, right?”

“This can work, however we decide it works, Toby.” Quentin went still as he waited for Toby’s response.

“I don’t want to decide.” Toby’s pout was so adorable that Quentin couldn’t resist smiling down at him.

“Have it your way, Toby. So, here’s what’s going to happen. You’re not to move unless I say so, and if you do, I’m going to spank you. It doesn’t mean that you’re in trouble, or that you did anything wrong. Okay?”

Toby nodded, then remembered that he was supposed to give Quentin verbal confirmation. “Yes, Sir.”

Quentin lifted his hand to Toby’s face and dragged a finger down his cheek. “You like calling me that, don’t you? I can

see it in your face.”

“I do. I’ve wanted to call you Sir since the first day I walked into the building, and you held the elevator for me.” Toby had the sweetest smile. It wasn’t the usual one he gave Quentin when they were out. It made him look more shy than usual. Vulnerable in a way he wouldn’t be until now.

Toby needed Quentin to be a Dom. To take over and set down rules and enforce them. He didn’t seem to want to push back or be forced to make too many decisions, and that suited Quentin just fine for now. Maybe one day down the road, Toby would be more comfortable asking for things he wanted, but until then, Quentin was more than willing to give Toby what he thought he needed.

Right now, Toby needed to see that Quentin wanted him, and the only way to do that was to show him. One day soon, that would mean flipping him over and eating his ass like the snack it was, but tonight he wanted to see Toby’s face.

Quentin sat back and quickly shoved Toby’s shirt up. Instead of taking it off all the way, he left Toby’s arms above his head, still tangled in the fabric. “That should help you stay still.” Quentin smiled down at Toby, who was now bound and helpless.

Toby wriggled his arms a little, then locked eyes with him and went still. Quentin saw the moment all the tension bled out of Toby. The barest trace of a happy smile danced across Toby’s expression.

“Thank you, Sir.” Toby sucked in a deep breath then let it out slowly. Quentin’s plans for Toby were momentarily forgotten as he leaned forward and kissed Toby. The taste of strawberry tea lingered. It was addicting, intoxicating, to taste his favorite tea on Toby’s tongue. Quentin could easily spend all night just kissing Toby, and maybe he would another night. But tonight, Quentin had other ideas.

He kissed his way down Toby’s neck again, then lower, following the slope of his clavicle with his mouth. “How do you feel about marks, Toby?”

“Don’t leave them where my boss can see. That’s all I ask.” Toby sounded half gone with arousal. His voice rough and heady. It made Quentin’s cock thicken.

“Thank you, Toby.” Quentin said. He kissed and mouthed his way around Toby’s pecs, paying special attention to his nipples, which made Toby shake and squeak and hiss. The first hickey Quentin sucked lay over Toby’s heart. Quentin hadn’t thought of it until he’d done it, but he enjoyed seeing his mark there.

Quentin’s hand roamed over Toby’s body, taking in the lean lines. It was impossible not to notice the differences between them. Toby was younger and fitter, thinner. Quentin tugged at Toby’s pants, popping the button free of the hole before tugging the zipper open. Quentin gave Toby’s pants a tug, pulling them down.

His gaze flicked down, then up to Toby’s face, and he found himself grinning. “No underwear. I approve.”

Toby’s face went bright red, and he looked sheepish, almost nervous. “I’m not... hung or anything.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Quentin said. “A man is more than the size of his dick.” Quentin tugged Toby’s pants lower, freeing his cock. He held eye contact with Toby as he lowered himself and licked a stripe up the underside of Toby’s cock. “It’s a perfectly good dick, Toby. Wonderfully proportional to your body. Sometimes, average is a good thing.” Without qualifying further, Quentin went down on Toby, taking his cock to the root.

Toby jerked in surprise and Quentin slowly eased back, caressing Toby’s cock with his tongue until he released it. He watched it slap against Toby’s skin and he looked up at Toby with a feral grin.

“You moved. Do you know what that means?”

Toby’s chest heaved, but Quentin thought he saw a hint of a smile when Toby answered. “You’re going to punish me?”

“Yes, I am. But first,” Quentin didn’t finish his sentence. He let his actions speak for themselves and he took Toby’s

cock into his mouth again. Toby moaned and his hips tried to arch up. Quentin loved sucking cock, and he was glad Toby wasn't hung like a horse. Giant dicks were great and all, but they tired Quentin's jaw out too fast. Toby had a dick Quentin could suck for days.

Quentin took his time with Toby, following the thick vein that ran up Toby's cock with his tongue. He switched between taking Toby's cock all the way down and swallowing around it, working Toby into a frenzy and nuzzling the base as he kissed lower, lavishing attention on Toby's balls.

"Quen—Sir. I'm close." Toby writhed as though he were trying to escape Quentin's ministrations.

Quentin looked up at Toby and his breath caught. Toby's chest was flushed and pink. His hair mussed and the hickey on his chest stood out like a stamp of ownership.

"You're the most beautiful man I've ever seen." Quentin needed to see Toby's face when he came. He slid up Toby's body, kissing and licking and driving Toby insane. Quentin buried his face in Toby's armpit and Toby squealed, pulling away the best he could.

"Sorry, that's ticklish. Holy shit." Toby's laugh turned into a moan when he made a fist around Toby's cock. He didn't keep lube in the living room, and he wasn't willing to get up just yet to fetch any, but Toby didn't seem to mind the friction of skin and spit.

Toby tipped his head back, his back arched, and he panted as he struggled to stay as still as possible, even though he'd already earned himself a punishment.

"Such a good boy, Toby. So beautiful. You'll be even prettier when I spank your hot little ass."

Toby's mouth opened in a soundless cry, and he spilled all over Quentin's hand. He kept stroking until Toby was writhing underneath him, making pained noises as his dick softened, then hardened all over again under Quentin's expert touch.

When Quentin stopped, Toby's eyes flew open. He brought his cum sticky fingers up and Toby licked them clean. It

reminded Quentin of a kitten, and he smiled at the thought. Kelly had always been dead against dress-up of any kind, but perhaps Toby would someday be willing to entertain a pair of ears.

“Are you ready for your punishment, kitten?”

Toby stilled and stared at Quentin. “Kitten?” He arched an eyebrow, but he didn’t seem annoyed or put off by the nickname.

“You were like a kitten just now, licking my fingers clean. If you don’t like it...”

“No, I do. It just surprised me, that’s all.” Toby’s cheeks flushed pink, and he looked suddenly shy.

Quentin brushed his hand down Toby’s chest, pausing at the hickey on his skin. He pressed into the mark, watching the way Toby’s eyes turned into dark pools of lust. His nostrils flared.

“Please,” Toby said. “I’m ready.”

Quentin kissed Toby gently, licking his way into Toby’s mouth and devouring him. He reached up and untangled Toby’s arms from his shirt, then broke the kiss to finish stripping Toby naked. He stood, towering over Toby who lay on his couch, naked, spent, but hard all over again. It was easily the hottest thing Quentin had ever seen.

Quentin rolled up his sleeves. He didn’t wait for Toby to sit up. He simply leaned down and scooped the smaller man into his arms and sat down with Toby cradled against him, sitting in his lap like he belonged there.

“What’s your color, kitten?”

“Green, Sir.” Toby had a fistful of Quentin’s shirt and his heart fluttered at the sight of Toby clinging to him.

“Normally, I wouldn’t ask, but we’re both new to each other. Do you need me to ease you into this? I can start off easy and we can work our way up to more intense punishments.”

Toby shook his head and held on tighter. “I want to feel you for days after.”

TOBY

THE HICKEY on his chest throbbed and reminded him that this was real. It was happening. Toby sat cradled in Quentin's lap one minute and the next he was stretched out over it, face down, ass up. Warm, powerful hands stroked Toby's back, soothing the last bit of his nerves.

The orgasm had helped settle Toby, but he still felt jittery, like his excitement was too big for his body.

"Shhh," Quentin soothed. "You're okay."

"I know." Toby sucked in a deep breath and willed himself to relax. He kept his teeth clenched together because he felt shaky still, like he might chatter apart from all the emotions rushing through him.

Quentin continued to pet him, stroking his fingers through Toby's hair while tracing the line of his spine in long, soothing strokes. Gradually, the tension eased out of him. Toby sighed as Quentin's fingers danced over the crease of his ass.

The first hit was sharp and chased by a second. Toby gasped at the sensation, the sudden sting. Quentin squeezed his ass cheeks, petting and soothing the sting away before delivering two more decisive blows.

"Do you know why you're getting spanked, kitten?"

Kitten. There was that nickname. Toby didn't mind it. In fact, it made him feel soft inside, like Quentin had seen through to the very heart of him. Toby licked his lips.

"Because I didn't stay still." He answered.

“And?” Quentin prompted.

Toby tried to twist to look at Quentin, but a powerful hand held him in place.

“And?” Toby stiffened, so he didn’t shake. He hated trembling like some sort of scaredy-cat, but he still felt like he was one wrong move away from fucking up.

“And you need it, don’t you, kitten?”

“I—” Toby swallowed, and Quentin stroked him again.

“Hush now. I’ve got you. Remember your safeword?”

Toby nodded, then remembered that he was supposed to give verbal responses. He supposed that made sense. Body language was easier to misinterpret than a verbal yes or no.

“Yes, Sir. It’s red.”

“Good, now deep breath for me, okay?”

Toby pillowed his head on his arms and forced himself to take a deep breath. The first hit felt like it cracked the world down the center. Toby cried out, more out of shock than anything.

“That’s a good boy. You can be as noisy as you need to be.” Quentin didn’t wait for a response. He laid a series of alternating hits on the fleshiest part of Toby’s ass until it felt hot. Quentin paused to massage some of the sting out. The deep breath Toby sucked in shuddered all the way down into his lungs. He was harder than iron, even though a knot of angst sat tight in his throat.

Quentin started up again and the next hit knocked the knot loose. Every emotion he’d held so tight to since meeting Quentin unfurled, and Toby sobbed. He buried his face to try to hide his tears.

Quentin paused. “Color, Toby.”

“G—green.” Toby choked out. He didn’t know why he wanted more. He shouldn’t. His face was already hot with shame and wet with tears, but he clung to Quentin like he was a life raft and Toby was drowning.

Without further pause, Quentin continued. One cheek, then the other. Toby's ass screamed from the sting. Then the pain bloomed into something else entirely. Something soft and searing that torched everything else. Toby had nothing to compare this experience to. It was nothing like the half-hearted spanks that Ron had administered to him what felt like a lifetime ago.

Quentin sped his pace and Toby broke out into sobs. The spanking stopped and Toby found himself scooped up into Quentin's arms. Toby burrowed in against Quentin's chest and took a deep shuddering breath and swiped at his tears. Oddly, his stupid dick was still hard and aching. Toby almost laughed.

"Sorry." Toby said. "Sorry, shit. I'll go or whatever." Toby tried to get up, but Quentin caged him in with his powerful arms.

"Stop. Did you want to leave?"

Toby shook his head.

"Then I'm not letting you." Quentin rubbed Toby's back. "It's okay. Spanking can be a lot of different things for people. For some, it's arousing."

Toby snorted miserably and motioned to his half-hard cock.

"And sometimes they're a catalyst. They can help release things we've been holding onto."

Toby wiped at more angry tears. "I thought kink was supposed to be like... not so teary."

Quentin caught Toby under the chin and tilted his head so Quentin could see his face. Instead of talking, he pressed a kiss against Toby's lips. "Kink is a lot of things, and that's okay. The only time it's not okay is if someone isn't enjoying themselves."

"Are you?" Toby blurted, immediately regretting the question. Who on Earth could enjoy watching someone cry over a few spanks? Quentin shifted Toby on his lap until the hard bulge pressed against Toby's naked ass.

“What do you think?” Quentin asked.

Toby looked at him, blinking a few times. “How?”

“I don’t mind your tears, Toby.” Quentin swiped them away with his hand. “They’re beautiful. I’d let you cry all over my cock, then fuck you with your own tears.”

Toby blinked. “That’s...”

“Fucked up?” Quentin shrugged, seemingly unaffected.

“And kind of hot.” He sniffled. “But I’m not sure I like crying, despite what my dick says. Ignore him, he’s confused.”

“I don’t think he is. I think he knows he’s safe here. It’s your brain that has to catch up.”

Toby sighed. He felt tired suddenly. Whether it was from the amazing orgasm or the emotional impact of the whole evening, he couldn’t be sure. He snapped his head back and looked at Quentin.

“You haven’t come. I’m so...” Quentin clapped a hand over Toby’s mouth.

“Say it and I’ll gag you and stick you in a corner. My pleasure is my responsibility. Your pleasure is my responsibility. If I want to come, I’ll come. Right now, I want to take care of you and if you don’t want that, you can safeword and we can stop the scene.”

“Please, no.” Toby didn’t care that he was still acting shameless and needy. Quentin didn’t mind it. In fact, he seemed to enjoy it.

“Unless you have any objections, I’d like it if you stayed the night.”

Toby nodded. “I’d like that. Are we still in a scene?”

Quentin held Toby tighter, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. Toby enjoyed feeling smaller and powerless in Quentin’s arms. “If you want to be.”

“I do.”

“How about this? Whenever we arrange to come here, it’s a my-house, my rules-situation. And if for any reason you need to pause or take a break, you can safeword, or just tell me you’d like to take a break and we can just be two dudes hanging out.”

“I like that.” Exhaustion had a choke hold on Toby and he fought back a yawn.

“As much as I’d like to pretend that I’m the Hulk and could carry you around effortlessly, I’m afraid you’ll have to use your legs and follow me to the bedroom.”

Toby gulped and climbed off Quentin’s lap. He stood and tried to cover himself because he suddenly felt a lot naked and a little awkward and Quentin hadn’t done more than roll up his sleeves.

Quentin took Toby by the hand and led him through the house. Toby glanced around, relaxing a bit when he saw that all the curtains were drawn. He internally chastised himself both for not thinking to check sooner and for not trusting Quentin to preserve their privacy.

Quentin tugged Toby into a room. “Wait here.” Quentin left him briefly, then flicked a light on.

“Your bed is huge.”

Quentin shrugged. “It seemed like a good idea at the time. When Kelly and I split up, at first, I had this tiny double bed, but it felt lonely.” Quentin yanked his shirt off over his head, revealing a broad chest with a dusting of hair that thinned out as it traveled down his stomach and disappeared into his pants.

Toby shuffled forward when Quentin tossed the covers back and motioned for Toby to come closer.

“You were lonely, so you got a bigger bed?”

“It makes sense if you think about how little room there is in a double bed, and you’re there by yourself and it feels like there’s not any room left for another person. So, I bought a larger one. There’s more room than I need, but I’d hoped to find someone to help with that.”

Toby scooted past Quentin and climbed into bed. He almost gasped at how soft the sheets were. And the mattress felt like a cloud. “This bed is amazing. Everything is so soft.” He looked up at Quentin in time to see him unzip his pants and shove them to the floor. Quentin’s cock was still hard and pressed against the tight fabric of his briefs.

Maddeningly, the briefs stayed on as Quentin climbed into bed. Toby did his best not to pout, but he must’ve failed because Quentin looked at him and laughed softly as he pulled him into his arms.

“What’s that face about?” Quentin didn’t give Toby a chance to answer before his mouth descended on Toby’s. Toby whimpered as Quentin took over. He found himself eased down onto the mattress, Quentin kissing him deeper and deeper, not stopping until Toby was breathless.

Toby let his hands roam on Quentin’s body, unable to stop himself from exploring so much naked flesh. Toby had tried to imagine what Quentin might look like under the suits, but nothing compared to this, because this Quentin was real and here and kissing Toby like he might die if he stopped.

“Quentin,” Toby gasped when Quentin’s hardness pressed against his. Toby tugged at Quentin’s briefs. “Take them off?” His body shook with anticipation and perhaps a little exhaustion. It felt like he’d been put through the wringer, but he needed Quentin before he went to sleep, or he was afraid he wouldn’t sleep at all. He’d lay there and fret about why Quentin didn’t want to get off.

Blessedly, Quentin wriggled out of his briefs. He paused for breath, then chuckled. “I shouldn’t have bothered with them at all, should I?”

“Nope. They’re nice briefs, very comfy looking, so I can sort of see why you’d like to wear them.” They were both covered, so Toby couldn’t get a look at Quentin’s cock, but there’d be time and opportunity for that later.

Toby held Quentin’s gaze as he skimmed his hand down Quentin’s chest. He brushed his fingertips through Quentin’s chest hair, then dragged his touch lower. Quentin seemed

content to let Toby explore his body for now, and Toby felt his heady gaze as Quentin watched Toby.

Toby flicked his gaze up to meet Quentin's as he wrapped his hand around Quentin's cock. Fuck, he was long and thick. Not too huge, but definitely on the larger side of average.

"Hold that thought." Quentin said. He rolled away and returned with a bottle of lube from his nightstand. He squirted a dollop into his hand and rolled onto his back. "Get on top of me."

Toby obeyed, sliding a leg over Quentin, as he straddled him. Quentin wrapped an arm around Toby and pulled him closer until their cocks brushed against one another. He took them both in his hand and Toby let out a surprised gasp.

He watched Quentin jerk them both together. Quentin's cock was longer and thicker, redder at the tip than Toby's.

"I've thought of you in my bed since I met you." Quentin's confession had Toby's gaze snapping up to meet his eyes.

Stunned speechless, his chest heaved as he sucked in breath after tortured breath. Underneath him Quentin looked calm on the outside, stoic almost, but Toby could see beneath that thin veneer of control. Unable to stop himself, Toby brushed his fingers over Quentin's nipples.

Quentin made a sound of shock in the back of his throat and suddenly he was coming. He clenched his teeth and every muscle in his neck tensed, his skin flushed red, and he painted his chest with his cum. Toby came again directly after. It was too much stimulation. The sight. The sounds. Toby wanted to burn them into his memory so he could see it whenever he closed his eyes.

Toby leaned forward and licked the cum off Quentin's chest. He paused and pulled a hair out of his mouth and sheepishly looked up at Quentin after he retrieved it.

"You're going to be the absolute death of me." Quentin wrapped a hand around the back of Toby's neck and pulled him in for a kiss. "We're getting tested as soon as fucking possible."

Toby collapsed down onto Quentin's chest and let out a happy sound. "Absolutely."

"But first, sleep." Quentin Toby's hair off his forehead.

Toby let Quentin urge him back out of bed long enough to clean up and brush his teeth with a spare toothbrush, but a few minutes later they were back in Quentin's bed and Toby was mostly asleep, curled into Quentin's side feeling warmer and safer than he could remember ever feeling.

QUENTIN

QUENTIN HAD BEEN on the verge of begging Toby to stay Sunday night as well. He hadn't wanted to part from him, and he immediately kicked himself for being so clingy. He drove Toby home and made plans to meet with him Monday for a coffee before work and again at lunch. If Quentin wasn't careful, Toby was going to get sick of him. Who wanted their boyfriend-slash Dom looming over their shoulder all the time?

He recognized the train of thought as his insecurities running rampant and did his best to derail that particular train before it went on too long. He spent Sunday night cleaning his apartment and making a grocery order.

After his groceries arrived and he put them away, he found himself in front of his bedroom closet. He pulled the bifold door open and emptied all his kinky shit out onto his bed. He spread it out and took a good look at everything. He'd never really been the type to hoard objects. Things were useful, or they weren't. Some things were aesthetically pleasing. He wasn't some sort of minimalist, but by and large he found it easy to part with things.

He did that now, removing anything that he'd used on someone else. The idea of something touching Toby that had touched someone else made his stomach clench. Toby was important and deserved better than secondhand props and toys. It didn't matter that Quentin used condoms on the dildos, or that the floggers he tossed in the trash bag had been expensive. He'd buy new ones.

Once he bagged all the things he planned to get rid of, he carried them out to the trash and returned to stare at the space it had created. The space it created didn't feel like a loss, but an opportunity to fill it up again with something more meaningful.

The urge to call Toby thrummed through him and he gave in despite them only being apart for a few hours. His closet clean-out felt monumental, and he wanted to share that with Toby.

“Hi,” Toby answered, sounding slightly breathless.

“Hey,” Quentin said. Now that Toby was on the phone, words failed him.

“How are you?” Toby asked after an awkward silence. The unsure twang to his voice helped snap Quentin out of his own bout of nerves.

“I'm amazing. Just did a bit of a kinky clean out. I want to start this right and have things that are new, like us. I'm going to send you a website and I want you to have a look at things you might like. Toys, props, dildos, whatever you'd like.”

“Uh... I—sorry what?” Toby's laugh was a little nervous and Quentin kicked himself for misjudging the situation. Toby didn't seem eager to make too many decisions for himself.

“Or, if you'd rather, I could choose for us.”

“Yeah. Sorry, I know it's a pain but too many choices and my brain goes blank. It makes shopping impossible. But uh, thank you? For doing that. You didn't have to go to any trouble for me.”

“How about I pretend you said nothing after thank you, because it's not trouble. It's basic decency. You deserve new things. Things that are only ours and I want to provide that for you. I should've remembered that you wouldn't enjoy the whole shopping process.”

“It's okay. Really. It's nice that you care so much that you want me to choose.”

“How about we shop together when you come over this weekend? Friday after work we can get tested and grab take out, then come back here and do some shopping. Are you free?”

“I’m always free.” Toby said eagerly.

Quentin had a feeling that even if Toby wasn’t available that he’d change plans to accommodate him. Toby was sweet and eager to please and Quentin was glad that Toby had ended up with him and not some asshole who would take advantage of that.

“What kinds of things are we going to be looking at?” Toby asked sheepishly. Quentin guessed by the tone in his voice that he was battling embarrassment. Did he enjoy being embarrassed? Quentin wondered. It was hard to tell over the phone when he could only hear Toby’s voice and guess what his reactions might be on the other end.

Quentin thought about taking himself in hand and jerking off while he talked to Toby, but another, more primal part of him wanted to save every drop for Toby so he could paint him with his release. He could see Toby on his knees, red faced, puffy lips from sucking Quentin’s cock.

“We’ll need dildos. Of all sizes. I want to see how much you can take. Maybe one day you could take my fist. What do you think, Toby?”

Heavy breathing was all Quentin heard for several seconds. “You have really big hands.” Toby sounded unsure and Quentin almost backed down, but Toby spoke again, quieter this time. “I’ve never taken anything that big. Do you think I could?”

“I think I’d have to work you up to it. Stretch you open little by little. We’ll need plugs to help keep you open. I want to train your tight little hole to take my fist.”

Toby whimpered helplessly.

“Toby, are you touching yourself?”

“No.”

“Do it.” Quentin said. “I want you to grab your dick and stroke it the way you like it. I want you to tell me one thing you want me to do to you, one thing you can’t stop thinking about. It doesn’t have to be kinky or extravagant. It can be simple and vanilla. But I want to know one thing you want.”

“I—”

“Don’t say you don’t know. You know. There’s lots of things you want, aren’t there, kitten?”

“Yes.” Toby’s breathing changed into a breathy rhythm.

“There’s so many things you want that you can’t choose. Is that the problem, kitten?” Quentin let Toby get away with not answering. Instead, he kept talking while Toby stroked his cock. He went to the living room and sank down onto his couch and spread his legs. He pictured Toby kneeling between them.

“I’ll get you a pair of ears. Would you like that? Be my kitten for real. I’d dress you in the nicest ears and we could get you a tail to match.”

Toby whimpered. “Do...” he panted, and Quentin wondered how close he was. “Do kitties get leashes?”

“If my kitty wants a leash, I’ll put him on a leash.”

“I don’t want to be a kitty all the time, though. I want...” Toby’s words broke off in a groan.

“That’s a good boy. You’re close, aren’t you? If you tell me what you want, you can come.”

“I want... want to be dirty.” Toby whimpered.

“You want to be my dirty little slut?” Quentin leaned into the list Toby had gone over with him and the fact that he’d circled dirty talk. He didn’t know if Toby liked the mild degradation, but if the hitch in his breathing was any sign, Quentin was on the right track.

“I think you don’t care if you’re a kitty, a puppy, or just a dirty little slutty submissive, as long as I’m the one in control, right? That’s what you really want, isn’t it? You don’t enjoy thinking and asking for things for yourself. You’d rather I

choose for you. Isn't that right, boy?" Boy. Kitten. Slut. It didn't matter what Quentin called him, because they all meant the same thing. Toby belonged to him.

"Sir... I'm close."

"You can't come yet. Not until you tell me one thing you want."

Quentin squeezed his cock through his pants as he waited for Toby to answer.

"I want to crawl. I want you to make me. Fuck, I'm coming." Toby cried out, and the phone clattered, Toby's voice grew distant for a second before it returned. "Sir..." God, Quentin needed to get tested so he could bury himself balls deep and own Toby the way he really wanted to.

"You're a good boy, Toby. Thank you for telling me. I know asking for what you want is hard, but I'm proud of you for listening and doing what I asked."

"Did you..." Toby panted. "Did you like that?" Toby asked.

"I like everything we do together."

"Everything?"

"I like our lunches and I loved taking you out on a date and yeah, I liked listening to you get yourself off while you thought of all the naughty things you want me to do to you."

"Did you get off?"

"I'm saving it for you and now that you've come, I want you to know that it's going to be the last time you jerk off until the weekend."

"What?" Toby squeaked.

"You heard me. No jerking off. No coming. No touching your pretty little hole, either. Friday night, you'll have more pleasure than you'll know how to handle."

Toby's breath trembled in Quentin's ear.

"Can you be a good boy for me, Toby?"

“Yes, Sir.” Toby exhaled. “I can be good.”

“I know you can, Toby.”

“So how much stuff did you really throw away? You know you didn’t have to do that, right?”

“I threw most of it away. You deserve more than some used toys, Toby.”

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

“You don’t have to say anything.” Quentin exhaled.

“Oh, shit. My friend is trying to reach me. He lives in the UK. Can I call you back?”

“Absolutely. You can call whenever you want.”

“Okay, I’m going to take this. Uh... thanks for the orgasm?” Toby laughed.

“You’re welcome. Talk to you later, Toby.”

When the call ended, Quentin closed his eyes. He spent a few minutes luxuriating in the sense of rightness that swelled in him. Without sharing details, he sent a text to Nick, telling him he’d finally gone out with Toby. He didn’t tell him anything else, just that it went well. Very well.

The rest Quentin wanted to keep for himself. He wanted to hoard all the tidbits of Toby that he’d learned about like a dragon guarding a treasure. He rubbed at his sternum, suddenly feeling overwhelmed with emotions he couldn’t name. Everything inside of him that felt fractured and fragmented had scraped him raw. Not raw, clean. Toby’s presence in his life made everything new again, including Quentin.

He could never go back in time and change what he’d done and undo the mistakes he’d made, but he could use that knowledge in the future to prevent himself from making the same mistakes. He had to. He couldn’t fuck this up.

TOBY

THE WEEK CRAWLED BY. The only thing that made it even slightly bearable was that he got to see Quentin every day. Except for Thursday, when Quentin went off to keep his standard lunch date with his ex-husband, they ate together.

Never had an elevator ride been so arousing before, but when Toby rode down to the lobby after work Friday, the closer he got to the ground floor, the harder his dick got. He exhaled when the doors slid open and stepped out. Quentin appeared a second later and Toby's whole body woke up at the sight of him.

Toby loved how Quentin wasn't out of the building yet and he'd already loosened his tie and slid his blazer off. Seeing him slightly ruffled made Toby thirst to mess him up even more. Or to be messed up by him. Quentin took two long strides and swept Toby into his arms. As if reading his mind, the first thing Quentin did was kiss him. The second was to loosen Toby's tie.

Two seconds in close contact and Toby already felt as though he were drowning. His affection for Quentin was no small load to carry and every day, he only fell deeper and deeper. He imagined telling Quentin just how he felt, but he couldn't. Not until he knew with absolute certainty that Quentin felt the same.

Besides, sometimes Toby wasn't sure what he felt. Was it love? He thought so, but then he worried he was getting everything muddled up in his head with kink and love and lust

all thrown into the mix. His mind raced so fast it made his head swim.

“Toby? Are you okay?” Quentin’s brow pinched in concern.

“Yeah, sorry. I guess I got lost in my head.” He clung to Quentin as if he was a lifeline, cast into the storm of Toby’s life to keep him from getting lost.

Quentin dipped his head lower and stole another kiss. “Come on, we have things to do before I take you home.”

Getting tested was the first thing they had to do. Followed by a trip to Toby’s building so he could pack an overnight bag. It felt strange but comforting to have Quentin in his space. It wasn’t much, but he liked the way Quentin looked around the tidy apartment with an air of approval.

“Pack things you don’t mind leaving at my place.”

Toby’s hands trembled when he shoved some spare clothes and toiletries into a bag. Leaving things at Quentin’s made him feel wanted. Though he’d ached for that very thing, he didn’t know what to do with it. It was like being a kid and being told you could order anything you wanted, but then you actually get the sixty-two-scoop ice cream sundae, and you don’t know what the fuck you’re going to do because it was too much of a good thing.

Strong arms wrapped around Toby from behind. Instinctively, he tipped his head to the side, allowing Quentin access to his neck. Lips danced up his flesh and breath tickled his ear.

“You’ve been on edge all day.” Quentin’s hand skimmed down Toby’s chest. “Is there anything you need to tell me?”

Toby was suddenly very aware of the fact that he hadn’t come all week. Quentin’s hand cupped his erection, and he arched into his touch with a moan that could only be described as shamelessly slutty. His cheeks flamed at the thought.

“Quen... Sir.” Toby’s breath caught.

“Your mind keeps wandering.” Quentin whispered in his ear. “I’m going to ask you again. Is anything wrong?”

Toby shook his head. “No... I’m excited. Happy.”

“But?” Quentin squeezed Toby’s cock. Not too hard, but just enough to chase away the idea of an orgasm.

“Nervous. My brain won’t quit spinning.”

“Why are you nervous?”

“I don’t want to mess up.” Toby confessed. He was shocked Quentin heard him with how quiet he’d spoken, but Quentin’s attention was razor sharp and focused completely on Toby.

“Listen to me. I’m in charge, right?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And if I’m in charge, what does that mean?”

Toby opened his mouth to answer but closed it again. Words failed to come, and he bit his lip to stop it from trembling.

“It means that what I say goes. You can’t mess anything up because I haven’t told you what to do yet. So, here’s what’s going to happen.” Quentin stepped away and Toby’s body went cold. Quentin’s presence at his back had been warm and comforting. “Turn around.”

Toby obeyed. Quentin tugged Toby’s tie off and tossed it aside. Then he pulled his own over his head and put it over Toby’s. He tightened it a little, his expression warm and confident.

“It’s not a collar, but it’s as good as one for now. How’s that?” Quentin grabbed the tie and pulled Toby closer. “It’s a good leash too. Now you’re my little kitten and all you have to do is obey me, okay?”

Toby nodded. “Okay, Sir.”

“Finish packing. I’ll order dinner and we can grab it on the way back to my place.”

Toby was just as glad that Quentin took over and didn't ask him what he wanted to eat, because he had two answers, Neither were what Quentin would want to hear. One, he was too excited and nervous to eat and two, the only thing he wanted in his mouth was Quentin's cock.

Toby finished packing and smoothed the tie down his front. He hoped that he'd get to wear Quentin's tie every day. It wasn't anything fancy. It was a plain navy blue tie with subtle silver stripes, generic enough that Toby was certain he could buy a hundred just like it. But it wouldn't be real. It wouldn't be warm from Quentin's body, and it wouldn't smell like him. It would be Toby, once again pretending. But reality was so much better.

The tie settled Toby's runaway train of thought. The symbol of ownership was simple, but effective. It calmed something inside Toby that he hadn't been aware needed to be calmed. It was like being owned in that small, simple way, set a brick in Toby's foundation to rights. Toby took a deep breath, paying special attention to the way he felt lighter, like this deep breath was the first real one he'd taken in years.

Quentin tucked his phone away as Toby exited his bedroom, bag in hand. A small part of him would be happy if he never returned to his apartment, but the other part of himself, the one anchored in the real world, knew that was unrealistic.

Quentin didn't ask if he was ready, or if he needed anything else. He trusted that Toby had taken anything he needed. Once Toby got settled into the passenger seat, his bag resting on his lap, he stroked his fingers over the tie.

Quentin didn't seem to be bothered by Toby's silence. It was comforting to not feel obligated to fill the void with inane chatter. Quentin, at one point, looked at Toby and smiled, like he knew exactly what Toby was thinking and he, too, enjoyed that they could be together like this.

Quentin ordered baked spaghetti and garlic bread with the reasoning that you could eat garlic on a date so long as both

people ate it. Besides, they'd be dining in Quentin's house and Toby could always scurry off and brush his teeth after.

The minute Toby walked into Quentin's house, the energy between them changed. The hair on Toby's arms stood on end. He could feel Quentin's gaze bore holes through him as he toed out of his shoes.

"I'll get the table set up. I want you to go into my room, unpack your things, and get undressed. Leave the tie and your briefs, but everything else can go."

Toby turned and looked at Quentin. His heart slammed against his ribcage like it was trying to escape Toby's body and leap into Quentin's arms. "Yes, Sir."

"I made space in the top drawer for you, and there's a basket on the vanity for your toiletries. You have five minutes."

Toby only needed three. He stripped out of his shirt, pants and socks and stuffed his dirty clothes in Quentin's hamper. Before he could analyze the meaning of an empty drawer and a brand new basket, just for him, the tiny spaces in Quentin's life that he'd rearranged to make room for Toby, he was back in the kitchen. Quentin had rolled up his sleeves and undone the top three buttons of his shirt and Toby nearly swallowed his tongue.

Fuck, he was so sexy. Toby's cock stirred with interest. Quentin's gaze flicked up, and he closed the cutlery drawer. He held his free hand out to Toby who it, feeling the warmth seep into his skin. That one small touch warmed Toby all over. Or maybe it was his arousal. Being partially naked while Quentin stayed dressed definitely did it for Toby. He didn't bother trying to hide his erection.

Not that Quentin paid it any attention. He pulled a chair out for Toby and once he was seated, Quentin sat in the chair opposite to him at the small dining table.

Toby hadn't thought he was hungry until the first bite passed his lips. He let out a moan of approval and dug into his meal, barely sparing a look or a word for Quentin. When it hit

Toby that he was getting full, he took a deep breath and looked Quentin in the eye.

“Sorry, I was hungrier than I thought.”

“Because you barely touched your lunch.” Quentin stated. It wasn’t a rebuke, but it stung, nonetheless.

“I’m sorry, Sir. All week I’ve been nervous.

“I’m not upset with you, Toby. Okay?”

Toby nodded. “Okay. Uh, Sir? Can I ask what our plans are this weekend?”

“Well, after dinner we’re going to have a look online and do some toy shopping. I thought we could start exploring things on the list. I’m not going to have us jump into the deep end, but I want to make a start helping you explore some of the things on your list that you haven’t done yet.”

“I like that.” Toby cleared his throat. “I like that you’ll get so many of my firsts.”

Quentin’s expression darkened into an expression far more smug than Toby had ever seen. “I’m looking forward to that. But you’re going to have to be honest with me, every step of the way. I’m going to check in often, but if you need to stop or slow down, I expect you to use your safewords.”

“Yes, Sir.” Toby toyed with the tie that he still wore. The motion caught Quentin’s attention.

“Do you like wearing my tie, kitten?”

“It makes me feel like I’m yours.”

“You are.” Quentin glanced at their mostly empty plates. “I’ll clean this up. Go to the living room and kneel by the couch and wait for me.”

“Yes, Sir.” Toby scrambled to obey. Grace and poise be damned. He was too eager to worry about looking pretty or moving in a way calculated to entice Quentin. Maybe another day when things weren’t as new and shiny. Until then, Toby was happy to play the part of the over-eager submissive.

QUENTIN

QUENTIN Poured himself a glass of water and drank half. Toby kneeled in the next room and if he angled his head just right, he could see Toby from here. His posture needed work if Quentin was going to take him to the club, but for now, kneeling was enough. He took his half empty glass of water into the living room and approached Toby from behind, watching the way his shoulders lifted as he took a deep breath.

“Shoulders back.” Quentin set the water down and gently arranged Toby the way he wanted him. He pulled his shoulders back, then went around to face Toby. With his foot, he pushed Toby’s knees farther apart. “Hands on your thighs. Palms up.”

Toby obeyed and Quentin was happy to see he could do so without shaking like a leaf. In fact, Toby seemed steadier than he had before. His breathing had deepened and evened out. Quentin combed his fingers through Toby’s hair.

“Your hair is so soft.” Quentin said.

“Thank you, Sir.” Toby relaxed a little more.

Quentin sat on the end of the couch closest to Toby. They were close enough that he could reach out and touch Toby, but he wanted him closer. He grabbed the tie and gave it a gentle pull. “Come here.”

Toby crawled forward, following the tug of the makeshift leash. Quentin pulled him so close that Toby had no choice but to press himself against Quentin’s thigh. He stopped pulling on

the leash but kept hold of it. The fingers of his free hand wove through Toby's hair again.

Quentin had thought about this all week, but the moment was better than anything he could've imagined. He had to appear solid on the outside for Toby's sake, but inside he was an intoxicating mix of nervous and excitement. Confident enough to jump in, but still fearful enough to play it safe.

He hooked a finger under Toby's chin and tilted his head up. "Eyes on me."

Toby's gaze shone with light and hope. He looked calmer than he had all week, more peaceful. Quentin couldn't tell if he had settled completely, but he was definitely calmer.

"What's the first rule?" Quentin asked.

Toby blinked a few times, then a small smile graced his lips. "Use my words."

"Good. And your safeword?"

"Red to stop. Yellow to slow down."

"Good," Quentin said. "Hands behind your back."

Toby obeyed in an instant. His eagerness was endearing to Quentin, who'd gotten used to men who submitted as a means to an end. If they kneeled just right and listened well enough, they'd get fucked, or flogged, or edged into oblivion. Maybe he was jaded, but Toby was fresh and new. He kneeled because he liked it, and because it made Quentin happy. Quentin got the impression that he could leave Toby on his knees all night and he'd be grateful for the experience so long as Quentin told him he did a good job.

Quentin unzipped his pants and pulled his cock out. Toby's eyes widened and his gaze flicked back up to Quentin's face, then down again. He took himself in hand and stroked slowly, lazily, watching Toby watch him touch himself.

"Did you want a taste?"

Toby nodded. "Yes, please." His chest heaved, and he made a move toward Quentin's cock but remembered himself at the last second and sat back.

Quentin reached for Toby. With a hand on the nape of Toby's neck, Quentin guided him in. Toby's lips parted and Quentin groaned as he slid his cock into Toby's willing mouth. He thrust his fingers through Toby's hair.

"Stay there, just like that. That's a good boy." Quentin said.

Toby closed his eyes as Quentin carded his fingers through his silky, soft hair.

"You were so good for me this week, weren't you?"

Toby tried to pull back, presumably to answer Quentin, but he held him still.

"You don't need to answer, kitten. Just listen."

Toby took a deep breath and let it out all at once. Quentin waited until he felt him relax before he continued.

"You were a good boy this week. I want to reward you and take care of you. First, I'm going to fuck your mouth, then I'm going to watch you crawl to my bedroom. I'm gonna tie you down and play with you." Quentin smoothed his hand through Toby's hair again. "Your hands aren't tied right now, so if you need me to stop, tap on my leg. Understand."

Toby released his hands and lifted one to give Quentin a thumbs up.

"Good boy." Quentin cradled Toby's head in both hands and slowly worked his cock into Toby's mouth. Toby hummed in appreciation, and lust shot through Quentin. Fuck, ten seconds into fucking Toby's face and he already felt out of control.

"You have a perfect mouth, Toby." Quentin praised him, knowing it would make him happy. Toby loved being praised. He needed to know he'd done a good job. Maybe eventually they'd find out if Toby had any brat in him, but Quentin doubted it. Toby was a pleaser, down to his core.

Quentin stroked Toby's cheek. "Relax for me. Breathe."

Toby took a breath and went pliant in Quentin's grip. It was impossible to look away. The sight of his cock sawing in

and out of Toby's mouth sent him spiraling. He tightened his grip on Toby's hair, dragging a hot whimper out of him.

"Fuck, you look good on my dick." Quentin said. The tips of Toby's ears flushed red. "Such a good little cocksucker."

Toby responded by swirling his tongue over the head of Quentin's cock. He looked up and the adoration he saw in Toby's gaze was a gut punch. *Fuck*. It made Quentin feel slightly feral, like he was two seconds from ramming his dick as far down Toby's throat as it could go. He wanted to choke Toby on his dick, deprive him of breath just to be the one to breathe air back into his lungs.

Quentin closed his eyes for a moment and sucked in a deep breath. Toby relaxed again. Quentin released his hold on Toby's head and spread his arms out over the back of the couch. He leaned back.

"Suck me, kitten. No hands."

Toby immediately took more of Quentin's cock into his mouth. He sucked and bobbed, swirled his tongue around the head and caressed every inch he could fit in his mouth. It was all Quentin could do to keep himself from coming.

Toby took a deep breath, and he took all of Quentin's cock into his mouth. His throat convulsed, and he pulled back, gagging, tears in his eyes. Quentin reached for his cock as Toby pulled back.

"Fuck, that's hot." Quentin jerked himself with only Toby's spit for lube. "Close your eyes."

Quentin's toes curled as ecstasy rolled through him. He clenched his jaw and jerked himself, not taking his eyes off Toby for a second. His balls drew up tight and heat pooled in his stomach. He gripped the back of the couch with his free hand as his hips arched up and he came all over Toby's face. Ribbons of cum painted his flushed cheeks. Toby stuck out his tongue, trying to catch a taste, and Quentin obliged, doing his best to aim.

When he was done, he used his fingers and gathered the cum off Toby's cheeks and chin and fed it to him.

“You have an amazing mouth.” Quentin stole any response Toby might’ve given him by sealing his mouth over Toby’s and plunging his tongue inside to lick the taste of himself off Toby’s tongue.

When he pulled back, Toby rocked back on his heels and opened his eyes. That same look of lusty affection was there. It made Quentin want to flip Toby over and fuck him right there on the carpet, rug-burn be damned.

“Crawl to my room and get on the bed. Lay on your back. You can lose the briefs, but the tie stays.”

“Yes, Sir.” Toby moved to all fours and made his way to Quentin’s bedroom. He watched the sway of Toby’s ass for a few seconds before getting up to follow. He kept his gait slow and easy, giving Toby time to situate himself. Quentin steadied himself with a deep breath and stepped into the room.

Toby lay naked, except for the tie Quentin had put on him earlier. He raked his eyes up Toby’s naked body as he stepped closer.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous.”

Toby tried to smile, but it faltered. “You think so?”

“Top to bottom. You’re absolutely stunning.”

Toby’s cheeks heated and his hands fidgeted at his sides, like he wasn’t sure where he should keep them. Quentin’s bed was the kind with thick wooden dowels, giving people plenty of places to hang on to, or to be tied to.

“Arms over your head, grip the bed.”

Toby’s arms flew above his head. In a rush to obey, his knuckles connected with the wood and Toby winced as he swore. He squeezed his eyes shut and his face turned the color of a ripe tomato.

“Easy, kitten. It’s okay.” Quentin put his hand on Toby’s bare ankle and smoothed it up his leg. “I’m not going anywhere. I want to take my time with you. Can you take a deep breath for me?”

Toby nodded and Quentin watched his ribcage expand.

“Good. Let it out as slow as you can, then take another. Inhale for four seconds. Exhale for four seconds. I know you’re nervous and excited, but I want you to have a good time, and you’ll feel better if we can get you to relax a bit.”

Toby did as he was told, and Quentin rewarded him by continuing his exploration of Toby’s body. His skin was impossibly soft and smooth. When Quentin’s hand skated up the outside of Toby’s thighs, his dick twitched against his stomach.

“You’re gorgeous.”

Toby bit his lip. His eyes were still pressed tightly closed. Without taking his hand off Toby, he reached for the nightstand and grabbed the bottle of lube he kept there. There were condoms in the drawer, but maybe they’d get to that later. Right now, Quentin wanted to make Toby feel good. He wanted him to feel as gorgeous as Quentin thought he was.

After squirting a healthy amount of lube into his hand, Quentin stroked Toby’s cock. Toby gripped the headboard tighter as he arched off the bed.

“Fuck.” Toby’s voice cracked. The pink in his cheeks had already traveled up to tint his ears and Quentin watched as it spread down his neck and across his chest with every stroke of Quentin’s hand.

Toby’s breathing hitched and Quentin released his cock. He bent forward and took Toby’s nipple into his mouth. Toby writhed and whimpered and attempted to twist away.

“You’re delicious.” Quentin told him as he reached down again, taking Toby in hand. He ghosted his lips over Toby’s as he teased him to the brink again. When he released Toby’s leaking cock, he sealed their mouths together, kissing him hard and deep. Toby bowed beneath him. The way he squirmed made Quentin think he was fighting to get closer but didn’t want to disobey Quentin’s directive to hold on to the bed.

“You’re such a good boy, Toby.”

Toby whimpered.

Quentin dragged a fingertip up the shaft of Toby's cock. "You like that, don't you? Being my good boy?"

"Yes, Sir. I... please. I want..."

"What do you want, kitten?" Quentin wrapped his hand around Toby's cock again and resumed his torture. Toby lost the ability to speak. Whenever his mouth opened, a whimper or a moan would tumble past his lips.

Quentin took him to the edge again before letting go of his cock. By now, Toby's hair was damp with sweat and the scent of him flooded Quentin's senses when he leaned in close.

Remembering the way Toby had loved the mark Quentin had left the last time, a mark that had mostly faded now, Quentin set to work sucking up a new bruise in a slightly different spot. When almost satisfied he took Toby in hand again and stroked him without mercy.

"I want you to hold off as long as you can, but you're allowed to come, understand?"

"Yes... shit. Sir. Sorry." Toby's legs shook, his whole body trembled and still he held back. Quentin watched the determined expression and redoubled his efforts to make Toby fall apart.

He stroked his thumb over the head of Toby's cock, making him cry out and tremble even harder. Quentin leaned down and brushed a kiss against the corner of Toby's mouth. Toby's lips parted, and he turned his head, capturing Quentin's mouth as he came.

Quentin stroked him until he had spilled every last drop. He looked at Toby as he pulled his hand away. "You're an absolute mess. All covered in cum. My little cum-kitten."

Toby snorted. "I'm a cum-kitten now?"

"Only if you want to be."

"I'll be whatever you want me to be." Toby said with a happy sigh.

"You can put your arms down now. Actually, we should get clean. I've absolutely wrecked you."

Toby opened his eyes and met Quentin's gaze. "I loved every second, Sir."

Quentin cupped Toby's cheek. "So did I."

Quentin got Toby to his feet and ushered him into the bathroom, where Toby inspected his appearance in the mirror. His gaze fell on the mark Quentin had left on his chest, and he watched Toby smile as he pressed his fingers into it.

"Thank you, Sir." Toby said, turning away from the mirror. He stepped into Quentin's space and unbuttoned his shirt for him, pausing only to rise on his toes and brush a kiss against Quentin's mouth. He stopped moving for a second and Quentin saw uncertainty flash in his eyes. "Am I allowed to do that?"

"What? Kiss me?" Toby nodded and Quentin smiled at the sweet, uncertain man before him. "You are always allowed to kiss me, Toby."

Toby smiled and kissed him again. A quiet, thank you, fell from his lips. Then he set about helping Quentin undress the rest of the way so they could shower together.

TOBY

THE FIRST THING Toby did Sunday night after Quentin dropped him off at home was call Dylan. Toby felt unmoored the moment he was no longer in Quentin's presence. They'd had so much fun together, doing basically nothing but hanging out and learning more about each other. Quentin had led the whole time, allowing Toby to sink into a nice headspace and stay there. Having to join the real world again was jarring.

Quentin as a Dom was everything Toby could've ever wanted, which terrified him. Toby had spent years tucking his wants and needs away in tidy boxes and not thinking about them. But then Quentin came along, and all Toby's careful packing was being undone. It was creating the best kind of mess because Toby was finally getting a taste of something he'd wanted for so long, but it also terrified him. Because if things with Quentin didn't work out, there was no way he could put everything back. He'd be left alone with the chaos, but still, he couldn't find it in himself to regret anything.

When Dylan finally picked up, he had a cigarette hanging from his fingers and he exhaled away from the phone screen.

"Long time no see, stranger."

"Don't be dramatic. I sent you no less than ten memes the other night."

"Memes. I ask for friendship and the man gives me toilet humor. I feel the love."

"I swear your mother should've named you Drama instead of Dylan."

“Slander.” Dylan took a drag of his smoke before dashing it out in an ashtray. “Tell me all about your weekend. Last I heard, you were going to your bloke’s place for a sex-cation.” Toby’s cheeks heated and before he formulated a response, Dylan flailed at the screen, looking too smug. “That’s the face of the well-fucked.”

“Well, not exactly. We haven’t...”

Dylan scoffed. “Did he help you get off?” Toby nodded. “Then you had sex. You don’t need to penetrate someone to fuck them. Shit, what do they teach you over there?”

“Anyway. Yes. I was at Quentin’s all weekend. I just got home, actually.” Toby still had to get his laundry done and cook his dinner, but he couldn’t make himself get up off the couch to do anything. It was like his brain was stuck in a weird place halfway between regular everyday Toby and kinky, submissive Toby.

“Did you sleep or did that kinky sod have you up half the night?”

“I don’t kiss and tell.” Toby found it impossible to stop smiling. “But if I did, I’d tell you I had the literal best time. He’s hot and nice. We watched some trashy reality tv. He really turned the romance on, too. I have a drawer to myself and we ate breakfast in bed. It was so good, Dylan. The absolute best.”

“Good. You deserve that.”

“He wants to introduce me to his friends.” The subject had come up just before Quentin took Toby home. His friend, Nick, texted him, asking about Quentin’s progress, if he’d asked Toby out yet or not, and Quentin updated him with a cute selfie they’d taken earlier. Rory, one of Nick’s boyfriends, demanded that he get to meet Toby. And no one says no to Rory, apparently. Toby wasn’t sure why, but it put a strange feeling in his stomach to think that Quentin’s friends wanted to meet him. Did they want to meet him because they approved and were happy for Quentin, or did they want to size him up and make sure he was good enough for their friend? Toby bit his lip.

“Is that a good thing? I only ask, ‘cause it looks like you stepped on a bee.”

“It makes me nervous to think about it.”

“So don’t think about it then. Do you want to go?”

“I want to meet them. I think.”

“Then say yes. If he’s as nice as you say, trust that his friends will be nice. Birds of a feather and all that.”

“So wise, Dylan. Practically fortune cookie material.”

Dylan flashed Toby a lopsided smile. “There’s a new career for me. Fortune cookie writer.”

“You’d be great at it.”

“Fuck off.”

“See, there’s another great one.” Toby laughed.

“Can you imagine opening your fortune cookie thinking it’s going to tell you that love is around the corner or some such shit, and it tells you to fuck off? Bloody brilliant.”

“Do you really think I should meet them?”

“The way I see it, Tobes, is that you meet them, and they’re utter shit, or they’re just as nice as your boy toy. If they’re shit and your boy is okay with that, then it’s time to reevaluate things.”

“You make me feel so confident about this, Dylan, really. Thank you.” Toby rolled his eyes, and Dylan flipped him off.

“Don’t bloody ask shit if you don’t want my opinion.”

“Sorry,” Toby frowned and started to apologize further when Dylan interrupted.

“Stop. It’s fine. Christ on a cracker, you’re soft.” Dylan pointed to Toby through the screen. “Now don’t go taking that as a bad thing. It’s why I like you as much as I do. Everyone else I know is a fucking cunt, except for you. You’re not.”

“Awww, Dylan. I knew you loved me.”

“You’re fuckin’ right, I do. I’ll come over there and kick ass if anyone hurts you.”

“You’re the sweetest.”

“Fuck off, I am not.” Dylan’s crooked smile was back. “Meet the friends. You need a social life that is more active than sending me memes all hours of the fucking day.”

“I love hearing you swear. It sounds so sophisticated in your posh accent.”

Dylan choked. “Right. Definitely can tell you’re not from here, ‘cause no one from here would ever call me posh. You’re a fucking wanker.”

“I love you too, Dylan.”

“Get off my screen.” Dylan winked at him to show he didn’t really mean anything he said. Dylan was best at expressing his emotions if they came out oozing with some sort of negative emotion, like disdain or sarcasm. Toby knew Dylan loved him; he just had a different way of showing his affection.

“I have to do laundry, anyway.” If he could get himself up off the couch, he thought.

“Right. Talk to you later, Tobes. Be good. Meet the friends. I’m serious.”

“Okay, fine. You win. I’ll tell Quentin right now.”

Dylan ended the call after another brief goodbye. Instead of calling Quentin right away, Toby curled up on his side and turned the tv on. He’d slept great at Quentin’s house, but he felt tired suddenly, as if he was weighed down by a thick blanket. He let his eyes drift closed.

He hadn’t meant to fall asleep, but when he woke, he couldn’t deny that he felt fresher than he’d felt when he first got home. After tossing a frozen pizza in the oven for dinner and cracking a beer, Toby sent a text to Quentin, telling him he’d love to meet his friends.

Dylan had returned his flurry of memes and Toby scrolled them and responding accordingly. His phone buzzed with a

message and Toby's stomach warbled when he read it.

He supposed he should've expected to hear from Ron's family, but he hadn't truly counted on it. He'd made a donation in Ron's name to the charity his family had listed. Other than that, he'd tried not to think about it much. Not that he was particularly successful at avoiding that train of thought, but he still didn't expect Ron's brother to reach out to him.

The message was thankfully short, but Ron's brother wanted to know if Toby was going to attend the celebration of life. Because his family was so spread out, it hadn't happened yet. Toby didn't know what to say. He'd never been to something like that before, and the idea of going made his skin crawl off his body.

He wouldn't know anyone there and it would be awkward. Did he want to play the part of the weird guy off in the corner trying to drown himself in cheap funeral wine? Not really. He'd loved Ron once upon a time, but truthfully, he and Ron hadn't been friends since. Or friendly. They'd broken up and gone their own way and were it not for his sudden passing, Toby would've given him little thought.

But not going made him feel like he was a terrible person. What kind of person skipped someone's celebration of life simply because they'd grown apart from that person? A bad person. Toby answered. Part of him knew the statement was false, but emotions were seldom logical.

Toby raked a hand down his face, and it was only then he realized it was shaking. He tossed his phone down onto the coffee table and left it there while he checked on his pizza. When the timer went off, he took the pizza out of the oven and sliced it. His phone buzzed on the coffee table a few times, but Toby ignored it for a minute until he realized it might be Quentin.

After he piled a few slices of pizza onto a plate and grabbed a beer from the fridge, he returned to the couch. He shoveled the first bite into his mouth with immediate regret as he huffed and puffed and tried to cool it off before it burned his tongue beyond repair.

His phone vibrated again, and Toby contemplated tossing it in the sink or throwing it out the window, but once he saw it wasn't another message from Ron's brother, he breathed a bit easier. He knew he should talk to Quentin, but the idea of having a conversation didn't appeal to Toby. Besides, he didn't want to come off as clingy. They'd just spent most of the weekend together and they had plans for morning coffee and lunch the next day. It was enough.

Toby ate his pizza and stared at the television until it was time to crawl into bed. After he laid in the darkness for a while with no luck falling asleep, Toby broke down and opened his phone and called Quentin.

"Hey, Toby."

"Hey. I didn't wake you, did I?"

Quentin scoffed quietly. "Not at all. I was just laying here trying to read."

"Shit. Sorry. I can let you go."

"Toby, I said I was trying. I wasn't succeeding. There's a certain someone I can't get off my mind."

Toby burrowed down into this bedding and was happy that Quentin couldn't see the absolute shit-eating grin he had on his face.

"Ron's brother messaged me." In the darkness, the words came easy.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Toby took a deep breath. "He invited me to the celebration of life."

"That's thoughtful of him."

"I don't think I want to go. Does that make me a bad person? What kind of person skips something like that?"

"You're not a bad person, if you attend or not. If you don't feel comfortable going, it's fine to not go. And if you need someone to go with you, I'd be more than willing."

“Thank you,” Toby whispered. “I don’t think that I’m going, but I have time to think about it. It’s not for a couple of weeks yet. I thought about it, and I would very much like to meet your friends.” Toby desperately changed the subject.

“That makes me happy, thank you. You know that Kelly will also want to meet you, eventually.”

Toby let out a nervous laugh. “I’m not sure I’m ready for the ex-husband’s interrogation yet. Let’s cross one bridge at a time.”

“I can live with that.”

Toby let out a jaw-cracking yawn.

“You should get some sleep. We’ll talk in the morning, okay?”

“Okay. Goodnight, Quentin.”

“Goodnight, Toby.”

QUENTIN

MONDAY MORNING CAME at Quentin hard and fast. Waking up without Toby next to him, frankly sucked, but he forced himself out of bed and by the time he'd showered, his mood had improved. He didn't analyze his emotions too closely. Toby was important to him, and he missed him when they weren't together. It made sense because Toby's presence made Quentin's life infinitely better.

He dressed and drove to work, knowing that Toby would meet him there a bit early so they could get a coffee together. What he didn't expect was to see Toby in the lobby waiting for him, wearing the tie Quentin had smuggled into his bag for him to take home.

The sight of it made his stomach swoop. Toby's face lit up when he spotted Quentin. He strode over with a coffee in each hand and rose on his toes to kiss Quentin.

"Good morning." Quentin said, taking the coffee from Toby. He let his gaze flick to the tie, then up again to Toby's face. "Nice tie."

Toby looked sheepish. "Thank you."

Quentin knew he'd be giving Toby more of his ties. Now that he'd seen him in one, in public, it was like a quiet little mark of ownership that only they knew about. Maybe he'd have some monogrammed with his initials and give them to Toby.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Toby asked.

“I’ve no idea what you mean.” Quentin slid his arm around Toby and steered them toward the elevators. “I’ll walk you to your desk.”

“What a gentleman.”

“Are you free Saturday?” Quentin asked as the elevator doors opened and he ushered Toby inside.

“Of course.”

“Great. I’ll let Rory know to make plans.”

“What kind of plans?” Toby asked. “Are we all going out somewhere?”

“I’ll talk to Rory and let you know.”

“Rory’s a Dom, right? How does that work? Us hanging out?”

“Well, Rory is a Dom, but he’s not *your* Dom. That’s my job. I don’t think we’ll be hanging out in a formal, kinky capacity where you need to worry about anything like rules and protocols.”

“Okay.” The way Toby said it made Quentin wonder if he felt disappointed that they’d be hanging out as friends in a non-kinky setting. But before he got a chance to answer, the elevator opened at Toby’s floor. “Walk me to my desk?”

“Of course.” Quentin followed Toby through the maze of offices and cubicles until Toby stopped at a desk that sat directly outside of Mitch’s office.

“This is me.” Toby glanced at the stack of files on the desk. “No rest for the wicked. Are we on for lunch today?”

“Of course.” Quentin glanced around before leaning in to steal a kiss. “I need to get upstairs, but I’ll get in touch with Rory and iron out the rest of the details, and I’ll see you soon.”

“Okay. See you later.”

Quentin hated leaving Toby, but they both had jobs to do. Upstairs, Quentin dove into reading and responding to the

emails in his overflowing inbox. He had a few minutes before lunch time, so he called Rory on his cellphone.

“Hello?” Rory’s voice was smooth as always, sounding like spun silk.

“Hey, Rory.”

“Quentin, how are you? Don’t tell me you’ve changed your mind about the weekend. Nicky will be very displeased.”

“No, nothing like that. I just wanted to know what the plan was. Are we meeting at your place?”

“We could meet there or the club. Whichever you prefer.”

Quentin had yet to take Toby to the club, and he wasn’t sure that going on a double date as a first time would be a good idea. He didn’t want Toby to feel pressured or out of place, surrounded by men who had more experience in that atmosphere than he did.

It would also give Quentin a little more time to find his footing as a Dom.

“How about your place?” Quentin answered.

“Delightful. Nicky loves to grill. Does your boy have any sort of allergies?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Great, see you Saturday.”

Quentin got off the phone and went to meet Toby for lunch. Seeing him shook some of the nerves from Quentin, but as soon as they were apart, he wondered if he could really be the Dom Toby needed when he’d already failed at being a Dom to someone else.

Logically, he understood that Kelly and Toby were nothing alike, but the fear of failure nagged at him. Most of the time, he could ignore it and push through, but everyone had bad days. Days when, no matter what mantra he pulled out, or what affirmations he repeated, he couldn’t shake the lack of self-confidence. It had infiltrated him and clung to his bones,

choosing random occasions to poke its ugly head up and demand attention.

The idea of talking to Kelly presented itself, but at this moment, Quentin felt like that would be pointless. They'd hashed everything out before. With nothing new to be said between them, it would be Quentin seeking validation from an external source, when what he really needed to do was to take a deep breath and believe that he was the person Toby needed.

Despite wanting Toby with him all the time, Quentin went home alone. To his delight, several packages waited for him. Quentin cracked a beer and cut into the boxes. Logically, he knew that toys didn't make someone a Dom. Toys were props. They were a means to an end. It was possible to be kinky without them, to take someone apart by using only his hands, his voice, his mouth, his attitude. But he liked toys. They opened new doors for pleasure.

Quentin took a long pull of his beer before setting it aside. True to his word, Toby had been indecisive, but Quentin thought he'd done a pretty good job of reading his boyfriend. The more he blushed, the more he liked something. If he squirmed, Quentin bought it. One thing Quentin had appreciated was that Toby could vocalize when he wasn't interested in something. It reassured him to know that Toby was willing and able to speak up about things that didn't interest him. Like the humbler. Toby had no interest in that. He'd even gone pale at the sight of it.

Props and toys might not make someone a Dom, but the sight of them sure as hell pleased Quentin. The more he unpacked, the better he felt. He didn't need them, but he liked them. They settled something inside him. It was like, even though he was okay without them, having these things helped himself feel validated. They made him feel like he could provide for his submissive.

The time he took to clean and store the toys made Quentin miss dinner. He placed an order with his favorite burger place and called Toby. Not a night went by now when they didn't talk. Sometimes Quentin felt like an obsessive teenager. If he'd been this way with any of his exes, he didn't recall. There

was something about Toby that made Quentin want to be with him all the time.

“Hey, you.” Toby answered. He sounded a little breathless.

“Hey, did I get you at a bad time?” Quentin asked. “I can call you back.”

“No, it’s fine. I was doing some cleaning.”

“Me too. Our toy shipment arrived, so I gave everything a wash and put it away.”

The other end of the phone was deathly quiet. Then Quentin heard a squeak.

“Toby?”

“Sorry. I got excited. I can’t wait to see everything.”

“I’m glad you’re excited. When you got quiet, I thought you’d changed your mind.”

“Not on your life,” Toby spat. “Words can’t describe how happy I am to be with you, and to have this. It’s everything I thought I’d never have.”

“Oh, we’re just getting started. Saturday, when we go to Rory’s, I’m going to have you wear a plug.”

“A plug?” Toby didn’t sound opposed to the idea, but it was hard to tell over the phone.

“Would you like that? I’ll get it nice and wet and slide it into your hot little ass. All night long while we’re hanging out with my friends, it’s going to be there. Tormenting you, and when we get back to my place, I’m going to fuck you through the mattress.”

“Quentin,” Toby whined. “This weekend is so far away.”

“Eager, are we?”

“I’m so hard I can’t see straight. There’s no blood left in my brain because it’s all in my dick.”

“Does my poor kitten need relief?”

Toby whimpered in response. “Can I?”

“I like that you asked for permission. I won’t always let you, but I’m feeling generous tonight. You may come, but there are conditions.”

“I have a feeling I’m not going to like this.”

“Oh, but I am. First off. You can come, but you can’t touch your dick.”

“Sir, that’s not fair. If I can’t touch myself, how am I supposed to come?”

“I said you couldn’t touch your dick. You’re more than your dick, aren’t you? You have nipples, a hole, other erogenous zones to work with. I want you to explore. I want you to tell me what you’re doing. And you better hurry, because I ordered dinner and I’m putting you on speakerphone, so if you haven’t come before my dinner gets here, the delivery driver might hear how hot and slutty my boyfriend is for me.”

Quentin feared he might’ve gone too far, but then Toby’s voice came over the phone as Quentin put him on speaker.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good boy. Now, tell me what you’re doing. I’m not there to see you, so you’ll need to describe what you’re doing.”

“I’m ah—I took off my shirt.”

“Take off your pants, too. I want you completely naked.”

Toby’s uneven breaths puffed out as Quentin heard the jangle of a belt. “Can I... your tie. Can I keep wearing it?”

Quentin reached down and pressed the heel of his hand into the base of his dick.

“Yes, kitten, you may leave the tie on. Tell me what you’re doing.”

“I’m lying on my bed.” Toby said breathlessly. “I put you on speaker so I can use both hands.”

“What are those hands doing?”

“I have my legs spread and I’m running my hands up my inner thighs.”

“How does that feel?”

“I never noticed how soft my skin is there.”

“I’ll have to sample for myself next time.” Quentin undid his pants and took his cock out. He might have forbidden Toby from touching himself, but that didn’t mean that Quentin had to abstain.

“I’m never going to come.” Toby whined. “It’s not enough. I’m so close I’m humping the air.”

“Did you want some assistance?”

“Yes, please.”

“Get the lube and get two fingers nice and slippery. You’re going to touch your hole, but don’t put them inside you until I say so.”

Quentin heard Toby scramble to obey. A drawer opened. He heard Toby rustle around then silence for a short time.

“Okay.” Toby’s voice was strained now, like he’d gone from not able to come to having to hold himself back. “Okay, I’m touching myself.”

“Tell me how it feels.”

“Good.” Toby whined. “It feels... soft, vulnerable. Empty.”

Quentin spit into his hand and jerked himself, doing nothing to hide the sounds from Toby. “You’re empty? Do you want to be full?”

“I do,” Toby whined again. Quentin could see him in his mind. The way he’d look as he tried to find the perfect angle to stuff his fingers as deep as they’d go.

“I want you to put your fingers in your ass now and I want you to fuck them until you come and I don’t want you to stop talking. I want to hear you describe every sensation to me. Every emotion. Leave nothing out.”

“Oh,” Toby exhaled. “It’s tight. It’s warm. Oh fuck, Sir, they’re only part way in and I’m already so close. All I can think about is you, how much better it would be if it were your fingers. God, shit. They’re all the way in.” Toby made an unidentifiable sound. “It’s not enough, but it’s too much.”

“Tell me what that means, kitten.”

“I want your cock. I want—oh fuck. Fuck. I want your cock stretching. It would be so much better. But I’m close. My dick is so hard. My balls are full and aching. Sir. Sir, please.”

“Fuck yourself with your fingers, sweetheart. Let me hear you.”

“I am. I am. I’m going, ungh, faster.” Toby’s words were breathy, and his struggle to speak was obvious in his voice.

“You’re so good. Come on, that’s it, you can come whenever you want.” Quentin jerked himself faster. Reaching down, he cupped his balls with his other hand, a short, gentle tug was enough to send him over the edge. “You just made me come.” Quentin let go of his nuts and came into the palm of his hand. He listened to Toby’s erratic breathing as he rode the last wave of his orgasm.

“Sir. Oh god. I’m—fuck.”

“That’s a good boy. Keep going. Keep fucking yourself for me.”

“It’s so much.” Toby said. “So much cum. Fuck. I’m covered in it.”

“How does your hole feel now?”

“Hot. Tight. Sensitive. I want—oh shit. I want to stop, fuck. It’s too much.”

“Keep going.” Quentin gave his cock a last stroke. “Keep talking to me.”

Toby let out a forlorn sounding whimper. “Everything’s sensitive now. I might die if I keep going.”

Quentin turned to the sink and washed the cum off his hands just as his phone buzzed with an alert from the delivery

driver. “You can stop now. My dinner is here.”

“Thank fucking god.” Toby let out a sigh. “I feel boneless. And twitchy, but a good sort of twitchy. I wish I was there so we could snuggle.”

“I love how candid you are after an orgasm. I’ll have to blow your mind more often.”

“You’ll get no arguments from me.”

“I have to get the door now, so I’m going to go. If you feel the need for more orgasms, you’ll have to call and ask permission. I really liked what we did tonight, Toby.”

“I did too.”

Those three words filled Quentin to the brim with pride. Knowing he could bring pleasure to his sub without being in the same place made Quentin feel like he was doing something right. It gave him hope for their future as a couple, and their future as a Dominant and a submissive. He couldn’t wait for the weekend when he could put all his new toys to use.

TOBY

TOBY KNEW PERFECTLY WELL that every time he squirmed in the passenger seat, Quentin smirked a little. It was Quentin's fault, after all, that Toby was in the state he was in.

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this." Toby complained, but he didn't really mean it. That was the beauty of safewords. He could complain all he wanted, and Quentin wouldn't feel bad and put an end to their fun.

"You like it."

"I'm going to meet your friends. And I'm going to be awkward. I need to make a good first impression."

Quentin laughed. "First impressions aren't everything. Nick met Andrew one night because he picked him up for public intoxication. Andrew practically puked on him and look how that turned out for them."

"You're lying."

Quentin laughed harder. "I know it sounds unreal, but it's the truth." He glanced at Toby. "In all seriousness, don't worry, Toby. They're going to love you."

"I bet you say that to all the boys."

"There haven't been other boys. They know Kelly, of course, but there's only been you."

"Oh." Toby exhaled. He knew that Quentin was divorced. That wasn't a secret. But knowing that he was the first person who Quentin had deemed worthy of meeting his friends calmed Toby's nerves.

“If you want that plug out of you at any point, just look at me and tug your earlobe and I’ll take care of it. In the event that you can’t remember the signal, we both have our phones. You can excuse yourself to the bathroom and send me a text.”

“Because that wouldn’t be obvious.” Toby scoffed as his nerves came back in full force.

“Rory has a room dedicated to kink. Nick has more rope than a half dozen cowboys, and Andrew has probably had more things up his ass than you could count, because he’s the submissive to both those kinky fuckers. Trust me when I say they won’t care, Toby. But you care, and that’s why I’m doing my best to give you discrete options.”

After a few deep breaths, the truth of Quentin’s words sank in. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Quentin glanced at Toby, flashing him a brief smile. “I want you to enjoy yourself.”

“I think I can do that.”

“Good boy.” Quentin flicked his turn signal on. “We’re almost there.”

There was a house on the outskirts of the city in a neighborhood that had more trees than houses. It felt like it was a world apart from the city. It was quieter, that was for sure.

“Rory’s a Dom, right? And Nick, too?”

“Nick is a switch, but yes.”

“Do I... will I have to do what they say?”

Quentin pulled into a driveway that must’ve been their destination, and he killed the engine. “Any Dom worth his salt doesn’t just go around dominating whoever they want. Unless you give consent, no one should try to fill that role in your life. Rory has his own boys and while he’s willing to be dominant for other people’s submissives, occasionally, he tends to have his hands full with Nick and Andrew.”

“So, the short answer is no.” Toby breathed a sigh of relief. “Okay. Good.”

Quentin walked Toby to the door, one arm slung casually around Toby's waist the whole time. The door opened a moment later and a gorgeous middle aged man with bright blue hair answered.

"Quentin, you're late."

"I am not. You're just impatient." Quentin stepped inside, tugging Toby with him.

"Well, of course I am. Who could blame me? I've been trying to get you to come for dinner for ages."

"Rory, this is my boyfriend, Toby. Toby, this is Rory. He's an old friend and a huge pain in my ass."

Rory extended his hand to Toby. Shiny bracelets and bangles covered his slender wrist. "Finally. It's good to meet you, Toby. What can I get you to drink? Water, coffee, tea, wine?"

"Uh, tea?"

Rory's eyes sparkled. "Tea it is."

Quentin and Toby took their shoes off and left them by the door before following Rory into the next room.

"You just made his evening." Someone tall and broad said to Toby. He extended a hand and Toby took it. "I'm Nick, and Rory is always trying to turn people into tea drinkers."

"What's wrong with tea?" Toby asked.

"Absolutely nothing. That's why everyone should drink it." Rory said as he swept back into the room. "The kettle is on, and the tea should be ready in a few minutes. There's beer if you want one, Quentin."

"Maybe with dinner." Quentin sat on the couch and pulled Toby down next to him. The plug in Toby's ass shifted, and he bit his tongue to keep himself quiet. Quentin draped an arm over Toby's shoulders, and he leaned in to brush a kiss against Toby's temple. Maybe as an apology for stuffing a butt plug in his ass and then making him socialize.

Truthfully, Toby liked it. Maybe too much, because if he thought about it for any length of time, his stupid dick tried to get hard.

Toby saw the change in Rory the minute the third man entered the room. His eyes softened, and he stretched an arm out, reaching for him.

“Toby, this is Andrew. Andrew, this is Quentin’s boyfriend, Toby.”

Instead of shaking Toby’s hand, Andrew went to Rory and brushed a kiss against his lips. “The grill is ready, as you asked.” Andrew said to Rory before turning to Toby. Andrew offered him a bright smile. “It’s good to meet you, Toby. Nick said Quentin, eventually. How did you meet?”

“I work in the same building as Quentin.”

“He saved my life,” Quentin said, pulling Toby tighter against him. Toby laughed and looked at Quentin.

“That’s a shameless lie. I bought you a sandwich.”

“It was the last one. I’d have died without it.”

“You’re dramatic.” Toby turned his attention back to their hosts and felt his face heat. All three of them were staring at Toby and Quentin, not in a bad way, but they all had stars in their eyes like Toby was some sort of miracle. He wasn’t sure how to deal with that.

In the other room, a kettle whistled. Rory moved to get up, but Andrew stopped him. “I’ll get it, Rory. Are you having your usual?”

“Yes, Cub. And Toby was having tea, as well. What kind did you want? If it exists, I probably have it.”

“Uh, chamomile?”

“What about apple, cinnamon, chamomile?” Andrew asked him. “If you put sugar in, it almost tastes like pie.”

“Sold,” Toby responded. He winced at his exuberant reaction, but no one seemed to notice, or care, and Toby relaxed a little more. It had been a long time since Toby had

met people with the hope or intention of befriending them. He'd grown used to the knowledge over the years that he was disposable and forgettable.

“You said you work in the same building as Quentin. What do you do? Do you work with Quentin?”

“Oh, I work for an attorney in the firm on the fourth floor. I haven't been there for a year yet, but Mitch is great to work for. Quentin tells me you're a cop.” Toby looked at Nick and hoped that he'd take over the spotlight. Having people pay attention to him was making Toby's insides itch. He didn't mind observing or joining in on less personal conversations but sitting in the spotlight made him uncomfortable.

Andrew returned with two cups of tea. He passed Rory's over first, then brought Toby his. “Careful, it's hot.”

“Thank you.”

Toby sipped his tea and let the conversation flow around him. He heard firsthand about Nick and Andrew's first encounter. They had a way of talking without making Toby feel excluded. When it came time for the food to go on the grill, Andrew extended an invitation to Toby.

“It's nothing fancy, just some burgers for the carnivores and a portobello mushroom for Rory, but I'd like the company.”

“Okay.” Toby nodded and got to his feet. After giving Quentin a quick kiss, he followed Andrew out through the kitchen and onto the deck. The patio doors opened to reveal nothing but woods behind them. Toby stopped and stared as if he'd never seen trees before.

“It's like you live in a bubble.” Toby said, tearing his gaze away.

Andrew smiled affectionately. “It feels like that sometimes.”

Toby watched with interest as Andrew preheated the grill, then set the burgers on it to cook.

“Are you okay?” Andrew eyed him with concern.

“I’m fine.” Toby didn’t have to lie. He was fine. Had he not been preparing all week for wearing a plug all night, that might’ve been a different story. But Quentin had given him a similar plug and had him wear it every night at home for increasingly long increments of time.

Toby shifted his weight, and the plug moved inside him, reminding him that Quentin was nearby. Toby liked the way it made him feel owned.

“They can be overwhelming at first,” Andrew said, closing the lid of the grill. “Nick and Rory, I mean.”

Toby blew out a breath. “They’re very nice.”

“They’re also very bold personalities.”

“I don’t mind that so much. I’m sort of the opposite.”

Andrew raised an eyebrow. “You have a bit of boldness in you if you made the first move on Quentin.”

Toby’s cheeks heated. “It took me months to work up the courage. I’m usually not that forward.”

“All it takes is one moment of courage.” The way Andrew spoke led Toby to believe they had similar personalities. Toby was a low-risk kind of person and he couldn’t imagine Andrew being much different. There was a softness about him too, like he wore his heart just under the surface.

One moment of courage brought him and Quentin together. It was nice to think of it that way. That amazing things could happen to him if he was brave just once. It made him almost giddy to think of it. His one moment of out of character boldness had brought him and Quentin together.

The patio door opened, and Rory came out with Nick and Quentin close behind. Quentin passed Toby a tall glass of ice water and brushed a kiss against his lips. “Are you good?” Quentin asked.

Toby was sure Quentin meant the plug in his ass, but it didn’t matter. No matter what, the answer would be the same.

“I’m more than good.” Toby sidled in close to Quentin. “I’m the best I’ve ever been.”

QUENTIN

AS GLAD AS he'd been to see his friends, he was equally glad when it was time to take Toby home. He had plans for him he'd looked forward to all week. But it had warmed Quentin's heart to see how well his friends took to Toby. Especially Andrew. It appeared that Andrew's soft heart had won Toby over.

Quentin was glad that Toby seemed to like the trio and seemed comfortable around them. One day soon, Quentin wanted to take Toby to the club. He thought that it would be nice and less terrifying for him if there were more familiar faces there. He wanted Toby to be at ease so he could enjoy himself.

Quentin unlocked his door and ushered Toby inside. "Did you have fun?"

Toby took his shoes off, the happiness in his expression unmistakable. "Your friends are really nice. Andrew wants to hang out sometime."

"I'm glad."

Toby wound his arms around Quentin's neck and tugged him down for a kiss.

"Thank you for today."

"Oh, the day isn't over yet." Quentin skimmed his hands down Toby's back and cupped his ass. "Not even close."

Toby's only response was to stare up at Quentin with hungry adoration.

“Get to my room and get naked. I want you on hands and knees on the bed. You remember your safewords, right?”

“Yes, Sir. Red and Yellow.”

Quentin gestured in the room’s direction. “Then you better get in there.”

“Yes, Sir.” Toby broke away from Quentin and scrambled to obey.

Quentin followed Toby and while Toby stripped himself naked, Quentin watched from the doorway. Once Toby was naked and waiting for him on all fours, Quentin entered the room. He took a slow step toward Toby, watching the way Toby took deep breaths to try to settle himself.

“Someone’s excited.” Quentin smoothed his hand down Toby’s back, paying close attention to the way Toby arched into the touch.

“I dreamed about this all week, Sir.”

“Let’s see how many of your dreams I can make come true, then.” Quentin pulled his shirt off and discarded it before going to the dresser he’d stored the bulk of his purchases in. He didn’t let Toby see what he’d gathered from the top drawer until he dumped it on the bed next to him.

“You’re not the only one who has put a lot of thought into this.” Quentin reached for Toby. Cupping his cheek, he made eye contact. Toby’s eyes were pools of vulnerability that hid nothing from Quentin. Toby openly gazed at him with unbridled affection.

“Please say you’re going to fuck me tonight. I might die if you don’t.” If Toby had meant his comment to sound light and maybe even slightly funny, it missed the mark and instead revealed his vulnerability.

Quentin bent down and kissed Toby. It was a gentle, searching sort of kiss. One that encouraged Toby to slow down and breathe. He took his time with Toby’s mouth, gently teasing it open so he could deepen it. When he pulled away, he brushed a thumb against Toby’s lower lip.

“Don’t worry about anything. I’ll take good care of you.” Quentin had planned to save one purchase for later, but he had the sudden thought that now was as good a time as any. “In fact, I have something for you. If you like it. I won’t force you to wear them.”

Toby’s look of concern made his nose wrinkle in a way that could only be described as adorable. Quentin went back to the dresser and took out the pair of black fuzzy kitten ears. Originally, he’d sort of purchased them as a bit of a joke, but there was nothing funny about the look of surprise and wonder that crossed Toby’s expression when he saw them.

“I didn’t know if a tail would be a bridge too far and maybe we can try one another night when your poor ass hasn’t been tortured half to death already.” Quentin paused in front of Toby with the ears in hand. “Would you like to try them on?”

Toby nodded, and just this once, Quentin let him get away with it. He slipped the ears on Toby’s head, then pulled his phone out and unlocked it.

“Can I take a picture so I can show you? Words, kitten.”

“Yeah.” Toby swallowed nervously. “A picture is fine. I trust you, Sir.”

“I can delete it after if you want.” Quentin took the picture, then turned the phone so Toby could see. “What do you think?”

Toby’s smile was soft and tentative, but his eyes filled with such joy that Quentin knew he’d done the right thing.

“I love them. And you don’t have to delete the picture. I don’t mind.”

“Thank you.” Quentin turned his phone off and set it aside. “I’m glad you like them. Now, I need you to relax for me. I’m going to pull that plug out and give your ass a small break before I take it.”

Toby shivered from head to toe. “Yes, sir. But I really am fine.”

“I know you are. But we’re doing things my way.”

Quentin circled around behind Toby and smoothed his hand down Toby's back. Shaped for comfort, he still worried Toby had left it in too long. He gave Toby's ass a squeeze, then pulled his cheeks apart and had a look. As gently as he could, he removed the plug and tossed it aside. Toby's hole looked pink and slippery with lube. It was slightly open still, and he succumbed to temptation and carefully slid a finger into the entrance.

Toby moaned and rocked forward as though he were trying to escape Quentin's touch.

"Too sore?" He slid his finger free and smiled when Toby whimpered in protest.

"Too close. I've been horny for hours."

"My poor neglected kitten." He gripped Toby's ass again, hard enough that Toby gasped. When he released his grip, he smacked Toby's ass. A sharp spank left a handprint and Quentin admired it, smoothing his fingers over the discoloration.

"On your stomach, hands behind your back."

Toby nearly face-planted into the mattress as he scrambled to obey. It made Quentin smile, but he didn't say a word to Toby about how fucking endearing it made him. While laying down, Toby's ears got knocked askew, and he reached up to fix them before putting his hands behind his back as Quentin had instructed.

Quentin grabbed the brand new cuffs, thick leather ones with sturdy buckles, and fastened one to each of Toby's wrists, then fastened them together. With Toby suddenly so helpless, Quentin's pulse kicked up a notch. He took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. It was good to feel that way again, Quentin thought. He took the liberty of petting Toby all over. He took his time, stroking his hands down Toby's arms and legs. He continued until Toby was practically purring.

Toby was light, easy to lift. Quentin helped him to his knees.

“Fuck, look at you.” He reached out and straightened Toby’s ears for him. He was stunning. Easily the hottest thing Quentin had ever seen. Having his hands behind his back made his shoulders draw back and his chest puff out. He was demure and horny. Quentin noticed the bead of precum that slipped down the head of Toby’s cock and made the slow descent to the bedding below.

Quentin caught it with the tip of his finger and popped it into his mouth. “Delicious.”

Toby’s chest rose and fell as he stared at Quentin with wide, enamored eyes.

“Are you all right?” Quentin asked. From the pile of gear, he grabbed a set of nipple clamps. Toby’s gaze zeroed in on them, then he must have remembered that he’d been asked a question. His gaze snapped up to Quentin’s and, to his surprise, Toby’s mouth tipped up into a smile.

“I’m perfect.”

Quentin raked his gaze down Toby’s naked body, taking in every angle, every freckle and blemish. “Yes, you are.”

Toby wriggled slightly in his bonds, as if to get comfortable. Quentin loved seeing him settle in. There was something about Toby’s naked trust that flayed Quentin open. The way Toby looked at him hid none of his thoughts or his feelings and instead let himself be an open book for Quentin made his pulse race.

He kneeled on the edge of the bed with one knee, keeping the other foot on the floor. Wrapping an arm around Toby, he yanked him close. Toby’s surprised gasp ended when Quentin crushed his mouth down on top of Toby’s. Toby stiffened at first, but quickly relaxed in his arms, giving himself over to Quentin and whatever he desired.

Quentin brushed his hand up Toby’s side, letting the chain of the nipple clamp slide against his skin, reminding him of what was to come. He brushed his thumb over Toby’s nipple and deepened the kiss when Toby moaned for him.

“I love hearing all your little sounds.” Quentin told him. “The whimpers you try to hold back are mine. All your little sounds belong to me, and I want to hear them.” He bent down and took Toby’s nipple into his mouth. Toby gasped and Quentin felt him stiffen in his hold.

Quentin went back and forth between the two nubs, working them up into hard peaks. Kiss swollen and sensitive, Toby cried out when the first clamp went on.

“That’s a good kitten.” Quentin praised Toby, whose breathing had increased at the first flush of pain. “Let’s get this other clamp on you and then I’ll show you how pretty you look in my jewelry.”

Toby made a sound in the back of his throat when Quentin attached the second clamp. He gave the chain a gentle tug and watched Toby’s lips part, but no sound came out. Quentin retrieved his phone.

“Did you want to see?”

“Yes, Sir. Show me?”

Quentin took a picture of Toby on his knees on the bed. Legs spread, bare cock red and angry, still oozing precum. The chain that attached the clamps together was a delicate-looking chain that swayed when Toby moved.

“See how hot you are? I want to dress you in nothing but chains, just like this.” Quentin gave the clamps a gentle tug. Toby threw his head back and his cock jumped as a wanton sigh escaped him. “You like the sound of that? You want me to dress you up in chains? Tie you to my bed so I can wake up and use you in the middle of the night. I bet you do.”

Toby’s chest heaved, and he looked at Quentin like he hung the moon.

“Yes,” Toby said. “I want that.”

“And you’ll get it,” Quentin promised. “But first things first.” Quentin unzipped his pants and Toby looked at him expectantly. Hunger burned in his gaze as he watched Quentin strip naked.

He kicked his pants to the side and grabbed Toby. He turned him around and pressed his chest down into the bed. Toby's squeak of indignation turned into a throaty moan when Quentin parted Toby's cheeks and licked a strip from his balls to his hole.

“Sir... I'm already—I'm close.”

“You can come as many times as you want.” Quentin delved his tongue into Toby's passage and did his very best to wring the first of many orgasms from his sweet little kitten.

TOBY

QUENTIN'S BED was too soft, his tongue too warm, his touch too commanding. Toby never stood a chance. Even though it had sounded ominous when Quentin had promised this would be the first of many orgasms, Toby couldn't hold it back.

He was going to make a mess of the bed. The covers were already ruffled, and the pillows had been knocked askew at some point. The patch of blanket under his face was too warm, but he couldn't make himself move, not when Quentin was eating his ass like it was his last meal.

Toby panted, helplessly stuck where Quentin had placed him. He arched his back, pressing his ass closer to Quentin. He couldn't have stopped it if he tried. His orgasm rose in him like a tidal wave, smashing through his defenses. Every touch Quentin gifted him with felt important tonight. Monumental. Like they'd found their places with each other. Toby's place was blissful underneath Quentin.

He came so hard he couldn't breathe. Air stopped entering or leaving. Quentin's fingers bit into Toby's flesh as he pulled him closer, plunged his tongue deeper.

When Toby regained the ability to breathe, everything came back to him in stages. His nipples hurt. Quentin's tongue had retreated from his ass and had been replaced with a finger. His body felt on fire, but his brain was blissfully silent. There wasn't a thought beyond the fact that Toby was seconds away from begging for Quentin's cock. There wasn't a world beyond the bed Toby lay pinned against, helpless.

Toby mewled when Quentin's broad hand traced the curve of his spine.

"How are you doing, kitten?"

"Green. But... so empty." Toby wiggled his hips and flexed his fingers. Being restrained with his hands behind his back for so long made his shoulders ache, but in a good way. In a way that would linger to later remind Toby he belonged to Quentin. He'd willingly hurt for this man, because he knew he'd be there to kiss all his tender bruises better. He'd do it because Quentin gave him a tie so he could feel owned. He gave him ears so he could feel like a pet, pampered and chosen. Something, someone wanted.

Quentin tugged on Toby's wrists and freed them from the chain that bound them together.

"Hands and knees. Stretch those shoulders out."

Quentin climbed up onto the bed and leaned against the headboard. Toby gingerly pushed himself up onto all fours. Quentin made eye contact with him, and he crooked a finger, beckoning him closer.

Toby crawled up the bed, swaying his ass a little more than strictly necessary. When he reached Quentin, he reached for Toby and straightened his ears. Maybe later he'd examine why the gesture threatened to bring tears to his eyes, but right then Toby only wanted one thing.

He needed to feel Quentin inside him. He was so empty it felt like he was going to collapse in on himself. Carefully, he straddled Quentin's lap. Bracing his hands on Quentin's shoulders, he sat trapping Quentin's rock-hard cock against his own. Toby moved, eager to make friction. Desperate for whatever he could get.

"Naughty kitten." Quentin chided. He tugged at the chain connecting Toby's nipple clamps. Toby's head snapped back, and he cried out. It hurt in the most amazing way. Fire flashed up his body, igniting him, burning away all thought. He clung to Quentin and took a shaky breath.

“Did I say you could do that?” Quentin asked. He seemed pleased by Toby’s eagerness, even if he pretended not to be. Maybe Quentin wanted a kitten that was slightly naughty.

Toby bit his lip, looked Quentin in the eyes and did it again. He’d already come once, and his cock let him know about it by how sensitive it was. Every sensation was too much, and it almost hurt to grind their erections together, but he couldn’t stop himself.

Quentin gripped Toby’s waist and forced him to stay still. “Naughty kitten wants to do all the work, does he? Turn around, you little minx. Face the other direction.”

Parting from Quentin even long enough to obey was torture. Toby wanted to wrap himself up in the man and never move. He ached to be owned, to have Quentin pin him down and fuck him like he wanted to ruin him for anyone else. Words were impossible for Toby, who could barely string a coherent thought together.

He obeyed, turning around to straddle Quentin reverse cowboy style. A broad, warm hand grabbed Toby’s ass, halting his descent onto Quentin’s lap. Lube dribbled down the crack of Toby’s ass, causing him to gasp. Thick fingers spread it over his hole, then breached him. Toby was thankful his hands were no longer bound together or he might have fallen on his face. As it was, he braced himself and rocked back, seeking more. It wasn’t enough.

“What do you need?” Quentin asked, knowing the answer. How could he not? Toby was practically pathetic with desperation.

“I’m so empty.” Toby half-sobbed. Fingers weren’t enough. He needed to belong to Quentin on a primitive, primal level. Like once Quentin fucked him, he’d have to keep him. Logic had no place in Toby’s mind anymore. His need had pushed it out, leaving Toby an empty shell, begging to be filled with nothing but Quentin.

“Shhh, I’ve got you. I have what you need right here.” Quentin guided Toby back. As the blunt head of Quentin’s cock pressed against Toby’s hole, he shut his eyes. The world

quieted and Toby exhaled, letting Quentin inside of him. Taking every inch of him in a long, slow, controlled slide.

Toby's whole body trembled. He couldn't stop himself. His mouth hung slack, and he breathed heavily, lost in the stretch of his ass and the way Quentin's hands roamed his skin, caressing every inch. Then Quentin thrust, sharp and brief, but it made Toby cry out.

Quentin shifted around until he could draw Toby against him, back to chest. Quentin pinned Toby against him with his powerful arm. He reached between Toby's legs and took hold of his cock. Toby jerked in Quentin's grasp. He was aware of his whimpers but unable to stop them. He'd never been with anyone who had that effect on him before. Sometimes he felt like Quentin was too perfect to be real.

Toby's skin felt too tight to contain him and he writhed helplessly in Quentin's grip. Quentin reached down and he gently touched the sensitive skin of Toby's hole where it stretched to accommodate Quentin's cock.

"Fuck, it's like you were made for me." Quentin said, echoing Toby's own thoughts.

He thrashed when Quentin took hold of his cock again, whimpering and moaning what he knew he must have sounded like gibberish, but he couldn't stop himself.

"Sir, ungh." Whatever he'd meant to ask for was forgotten when Quentin thrust and jerked Toby at the same time. He was pulling him apart and if Toby didn't survive, he wouldn't even be mad.

Quentin's other hand skimmed across Toby's chest. When it came into contact with the chain, Toby gasped. The clamps fell away and Toby's body went rigid, then everything whited out. Pain lanced through him. His chest screamed and his cock throbbed, coming again already, as though his only purpose now was to writhe and explode in Quentin's arms.

Like lightning, Toby was on his face on the bed and Quentin was sliding back into him. Taking him in long, hard strokes. He tried to reach for Quentin to urge him to go faster

and harder, but Quentin pinned Toby's hands above his head without pause.

Quentin was a comforting weight on Toby. Taking him, but also protecting him. Fucking him, but somehow it was more than that. Toby didn't know if his thoughts made sense anymore because everything that wasn't Quentin had disappeared. He got lost in the sensation of lips on the back of his neck and a fat cock sliding in and out of him, and all he knew for sure was that he wasn't empty anymore.

They managed a kiss that was awkward because of the angle but perfect and warm, if a little wet. Toby wanted Quentin to fuck him face to face next time so he could see him better. Kiss him more. Get lost in his deep blue eyes and drown there, surviving on Quentin for the rest of his life.

"Fuck, Toby." Quentin growled in his ear. Kisses rained down on his neck as Quentin rode him harder and harder. Faster. Deeper. Sex had never been this good. This consuming. Toby felt nothing but the places Quentin had touched him. His chest still burned; his hole ached in the best way. He could feel the pressure of Quentin pushing his wrists into the bed. But nothing else. His mind was blank. His body had gone. He was bits and pieces strung together by all the places Quentin touched.

He didn't want it to be over, but he knew it was about to end because Quentin was sucking a hickey up on Toby's shoulder. His rhythm was faltering, and it was Quentin's turn to make all sorts of delicious sounds.

"I'm so close. Do you feel that?" Quentin thrust again, sharp and fast and it forced Toby to cry out.

"Please. In me. Come in me. I need it."

"God, kitten." Quentin captured his mouth in another awkwardly perfect kiss that broke off too soon when Quentin came. He groaned loudly in Toby's ear, his hips thrusting wildly without rhyme or rhythm. They filled the room with their combined cries and their mingled scent and sex.

Quentin thrust a few more times before pulling out and Toby was so wrung out, he didn't have the energy to do more than whimper in protest. Warm hands spread his cheeks, and a finger breached his hole.

"You're fucking gorgeous like this. Sweaty and full of my cum. So loose." Quentin inserted a second finger to prove his point. He kept his fingers buried deep in Toby's ass. His free hand stroked tenderly through Toby's hair. He didn't understand what Quentin was up to until his fingers brushed against Toby's prostate.

"Sir..." Toby whined, writhing on the mattress. He was fucked into oblivion. There was no way in hell he had another orgasm in him, but Quentin pegged his prostate with determination. He whispered sweet reassurances to Toby as he tormented him.

"You're doing so good. Just one more. One more and you can rest."

Toby was too weak to protest. Too far gone to do much but pant and beg and softly moan when a third and final orgasm ripped through him.

Quentin gingerly pulled his fingers out of Toby's ass. Toby didn't realize he trembled until Quentin gathered him into his arms, pulling him close and kissed his forehead.

"Shh. You're okay."

Toby burrowed into Quentin and absorbed the affection and the body heat. After a few minutes, his shaking had subsided and Quentin took the cuffs off Toby's wrists. He reached up and touched Toby's fuzzy ears, that were somehow still on his head.

"Are you ready to take those off yet?"

Toby thought about it for a second, then shook his head.

"That's okay, you can keep wearing them. How do you feel?"

Toby smiled so wide his cheeks hurt. "I feel amazing."

"You're not sore anywhere?"

Toby took stock of his body. His shoulders ached in a pleasant way. His ass throbbed like it had a heartbeat all its own. His nipples still hurt a little and the place Quentin had given him a hickey pulsed on and off. He added up all the little hurts and burrowed closer to Quentin.

“I’m the right amount of sore.” Toby had thought he’d felt needy before, but something about sex with Quentin had made it worse. Maybe it was the endorphin rush or the crash after, but Toby felt as though he couldn’t get close enough. Feeling brave, but also needy, he tilted his head back and looked at Quentin.

“Kiss me?” Toby could ask because he trusted Quentin not to reject him. Being in Quentin’s arms made him feel safe and cared for. Loved, even. Though it was unlikely that he felt that way about him, Toby wouldn’t be so lucky to have his feelings returned already. And had he been just a bit braver, he might have revealed them instead of asking for a kiss, which Quentin was only too happy to oblige.

QUENTIN

TOBY DOZED IN HIS ARMS, his kitten ears askew. Soft rhythmic breaths puffed out against Quentin's chest. He never imagined that he'd be into something like cat ears, but already Quentin was thinking about how Toby would look in a cat's tail. Something long and fluffy and luxurious. If his phone hadn't been halfway across the room, he'd have already gone ahead and ordered one. Or two.

Who was Quentin kidding? He'd have had half the catalog ordered. It wasn't that donning the cat ears made Toby a different person. He was still the same sweet man he'd always been. Just cuter. And slightly sassier. Quentin liked Toby's bolder, playful side.

Toby stirred and blinked up at him sleepily. "How long was I out?"

"Not long. Half an hour at the most."

Toby moved to sit up and winced.

"Everything okay?"

"Apparently, almost thirty is too old for my shoulders."

Quentin stretched over and snagged the lube. "Sit forward, get comfy. Let me massage that ache out of your muscles. I'll get a longer chain next time, so there's less stress on your shoulders."

"Don't you dare." Toby grouched. "I'm not made of glass. I liked everything we did. And the pampering afterwards is especially nice." Toby wriggled around and got comfortable.

Quentin chuckled quietly. “I guess I’ve been told.”

“Are you really going to massage me with lube?”

“It’s oil based.” He squirted a healthy amount into his palm and set the bottle aside. After briefly warming the liquid, he started rubbing Toby’s shoulders, working his thumbs up the back of Toby’s neck.

Toby moaned and let his head drop forward, making the kitten ears shift.

“Oh, I’d forgotten.” Toby reached up and took them off his head. Quentin was pretty sure he saw Toby stroke his fingers over the soft, fuzzy ears. Yes, he was definitely getting a tail.

“Did you like wearing them?”

“I did. It was different. I never thought of myself as being someone into pet play, and while I don’t know that I want to eat from a dish on the floor, I do like the ears. Is that okay? To only want bits of something?”

“The beauty of the lifestyle is that each person gets to choose what is right for them. There is no law saying you have to be into every aspect of something to appreciate one aspect of something. So if you like the ears, and they make you happy, you can have ten pairs if that’s what you want.”

“Oh god no. Not ten pairs. I’d get too anxious about choosing the right ones. One pair is enough.”

“What about a tail? Something long and fluffy with a nice, fat, butt plug.” Quentin worked his hands over Toby’s shoulders, rubbing the tension and soreness out of them.

Toby turned and looked at Quentin over his shoulder. “As long as it matches my ears.”

“We can get new ears that come with a tail. They make matching sets.”

“No. I want these ones.” Toby’s face instantly flushed bright red. “Fuck, sorry. I didn’t mean to sound like a petulant child.”

Quentin wrapped his arms around Toby and kissed the shell of his ear. "It's okay, Toby."

"What's wrong with me?"

"Sub drop is different for everyone. It's normal to feel emotional. And if you like those ears, getting a matching tail will be easy enough."

Toby took a deep breath and nodded.

"How are the shoulders?"

"Better."

"Okay, then it's bath time for my dirty little kitten." Quentin had Toby scoot forward to give him space to climb off the bed, then he scooped Toby up into his arms, making Toby yelp and cling to him.

"I can walk, you know. I'm a grown man."

"Yes, you are. And you're my submissive kitten boyfriend and I want to take care of you and you're going to let me. Because you like it, and I like it, and it makes us both happy."

"Would you let me walk if I were a puppy?"

"Nope." Quentin answered. "I'm in charge and unless you safeword, I'm carrying you the fifteen feet to the bathroom. Quentin set Toby down on his feet. "Shower or bath?"

"Shower, please."

"You can put your ears on the counter, so they don't get wet." Quentin said. He started the water and adjusted it to the perfect temperature, then guided Toby into it and stood him under the spray.

"Did you want to be a puppy?" Quentin asked as he grabbed a loofah and squirted body wash into it. Maybe Toby would like to bring his own shampoos and stuff over one day, but Quentin liked it when Toby smelled like him.

"Not really, to be honest. I know pups are popular, but I've always been more of a cat person. Did you want me to try? Because I can. I could be a good pup. I'm sure there are other animals. I saw a cute cow costume once."

Quentin let out a laugh. It was louder and sharper than he'd intended. "Cows are definitely off the table. One day I want to take you to meet Kelly, my ex-husband. We'll go to his house, and you can see why I will never ever want to dress you up like livestock."

"Is your ex a cow?"

"No, but his kitchen is cow-themed. Towels. Teapots. Cookie jars. A spoon rest. Salt and pepper shakers. A lot of it belonged to his grandparents and he just sort of kept the collection going."

"That's sweet though." Toby leaned into Quentin for support as he ran the loofah all over Toby's body, lifting his arms one at a time and washing them. "I wish I had something like that, a family connection of some kind. My family and I aren't close."

"Most of the time when people I know say that it's like a code and what they're really saying is that their family is homophobic."

"Nah, mom had me young and while that works out well for a lot of people, it didn't go so good for us. I don't want to make it sound like I had a bad life, Mom was okay, just uninterested. We don't talk."

"Do you have any other family?"

"Not really. My grandparents passed when I was in high school, and mom was an only child. I don't know who my dad is. I don't think mom knew either. What about you?" Toby asked, clearly uncomfortable with the current direction of the conversation.

"My family is scattered. Divorced parents who moved to opposite ends of the country. A half-sister who mostly pretends I don't exist."

Toby turned and looked at Quentin with large, glassy eyes. His wet hair plastered to his forehead. "You're alone, like me."

Quentin caught Toby's trembling chin between his finger and his thumb. "I'm not alone because I have you. And we

have our friends. It's not just us." Toby looked at Quentin with a puzzled expression.

"Friends?"

"Rory, Nick, and Andrew. They're your friends, too, now. Andrew especially took a shine to you."

"But they're your friends first. So, they're still your friends."

"Then introduce me to your friends."

Toby's chin trembled. "You are my friend. You're my whole social circle. Except Dylan, but he lives in the UK. He's a different sort of friend. It doesn't count."

"Do you talk to him?"

"Yes."

"Do you like talking to him? And does he like talking to you?"

"Well... yeah. Of course."

"And you tell him things, things you'd tell a friend."

Toby nodded.

"Then it counts. And don't let anyone tell you any different. But if you wanted, I could take you to the club and maybe you could make friends with some guys all on your own. I'd be there to support you and be with you, but you could mingle and get to know some people. If you really want to expand your social circle. I love being your friend, but I don't want to be your only friend. I want you to be happy, and that means making sure you have a support network outside of this relationship."

"I'd like that." Toby sighed against Quentin, and it felt like all the tension in his body left. Tension that Quentin hadn't even been aware of. "I've never been to a club before."

"We can invite Rory and his boys along if you'd like. That way, you'll have a few familiar faces there. It might seem less daunting that way."

“Can we?”

“Of course. I was hoping you’d get along with them. I wanted to take you to the club. It’s been forever since I’ve even been there, but I didn’t want you to feel overwhelmed or out of place. I figured a few familiar faces would help.”

“You really want to take me to the club?”

Quentin brushed a kiss against Toby’s mouth as he drew him close. “Of course I do.”

“What if I mess up? What if I embarrass you?”

“First off, not possible. Second, not possible. I’d never be embarrassed to have you next to me. Or at my feet. In my arms. Doesn’t matter. I want you with me. I want to go back, and I want to go with you.”

“Me?” Toby looked at Quentin, hope overflowing out of him.

“You. No one else has ever made me feel as you make me feel, Toby.”

“And how do I make you feel?” Toby licked his lips and held Quentin’s gaze.

Quentin dropped the loofah and pulled Toby tight against him. “I feel more myself with you than I’ve ever felt before. Whenever you look at me, I feel lucky to be noticed by you. When you’re in a room, I want to be touching you and when you’re not in a room, I want to find you. Put into the simplest terms possible, I’m head over heels in love with you, Toby.”

Toby let out a high-pitched squeak and flung his arms around Quentin’s neck. He smashed their mouths together as he vibrated in Quentin’s arms. Quentin’s only choice, of course, was to kiss him back. He took over, plunging his tongue into Toby’s mouth, pushing him up against the wall of the shower as he pinned him there against the tile.

Toby tried to writhe against him, but Quentin ignored his advance. Instead, he savored the feeling of intimacy between them. The way Toby felt comfortable enough to whimper in protest when he didn’t get his way and the way he softened

when he must have realized that more sex wasn't on the agenda just yet.

They kissed until Quentin's face started to ache and he pulled away. Toby sank his hands into Quentin's hair and pulled him down for one more brief kiss.

"Say it again, Quentin. Please."

"I'm in love with you." Quentin dug his hands into Toby's hips and said it once more just because he could. "I love you."

"I love you, too." Toby blinked up at him and a broad, beaming smile broke out, stretching from ear to ear. "Holy shit, we're in love."

Quentin kissed the tip of Toby's nose. "Yes, kitten. We're in love."

"We need to celebrate." Toby wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"We can celebrate with food and drink, first and foremost. Other celebratory acts will wait until you're properly fed and hydrated."

Toby tried to school his expression, but he couldn't wipe the smile from his face. "Yes, Sir."

TOBY

“ARE you sure you don’t want to come with me?” Quentin put his hand on the wall next to Toby’s head and leaned in close. “Kelly’s been dying to meet you.”

Toby nodded and lifted himself up on his toes to kiss Quentin. “I’m sure. Soon, I promise.”

“Not until you’re ready.”

Toby nodded and stole another kiss. “If you don’t leave, you’re going to be late.”

It was strange to see Quentin pout. He was taller and broader and more imposing than Toby could ever hope to be, but he managed to look adorably put out.

“I’ll meet him soon. Maybe we could meet him in a group setting, so it would feel more like we’re just bumping into him and less like an interrogation.”

Quentin furrowed his brow. “Kelly would never interrogate you.”

Toby’s heart thumped wildly in his chest. “My mind knows this, but I’m nervous. He’s important to you.”

“You’re more important.” Quentin sighed into a kiss before pulling away. “I need to go.”

“You act like we’re never going to see each other again. I’m literally going home with you tonight.” Toby had been spending a lot of time at Quentin’s. His place was bigger, and he was the one who drove to work while Toby took transit. It

only made sense. Maybe one day it would be their home, but that was a dream he didn't dare whisper.

A sudden thought that over time Quentin might think him too needy. Too greedy. Too clingy. Quentin loved him, but would he get tired of him? What would he think if he knew Toby wanted to go home with him every night and sit at his feet?

“Ugh. Okay. I'm really going this time.” Quentin pushed away from Toby. As he dropped his hand, he let it brush against Toby's. The brief contact felt like a silent declaration of love.

Love. Quentin fucking loved him. Toby still couldn't believe it somehow. And sometimes if he thought about it for too long, it made his chest hurt. He'd somehow gotten Quentin to fall for him, but now he had to keep him. It didn't seem possible.

“Hey, you okay?” Quentin furrowed his brow in concern.

“I'm fine.” Toby forced a smile. “I'm going to get a sandwich and a coffee. Say hello to Kelly for me.”

Reluctantly, Quentin left. He was going to be late to meet Kelly for lunch, but it honestly wasn't the first time. With Quentin gone, Toby lined up and bought his sandwich and a latte. He took it upstairs to the lunchroom at his office and was just sitting down to eat when his phone buzzed.

Toby swiped to answer the unfamiliar number. He hated leaving things to go to voicemail and having to call people back if he could simply just answer the phone to begin with.

“Hello?” Toby said.

A throat cleared. “Hello, uh, is this Toby Wade?”

“It is.”

“Oh um. I didn't think you'd answer, to be honest.”

“Can I ask who's calling?” Toby frowned as an ominous feeling built in his stomach.

“You don't know me, but I knew Ron.”

“Oh.” Toby’s appetite vanished. “I’m sorry for your loss. Can I get your name? How did you know Ron?”

The throat cleared again. Whoever was on the phone was clearly struggling.

“My name is Brian. Ron was my boyfriend.”

“I’m sorry. You must really miss him.”

“Thanks. Uh, I was hoping to have met you at the celebration of life, but you never came. His mom said you were invited.”

Toby thought for sure he was going to be sick. “I haven’t had contact with Ron since our breakup. I almost went, but it felt wrong of me to go. Like I’d be intruding.”

“I understand, Toby. It’s fine. I just wanted to thank you.”

Toby couldn’t move or speak for several agonizingly long seconds. “Thank me? For what?”

“Ron was more than my boyfriend. He was my Dom. He talked about you a lot, and fondly. He said he didn’t quite get what you’d wanted from him until it was too late.”

“Your... what?” Toby’s stomach dropped, and his face heated beyond the point of comfort. The room spun and his mouth watered like he was going to throw up. Ron had told him that stuff wasn’t him. It wasn’t his scene. He didn’t do those things, but what he’d really meant was he didn’t want them with Toby. It wasn’t the scene he didn’t want. It was Toby.

He shouldn’t care. He was in love with Quentin now and his relationship with Ron was what felt like a lifetime ago. He wasn’t even the same person he’d been back then. But it stung in ways he didn’t expect.

“Toby? Are you there?”

“Yeah.” Toby forced the word out. Shoving his food to the side, he closed his eyes and flattened his empty hand on the table. The cool surface helped to ground him. “Why did you want to thank me?”

“You were the one who introduced him to the lifestyle. My time with Ron was short, but he was,” Brian stopped and cleared his throat. “I can’t explain what you did for him. He thought so highly of you. I thought you’d like to know that he still has the pictures from the Halloween party you went to. If you’d like, I could send them to you.”

“Thank you, no. That’s not... I don’t... I need to go.” Toby hung up the phone and dropped it on the table. It clattered noisily and Toby buried his face in his hands and sucked in huge gulping breaths as he tried to get himself under control.

Toby’s phone rang again, and he scrambled to silence it. In his rush, and his emotional distress, he knocked it across the table where it clattered to the floor, where it continued to mock him with its incessant buzzing.

“Hey, Toby. Is something wrong?”

Toby snapped his gaze up and met Mitch’s. He towered over Toby, the picture of concern. His face turned into a frown as he eyed the untouched food and the suddenly silent phone on the floor. Bending over, he scooped the phone up and set it gently on the table. “Toby?”

“I’m not feeling well.” It wasn’t a lie. The phone call from Brian made Toby want to cry until he puked. He’d barely thought of Ron lately, but the phone call had opened all his old wounds and he wanted to be anywhere else.

“I’m calling you a cab on the company account.”

Toby opened his mouth to argue, but a stern look from Mitch had his protest withering before it got started.

“I had things this afternoon. Things to do.” Toby winced, knowing he sounded not like his usual self. Even if he’d really wanted to stay, there was no way Mitch would let him. Not to mention the fact that he felt completely useless, unable to string together a coherent thought or sentence.

“Is there anyone you need me to call? What about that boyfriend of yours?”

Toby shook his head. He didn’t want Quentin to see him like this. Falling apart over an old boyfriend’s new boyfriend

who had just had to go and meddle. Who had to tell him things that Toby hadn't wanted to know. He'd been good with not knowing. The reason he skipped the celebration of life was because he felt like a fraud going and mourning the loss of someone he'd let go of a long time ago.

A voice in the back of his mind screamed at him to call Quentin, but he was with Kelly at lunch. A lunch Toby hadn't wanted to be at. Maybe if he'd have gone, Brian would've hung up and left him alone.

Mitch put a glass of water on the table in front of him. "Drink up."

Toby obeyed by rote. Mitch was his boss, and he had to do what his boss said. The first sip made his stomach clench, but he braved another and by the time he'd drunk half, he felt a little better.

"Okay, let's get you downstairs and into the cab."

"I can get there. I'm okay. I can probably work. I'm not sick, just..."

"Not another word, Toby. You're taking the rest of the day off. Go home and relax. Let me know if you're coming in tomorrow."

"I'll be here. I'm fine. I promise."

"Mmhm. You're not fine, but nice try." Mitch had stopped looming over him and had dropped into a chair next to Toby. "Is there anything you need from your desk?"

Toby shook his head, then he patted his pockets to make sure. The little voice in the back of his head screamed at him to call Quentin, but he was at lunch and Toby wanted to be alone with his thoughts. Besides, his boss had told him to go home. He knew that was a shit excuse and that he was being a dick, but he couldn't make himself call Quentin and admit that his worst fear had come true. He hadn't been enough for Ron.

If he hadn't been enough for Ron, then what made Toby think even for a second that he would be enough for Quentin? Toby stood on shaky legs and pocketed his phone.

“The cab should be there by the time you get to the curb. Did you want me to walk you down?”

“I’m okay. I can stay and work. I really am fine.”

“Toby, I love you like a kid brother and if my kid brother looked the way you look, I’d send him home, too. Can I help in any way?”

“No, it’s uh... just... I got some news.” Toby furrowed his brow. News wasn’t the right word, but it would have to do. Words escaped him. They were too hard. Talking felt impossible, like every syllable he uttered was a battle.

“Take all the time you need.”

“Thanks. Uh. I’ll go. Thanks.” Toby made it to the street, poured himself into the back of the cab, and gave the driver his address. The minute he walked in the door, Toby regretted coming home. He regretted not calling Quentin and begging for him to come.

Toby loosened his tie, which was actually one of Quentin’s. He only wore Quentin’s ties now. Toby sank to the floor and pulled his phone out of his pocket. He had a few text messages from the number he recognized as Brian’s, but he didn’t read them. Maybe Quentin would.

With shaking hands, Toby dialed Quentin’s number. If he couldn’t come, then Toby needed to hear his voice.

“Hey, Toby, miss me already?” Quentin’s voice was a balm on Toby’s wounded soul.

“Hey, uhm. Quentin...”

“Toby? What’s wrong? You sound strange. Are you okay?”

“I’m at home. Mitch—Mitch sent me home.” Toby squeezed his eyes shut.

“Are you in trouble? Did something happen with your job?” There was some noise in the background. “I’m on my way to you right now, but I need to know what happened.”

“I’m not in trouble.” A knot of tension loosened enough for Toby to take in a deep breath. “I just need you.”

“You’ve got me. I’m on the way, okay? Stay put and don’t move.”

“Okay.” Toby took a deep breath. “Quentin?”

“Yes, kitten?”

“Ron had a submissive. He... he called me.”

“Take a deep breath, Toby. Close your eyes. I want you to count to one hundred, then when you get there, I want you to count backwards to zero. Keep doing that until I get there. Breathe and count. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Toby closed his eyes and clung to the phone. And because Quentin told him to, he started counting.

QUENTIN

MAKING IT ACROSS TOWN, Quentin had probably broken no less than six different traffic laws, but luck was on his side at least a little because he didn't get pulled over. He didn't wait for the elevator when he got to Toby's building. Once Toby buzzed him in, Quentin took the stairs and was knocking on Toby's door only moments later.

The door opened and Toby used it like a shield, blocking himself from view. Quentin burst into Toby's apartment, shut the door, and pulled Toby into his arms. "Care to tell me what's going on?" Quentin kept his voice soft, although severely annoyed with Toby. But that was a bridge they'd cross later.

"Ron's boyfriend tracked me down. I don't even know how he got my number. Maybe Ron's mom. I texted her before the celebration of life."

Toby trembled in his arms and Quentin held him tighter. "Let's get comfortable somewhere."

Quentin wasn't asking. Toby was falling apart, and he needed Quentin to step in and hold him together. He led Toby down the hall to his bedroom and he piled into bed with him, not bothering to burrow under the covers, because they wouldn't be staying.

"Tell me what happened. Don't leave a thing out."

"Nothing happened, really. Brian, that's his name. He called and told me about him and Ron. He thanked me," Toby said incredulously. "He said Ron didn't get it at first but then

he did and he was Brian's Dom and I shouldn't care that he had that with someone else and that I was the one who introduced him to something he said he didn't want. But all he meant was that he didn't want it with me. I shouldn't care because I love you, but I wasn't enough for him." Toby's shoulders shook, and he clung to Quentin, trembling and sobbing. "I wasn't enough."

Quentin wrapped his arms around Toby and let him cry it out. "I know Ron used to be important to you, but you have to trust me when I say you were enough."

"Then why didn't he want me like that?" Toby sniffled. Quentin hated how destroyed he sounded, but it was a pain Quentin thought he might understand. It was the same pain that festered in him after Kelly left. Knowing that he'd been too much for Kelly. That their pieces hadn't fit and instead of smoothing out each other's edges, they'd only bashed around and made them more jagged.

"People evolve, Toby. Despite our best efforts sometimes. We end up doing things we never thought we would. Kelly and I never should've gotten married. We were far younger than we are now, and we were in love, but we both knew it wasn't enough. That deep down, we were too different. We tried to marry our incompatibilities away. Quite simply, Toby, we fucked up."

Toby sniffled again and took a deep breath. He yawned when it shuddered out of him. When they finished, Quentin intended to take him home and put him to bed.

"No offense, but I'm not sure I understand where you're going with this."

"You and Ron weren't compatible in the way you wanted to be, and that's no fault of yours. Or Ron's. It just is. It's a truth that you don't like admitting, but that doesn't make it less true."

"Ouch." Toby burrowed closer like he wanted to climb inside Quentin for protection.

“That doesn’t mean you weren’t enough. It means you were meant for someone else. That’s why it didn’t work with Kelly and me. Not because I was too much, but because I was meant for someone else.”

Toby was quiet for so long; Quentin might’ve thought him to be asleep if he hadn’t been dragging his finger around in circles on Quentin’s chest.

“Were you meant for me?” Toby shifted in Quentin’s arms and looked up at him with hope and anguish in his expression. Toby was sweet and earnest. Quentin loved that about him. He adored the way Toby wore his emotions on his sleeve. There was never any guessing about his mood that way. He especially appreciated the way Toby allowed himself to lean on Quentin when things were hard or uncomfortable.

“Yes, Toby. I was meant for you.” Quentin cupped Toby’s cheek and gently sealed their mouths together in a kiss that was gentle and cotton-candy soft.

“I’m sorry about this afternoon. I didn’t expect Brian to call. He texted a bunch after I hung up, too.”

“What did they say?”

Toby shrugged and went back to using Quentin’s chest for a pillow. “I didn’t read them. I’d sort of hoped you would. I understand everything you said, and I think I know what you meant, but... it’s going to take a while for me to believe it.”

“I don’t mind reminding you. As often as you need me to.”

“Quentin, am I in trouble?”

Quentin smiled. “Should you be?”

“I didn’t call you. Mitch even asked if I wanted to.”

“And you said no.”

Toby nodded. His misery poured off him in waves.

“You should’ve called me. I’m not only your Dom, but I’m your boyfriend. I want to be there for you. So yes, you’re in trouble. I think, because you didn’t ask me for help when you

should've, that you need to learn to ask me for things. Sit up so I can look at you better.”

Toby wriggled around until he sat cross-legged on the bed, facing Quentin. His eyes were puffy and red, his face splotchy, but the thing which bothered Quentin the most was how defeated Toby looked.

“You didn't reach out when you knew you wanted to. You felt like you needed me but denied yourself my help. As a result, you're going to have to ask permission to do anything. Until I say otherwise.”

Toby opened his mouth. “I thought you'd just spank me or something.”

“Well, I think you like spankings, so that's hardly a punishment. I want to teach you to rely on me, Toby. I know you're used to going it alone, but you don't need to do that anymore. You knew you should've called me. There was no need for you to suffer through a cab ride all the way across town by yourself. So until I say otherwise, you're going to ask me whenever you want to do something. If you need the bathroom. Or if you're hungry. You're not going to so much as blink without asking me first.”

“I understand. But what about work?”

“I don't plan on interfering with your job. But you will eat lunch with me and when we're together, the rule applies. It's a punishment, so you can't safeword your way out of it, but you can safeword if you need to discuss things or we need to re-evaluate the situation. Do you have any questions?”

“Just one.” Toby reached for Quentin but paused. “Are you still taking me to the club?”

“Certainly. Why wouldn't I? Because you made one mistake?”

Toby nodded and Quentin reached for him.

“I'll take you tonight if it makes you happy. I'm not mad at you, or disappointed in you. I was worried about you, that's all. I want to prove to you that you can rely on me. Did you want to go tonight?”

Toby shook his head. “Not tonight. Tonight, I want to go to your place and sit at your feet and not think. Can we do that?”

“Yes, Toby. We can do that.”

And that’s how Toby came to be sitting on the floor at Quentin’s feet, his fluffy cat ears atop his head. He leaned against Quentin’s leg and was practically dozing as Quentin stroked his fingers through Toby’s hair. So far, he’d taken his punishment well. He asked if he could wear his ears and if he could sit at Quentin’s feet.

Actually, he’d asked to kneel, but Quentin tossed a pillow on the floor and told him to get comfortable because he’d be sitting there until bedtime. Toby reached to adjust his ears, then thought better of it and looked at Quentin.

“Can you make sure they’re straight for me?”

Quentin adjusted the ears and stole a kiss. Toby sank down onto the pillow and shifted around for a few minutes before leaning into Quentin’s leg. Quentin had spent the better part of an hour staring at the television without watching it and petting Toby.

“Sir?” Toby turned his head and looked back at Quentin. “Can I use the bathroom?”

“You can. Make sure you wash your hands after.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Toby groaned as he unfolded his legs and stood.

“When you get back, I want you to curl up on the couch and keep me company from here while I cook us dinner.”

“Can I help?” Sometimes they cooked together. Neither of them would win awards for their skills in the kitchen, but they had fun, talking and chopping and preparing meals together they saw online.

“Not tonight. Tonight, I want you to sit and let me take care of you.”

When Quentin stood, Toby still hadn’t moved, and he took the liberty of grabbing a handful of ass.

“If you’re going to pout like that, maybe my kitten also needs a spanking. Will that make him less grumpy?”

“He isn’t grumpy.” Toby’s pout deepened.

Quentin patted Toby’s ass, then stepped around him and into the kitchen. “I thought you had to use the bathroom?”

He heard Toby sigh and then shuffle down the hallway. The door closed with a quiet snick and Quentin braced himself on the counter. He took a deep breath and gave himself shit for doubting himself. He was doing good. Toby was responding well to his punishment. There was no reason to think he was going overboard.

He remembered the conversation he’d had with Rory when Andrew and Toby had stepped outside. With Toby out of earshot, he’d been able to express to Rory his fears about being too much. Of taking too many liberties and pushing Toby into things he didn’t want to be in.

Rory had told him in no uncertain terms that he was being stupid and letting the past dictate his current relationship. Toby wasn’t Kelly. They were two different people with two different sets of needs and so long as it was Toby who Quentin was basing his decisions on, he’d be fine.

“Sir?”

Quentin startled at the sound of Toby’s voice and turned to face him. “Yes?”

“Can I have a blanket? It would make sitting on the couch without you warmer.”

Quentin’s heart soared at Toby’s easy acceptance of the situation. His willingness to try new things and let Quentin lead him. The doubt that had flashed in Quentin’s core quickly got doused. He didn’t expect it to be gone forever, but right now, he felt okay.

“Of course you can have a blanket. I’ll get one for you.”

TOBY

TOBY TRIED to think of what it would be like to be a cat full time, but he couldn't picture it. What did cats do all day? Sleep and lick their ass? That didn't sound like any kind of life Toby would want. Maybe the part where he was flexible enough to lick his ass, but as it was, it was torture to sit curled up on Quentin's couch and watch him cook.

He bit his tongue to prevent himself from asking if he could help. The answer would be no, and it would only prove that he wasn't willing to take his punishment. As far as punishments went, it wasn't what Toby imagined it to be. Most of the time he thought about being spanked, but he supposed this made more sense. The punishment certainly fit the crime.

Toby pulled the blanket up higher around him and held it tight in his fists. "What are you cooking?"

Quentin glanced over at him; a half-smile crept up his face. "You'll see."

Toby shifted around, intending to get up and maybe wander over and see for himself. He got as far as putting a foot on the floor before Quentin glanced his way.

"Did you ask to get off the couch?"

"I—" Toby snapped his mouth shut and tucked his leg back under the blanket. "No, Sir." Toby flopped over in a dramatic fashion. He wasn't aware that he'd drifted off until Quentin was there, brushing the hair off his forehead, talking to him in low tones.

"Hey, sleepy. Ready for dinner?"

Toby wriggled around and untangled himself from the blanket. He rubbed at his face and tried to make sense of everything. “How long was I asleep?”

“Just long enough for me to finish dinner. Come, eat with me.” Quentin took Toby’s hand and helped him to his feet.

Quentin pulled a chair out for Toby and had him sit down. He returned a moment later with two plates. The sight of the steak had Toby’s mouth watering. With it, Quentin had made baby potatoes and a simple Caesar salad.

Toby looked down at the table and picked up his fork. “This looks amazing.” He paused before stabbing a leaf of romaine lettuce. “Can I?”

“Yes, Toby. You can eat.” Quentin answered with gentle amusement.

Toby smiled at Quentin and dug into his salad. “You made it with extra dressing.” Toby said after he’d eaten his first bite. The steak on his plate looked juicy and amazing but when Toby went to cut into it, he realized he had no knife.

“Um, Quentin?”

“Yes, Toby?”

“I don’t have a knife.” Toby scrunched his brow.

Quentin glanced at him, holding eye contact for half a second as he slid his knife into his own steak. “Oh? You don’t?”

Toby’s cheeks were suddenly lava hot. “How am I supposed to eat it? Can I have a knife?” Toby shifted in his seat.

“No, I don’t think you need a knife.”

“Then how am I supposed to eat it?” Toby frowned at his dinner. He stuffed another bite of salad in his mouth.

Quentin didn’t answer him. Instead, he cut another bite off his own steak and brought it slowly to his mouth. Toby realized then what he’d have to do. It made him feel foolish to have to ask for help with such a simple task, but if he

attempted to cut it with his fork, or god-forbid eat it with his hands and tear chunks off with his teeth like a feral animal, he'd make a mess. No, the easiest thing to do would be to ask for help.

Toby finished his salad first. Then started on his potatoes. Quentin sat quietly the whole time. He eyed Toby from time to time, waiting for him to break down and ask. The longer Toby put it off, the more time it gave him to sit there and feel increasingly foolish. He shouldn't need to ask for help. He could get up, walk to the kitchen and get his own knife.

But he'd chosen this and remembering that settled something in him that had jostled loose when Brian had ambushed him. Toby had made a choice to be with someone like Quentin. A man who was more than a boyfriend. Someone who wanted to be bothered with Toby and all his baggage. Someone who wanted to help him, even with something as simple as cutting his steak to prove a point.

"Quentin?" Toby cleared his throat. "Sir?"

"Yes?" Quentin had nearly finished his own meal, and he looked up from his nearly empty plate, pinning Toby in place with his heavy gaze.

"Can you cut my steak for me? Please?"

Quentin's smile was lightning quick, and he pushed his plate aside, then tugged Toby's across the table and started cutting it into bite-sized pieces. Part of Toby wanted to feel stupid about it. He hadn't needed help to cut his food since he was a little kid. But Quentin wasn't doing it to make him feel stupid. He wanted Toby to learn that no matter the request, Quentin would help. It could be something huge, like leaving work to come rescue Toby from what had likely been a panic attack. Or something small, like cutting his food. He wanted Toby to know he'd be there for him.

Quentin shoved his chair back and patted his lap. "Come sit."

Toby didn't have to be told twice. He left his chair and climbed gingerly onto Quentin's lap. It was awkward at first,

then Quentin wrapped one of his deceptively powerful arms around Toby and shifted him around until he had Toby where he wanted him.

Quentin stabbed a piece of the steak and held the fork out for Toby. He started to reach for it, but Quentin pulled it away. Getting the hint, Toby folded his hands in his lap and took the offered bite with his mouth.

“Good boy.”

Toby chewed and swallowed before he could comment.

“I like it when you say I’m good. I don’t like feeling like I did earlier, like I did when I let you down.” Quentin opened his mouth to talk, but Toby pressed on. “I know why you’re doing this, making me ask for things. I get it.”

“Good, but that doesn’t mean we’re stopping just yet.” Quentin stabbed another bite and offered it to Toby. The steak practically melted on Toby’s tongue. Thick and juicy and full of flavor, it was easily the best steak he’d ever eaten.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call you. I wasn’t okay.”

“And how are you now?”

Toby took a deep breath. “I’m better? I don’t know. It’s weird to think about. That I cared that much about it. He’s not even alive anymore.” Toby’s voice caught, and he steadied by leaning into Quentin. “I don’t feel like I have a right to be sad about it sometimes. Other people who still knew him have that right, but it doesn’t feel like I should, you know? We hadn’t talked since the breakup.”

“You’re allowed to feel how you feel, Toby. No one can take that from you.”

“He sent me some texts after I hung up on him. I think he got my number from Ron’s mom, because I’d texted her my condolences.” Toby sniffled and let his head rest against Quentin’s shoulder. “I don’t want to read them. Can you?”

“Did you want me to tell you what they say?”

“Only if you think it’s something I should know.”

“Get me your phone.” Quentin put the fork down and pushed the plate of half-eaten steak to the side.

Toby took his phone out of his pocket and handed it to Quentin. He was proud that he did so without his hands shaking. “The unlock code is four-four-seven-nine-one-four.”

Toby closed his eyes and let Quentin read the bothersome text messages. After a minute, he felt Quentin shift and heard his phone get set down on the table.

“He apologized about seven times and offered to send the pictures, if you wanted them.”

“I don’t.” Toby was quick to answer. A tear slipped from the corner of his eye, and he tried to swipe it away without Quentin noticing.

“Are you sure?”

“They’re stupid Halloween pictures. We’d been dating for a bit, and we decided to do the cute couple thing and have themed costumes and he said if I really wanted him to be my Dom then I had to let him choose the costume. Fucking togas and sandals with those stupid leaf things. He said we could pretend to be Greek gods, but I wanted something more original.” Toby choked on a laugh. “We won an award for the worst costumes. He was so fucking mad.” Tears Toby didn’t ask for tracked down his cheeks. “I don’t even know why I’m crying. I barely ever thought about him.”

“Doesn’t matter why, just let it out.”

Toby wasn’t sure how long he sniffled and sobbed, but it couldn’t have been too long. “Can I go blow my nose?” Toby asked after a particularly unattractive sniffle.

“Of course.” Quentin brushed a kiss against Toby’s forehead, then let him up off his lap. He shuffled his way down the hallway, swiping the last of his tears off his cheeks.

Quentin followed him into the bathroom and Toby turned his head as he tore off a chunk of toilet paper. “I promise I don’t need help to blow my nose, Quentin.” Toby’s smile felt shaky and fake, but he wanted to be okay. He was tired of thinking of the things Brian had said, which were meant to be

nice, but had him feeling as if he'd been punched with broken glass.

"I'm pouring you a bath." Quentin bent over and adjusted the water before dropping the plug in the bottom. He turned to Toby and started undoing the buttons of his shirt.

"I can undress myself." Toby protested, but made no move to stop Quentin from stripping him out of his shirt.

"Good for you." The hint of a smile proved to Toby that Quentin wasn't actually mad at him or upset. This was a dominance thing. Quentin wanted total control, and Toby was only too happy to give it to him.

Once Toby was all naked and the tub full, he stared at the water, then looked back at Quentin. He gave Quentin his best puppy-dog eyes.

"Can you help me into the bath?"

Quentin's hand felt massive when he cupped Toby's elbow and held him steady as Toby lifted one foot over and plunged it into the water. He hissed through his gritted teeth.

"Too hot?"

Toby gave it a second before he answered. "No, I think it'll be okay." He stepped over with the other foot and sank down into the water. Quentin stripped naked and slid into the tub behind Toby. When Quentin urged him to lie back against his chest, Toby did so with pleasure. His tangled emotions had smoothed out somewhat, allowing Toby to take his first deep breath since that afternoon.

"Thank you." Toby tangled their hands together and wrapped Quentin's arms around himself.

"You're welcome."

"Quentin?"

"Yes, Toby?"

"When we get out of the bath, can you text Brian and ask him to not contact me anymore? It sounds petty, and it makes me feel petty, but I feel like he's trying to get something from

me I don't have to give. I don't want to be his friend. I don't want to sit and compare notes with him. He knew a different man than I did, and that's okay. But... I need him to leave me alone."

"I've got you, kitten."

Feeling the truth of Quentin's words in all the ways he meant them, Toby exhaled a sigh of relief and shut his eyes.

QUENTIN

QUENTIN SWEEPED into the room and held a gift bag out to Toby. His eyes widened in surprise and he looked at Quentin as he took it. “What’s this for?”

“Open it and see.”

Toby sat on the edge of Quentin’s couch and set the gift bag on the floor between his feet. Quentin watched as Toby carefully pulled out the crumpled tissue paper—wrapping gifts wasn’t his specialty—and set it aside.

He watched Toby’s face transform from a furrowed brow of curiosity to bald-faced joy.

“It’s perfect.” Toby pulled the extra-long, extra fluffy tail out of the bag and ran his fingers through the fur.

“Keep digging,” Quentin urged, not hiding the smile from his face.

Toby pulled out two pairs of extra short shorts. He eyed one curiously, and his face turned crimson when he realized what they were for.

“Oh my god, Quentin. They have a tail hole.” He didn’t think Toby’s face had gone so red before, but the flush of embarrassment crept up to the top of his ears and crawled down his throat, vanishing under his clothes.

“I didn’t know if you’d be comfortable in them tonight, but maybe another night.”

Toby’s shoulders rose to his ears as he sucked in a deep breath. “I—tonight? As in, do I want to wear a kitty tail butt

plug in my ass when go to a sex club for the first time ever?” Toby put the shorts on his lap and smoothed the fabric with his hands. “I don’t feel ready for that.”

“Then we’ll save that for here.” Quentin wasn’t upset at all about keeping that little outfit behind closed doors. As it was, he was already feeling possessive of Toby and the idea of him wearing short shorts, ears and not much else he wanted to keep private. Part of him wanted to keep Toby on a short leash, but half the point of going to the club was so he could mingle and make friends and expand his social circle.

“Go on, then. Get dressed and we can head out. Rory promised to be there with Nick and Andrew by the time we got there.”

Toby slipped into the bathroom to change, and Quentin took the opportunity to open the bottom drawer of his dresser and grab another surprise for Toby. He’d spent hours online scouring the web for the perfect one and it almost hadn’t arrived in time. But the craftsmanship that went into the item was perfect.

The bathroom door opened, and Toby appeared with his arms wrapped tightly around himself. Quentin raked his gaze down Toby’s body. The shorts left nothing to the imagination.

“I hope the club is warm because I am going to freeze if it’s not.”

“The club is plenty warm, I promise. And if you get cold, you can always ask me to warm you up.”

Toby’s gaze heated. “Okay.” He spotted the gift box in Quentin’s hands. “What’s that?”

Quentin’s heart hammered so loud he was sure Toby could hear it clear across the room. He wasn’t afraid that Toby wouldn’t accept his gift, but he was terrified of what it would mean to try to live up to it. To not let him down the way he’d let Kelly down. After taking a deep breath, he crossed the room and held his hand out. Toby slipped his hand into Quentin’s and held on tightly. Clearly, he was also nervous about the contents of the container.

He steered Toby to the bed and sat him down. Toby's eyes widened when Quentin kneeled in front of him.

"Are you?" Toby's hands fluttered around in the air, and he looked ten shades too green for Quentin's liking.

Quentin put him out of his obvious misery and opened the box. He saw the relief, the embarrassment, and maybe a hint of disappointment in Toby's eyes. Then the adoration washed in and Toby's face was naked with joy.

Carefully, Quentin lifted the collar, and the coiled up leash out of the box. "Every kitten needs a collar, so people know who he belongs to."

"And a leash." Toby gently brushed his finger over the soft leather. "It's like butter. Or satin. I've never felt leather this soft."

"My kitten is a delicate creature. He needed something that would suit him."

Toby pulled his hands back and folded them in his lap. He wrung his fingers together. "I know the difference between a play collar and, like... a real one. And I won't be mad or sad or anything if this is just for play."

"Toby, listen to me."

Toby's gaze snapped up to meet his. That's what he loved about Toby. His eagerness to obey and listen. That he wanted to be good, to be enough. He gave everything over to Quentin every time, no questions asked. The naked trust he put in Quentin was the greatest gift he could ask for.

"When I first thought of getting a collar for you, it was under the pretense that it would be just for you to try on. A prop. A thing to add to our play. You seem to love being a kitten, even if you don't chase yarn around the house or meow or eat off a dish. The kitten ears do something for you. They calm you and I wanted to add to that. To give you something else. But I find I can't do anything halfway with you, Toby. If it would please you, I'd like this collar to be real. I'd like you to wear it knowing that I'm yours and you're mine, even when you can't wear it."

“I love wearing your ties.” Toby whispered. “And I like the ears because they make me feel you chose me, like you want to keep me. The way people choose their pets. I like the idea that out of everyone you could have, you chose me. The ears are fun and cute, and I like wearing them. But this—” Toby reached for the collar and gently stroked his finger over the leather again.

“I do choose you, Toby. Every day since I met you. Even before. When you first showed up in my building at work. You looked at me and you smiled, and I’ve been stuck on you ever since.” Quentin put the box aside and pulled the collar out. Toby closed his eyes and sat as still as a statue, as if he flinched Quentin might change his mind. *Fat fucking chance.*

“I didn’t know what I wanted until I found you.” Quentin draped the collar around Toby’s neck and tried a couple of holes before finding the one that felt perfect before he fastened the buckle. He made sure it wasn’t too tight or too loose, then he cupped Toby’s cheeks and pulled him into a kiss. Toby melted into him, sinking into the kiss, letting Quentin lead, but kissing him back with equal interest.

Toby mewled when Quentin took his lower lip between his teeth and gently bit. He pulled away, although Toby chased his mouth, eagerly asking for more.

“We need to finish getting ready.” Quentin stood with a little more effort than he’d have liked. His knees weren’t as young as they used to be and not for the first time, he was glad that he wasn’t the one who generally kneeled. But for Toby, Quentin would do anything.

Toby slipped a pair of track pants on over his shorts and slid into one of Quentin’s t-shirts. It was almost comically big on him, but Quentin thought it was easily the sexiest thing he’d ever seen. He prowled over to Toby and clipped the leash onto the collar. Holding it tight, he used it to pull Toby up onto his toes and into a searing kiss.

Toby flailed until his hands came to rest on Quentin’s chest, then he sighed and closed the rest of the gaps between

their bodies, plastering himself to Quentin, grinding his erection against Quentin's in a not-at-all subtle way.

He pouted adorably when Quentin broke the kiss.

“Ready, kitten?”

Toby's nostrils flared, and he sank back down to his natural height. “As ready as I'm going to get.”

“Remember that we can leave whenever you want.”

“I know.” Toby smiled sweetly. His eyes crinkled at the corners, proving that he wasn't that much younger than Quentin. “You've gone over this with me. I feel good about going. Am I nervous? Yes, of course I am, but I trust you to look after me.”

Toby's words swirled around in Quentin's mind all the way to the club. In the locker rooms Toby stripped out of his shirt and pants, leaving him wearing those sinful, skin tight shorts, fluffy ears, and the leather that tethered them together.

Quentin started for the doors that connected the locker room to the club and Toby reached for him, putting his hand on Quentin's arm.

“Do I look okay?” Toby's ears were crimson. “Am I really going to meet everyone when I'm half naked?”

“Toby, breathe.” Quentin had worn a simple white button up. He unrolled the sleeves and took it off, then carefully dressed Toby in it. He left it unbuttoned, but he let the sleeves long and they dangled down past Toby's fingertips.

Toby appraised the situation, eyeing himself, then Quentin. He wrinkled his brow. “I'm not so sure I like you shirtless, either.”

“I'll be fine.”

“People will look at you.”

“Yes, they will. And they'll see how lucky I am to be head over heels in love with the most gorgeous, sweetest man in the room.”

Toby's jealousy evaporated, but Quentin took careful note of the fact that his kitten had teeth.

"Well, when you put it like that, how can I possibly argue?"

"You can't. Now be a good kitten and take a deep breath. Everyone is going to love you."

"Not as much as you do." The sparkle returned to Toby's eyes.

"No one will ever love you as much as I do." Quentin kissed him until he was breathless. Then, before Toby could think or fret anymore, he led him out into the club.

Toby glued himself to Quentin's side like a frightened cat and Quentin draped an arm around him. "You're wearing my collar, my leash, and my shirt. No one is going to mistreat you or look at you in any way that's unwelcome."

"You came." A familiar voice sounded, and Quentin turned to find Andrew walking toward them. His outfit was notable by its absence and he glanced at Toby, who wore an expression of shock before he smoothed it into something less open-mouthed.

"Andrew, hi."

Andrew was in a skimpy pair of shorts and a rope harness, courtesy of Nick, no doubt. The rope was tied in an intricate pattern that Quentin couldn't begin to replicate.

"I'm glad you're here. I managed to convince Xavier to bring Everett, his partner. I think you'll like them." Andrew looked at Quentin. "Permission to borrow your submissive, Sir?"

Quentin caught Toby's chin and cradled it with his thumb and forefinger. He swept a kiss against Toby's lips as he unclipped the leash from the collar. "Go make some friends. If you need me, I'll be watching."

Toby looked uncertain for a moment, then Andrew took Toby by the hand and led him across the room to where a

familiar couple sat. Everett's platinum blonde hair was easily spotted. Toby looked back and Quentin blew him a kiss.

"Well, that was sweet." Rory slid his hand into the crook of Quentin's arm. "We have a table just over here. You'll be able to keep a close eye on your little pet, I promise."

"He's nervous."

"He's not the only one." Rory said, smoothly guiding Quentin to the table. He gave Quentin the seat that had the best view of Toby.

"Andrew sure has come into his own." Quentin commented on the way Andrew smiled and eagerly towed Toby around to meet Everett and Xavier. When Quentin first met him, he'd been like Toby. New to the scene and unsure of himself. But now he was confident and open. The change in him was nothing short of remarkable.

"He's made excellent strides. I wish I could take all the credit, but he's done a lot of the work himself. Plus, there is always Nicky and his influence." Rory's eyes always softened when he talked about Andrew and Nick. Had they been having this conversation six months ago, he might have been jealous.

Not anymore. He had Toby. Now he just had to keep him and not make the same mistakes he'd made with Kelly.

TOBY

TOBY HAD NO SOONER SET foot in the club and Andrew had been there with a friendly smile on his familiar face. Wearing Quentin's shirt made Toby feel safe enough to enter the club, but now as Andrew led him across the room to meet some people, he tugged at the fabric and wondered if he looked stupid.

"Stop." Andrew said to him as they approached a couple of good looking and very affectionate men. "You look amazing."

"Thanks." Toby exhaled. "I'm nervous."

"Everyone is nervous their first time here, but don't worry, Xavier only bites Everett."

"This is true." The platinum haired man said. He was thin and probably a few years younger than Toby, though his boyfriend looked to be older. Not much, though. "I'm Everett. Best friend to Andrew and boyfriend to his brother, Xavier."

Toby shook hands with Everett and Xavier. Toby didn't want to make assumptions, but he felt sure the younger of the pair was the Dom. He was pretty sure the cuffs on Everett's wrists were a dead giveaway.

Xavier appraised Toby with a gentle, appreciative gaze. "You'll do nicely for our boy, Quentin."

Toby snorted. "Quentin is hardly a boy."

"Yes, but he's ours and you look like you'd be good for him." Xavier said. "We've missed seeing him around here. Not

that we're here much ourselves sometimes, but Rory and Nick were worried about him after the divorce.”

Toby shifted his weight and fought the urge to slip back across the club and burrow in next to Quentin.

“Let’s talk about something else, Xavier.”

“Is that a new rope?” Everett asked Andrew. He had some kind of rope harness tied around him in an intricate way that highlighted his shape—fit, but not trim—and the lovely tan on his skin.

“Nick is addicted to this online shop that sells custom rope. I think he has every color they offer now.” Though Andrew rolled his eyes, it was clear to anyone watching that this secretly pleased him.

“If I wasn’t a Dom, and in a super committed relationship, I’d be jealous of you.” Xavier teased Andrew as he slid an arm around Everett’s waist and pulled him closer.

“Are your ears as soft as they look?” Everett asked.

Toby reached up and brushed his fingers over them. He’d almost forgotten he was wearing them and remembering the fuzzy tail he had yet to try on had a blush creeping into his skin.

“You can touch them if you want. They’re super soft.”

Everett reached up and stroked a finger over Toby’s ears. He smiled and pulled his hand back. “They’re really nice.”

“Thanks. Quentin uh—there’s a tail.” Toby’s face heated when Xavier tried to get a look at Toby’s ass. “I’m not wearing it today. Maybe next time.”

“Unless these two scare you off.” Andrew nudged Toby playfully, but also maybe Andrew was worried about how awkward Toby was still acting.

“Nah, they’re okay.” Toby reassured him. “They’re probably the least intimidating people in the room.”

Andrew laughed, and Xavier scrunched his nose.

“I can be intimidating,” Xavier grouched, and Everett kissed his cheek. He turned to his boyfriend and continued his protest. “I can!”

“I know you can, X.” Heat simmered between the two and Toby wasn’t the only one who noticed.

“Okay, you two. Keep the sex eyes to a minimum in front of the older brother, okay?”

The corner of Everett’s eyes crinkled in amusement, and he practically plastered himself against Xavier like a second skin. Their noses brushed against each other, and Andrew groaned unhappily. “Come on, Toby, let’s let them suck face and get it out of their system. We’ll grab something to drink.”

Andrew linked arms with Toby and steered him away.

“It was nice to meet you.” Toby called back to the couple, who broke apart for a moment to return the sentiment.

“Are they always like that?” Toby asked once they reached the bar.

“Worse.” Andrew looked equally happy and grossed out by the admission. “They’ll be less gross once we bring them a drink. What do you want? It’s on me.”

“Just water is fine.” Toby didn’t have to ask permission for every single thing he did anymore but drinking something other than water seemed like something he’d have needed prior permission for.

Andrew ordered a bottle of water and handed it to Toby. He ordered three mocktails and carried them back to Everett and Xavier. Everett looked kiss-drunk, and he took the glass from Andrew with a quiet thanks.

“So what do you two do?” He remembered Andrew saying he worked in construction.

Andrew smirked behind his drink. “Finally, someone who doesn’t recognize you.”

Toby looked at Everett, then back at Andrew. “I’m confused.”

“Xavier thinks Everett is a celebrity.”

“He’s well known, at least around here. That’s all.” Xavier turned to Toby and smiled. He ran a hand down Everett’s chest while he spoke. “Everett has a popular online cooking show. It’s quite brilliant.”

Everett rolled his eyes. “I cook half naked. I’m eye candy with a spatula.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, E.” Xavier chided gently before turning his attention back to Toby. “Well, what do you think of our little club so far?”

“It’s nice.” Toby glanced around the room to track Quentin’s whereabouts.

Everett pointed Toby’s attention to a table behind them. Quentin was sitting with Nick and Rory. “God, he’s so smitten. I don’t remember him ever looking at anyone like that.” Xavier said. “Not even Kelly.”

“Xavier.” Andrew scowled. “That’s not polite.” He spoke through gritted teeth.

Xavier looked a little miffed to be called out by his brother, but if it bothered him long, he didn’t let it show. “Well, it’s true. Anyway, welcome to the club, Toby. I think you’ll fit in just fine.”

Everett nudged Xavier and their attention turned to the door.

“Jade’s here. And where they go, Sterling goes.”

The name Sterling sounded vaguely familiar. Andrew leaned down and whispered in his ear.

“Sterling is Kelly’s new boyfriend. That means, if Sterling is here, Kelly is probably here.”

Toby whipped his head around and spotted Quentin. So far, he was still alone with Rory and Nick, but Toby didn’t like the idea of Kelly just waltzing up to Quentin without Toby being there.

“I’m going to, um—go back.” He pointed at Quentin and Xavier flashed him a smile.

“Someone has teeth,” Xavier said appreciatively.

“Will you stop?” Everett pinched Xavier’s ass. “It was nice to meet you, Toby. Have Andrew bring you around some time and I’ll cook us all lunch.”

The offer nearly knocked Toby on his ass. He hadn’t quite known what to expect, but the people in the club were far friendlier than he’d expected.

“That sounds nice, thanks. It was good meeting you both.”

Xavier waved with a free hand as he gripped Everett by a cuff on his wrist and hauled him close, pinning his arm behind his back.

“It’s hard to believe he’s a Dom.” Andrew said when they were farther away. “Because he’s such a brat. You’ll have to excuse him. He’s not house trained.”

“He’s friendly enough.”

Andrew laughed. “You make him sound like a dog.”

“You’re the one who said he wasn’t house trained.”

They reached the table and Nick grabbed Andrew by the harness and yanked him close. Their lips hovered a breath apart.

“Are you behaving yourself, cub?”

“Yes, Sir.” Much to Toby’s relief, Andrew blushed. He was glad to see he wasn’t the only one whose cheeks could turn that shade of red.

Quentin crooked a finger at Toby, beckoning him closer. “You didn’t mingle long.” He wound an arm around Toby and pulled him into his lap. It felt a bit strange for half a second, but he couldn’t think at all when Quentin’s tongue caressed the shell of his ear.

“Sterling is here?” Toby said, but it was more of a question because he’d never met the man before. “With his friend Jade?”

“I’m sorry, kitten. I didn’t know they’d be here tonight. If you’re not ready to meet Kelly, we can leave.”

“No, I want to meet him.” How could he explain that he’d hightailed it back to Quentin because he was jealous? Because he wanted to see for himself if what Xavier said was true. Did Quentin look at Toby differently than he looked at his ex? He wasn’t scared that Quentin and Kelly would get back together, but curiosity killed the cat, he supposed.

“Well, good. Because he’s on his way over.” Quentin pulled Toby closer. “I’m proud of you for coming here tonight and meeting people.” Quentin’s head dipped, and he kissed the side of Toby’s throat. His large hand splayed wide on Toby’s chest, like he was aware of how hard Toby’s heart hammered and he wanted to keep it secured in his chest.

Someone who had to be Kelly approached. It couldn’t be anyone else with the way they looked at Toby, with curiosity and happiness all stirred up together.

“Hello, Quentin.”

Quentin looked up and Toby felt him smile. He didn’t like that he was on Quentin’s lap and couldn’t study his expression without rubbernecking and being obvious about it.

“Hi, Kelly. I’m sure I don’t need to introduce the two of you, but this is Toby.”

Kelly’s smile was warm and friendly. He extended a hand for Toby to shake. Upon shaking, Toby felt convinced he could take Kelly in a fight if he had to, but he also knew that such an occasion would never arise.

“Quentin has told me all about you, Toby. It’s good to finally put a face to the name.”

“Quentin told me you collect cows. Well, not actual cows, but cow related decor.”

Kelly groaned, but a smile lit up his face. “Sterling bought me a wooden footstool that looks like a cow. The decor used to be limited to the kitchen, but now it’s spreading.”

“Like mad cow disease.” Toby said before he thought about the words and for a horrifying moment everyone at the table went stone cold silent. Then Kelly tipped his head back and let out a peal of laughter that continued until he had to take a breath and wipe the tears from his eyes.

“Sterling made that same joke two nights ago.” Kelly explained as he swept his gaze over the club. “He’s around here somewhere.”

“Near the bar with Jade.” Rory supplied Sterling’s location to Kelly and when Kelly’s gaze zeroed in on the man he was looking for, Toby saw it. The look. The one that Kelly didn’t give Quentin. Lust and affection and urgency.

The corner of Kelly’s mouth tipped up in a smile, and he turned back to Quentin and Toby. “Excuse me, friends. It was nice meeting you, Toby. You should have lunch with Quentin and I sometime soon. I apologize that Sterling’s not said hello, but he hadn’t seen Jade in a while, so they’re catching up.”

“It’s no big deal.” Toby wasn’t concerned about it. He’d already had more social interaction in the past hour than he’d had in months, and his energy was flagging a bit. He burrowed into Quentin and let his eyes close for half a minute.

“Tired?” Quentin asked softly. “We can leave if you’d like.”

Toby tilted his head back to look at Quentin. “I don’t mind staying. I’m just not used to so many people all at once outside of work.”

“My poor sweet introvert.” Quentin kissed the tip of Toby’s nose. His eyes crinkled softly at the corners, and he gazed down at Toby. His earlier moments of jealousy seemed both exceedingly stupid and unnecessary suddenly. Toby saw then what other people saw when they saw them together. Quentin was openly, irrevocably in love with him.

“Quentin? I think I’d like to go home now.”

Quentin’s gaze darkened, and he leaned close, breath puffed over Toby’s ear. “Home? Or upstairs?”

Quentin’s question sucked all the oxygen out of the room.

“I—” Toby forced himself to take a breath and calm down. Half of Quentin’s friends were here. People Toby considered friends were here. If they went upstairs, everyone would know what they were doing. Instead of that being a deterrent, Toby’s cock thickened so fast his head spun. “Upstairs.”

Quentin’s smile was positively feral, and a jolt of fear shot through Toby.

He couldn’t wait.

QUENTIN

WELL AWARE OF the weight of everyone's gazes, Quentin clipped the leash to Toby's collar and urged him to stand. There wasn't a feeling that matched one of having a pretty submissive on a leash. But Toby wasn't just any sub, he belonged to Quentin. Now and hopefully forever.

Pushing the romantic thoughts aside, he led Toby through the club, earning them more than a few curious glances as they made their way upstairs.

"Are we allowed to be up here?" Toby asked as Quentin opened a door and tugged him into a room.

"Don't worry. I took care of everything." Quentin pulled him into the middle of the room and let the leash drop out of his fingers. Taking a step back, he examined Toby, slowly raking his gaze over him from head to toe. Toby squirmed under his scrutiny and his cheeks tinted that familiar pink that made Quentin's dick hard.

"What are your safewords?"

"Yellow to slow. Red to stop." Toby looked him in the eyes for half a beat before pinning his gaze to the floor. "Sir."

Quentin hummed his approval. "Very good. Look around the room and tell me if there's anything in here you don't want to do. I know we've discussed your limits before, but I want you to look, anyway."

The room was one of the standard BDSM type set-ups. A spanking bench, a cross, several impact play implements hung

in an armoire. A bed stood in the corner. Quentin watched Toby slowly turn and take it all in.

“I don’t... not the canes.” Toby’s face paled.

“What else?”

Toby looked back at Quentin. “I trust you.”

The truth in those words shifted Quentin’s world back into focus and he let out a breath as something long forgotten clicked back into place. “Then strip and kneel. Hands behind your head, legs open.”

Toby tried to keep his expression masked, but it split into a grin, and he hurried to obey. In a matter of seconds, Toby was naked and kneeling, his clothes folded haphazardly and stacked in a pile against the wall.

Toby linked his fingers behind his head and shifted his weight as he tried to figure out how far apart he should spread his legs.

Quentin circled him. Repeatedly, his eyes traveled between the fluffy ears on Toby’s head, to the collar, and back again. The longer Quentin went without speaking, the more anxious Toby looked. He shifted his weight around and rolled his shoulders back. He tried to settle, but Quentin recognized his struggle.

“I don’t know if you noticed, or not, kitten.” Quentin paused when he saw the way his voice instantly relaxed Toby. Clearly, being ignored made him antsy. Quentin slipped his fingers into Toby’s hair and trailed them down his cheek. Gently, he smoothed a finger under Toby’s collar, feeling him swallow hard. He took hold of the leash and tugged it a little, forcing Toby to look up at him. “But everyone was looking at you tonight.”

Toby’s blush deepened. “They were?”

“Do you want to know why?”

“Yes, Sir?”

Quentin forgave the cute way he phrased things like a question. “Because you were the hottest submissive in that

whole place tonight.”

“I—thank you, Sir.”

“Next time, though, you’ll be wearing fewer clothes. I think we’ll show up with you in those cute little shorts, but no shirt, and maybe your little kitten tail.”

Toby blinked at him and wet his lips.

“Don’t kittens walk on all fours?”

It took until Quentin arched his eyebrow at Toby for him to understand what was supposed to happen. Gingerly, he lowered his arms and put his palms on the floor. He rocked forward off his knees and looked up at Quentin.

Quentin smiled down at Toby and gently ruffled his hair. When it knocked Toby’s ears slightly askew, Toby’s gaze narrowed, and he reached up to straighten them.

“So sorry kitty.” Quentin tugged the leash and started for the spanking bench. He wanted Toby to be comfortable, but open and available to him.

When the leash hit the end of its slack and Toby didn’t follow, Quentin stopped and looked back at him.

“Are we a naughty kitty?” Quentin dropped his voice lower and watched the way Toby slowly licked his lips as though he were pondering his next move.

“No, sir?”

“Then follow me and get on the bench. I know how you kittens love to climb things.”

Toby started forward, making a show of the way his ass wriggled when he crawled. With more grace than Quentin had expected, Toby climbed up onto the spanking bench and languidly draped himself over it, acting every bit the part of a lazy, pleasure seeking feline begging for affection.

Quentin secured the end of the leash to the bench and smoothed his hand over the back of Toby’s neck. “Now you can’t escape me, my pretty kitty.”

Toby blinked at him, nervous, but still trusting.

“We might not have brought you a tail, but let’s see what we can find for that pretty little hole of yours instead.”

Quentin smoothed his hands down Toby’s arms and buckled his wrists, securing him to the bench. “So you don’t fall off.” Quentin said, not that there was any danger of that happening, but the pretense amused him.

He went to the armoire and slid a drawer labeled *insertable* open. He found the biggest, most alarming looking plug he could and set it aside. He wasn’t going to use it. It was bigger around than Quentin’s wrist and had a giant knot at the base.

After opening another drawer, Quentin located a slim prostate massager. Attached to the slim bulb was a thin silicone tail that was used to retrieve it. Quentin took it and the remote it came with. Grabbing the oversized toy and a few other things that looked to be fun, he carried them over to the bench and set them on the nearby bed, hiding the skinny prostate massager behind the intrusive looking dildo.

“What do you think? Quentin asked Toby.

“I—um—ouch?” Toby’s eyes zeroed in on the massive dildo with the huge knot.

“Don’t worry, we’ll work our way up to that.” Next to the bed was a bar fridge that served as a nightstand. Sitting on the top were a variety of condoms and several different lubes. Some flavored, some not.

Quentin grabbed a not flavored bottle of lube and drizzled some down the crack of Toby’s ass. Toby moaned when Quentin spread the lube around his pretty little hole. He’d left him unplugged, an oversight on his part. Because he could’ve simply removed the plug and fucked him senseless right now.

But there was something to be said for slow, methodical preparation. When he finally worked a finger into Toby, he rocked back, seeking more. Quentin smiled, broad and bold as he brought a hand down. The slap to Toby’s ass made him jolt and yelp, his passage clamped down on Quentin’s finger, giving him deliciously wicked ideas.

“Did I say you could move?”

“No.” Toby whimpered.

“No, what?” Quentin slapped his ass again, hard enough that he felt the sting in his fingers. Toby yelped again and scrambled to answer before Quentin could land a third blow.

“Sir. Sorry. No, sir.”

“Good boy.” Quentin reached up and gently toyed with the hair at the back of Toby’s neck. “Now stay still.”

Quentin worked a second finger in. He dragged them over Toby’s prostate, making him writhe and cry out. He reached up and caged the back of Toby’s neck with his free hand. It wasn’t like he could go anywhere, but he enjoyed pinning him down. The touch made Toby relax as Quentin continued to tease him. He worked Toby’s hole until it was loose and wet.

When he pulled his fingers out, Toby gasped, then went limp with relief.

“Are you close?”

“Mmhm.” Toby hummed, then remembered himself. “Yes, sir.”

“Good.” Quentin grabbed a condom and rolled it onto the prostate massager. Condoms on toys were a standard practice at the club and Quentin was glad for it. Walking back around, he slid the massager into Toby’s ass and turned it on the lowest setting.

A long, low groan filled the air and Quentin smoothed his hands over the globes of Toby’s ass. “Can you come like this, kitten?”

Toby shook his head. “No, sir.”

“Good.” Quentin squeezed Toby’s ass, then went back to the armoire. He hadn’t wanted to grab too many toys earlier and give his game away, and now he was indecisive. The hesitation burned hot in his stomach, and he curled his hand into a fist.

Learning the truth of his incompatibility with Kelly had kicked his feet out from under him. Sometimes he thought Toby had no business trusting him. But then Toby would look

at him and the obvious affection would pour out of his gaze and envelop Quentin. Toby didn't expect Quentin to be perfect. He didn't need that from Quentin. He needed his presence more than the rest of it, Quentin realized.

It wouldn't matter to Toby what they did, so long as they stayed in his limits, and they did it together. And later, Toby would let Quentin pamper him. He'd let him choose what tie he wore to the office that day and even what he had for lunch. Simple things that Quentin enjoyed doing for him. Little things that made Toby blush when Quentin did them.

Things with Toby had happened far more naturally than Quentin had thought possible. He didn't subscribe to the belief system that a romantic partner could complete him. Toby wasn't his other half. They were both whole on their own. Whole, but infinitely better and happier now that they'd found each other.

With a final deep breath, Quentin grabbed a few things that looked like fun and made his way back to Toby, who had waited so patiently for him. Not that he had a choice. Quentin set his toys down out of sight. Picking up the flogger with the soft deerskin falls, he trailed them over Toby's back. He watched Toby shiver as anticipation made his skin prickly with gooseflesh.

There was a time when he'd stand in front of Kelly like he did now but riddled with doubt. Not about his ability to swing a flogger or put Kelly through his paces, but about what would come after. He searched himself for any lingering doubt, any fear or apprehension, but all he found was a comfortable feeling of safety in knowing that he wasn't too much for Toby. Or not enough. That Toby loved him meant everything. It healed something in Quentin that he didn't realize had been so badly broken.

Quentin circled around to the front of Toby, flogger still in hand, he cupped Toby's chin and tilted his head up as he kneeled until they were eye level. Cupping Toby's cheek, he smiled as Toby leaned into the touch.

Quentin brushed a kiss against Toby's irresistible mouth. "I love you."

Joy radiated out of Toby, lighting him up from the inside. "I love you."

"You'll use your safewords if you need to."

"Yes, sir." Toby sighed as Quentin kissed him again, then pulled away.

TOBY

THE LOOK QUENTIN gave him made him shiver from the top of his head clear down to his toes. Until this point, being strapped down had felt no different to Toby than kneeling at Quentin's feet. But something had changed in Quentin. It was like Quentin pulled a curtain back and let the sunshine in. The warmth in his gaze soothed Toby even as nerves made his stomach tighten.

He was gifted a kiss that was flower-petal soft. When Quentin pulled back, he reminded Toby to use his safewords if he needed to. Delicious fear skittered across his spine as he agreed.

The falls of the flogger had been softer than Toby expected as they once again trailed down his back. He half wondered if Quentin would flog him like this, with his legs splayed wide and his cock suddenly overwhelmingly hard and vulnerable.

The tails tickled down Toby's sides, and he sucked in a greedy breath. His head already swam, and Quentin had barely done anything. The vibration in his ass increased, startling a helpless yelp out of him. Instinct made him buck his hips. The resounding crack came a split second before pain blossomed on Toby's ass.

It hadn't been a flogger or a paddle. Toby would recognize the feel of Quentin's hand anywhere. Holy shit. Toby gasped as the pain from the strike faded a little and bloomed outward, flowing into the rest of him.

“You okay, kitten?” Quentin kneaded the cheek of Toby’s ass with his iron grip.

Instead of forming words, Toby moaned and let out a sigh. The vibrator in his ass pulsed, making him groan.

“Use your words, please.”

“I’m good, Sir. Sorry. Oof. That’s... wow.”

Quentin’s touch disappeared. The vibrator quietened down to a low buzzing sensation. Toby feared his cock was leaking all over the floor, but all he could do was breathe and wait.

The moment Toby relaxed, Quentin laid down another set of strikes, alternating cheeks. They varied in strength from powerful and sharp to dull, tender strikes meant to soothe and tease his stinging flesh.

“Aaah.” Toby cried out when the vibrator changed speed. It roared to life so fast, Toby clenched his teeth together and groaned through them.

Something harder thundered against Toby’s ass, vacating all the oxygen from his lungs in one powerful exhale. His pulse throbbed in his cock like a heart beating outside his body, and the world went fuzzy as Quentin continued. He tried to rock his hips and fuck the bench. Any friction would be welcome at this point. His entire body ached for touch, his cock most of all.

The paddling stopped but the prostate massager buzzed on like a good little soldier, keeping Toby on edge without tipping him over. Quentin was at Toby’s side again, brushing the hair off his forehead.

“Color, kitten?”

Toby raised his head and gave Quentin a dopey smile. “Green, Sir.”

Strong fingers gently massaged their way across Toby’s scalp, and he practically purred, leaning into the sensation, feeling more like an affection starved cat than ever before.

The same touch traveled down his back and Toby arched into it, unable to stop himself. Soothing words reached his

ears. Whispered praise wrapped around him like a warm blanket.

Gentle hands explored Toby's body. Smoothing over the cheeks of his heated ass, fingers dipped into his crease and Quentin gave the prostate massager a gentle tug. It brushed against that bundle of tormented nerves and heat pooled low in his belly.

"Hmm. Someone's excited."

Toby couldn't respond. He didn't think he was supposed to, anyway. Soft hands cradled Toby's balls, and he wriggled his ass, hoping for something more than the teasing touches and the barely there vibration in his ass.

Quentin secured a cock ring around him, and Toby's low groan turned into a desperate shout when the vibration in his ass turned so high his teeth clacked together.

"That's better." The words came a second before a fresh bloom of pain erupted on the cheek of his ass. The strikes continued, bringing Toby past that place where pain was only pain.

He didn't know how long it continued. Minutes. Hours. It could've been days for how badly he needed to come. His cock throbbed, ached, pulsed with every sharp slap to Toby's ass.

The spanking stopped and Quentin came around to Toby and cupped his chin. He gently raised Toby's head and looked him in the eye. "Color?"

"Green." The breathy wobble of his voice surprised Toby.

"Excellent." Quentin released Toby's chin and unzipped his pants. He pulled his cock out and swiped the head over Toby's lips. "Open."

Toby closed his eyes and did as he was told.

"Look at me." Toby looked up at Quentin's smiling face. "That's good, keep your eyes on me."

Quentin slowly thrust forward, feeding his cock to Toby at a manageable speed. Toby did his best to make it good for

Quentin, but his mind was a melted marshmallow.

He thought for a moment when a wicked look crossed Quentin's face, that he was doing a horrible job. "Mind your teeth, kitten."

That was the only warning he got before Quentin struck him again. Toby inhaled and tears sprang to his eyes as Quentin buried his cock deeper into Toby's throat. Another strike, another thrust. Toby wasn't sure what it was, maybe a crop, but between the buzzing in his hole, the throbbing of his ass, and the dick in his mouth, it was a good thing Quentin had put a cock ring on him or he'd have come all over the floor by now.

God, he needed to come so fucking bad. The need was sudden and sharp and Toby locked eyes with Quentin, hoping to convey his desperation. Quentin smiled.

"Your mouth is exceptional. Maybe I don't need your ass tonight."

Toby whimpered. Quentin might not need it, but Toby sure as hell fucking did. He redoubled his efforts on Quentin's cock. Sucking and using his tongue to tease the head whenever Quentin pulled back far enough to allow it.

Quentin pulled out and slapped Toby's cheek with his cock before feeding it back in. It was all Toby could do to keep his eyes open under the weight of his lust.

He lost himself in the rhythm of Quentin fucking his face. His jaw ached. His ass hurt, but also didn't. It felt hot and amazing, and the warmth flooded through him, making his body feel loose, his mind quiet. There wasn't anything left of him, but that was okay, because he was safe with Quentin.

The cock left his mouth and the warmth of Quentin's touch moved around. He stayed in contact with Toby, reassuring him of his presence as he pulled the toy out of his ass and cast it aside.

Grip like steel clamped onto his hips and the blunt head of Quentin's cock pressed into him. Toby tipped his head back as far as it could go and cried out, a long guttural groan that he

felt powerless to stop even if he tried. Toby pulled at his bonds, not because he wanted to get away, not really, but all logic had fled, and Toby was operating now on instinct.

“Quen—” he cut himself off. “Sir. Please.”

A hand slid up Toby’s back and pressed down between his shoulders.

“Shhh, kitten.” Quentin said, as he buried his cock to the hilt. For several agonizing seconds, he didn’t move. It was fucking torture. Being filled, but not fucked. Held down, but not close.

It was amazing.

Toby went limp all at once when Quentin moved. Quentin could’ve lined up a hundred men to fuck him stupid. He could do anything to Toby, as vulnerable and spaced out as he was. But he trusted Quentin.

Slowly he noticed a breathy, keening sound and a pain in his hands. The sound was him. The pain was from the bite of his nails in his palms. His body hardly felt like his own anymore. Pleasure made him feel like his skin was on too tight. His lungs were too small. There wasn’t enough air for him to make complete sentences, so he babbled instead. Begging in scraps of words forced out syllable by syllable.

Please became the singular word Toby was capable of speaking. It poured out of him like a mantra. He’d been close to coming for what felt like hours. Deft fingers loosened the adjustable cockring. Quentin’s large hand took hold of Toby’s cock. Allowed or not, Toby was coming. Every muscle in his body locked up as he started to unload.

He managed to suck in a breath so deep his head swam. His cock twitched as Quentin continued stroking. When he released Toby’s cock, it was almost a relief to not be touched anymore. Quentin smacked Toby’s ass, making him yelp. Then all at once, Toby’s ass was empty. Behind him, he heard the telltale slap of skin on skin as Quentin jerked himself to completion.

Warmth spread up Toby's back in a sticky stripe. It spilled on his ass and Quentin rubbed it around with the head of his cock as he continued to come. Finally, hands returned to Toby's body. Quentin squeezed his ass cheeks and whatever quiet praise he offered was lost to the rush of blood in Toby's ears.

He wasn't sure how, but suddenly he was unbuckled and being carefully picked up into Quentin's arms. Toby managed to wrap his arms around Quentin as he was transferred to the bed.

He clung to Quentin, suddenly shaky and weak and afraid Quentin would leave him, though he wasn't sure why. When Quentin got comfortable with Toby on top of him, he watched Quentin wrap his hand in Toby's leash like he needed a tangible reminder that Toby was staying where he belonged.

Quentin shifted and grabbed a bottle of water. After opening it for Toby, he helped him take a few small sips to start with. Then Toby's real thirst kicked in and he took hold of the bottle himself, draining most of the contents in a few greedy gulps.

"Better?" Quentin brushed a stray hair off Toby's forehead, as if putting a few hairs back in place would make him look any less fucked than he must've looked.

"Mmhm." Toby wasn't ready for words yet. He burrowed into Quentin's arms and closed his eyes.

When he opened his eyes again, it was very apparent that some time had passed. Quentin hadn't moved, but Toby had. He woke up with his face pressed to Quentin's chest. A small trail of drool slid down his chin and he hurriedly wiped it away. Gross.

"Back among the living, are you? How do you feel?"

Toby took stock of his body. His ass hurt, his jaw was still tired, but otherwise he was no worse for wear. Tired, though. Even now, he could feel the exhaustion cling to him.

He tipped his head back to look up at Quentin. "Amazing. Sore and tired, but in a good kind of way."

“Do you feel ready to leave yet, or do you need more time?”

“I would love to go home and curl up in bed with you and cuddle for the rest of the night.”

“Then I’ll get our clothes and help you get dressed and we can go.”

Toby nodded and tried not to complain when Quentin had to leave the bed to cross the room and get their clothes. He wanted to attach himself to Quentin’s side like a barnacle. After he pulled his shorts on and once again slid into Quentin’s shirt, he did just that.

Quentin returned his embrace. He rubbed Toby’s back, warming Toby when he himself hadn’t realized he’d been cold.

“You okay?” Quentin asked.

“Never better.”

Never did he ever think he’d have something like this. He settled in against Quentin and closed his eyes as a kiss was brushed against his forehead. A strong hand gripped Toby’s abused ass, and he took a sudden, sharp breath.

“Sore?” Toby heard the edge of amusement in Quentin’s voice.

“In the best way.” Toby rose on his toes and ghosted a kiss against Quentin’s mouth. “I love you. Take me home?”

“Your wish is my command.” Quentin looked at Toby, his love echoed back at him in Quentin’s gaze. Taking the leash in his hand again, Quentin opened the door. “Come along, kitten. Let’s get you home.”

Toby happily followed.

QUENTIN

“ARE you sure you want to do this?” Quentin slid his hand into Toby’s as they made their way down the street to a little bistro they liked. “We can cancel.”

Over the past few months, his relationship with Toby had changed. Deepened. The longer they were together, the more Toby let himself lean on Quentin. They spent all their spare time together, splitting it between Quentin’s place—where an astonishing amount of Toby’s belongings had migrated to recently—and the club. The boys, as Quentin called them, Andrew, Xavier, and Everett, had taken a liking to Toby and they often met up outside of the club for lunch dates when they could. Most of the time, it was just Toby and Andrew, but sometimes the other couple would join in.

Toby still kept in touch with his friend overseas via video chats. Today, however, they were meeting Brian. The passing of his ex-boyfriend had rattled Toby, and it had taken him a few months to deal with the knowledge that Ron, after using Toby’s sexual needs as a reason to break up with him, had gone out and found his very own kinky lifestyle with someone else.

“I’m okay.” Toby squeezed Quentin’s hand. “It bothers me a lot less than it used to. We all have our own journey, right? Ron found what he needed when the time was right. I mostly feel bad for Brian.” Toby’s grip tightened further, and he stopped. Quentin looked down at Toby, whose eyes had turned glassy.

“I can’t imagine losing you the way Brian lost Ron.”

Quentin cupped Toby's cheek and swept him into a kiss. He kept it PG, only chastely pressing his lips against Toby's. Still, his sweet kitten made a decidedly rated-R sound, prompting him to pull away.

"Behave, you." Quentin admonished him and then started off for the bistro, pulling Toby along. When they reached their destination, Quentin's hand stilled on the handle of the door, and he looked at Toby. "Last chance to leave."

Toby took a deep breath and motioned for Quentin to open the door. "Let's go inside. Maybe if my stomach settles, I can get one of those fancy beef dip sandwiches and the Cesar with the extra dressing."

"We can get it to go, if you want." Quentin pulled the door open, and they entered the restaurant. There weren't many people there this time of the day, between lunch and dinner rush, but it looked like the person they'd been there to meet had arrived before them.

"That can't be him." Toby whispered to Quentin. It was quickly followed by a quiet curse. "Shit, I think it is."

A wall of muscle stood, and he stuck his hand out for Toby to shake. "I'm Brian. You're Toby. I recognize you from the photos."

Toby looked a little green around the gills, but he shook Brian's hand.

"It's good to meet you, Brian. This is my boyfriend, Quentin."

Quentin shook Brian's hand, and they all sat, rather awkwardly, at the small table.

It was Brian who spoke first, after twisting a napkin into a thin rope. "Thanks for meeting me. I know it's not easy."

"I'm sorry I didn't come sooner. Ron and I hadn't been close in a long time. We hadn't even talked since the breakup, but his passing still caught me off guard. It... rattled some things loose." Toby bit his lip and flipped the menu open. They ate here frequently enough to be familiar with it, but he stared at it like he'd never seen it before.

“I brought the pictures I mentioned.” Brian said softly. It was easy to tell by the strain in his voice and the tightness around his eyes that he wasn’t having an easy time of things. Quentin wasn’t without sympathy and his heart went out to Brian.

Brian tentatively slid the envelope closer to Toby. “He’d want you to have them.”

Toby exhaled and shut the menu. Setting it aside, he took the envelope and stared at it. As he opened it, his fingers shook, but he pulled out a thin stack of photographs.

“Ron had a bulletin board, and he liked to print pictures of us and stick them up. It was like an evolving scrapbook, but on a wall.”

“He did the same thing with us. It’s still up. I haven’t taken it down. I can’t.” Brian cleared his throat. “Sorry.”

Toby closed the envelope without taking the pictures out of it. “It’s okay.”

“I said I wouldn’t be sad today. I’d almost kind of hoped you wouldn’t show up so I could be mad at someone who isn’t Ron.” Brian cleared his throat again and drank half a glass of water. “Sorry. That’s... you’re not here to listen to this.”

Quentin put his hand on Toby’s thigh. Part of him didn’t feel right being part of this meeting, but Toby had asked him to be there and there wasn’t anything Quentin wouldn’t do for him.

“I’m here because Ron, for better or worse, used to be a friend once upon a time. He’d have shown up for me. The very least I can do is return the favor.”

Brian sniffled. “He said you were nice.”

“Ron was honest, to a fault sometimes.”

“God. I know. If you want someone to lie to you, don’t ask Ron.”

Toby’s hand came to rest on top of Quentin’s, and he gave it a squeeze. Quentin waited in case Toby squeezed it again, then relaxed as a server approached the table, apologizing for

the wait. They had a system, and if Toby squeezed Quentin's hand three times, it meant he needed to make an excuse so they could leave. But one squeeze was nothing but an acknowledgement of Quentin's presence. A silent gesture of gratitude.

Toby found his appetite, and he even talked Brian into ordering the sloppy Cesar. As far as lunches went, it was awkward, and the conversation was stilted, but by the time they left, a weight had lifted off Toby's shoulders.

They parted with a quick and gentle hug. Toby told Brian he could call him if he needed him, but something about the way Brian assured Toby that he would rang false to Quentin.

Quentin shook Brian's hand and slid his other arm around Toby, pulling him close. They watched Brian cross the street and head in the opposite direction before Toby let out a sigh, his shoulders deflating as he did.

"We won't hear from him again." Toby said.

"Does that make you sad?"

"Not really. Brian isn't what I expected. I don't dislike him, but I don't think we have much in common. besides we both knew Ron." Toby leaned into Quentin's side for support. He tucked the envelope into his back pocket. "Take me home?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

They were no sooner in the door and Toby disappeared down the hall. He came back wearing an oversized shirt that belonged to Quentin. Ever since that first day at the club, Toby had decided that he enjoyed wearing Quentin's clothes. In actuality, it had started with the ties. Toby never wore his own anymore, always insisting on wearing one of Quentin's, which he persisted in having Quentin pick out. Toby came padding over with a jumble of things in his arms.

"Sir?"

Quentin smiled even as he kissed Toby. "Of course." He took the ears from the pile of things Toby carried and stuck them on Toby's head. He could do that himself. Quentin didn't

have a rule about it, but Toby liked asking for things. It made him feel heard and appreciated when he came to Quentin with his ears or his tail, or any other kinky or non-kinky request.

“Will you sit with me when I look at these?” Toby held tight to the envelope.

“Of course.” Quentin swept Toby close and ushered him into the living room. Toby’s favorite blanket lay draped across the arm of the couch. A stack of books that Toby had been reading had migrated over to Quentin’s bookshelf. Little Toby-trinkets had filtered into Quentin’s house, finding homes in nooks and crannies, much to Quentin’s absolute delight.

He sat on the couch and pulled Toby into his lap. Toby’s fingers trembled only a little when he pulled out the stack of photos.

“Those togas are even worse than I remembered.” Toby groaned.

“They’re not that bad.”

“They’re bed sheets. Why did I let him talk me into that?” Toby flipped to the next picture and made an indignant sound. “What is on my head?”

“It looks like dollar store fake foliage. Maple leaves?”

“Oh god. Look at our feet.” Toby held a picture up higher so Quentin could see.

“Are those crocs?”

“That wasn’t very Ancient Greek of us.”

“You both looked like you had a lot of fun, though.”

Toby was quiet for a few minutes. He flipped through the pictures. They were self-explanatory. The kind of pictures young people took of themselves when they were young and full of rum and madly in love.

When Toby reached the end of the stack, he tucked them back in the envelope and set it aside. He let out a deep breath.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay. It’s like pressing on a bruise. It hurts, but only a little. And sometimes it feels kind of good, you know.”

Quentin kissed the shell of Toby’s ear. “I know all about bruises.”

Toby scoffed. “I know you do.” He shivered and grabbed the blanket off the arm of the couch. Just like a cat, it took him five minutes of fiddling around with the blanket to get it just how he wanted it, but when he did, he sank into Quentin.

“I didn’t realize until tonight how much of my stuff has made it over to your house. I can’t remember the last time I was home.”

Quentin wound his arms around Toby and kissed the side of his neck. “You’re home right now. This instant.”

“You know what I mean.” Toby said, arching his neck so Quentin had better access to kiss him and drive him crazy.

“I know you should just cut the bullshit and move in here with me.”

Toby shifted and looked back at Quentin. “Well... my lease is up next month.” He pretended to think really hard, but Quentin already saw the answer in his expression. “Do you think I should move in?”

“How else will you keep stealing my ties?”

“Then I guess that settles it.” Toby shifted around, the blanket forgotten as he straddled Quentin and draped his arms around Quentin’s neck. Leaning in, he brushed the tip of his nose against Quentin’s. “I’m glad I didn’t buy moving boxes for no reason.” Toby’s face split into a shit-eating grin.

Quentin wrapped his arms around Toby and stood all at once, making him yelp and laugh.

“What are you doing?” Toby asked as Quentin stepped around the coffee table.

“Taking you to bed to celebrate.”

“Yes, Sir.” Came Toby’s enthusiastic answer and he held on tight.

Quentin held on tighter.
He'd never let go.

The End

ABOUT E.M. DENNING

E. M. Denning is a married mom of three and a writer from British Columbia. Author of endearing filth and schmoopy sex, also addicted to books and coffee. She writes romance for the 18+ crowd.

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