

Title Options

Equally Unequal

Or

Unequally Equal

Or

Sarah & Ian

Chapter 1

When Sarah woke up Friday morning to nearly a foot of snow outside it didn't change her plans for the day. Logging in to work from her spare bedroom there was an email in her inbox from management. The office was officially closed and would be until further notice. Everyone who was able to log in remotely was asked to continue to do so as long as they were able.

The storm had been predicted for several days but no one had really believed it would be as bad as predicted until the temperature started to plummet that Wednesday. That afternoon her boss had encouraged everyone to come into the office the next day if they could, but to do what they needed to stay safe. She loved her company.

Not many people went into the office on Thursday even though the show hadn't started yet. Sarah had done only a half day on Thursday and it was normal for her to work from home on Fridays. The option to have a hybrid work schedule was something that nearly everyone took advantage of. The company had begun to offer it several years back when they had been extremely short staffed and everyone had needed to work overtime. It had been so popular that they had the hybrid work schedule as an ongoing option.

It was Friday morning around 11am when the office's power had gone out. Management sent out an update to personal email and a mass text telling everyone to stay safe and check back in once the storm broke. Once the office had power back everyone would need to log in remotely, providing they had power. And by 1 pm Sarah didn't.

Fortunately, she was prepared. She had flashlights, candles, a stock of food, and the stove and fireplace were gas. The only thing she had to get was gas for her generator, which she had done Tuesday. The main living area was an open floor plan, but she did what she could so the fireplace didn't have to work as hard. She moved everything she would need from her bedroom out into the livingroom and sealed off the back section of the house with a sheet tacked to the ceiling.

She slept on her pull-out sofa, which was quite comfortable. She shut off the fireplace overnight and even though she had put up a few blankets to act as curtains, she had worried that her house would turn into an ice box while she slept. She was pleasantly surprised at how warm the house still was when she woke up the next day. She still didn't want to climb out from under her pile of blankets, but to be fair, that wasn't much different from any other morning.

Once she unburied herself from her blankets she opened the curtains to get what light she could into the space. The storm was still in full force, but the blanket of snow over everything was beautiful. She was making breakfast when she heard a knock at the door. She went over to look out the front window to see if it could be a branch or something else making the noise. Surely no one was out in this weather.

To her surprise, her neighbor Ian was standing in the now two feet of snow holding a large suitcase. Sarah quickly opened the door to let him in. He stepped down into her entryway, trying not to bring in too much of the snow with him.

“Hey Ian,” Sarah said, quickly shutting the door behind him. “Are you ok?”

“Hey Sarah, my power is out and I don’t have a generator or working fireplace. Can I stay with you till I have power? I brought food.” Ian said, holding up the suitcase.

“Of Course.” They had chatted a few times since he had moved in, but even if she’d just seen him in passing she wasn’t going to turn him away, not in this storm. “I thought your place had gas?”

“Not right now”

“Well, you can put your suitcase wherever in the living room. I’m making breakfast, do you want some?”

“Sure.” Ian replied.

“I’m making eggs, English muffins, and tea. I can make something else if you would like.”

“I’ll take whatever as long as it’s hot.” Ian was just glad to not be eating cold bread and peanut butter...again.

She added two more eggs to the pan and put another muffin into the cast iron griddle to toast. While she cooked Ian found a spot in the living room to put his suitcase. He unloaded the food that he’d brought and took it to the kitchen. He wished he could have brought over more, but like an idiot, he hadn’t gone out to get extra groceries before the storm hit.

Over breakfast they chatted, finally having the chance to get to know each other. They had always seemed to run into one another on their way in or out, never having the time to chat. The conversation was pretty much the same as any time you were first getting to know someone. They talked about their work: Sarah worked in accounting and Ian in construction. They talked about their relationship status: they were both single and had been for a while. They talked about where they had grown up: both turning out to have grown up in the town they still lived in. They talked about their families: Sarah was the middle of three girls and Ian was an only child. And so on. When they were done with breakfast they went into the living room and sat on the bed Sarah hadn’t bothered to fold up for the day.

“You’re sleeping in your living room?” Ian asked as he took off his shoes and crawled up onto the bed.

“Yeah, once the power went out it seemed better to close off as many rooms as I could and stay in the living room. Using the bathroom is a little bit brisk, but it’s doable.”

They spent the rest of the morning playing card games and continuing their conversation. For lunch it was tomato soup and grilled cheese. It turned out Ian had brought premo bread and cheese, but it was Sarah who was the one who knew how to use it to the best advantage. To her surprise Ian watched her, wanting to learn how to make the most of his ingredients. She was starting to become thankful for the storm. She had never had a problem spending stretches of time alone, but the company was nice; and so was Ian.

It wasn't long after lunch that Ian started to seriously yawn. Having tried, and largely failed, to sleep in his icebox of a house he was exhausted. Sarah suggested he lay down for a little while. Ian, being as tired as he was, didn't put up any argument. Sarah got her book while Ian settled down, both of them under the blankets. They were still in their clothes so being under the covers together wasn't weird.

He was asleep in minutes and it wasn't long before she put her books aside and snuggled under the covers herself. She didn't curl up next to him, even though she wanted to. She thought he wouldn't mind, but didn't want to push it. She knew he was single and interested in her, but she'd been wrong before. She drifted off hoping she wasn't wrong this time.

Ian woke up before Sarah. He noticed that she had joined him in a nap and that he was now holding her. But not just holding her, his arm was draped over her chest, one hand gently cupping her breast. He didn't remember her snuggling into him. Had he actually woken up yet? He wasn't sure if he had or if it was just one of those spookily realistic dreams. If it was, it was a good one. And if it wasn't...? Would she be ok with it? He hoped so. He didn't want to move, didn't want to disturb her. He wanted to keep holding her.

When Sarah awoke a few minutes later to find Ian's hand holding her breast she was pleased. She didn't remember snuggling into him. She had a vague recollection of rolling over, of him moving, of worrying she'd woken him up, but hadn't realized she had pressed her body into his. She shifted her hand over his, pressing it ever so gently into her breast. This made him smile and he leaned in to kiss her neck.

She rolled onto her back to look at him. She smiled and said "Hi."

He didn't say anything. He just smiled and, propping himself up on one elbow, kissed her. She kissed him back, loving the feel of his lips, her hand reaching up to rest on his cheek. His hand hadn't moved from her breast, but neither did he start doing anything. The kiss was soft but not hesitant.

"I've been wanting to do that since I moved in." Ian said, once he had broken the kiss.

"Me too." Sarah replied. "I guess it's a good thing you don't have gas in your house right now."

"I guess it is." He lay back down, his arm moving to wrap around her, pulling her in.

She rolled over to face him. He had one arm over her, her head laying on his other using it as a pillow. She had tucked her arms up against his chest, her face snuggled into his neck. It felt warm, snuggled into him like this. She wanted to kiss him though. So she adjusted herself enough so she could. As they kissed she wrapped one arm around his body. They intertwined their legs and just enjoyed kissing each other, learning how their tongues could play; exploring how the other tasted. He moved slightly to brush her hair aside and started kissing down her neck. As he kissed back up her neck he stopped to nibble on her ear. She gave a soft moan. She loved having her ears nibbled on.

She could feel the effect her moan had on him as he began to grow, pressing against her hip. She slid the hand that was between them down to give a little brush against that wonderful spot. As she did he let out a small moan of his own. He put his hand behind her head and kissed her deeply, rolling her to her back so he could lay on top of her.

She loved the way his body felt pressed on top of hers. He propped himself up on his elbows and kept kissing her. She wrapped her arms around his chest and began to rub his back. His hips began to slowly grind into hers. They stayed like that for a while. Just enjoying the feel of each other.

After a moment, a bit, a while, she pushed up slightly, rolling him to his back so she could lay on top of him. He wrapped his arms around her torso holding her close. She held his face in her hands as she kissed him with a need she could feel building. His was obvious; wonderfully obvious. She pressed up against it, rubbing her thigh up and down slowly.

He began to run his hands under her shirt and up her back. His hands were slightly rough against her skin but it felt good, to both of them. The contrast of textures, soft and rough. They both wanted to undress the other. See what other soft and rough, and hard, parts they had.

Eventually the kisses became slower and shorter, until she rested her head against his chest. He pulled his hands from under her shirt and held her tight. After a moment she slid off him to lay on her side, her head resting on his chest, her leg still lying across him.

“Did you have a good nap?”

“Very good. I think I liked the waking up a bit more though.”

“Mmm, me too.”

The rest of the afternoon they spent laying next to each other chatting, learning more about each other. Sarah loved that she could work mostly from home, only having to go into the office two days a week. She had bought her place, freshly renovated, a few years ago after aggressively saving and living on the cheap.

"I looked at houses for months. The first one I put an offer in on I got outbid. The second one I got into a bidding war on. God that sucked. I was so glad that when I put an offer in on this place it was accepted. No haggling or anything."

"So third time really was the charm for you."

Ian was currently unemployed, his company having downsized him. He worked in construction which was why he was looking forward to doing the renovations on his place. While he loved his house, the manor in which he had come to own it wasn't ideal. His uncle had left it to him when he had died the previous March.

"Ray? I didn't know he had died." Sarah remembered a sweet older man she had said hi to on occasion. "I'm so sorry. I never really got to talk to him but he seemed so sweet."

"He was a good man." Ian nodded fondly remembering the man who had been more of a father to him than his father had been.

"I remember there being some other cars on occasion in his driveway, but I don't remember seeing you there."

"I would come visit as often as I could." Ian didn't really want to talk about it, but it seemed too rude to just ignore the topic. "We must have just missed each other. You know, funny thing, he actually mentioned you to me a time or two."

"Oh?"

"Yep. Though we would get along."

She smiled at him. "So, tell me about the renovations you want to do?"

He was glad of the topic shift. He told her that originally he had planned to renovate it in his spare time and then move in when he was finished. But then he lost his job and decided that since his lease was up on his apartment, he might as well move in. He had money saved up, and it would go much further if he didn't have to pay rent. He wasn't going to actively start looking for a new job until February so he could get a good jump on the biggest pieces of the renovation.

They talked about their social lives, which had barely existed recently. It wasn't that they didn't have friends, it was more that everyone's life seemed to be shuffling all at the same time. Things were starting to settle out though. Mostly he would grab a beer with the guys or watch a movie at a friend's place. Sarah's job had been hectic lately and she hadn't been able to do much more than the occasional lunch out on the weekend or movie night, especially with the holidays taking up everyone's time.

Talking about friends naturally transitioned into their dating lives. Both of them were not only single but were out in the dating world. Not to say there hadn't been any hook-ups, but neither of them had had anything serious in over a year; almost two in Ian's case.

"So, have you ever been married?" Ian asked

"I have, actually." Sarah replied.

"Oh, what happened? If you don't mind sharing."

"Not at all. We met in high school in 9th grade and started dating in 10th grade. George Robert Luellen." She smiled, remembering her first true love. "When it came time to look at colleges we promised each other that we would apply to and make a decision on where to go based on what was best for our future and not on each other. We'd figure out the relationship stuff later. I wanted to study business and he was a history guy. Well as it happened we went to the same university. He proposed when we were 20 and were married a year later. We were already living together off campus when we got engaged. It was great. We got along really well. We went to the theater, shopping, tried new restaurants, and had dinner parties, but after about two years we could both tell the marriage wasn't working."

"Why? Sounds like you two were great together."

"Well, as it turned out, *she* actually wanted to be with men too." She paused to watch his response.

It took him a moment. "She?"

"Yep." Sarah paused for a second watching Ian absorbing the information before continuing. "Kathy was raised in a pretty strict religious family. We met when her family had just moved to the area because of his dad's job. Not sure of the details there. So it was when she got away from them that *he* was able to be who *she* truly was. Our marriage, our whole relationship really, was her trying to make her family happy. But because I treated her as a person who wasn't evil for liking the things she did, she became comfortable being who she was. It was really hard on the relationship with her parents. They ended up disowning her when she told them why we were getting divorced."

"Because she was trans."

"Actually, initially she came out as gay. It took a further year to realize she was trans."

"Do you two still talk?"

"Oh yeah. I loved him and I love her, she's my best friend."

"That's amazing." Ian truly was amazed at her story and loved how she had dealt with the situation.

She pointed to two photos on a shelf on the wall. Both were taken on a vacation of some sort, based on how Sarah looked in each photo. One was clearly taken more than a few years ago and the other seemed to be more recent.

“George and Kathy?” he asked, pointing at one photo and then the other.

Sarah nodded. “Yep. High School senior trip and a vacation two years ago.”:

“She’s hot. You and her ever...?”

“No. Not my thing. And not her thing either. She’d rather suck cock than lick pussy.”

Up to the point he had thought of her life as being fairly normal. Not that she was boring, but this made him look at her in a new light. He had never met someone with a heart as big as hers. He wondered if his heart could ever be that open.

“Well, that kind of puts my life into perspective.” He said.

“Well, that was definitely a very unusual situation, to say the least.”

“No kidding.”

She noticed he smiled at her with something other than lust. She smiled back. “So, I take it from your response you’re an ally?”

“Yeah.” He paused. “I don’t know how I would respond if my son, or daughter for that matter, told me they were gay or trans. I’d like to think I’d hug and accept them, but I know I wouldn’t disown them.” He took a breath. “Ray told me just before he died, he was gay. Hid it his whole life.”

He hadn’t told anyone this. His family wasn’t homophobic, but he understood why his uncle had chosen never to come out. She could tell it was a weight on him. So she sat there, letting him continue or not. They had repositioned to lounging on the couch, facing each other rather than cuddling. She reached out and put her hand on top of his. He gave it a little squeeze. Time to change the conversation.

“So,” she asked. “I take it you want kids?”

“Yeah, I mean I’m pretty sure I do. What about you?”

“I’m undecided.” She answered. He gave her a slightly questioning look. “I mean, I think it will depend more on who I end up with and our life together than any maternal instinct. Not that I don’t have a maternal instinct,” she shrugged her shoulders.

“That makes sense.”

They talked about lighter things until it was time to make dinner. She made a box of mac and cheese but added a few extra things, like goat's cheese and herbs. Sometimes it doesn't take much to take a simple thing to the next level. This was the kind of cooking he wanted to learn how to do. Ian wasn't a bad cook, but he wouldn't have had any idea about how to make a box of mac and cheese that good. Sarah loved to cook and was only too happy to show him some tips and tricks. Apparently one of the secrets to making things just a little better was a bit of garlic powder and butter. He couldn't disagree with that.

When they were done with dinner he helped her clean up. Well, he insisted on doing most of it since she had cooked. Sarah never liked dishes, so it didn't take much convincing. When everything was clean and put away they cuddled up on the couch under the blankets. Since she had been able to keep her phone charged they decided to set it up on her tripod and watch a movie or something. After scrolling through their options they ended up putting on music and snuggled back.

Chapter 2

It hadn't taken long for the kisses to begin and for them to slide down from sitting to lying on their sides, bodies pressed together. It didn't take as long this time for his hands to work their way up her shirt to rub her smooth back. She didn't hesitate to reach her hand between his legs to rub him. He was getting hard, and as she rubbed she could feel him grow.

"I do hope this isn't all you want to do." He said, even though he was pretty sure it wasn't.

In response, she leaned in and kissed him. This kiss had more passion in it; their tongues playing, tasting each other. She began to feel the pulsing of arousal between her thighs. As he began to kiss down her neck she ran her fingers through his hair, holding his head. He was using one arm to prop himself up while the other moved from her back around to her belly and up to her breasts. He ran his hand over her hardening nipples before pulling her bra aside to give them a little tweak.

She gasped with pure pleasure, running her hands down his back. She drew his shirt up with both of her hands, pulling it over his head. He sat up to toss the shirt away. She let her hands explore his now bare chest. He had the body of a man who had muscles from physical activity rather than going to the gym. A perfect balance between soft snuggles and sexy protector. His jeans rode just low enough for her to see the hint of his pelvic bone, his chest hair trailing down his stomach and under his waistband.

He didn't give her a chance to run her hands down under his waistband. He gently, but not slowly, pulled her top over her head and reached around to unhook her bra. His hands ran down over her breasts, enjoying her smooth skin and wonderful curves. "Your breasts are amazing."

Her body was curvy and soft. Her breasts were full, she dipped in nicely at the waist and flared seductively out to her hips. Her skin was the same medium tone as his, but it looked as if it had never seen the sun. He squeezed her breasts once more before he ran his hands down her belly. He quickly and efficiently removed her sweatpants, lacy panties, and fluffy socks. Her legs were mostly smooth, it was winter after all, and her pubes were neatly trimmed. She had full thighs that tapered down to shapely calves and ankles. She had painted her toenails a deep blue. He liked it.

After he had finished undressing her he started working his way up her body. He kissed her ankles and rubbed her feet. He worked his way up her calves to her inner thighs, his hands massaging around her hips and ass. He hadn't yet seen it, but from the feel of it her ass matched the rest of her body, full and luscious. He kissed up over her hips and circled his tongue around her belly button making her giggle. He licked around the edge of her nipples and lightly blew on them. When he got to her lips he held her head with one hand and kissed her.

She stroked his hair, his shoulders, his firm biceps, and his strong chest and back.

He broke the kiss to tell her, "You have a damn sexy body."

"Well, now It's my turn to see if the rest of you is as pleasing as what I've seen so far." And with that, she stroked her hands down to his waistband. "Lay down."

He gladly obliged. She pulled his pants, boxers, and socks all the way off and appraised him as she crawled her way back up to him, running her hands up the tops of his sturdy legs. On her way, she gave a happy grin at his average length, uncircumcised and rock-hard cock. To her, large was too big. With this he could go all the way in her, getting them hip to hip, and hit bottom in that way she loved. She ran her hands up his chest, letting her body glide up his. When she got to his mouth she kissed him.

"Well, what do you think?" Ian asked, grinning.

"It'll do." She replied, deadpan at first then giving him the kind of smile that told him all he needed to know. "You clean?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Yep." She then quickly slid herself back down to between his legs, put her lips around his throbbing cock, and began to softly suck.

She kissed her way down his shaft, gave his balls a little lick, then kissed her way back up. She kept one hand on his balls, slowly working them. She licked the tip of him before slowly starting to take him in. She stroked him as she slowly took more and more of him in. Bobbing up and down, then a little further down, and a little further. When she got as much of him in as she could she began to really work him.

It wasn't long before he held her head, building her speed, holding himself deep in her mouth before she came up and ran her tongue around the rim and under the foreskin, licking up every drop of pre cum. He sat up a little to get his hands on her breasts.

With a firm grip, he pulled her upwards. She licked her lips and he kissed her. He then put his hands around her waist and lifted her, setting her on her back. He gave her one hard kiss as his fingers went between her legs, rubbing her already soaked pussy and brushing his thumb over her clit.

He didn't waste any time getting his mouth down onto her swollen lips. He started with his tongue, licking everything. As his lips began to suckle her clit his finger slid inside her, moving in and out slowly. When his fingers rubbed her g-spot she grabbed his head, holding tight. He grabbed her hips to hold her close as his tongue flicked her clit faster and faster. When she came she cried out one hand grabbing his hair tightly, the other above her head grabbing onto the pillow. He licked up every drop. He licked her inner lips, her outer lips, and down her inner thighs.

He looked up at her and asked "Got a few more in you?"

“Oh yeah.” She said with excitement, knowing what was coming.

He didn't waste any time. He knelt between her legs, leaning down to kiss her. “Birth Control?”

“Yep.”

She reached down and took him in her hand and guided him into her still very wet entrance. He started slow, going a little deeper with each stroke. Once he had gotten all the way in he pulled almost out before pounding all the way back down.

“Oh fuck yes!”

He began to pound her slowly, sinking himself fully in each time. He propped himself up on his hands and went a bit faster. With each thrust, she let out a loud moan and gasp. Her hands grabbed onto his shoulders, her nails starting to dig in letting him set the pace. As they got accustomed to the new feeling of each other he sped up, her hips rolling into him, matching his energy and need. She almost came again as his hands began to play with her nipples.

Wanting desperately to cum she instructed him to sit back on the couch so she could straddle him. He was happy to oblige, nearly lifting her onto him. The show of strength made her belly tingle and she wasted no time sliding onto him. They faced each other and now it was her turn to set the pace. He held her hips as she rocked back and forth. She held his shoulders, wrapped her arms around his neck, rubbed her hands along his biceps and back.

As he kissed her neck and began to nibble at her ear he asked “Can I bite? Can I leave marks?” Most women like to be nibbled on, but he had learned the hard way that most women didn't like biting or having any evidence left the next day.

“Oh yeah, both” she moaned back, sounding like she had been waiting for him to leave evidence of what had happened; something she could look at later and smile at the memory.

With that, he moved his mouth to the side of her breast. She cried out with pleasure as he did more than nibble his way to her nipple.

“I hope you know this means you'll have marks too.” She said between gasps. He simply nodded, murmuring something that she assumed meant yes. Fair was fair after all.

“And where should I cum?” He asked between nibbles.

“Anywhere you want.”

With that he put his hands on her hips to hold her as they sped up, their hips grinding into each other. She seemed to almost take it as a challenge. She rode him hard, gripping his hard cock with her soft pussy. Her nails dug into his shoulders and she threw her head back and screamed as she came. He kept going, but her cries of pleasure were enough to send him over

the edge. He grunted and groaned as loudly as he could with his mouth clamped onto that spot between her neck and shoulder and shot his hot load deep into her.

When he finished and the thrusting had slowed to a stop he fell back against the cushions and she fell against him; both of them gasping, trying to catch their breath. They lay like that for a moment, both feeling like limp noodles, their bodies slick with sweat. Eventually, she rolled off him and they slid down until they lay on their sides, facing each other, and pulled the covers up. They lay there, breathing. Their bodies entwined but not pressed together.

“You don’t happen to have hot water do you?” Ian asked after a few moments.

“Sorry, no.” Sarah responded. “I didn’t figure I’d need to shower before the power came back on.”

“Sponge bath?”

“That could work. Oh,wait.” she said before he could stand up. “I’ve got these moistened washcloth things, for like when you’re camping or bed bound.”

She got up, dashed to the bathroom, and dashed back. She had also brought a few towels. They quickly wiped each other down. Even in front of the fire, it was too cold to stay naked for long. He dug a pair of boxers and a long-sleeved shirt out of his suitcase and she pulled her long fluffy night shirt over her head and fuzzy socks on her feet.

They snuggled down under the covers together. Both of them wanted to lay naked together, and even though they had just fucked their brains out, it didn’t seem quite right to sleep naked together just yet. Also, Sarah wasn’t sure if it would be warm enough. She had noticed that he ran slightly hot, temperature-wise anyway; he was way more than slightly hot in every other way. Maybe with him in the bed, they would be warm enough.

“So, what do you usually wear to bed?” Ian asked. “I like the fluffy bunny pattern on your nightgown by the way.”

“Thanks” she giggled. “I love rabbits. In the winter I usually wear something fluffy and warm like this. I tend to run a little cold. In the summer I wear, like, a T-shirt or a silky slip nightgown. Depends on my mood.”

“Silky? Anything lacy?”

“Sometimes. I have a few items for special occasions.”

“Why just special occasions?”

“Because otherwise they wouldn’t be special.” It was one of the reasons she didn’t do a full face of make-up every day. It was more stunning if she only did it on occasion. “What about you? What do you like to wear to bed?”

“In the winter this basically.” He gestured to his long-sleeved t-shirt and boxers. “In the summer either just boxers or nothing.”

“What, nothing lacy or slinky?” She said in a slightly teasing tone.

“No. Not for me.” He laughed. “It’s a little weird how men tend to look better with more clothing on and women look better with less.”

She looked a little confused.

“Like with men, 3 piece suits and tuxedos make them all sexy, but with women, it’s all about low-cut necklines and high-cut slits.”

“I get that. You do look pretty good shirtless with those jeans riding low though.”

“Good to know.”

“I know what you mean about the suits though. It’s kind of funny too since guys tend to run warmer than women, and they get to be the ones with all the layers to look all sexy. We get to stand there and shiver. I mean it does give the opportunity for that whole chivalry thing of giving the girl your jacket, but it’s still kind of annoying.”

“Yeah, always have to make men be the big protector to the little meek women.” He said with more than a bit of sarcasm in his voice.

She gave him a bemused look.

“What, just cuse I’m a guy I can’t see the sexism and be enlightened about it?”

“Fair enough.” She kissed him.

They talked for a little while longer about fashion, what they liked and disliked, and a little about the inherent sexism woven into it. They seemed to agree on many things. She did prefer tuxedos with tails and ball gowns while he preferred 3 piece suits and slinky gowns, but those were details.

After a while, they kissed good night and snuggled in to fall asleep. It wasn’t long before Sarah woke up to take her fuzzy socks off and Ian had shed his shirt. Ian did keep her plenty warm. They slept soundly the rest of the night, snuggled into each other.

Chapter 3

Sarah hadn't shut the curtains that night and they woke up to the bright sunlight streaming in. It wasn't long, however, until the next wave of the storm darkened the sky once again. They spent the day doing what you do in a snowstorm; eating worm food, playing card games, and reading books. They made out for a while before drifting off into a nap. Afternoon naps were the best, whether you needed them or not.

For dinner on their second night snowed-in together they had the homemade meatballs Sarah had in her freezer. Ian was suitably impressed with her skills. For dessert Ian dipped into the provisions he had brought over which included a bottle of vodka, tequila, and a few mixers. With those, and a few things from Sarah's cabinets, he made her a very tasty mixed drink. So she had another.

And another.

And so did he.

After a while, they started 'playing' 20 questions. Sarah decided to film it, having heard the idea from somewhere, she couldn't remember where. That way they could watch it the next day when sober. The rules, well they were more like guideless than actual rules, were that they would take turns asking questions but they would both answer them. They called it 20 questions, but they wouldn't actually be counting how many they asked. Sarah started.

"So, you know I've been engaged, married, and divorced once each, all with the same person. What about you?"

"Engaged once, got the ring back. It was my grandmothers' and it turns out she wasn't a complete bitch; about that anyway. Married zero so divorced zero. What is your full name? Did you change it when you got married?"

"Sarah Beth Milligan, and yes. Changed it back when we got divorced. Not gonna do that again. Did you want your ex to take your name?"

"Ian Alexander Dean. I liked that she was going to, that we would all have the same name and all. I don't think I asked her to though. Have you ever dyed your hair a non-natural color? And not like a spray-in for Halloween or something"

"Yes. Dark Blue."

It took a moment for Ian to answer. He had asked the question but he didn't seem to want to answer it. "Yes, pure white tipped with purple and worn spiked."

She tried not to laugh and ended up snorting. He gave her a dirty look.

"Have you ever wanted to have anything other than your ears pierced? And where?"

“Yes, my nipples.” He gave her a naughty, wondering how adventurous she was.

“Yes.” She took a big gulp of her drink. “Thought about having my clit pierced but decided not to and that I never would.”

“How old were you when you lost your virginity?”

“17, to George.” She raised her glass to the photo of them in a small toast.

“15, but I didn’t have sex a second time till I was 18.”

“Ouch. That bad?”

“It was ok. We did it cuse she was moving away and she was all romantic about having a connection forever and whatnot. Never wanted to with any other girlfriends till the one I had when I was 18.”

“Ah, ok. How many sexual partners have you had?”

“Well, I’ve never really counted.” Ian was trying to remember, and add, while drunk. The strain was showing on his face. “20? Ish? Yeah, I’ll go with 20ish.”

She also took a moment for her slightly pickled brain to remember. “More than 25, less than 30, I think.”

He raised an eyebrow and she shrugged. “Have you ever been involved in a sex experience with more than one person?”

“No.”

He waited but she said nothing else. “Yes. Two girls, three guys, and once two girls and me.”

“What place have you had sex in that you weren’t supposed to? Ever been caught?” Ian continued, “back seat of a car, and yes”

“The bed of a truck, and no. With your preferred partner, what sex act or scenario is an absolutely no-go?”

“Guy on guy, like when in a threesome. Oh, and watersports.”

“Oh, water sports for me too.” She got a grossed out look on her face as she added, “ass to mouth. I don’t get how that’s ever sexy.”

“I get why people like it, but it never seemed like a good idea to me. What sex fantasy would you like to try?”

She took a moment and blushed slightly as she answered “Some light BDSM type stuff, as the sub. Nothing like whips or tying up or those electric shot things though.”

“The dom to your sub, but with a little harder stuff. But that can be worked up to.” He smiled mischievously at her. “If you could sleep with any celebrity, who?”

“Chris Hemsworth. But would you let your partner do so if the opportunity presented itself?” She added to the question. “Probably.”

“Jennifer Lawrence and Maybe.”

He looked a little surprised at her ‘probably’ and she at his ‘maybe’. Each was more open to the idea than the other though.

“Cats, dogs, or reptiles?”

“All things fluffy. And no, that doesn’t include spiders.”

“No spiders for me either.” He gave a slight shudder. “I prefer dogs, but I’m not against almost any animal. Except insects. But I don’t think they are classified as animals.”

“Yeah, I don’t know if they do or not. Probably not. Eh. Have you ever lied about your age, weight, or size?”

“Yes, never been asked, and no”

“Yes, to get into a bar, no one has ever asked about my weight, except the doctor and they weigh you, and the only people who have asked about my size were like people at clothing stores when I was looking for something so it would have been stupid to lie”

“Favorite genre of movie?”

“Action/Adventure followed closely by Disney/Pixar.”

He approved. “Horror, followed by action/adventure.”

She cringed at his mention of horror. “Ok, a movie trilogy or series you would watch over and over?”

“Saw.”

“Any of the Avengers movies, both group ones and individual hero ones.” She paused for a moment. “Or maybe Rush Hour. Or Indiana Jones. The trilogy. There is no 4th movie.”

He smiled broadly and nodded in the way you only can when drunk at her mention of Indiana Jones. “What was the last show you binged?”

“Queer Eye.”

“Breaking Bad.”

“Type of music you love and type you hate?”

“Love Rap. Hate Country.”

“Love Rock & Roll. Hate Country”

They high-fived each other for their shared dislike of Country music.

“What’s your view on guns?”

“Owning, iff. Using for target practice, yes and hunting for food yes. Just don’t ask me to go hunting.”

“Yes to all, but only if you know what you’re doing.”

“Have you ever gone hunting or shooting?”

“Hunting once. For ducks. I didn’t get anything. Been target shooting out at my Aunt’s place in the country. She’s actually a championship shooter.”

“Nice. Been to a range a few times and I don’t suck. It’s ok.”

“I’ll have to take you to my Aunts sometime. You’ll like shooting after. “What’s something you love to do but suck at? You know, something you’d like to be good at.”

“Architecture. Like designing houses and such.”

“Singing like a rockstar. I thought you worked construction or something?”

“General handyman, so kind of, but not designing them. You like karaoke?”

“Yep.”

“Nope”

“Dancing?”

“Depends on the type of dancing.”

“Same.”

“What job would you never do?”

“Stripping or bartending. The idea of dealing with drunk idiots...” she gave a shudder at the thought.

“Customer service, like the customer service booth or phone center kind of thing.”

“Have you ever, or would you ever join the military?” She asked.

“I haven’t and I won’t. If drafted I wouldn’t desert or anything. I love my country, but the military just isn’t for me.”

“No, and no.”

“Should women be included in any future drafts?”

“Sure. I’m glad I’ll probably be aged out by the time it happens though.”

“Same.”

They kept going for a while. At some point they noticed they were lying down, then their eyes closed, and they were asleep. Throughout the night they didn’t roll over once. When they woke up it wasn’t the worst hangover in history, but neither of them wanted to move.

Eventually, Ian got up and got crackers and water. Sarah grudgingly got up and went to the bathroom. When she returned Ian took his turn and joined her back in bed. For a little while they just sat there munching on crackers. It wasn’t long before they needed more water. Sarah got up to get it this time but before getting back under the covers she turned her emergency radio on.

The news channel was reporting about how the storm, which seemed to be easing up, was going to be hitting the city again for another wave later that day. The only power being worked on was going to hospitals, firehouses, and the like. Sarah and Ian both agreed that while they wanted power back, with the storm not over the city had their priorities in the right place.

They turned the radio off after listening a little bit about other current events, not wanting to use up the battery, nice as it was to have on. With the snow outside acting as a sound dampener, it was quiet in the house. So they started talking.

They just talked. Not about anything; the kind of conversations that you remember being ‘the best’ but you can’t remember anything that was said. It wasn’t long before Sarah remembered what they had done the night before and that there was a video of it. Part of her wanted to rewatch it, and part of her wanted to leave that drunken haze of a memory right where it was.

“So, do you want to watch the video of last night?” She asked.

“Oh yeah,” Ian answered. “I almost forgot about that. Yeah, pull it up. Should I make popcorn?”

She gave him a look as she reached for the phone. Settling back next to him she hit play. They hit pause a few times to dig further into some answers that had been given as they went, the very first pause coming at the third question.

“Why were you so hesitant to say you had dyed your hair like that?” Sarah asked.

Ian hesitated again. “Cuse it looked awful, and I thought it looked so cool. It was such a shitty dye job.”

“Hey, I said I dyed my hair. I didn’t say it looked good.” Sarah replied, giving him a little confidence boost. “Everyone’s got that look that they tried that just didn’t work, even though we probably thought it did at the time. And we all hope that no photos still exist of it.”

The next time they hit pause it was Sarah. “Why did you want to get your nipples pierced?”

“It was the same time as the hair. I thought it would be cool. God, I’m glad I didn’t.” He hit play again.

And then he hit pause when they came to the part about their respective body counts. “So do you not know exactly how many partners you’ve had?”

She gave him a dirty look, “Do you?”

He paused for a few moments, doing a little walk down memory lane. “Ok, so I believe it’s 17.”

“You believe?”

“Yeah, there were some one-night stands. It’s not like I carved notches in my bed post”

“Ok, that’s fair.” This time she took a few moments. “Huh, it’s more than I thought now that I actually think about it. 35.”

Ian was impressed, mostly at the fact that she could remember all of them. He hit play again. The next pause was when the group sex topic came up. This time Sarah hit the pause button.

“So when there are several people does everyone actually have a good time? Seems like someone would get left out at some point.”

Ian looked at her with a little confusion. “With as many partners as you’ve had you’ve never done anything in a group?”

Sarah shook her head.

“Well, no. At least in my experience, everyone was involved the whole time. Someone is always getting blown, or fucked, or kissed, or rubbed on, or something.”

Sarah shrugged and hit play again. The next pause was after the question about sexual fantasies. Ian had hit pause and looked at Sarah. She was blushing slightly.

“So,” he asked. “Why do you want to do some BDSM submissive stuff?”

“Well, I’ve dabbled in a little of it.” She was trying to figure out how to put what was in her head into words. “I guess it’s like letting go, letting someone else take the lead. Giving yourself to them, giving your trust to someone. I think it’s the same reason I like to get drunk sometimes. You don’t have to think, you just feel. That and the rougher sex can be fun sometimes, and so combining the two always intrigued me.”

Ian nodded thoughtfully. “What’s your safe word?”

“I’ve never had one,” Sarah responded. “I mean I know what they are but it’s never come up. I don’t know what I would use.”

“Well, you should always have a safeword, even if you just dabble.” It was important to Ian to build trust before anything happened. “Personally I like the stop light one. Red Yellow Green.”

“Stop, slow, and go?”

“Yeah, pretty much. Green means you have no problems and you want everything going on to continue or go further. Yellow is ‘slow down, go easy, pause cuse you’re on my hair’, that kind of thing. And Red is ‘stop everything immediately’. That can be because something is wrong, something hurts, or you just need a break. Because trust is such a big part of it the communication has to be that much stronger.”

“I can see that.” Sarah agreed. “So what draws you to it?”

“Well, being given that trust is part of it; being given control to try things. Previously agreed upon things, but still. It’s like how I asked about leaving marks. There’s a primal part that wants to lay claim to someone and to know that they let me lay claim to them. And then on the sex side, figuring out all the different sensations that can be explored to induce all sorts of pleasure responses.”

“So to you, it’s about all the sexual things you can do that aren’t directly sex?” Sarah pondered.

“I mean I want the sex too, but yeah.” Ian answered, glad she didn’t seem to be scared off by what he said. “I mean it doesn’t always have to be all that. Sometimes just making love is nice too.”

That made her smile. She snuggled into him as he put his arm around her. "You know, this is the first time I've talked about sex like this with someone I just met. I mean I've had sex after knowing someone this short a time, but never actually discussing it like this."

"Is that a good thing?" Ian was pretty sure he knew the answer but wanted to confirm.

"Yeah, it is."

He gave her a squeeze and kissed the top of her head and she smiled. They snuggled into each and hit play again, the questions moving onto lighter topics. Sarah was the one who hit pause next.

"Your aunt is a championship shooter?"

"Yep," Ian answered. "Even went to the Olympics twice. Got one bronze medal. Now she teaches it."

"I've done a little shooting, but I've never had anyone teach me. It would be fun to go out to her place and do some shooting." Sarah did like shooting, and she didn't suck at it either.

"It's better with a few tips from someone who knows what they're doing."

They paused briefly a few other times, laughing about what songs they would sing at karaoke, and how drunk they might need to be to do it in the first place. They both decided that their favorite types of dance were the ones that involved a partner. Neither of them had done much in the way of formal classes, but they liked going somewhere with a dance floor and just having fun.

Eventually, they got up to make lunch. They decided to sit at the dinner table so they wouldn't end up with soup all over the bed. They traded snow stories from when they were kids as they ate their tomato soup and grilled cheese. Sarah told Ian about her first time driving on snow in a two-wheel drive minivan. Ian told Sarah about taking sleds up to the top of a really steep hill and hoping they didn't hit any cars parked at the bottom.

As they were cleaning up from lunch Ian asked, "Hey, have you cleared the snow from your gas meter outside?"

"No. It's under the overhang. Why?"

"One of the ways gas lines can freeze is when snow builds up around the meter."

Sarah looked out the window a little concerned. "Well, I should probably go do it now then before the storm picks up again."

"I can do it." Ian offered.

"You don't have to do that. It's my house."

“And you’re putting me up in it. The least I can do is make sure we still have heat.”

She really couldn’t argue with that. So they both bundled up and went outside. While clearing all the snow away Ian lost his footing and fell back making them both laugh. In trying to help him up Sarah went down, face-planting. It took a few tries but they eventually managed to right themselves and clear the snow away from the meter. Fortunately, where the meter had been placed snow wasn’t able to build up around it very much. They would only need to clear it every other day or so.

Already being bundled up they decided to take advantage of the brief respite of the storm and play around a little. The wind was beginning to pick up but Sarah was still able to feel the peace and stillness that snow brought. She closed her eyes and listened to the crunch beneath Ian’s feet as he moved around. Then she felt a thud on her chest and a cold spray stuck to her face. She opened her eyes to see Ian standing there, another snowball in his hand.

“Oh, it’s on!” Sarah said, beginning to create her own amo as she dodged his next shot.

When they finally went back in, Ian took a look around her gas lines in the garage to make sure they were in good shape. When he came back into the living room he asked, “You bought this place already renovated?”

“Yep.”

“Well, whoever did it did a bang-up job on gas lines.” He didn’t know a lot about it but he knew enough to know quality work when he saw it.

“Good to know.” Sarah responded. She had gotten the inspection on the palace when she purchased it but hadn’t read too far into the report beyond the results and recommendations.

“If you could have renovated it what would you have done differently?” Ian asked.

Sarah thought for a moment. “Little things mostly. Like choosing a different backsplash for the kitchen and putting in heated floors in the bathroom. Or going with linoleum rather than actual tile.”

They spend the rest of the afternoon talking about their dream homes. They both agreed that quartz countertops were the best and that a cozy modern aesthetic was what they wanted to live in. They made chicken piccata over pasta for dinner and skipped dessert. All Sarah had was ice cream and neither wanted a cocktail after the previous night.

Ian was fine with that; she was dessert enough for him.

Chapter 4

They were lying in the bed kissing, things headed in an obvious direction. Sarah's hands were caressing his head and shoulders. Ian had rolled on top of her and decided to take things down a slightly different path than they had been before. He stopped kissing her, grabbed her wrists, and held them tightly above her head. He smiled down at her. Sarah had a moment of blankness, a moment of fear, then she looked in his eyes, at his smile. She wasn't quite smiling, but the fear was gone. She gave a nod and managed to whisper the word 'green'.

With that, he wrapped his mouth around her throat. He started gently, using just his tongue and lips. Then he used his teeth, biting down on her windpipe. Not hard enough to cut off any of her air, but hard enough to leave a light mark. She breathed in sharply, tensed up a little, but she let him claim her. She had a tight feeling in her stomach but she liked it.

She hadn't opened her legs for him so when he lifted his mouth from her throat and kissed her lips, he used his knee to spread her legs apart and pushed his knees up firmly between them. He didn't rub against her, he just held himself tight against her. He then switched to holding her wrists with one hand so his other could go up her shirt and grab her breasts, pinching and pulling her hard nipples between his fingers. Her moans and gasps had sharpened from what they had been before, and they were growing in intensity too.

His heart was pounding and she was breathing heavily both in pleasure and anticipation. Her body tensed in response to what he did, but she didn't try to stop him. When he let her wrists go and removed his knee from between her legs she remained in the same position.

He sat up and simply looked at her for a minute. He leaned down and kissed her lips gently and her body relaxed. He then began to undress her. She helped him only by moving her body just enough to let her clothes come off, lifting her hips as he pulled her pants off and sitting up slightly to get her shirt over her head. Once she was naked he positioned her the way he wanted. He spread her legs wide and her hands were together above her head.

He then took his own clothes off. He didn't take his time, but neither was he in a rush. She watched him, smiling in excited anticipation. When he took his boxers off letting his hard cock out she began to breathe heavier and bit her lower lip. Her hips began to move slightly, grinding, asking him to sink himself into her.

He placed his hands on her hips to hold them down and said, "Just hold still for me."

She just nodded, letting him look at her. It was a new feeling for her; to not move when she so desperately wanted to reach for him. She wanted to feel his hands on her so badly. It felt like an eternity but eventually, he did reach down to touch her. As she watched him stroking her legs, her belly, just barely touching her breasts she felt a satisfaction in doing nothing, in submitting.

He bent over her to grab her wrists above her head, supporting himself above her. The added pressure on her wrists, truly pinning her made her heart beat a little faster but she didn't feel like she needed to move away from him. He rubbed himself along her clit making her moan. He loved making her so eager for it, denying her what she wanted, but he couldn't deny himself much longer. So, without using his hands, he put the tip of his now rock-hard cock into her wet pulsing pussy and thrust deep into her.

She let out a satisfying gasp and a moan. He thrust slowly, but hard, keeping a steady pace. Her hips began to move with him. She wasn't trying to move them, it was her body's response to the waves of pleasure he was sending through her. Her legs began to come up and wrap around him.

He stopped his thrusting and looked at her. "Spread your legs out." His voice was firm, but not harsh. It was a command; one she had no hesitation in following. It felt strange to her to be laid out flat, but the grin on his face at her obeying him gave her a rush of pleasure.

It wasn't long before he sped up and he didn't do it gradually. He had felt her cum on his cock once already, but it was time to make her scream, and he couldn't hold on much longer either. As he sped up he leaned over and kissed her, hard and fierce, and moved his hand to rub her clit. It didn't take long before she began to moan louder and louder before a scream escaped her lips. Her cries of pleasure set him off, pounding fast and hard, grunting in primal pleasure he shot his hot seed deep into her.

As he finished he slowed, leaning over to kiss her breasts, biting her still-hard nipples, then continuing up to kiss her mouth. He hadn't released her hands yet. His tongue was gently exploring her mouth. He broke the kiss, pulled out, and rolled off her onto his back breathing heavily. He turned his head to watch her.

She was also breathing heavily with her head turned to see him. It seemed to take her a moment to come back to herself, to close her legs and roll onto her side, snuggling up against him. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her head. He hugged her tight.

"Thank you." He breathed out almost silently.

Kissing his chest she breathed back "You're welcome. And thank you."

They pulled the blankets over themselves and fell asleep. No matter how she moved in the night he moved to hold her. It had been an intense experience for both of them. It was only their third night together, only their third day of actually knowing each other; but something had shifted between them. Something that made them both want to do it again.

Ian woke up first. Since they had been waking up at about the same time he got up gently not wanting to wake her. He put some clothes on and went into the kitchen to make a simple breakfast. About halfway through the cooking Sarah woke up and pulled on her clothing before going into the bathroom. She started to go into the kitchen to help him with breakfast, but at his insistence, she went back to bed.

A few minutes later he brought breakfast over to her on a tray. There was an empty vase sitting next to the plates. She looked at it, smiled, then looked at him, a slightly amused question on her face.

He pointed out the window, "There aren't any flowers available."

She smiled and pulled him close for a kiss. "It does look like the storm has broken though."

"I guess that second storm surge was short-lived."

Outside the sun was shining off the white snow. They admired the scene out the window as they ate breakfast. They turned on the radio to hear that the storm was finally over. Temperatures would stay well below freezing for a while yet, but work crews could start repairing the power lines. There were no estimates as to how long it would take to get power restored to everyone, but the reporter said the power company was hopeful it wouldn't take more than a week.

"Well, at least the natural gas held." Ian commented as the reporter mentioned that some places across town had their lines frozen. "Part of me wants to have a wood fire just in case that happens. Gas lines are sturdy but they aren't infallible."

"True, but we don't get storms like this very often."

"Yeah, and they are a little bit more upkeep."

When they had finished breakfast they turned off the radio and Sarah helped clean up. The breakfast Ian had made was simple, but Sarah loved it all the same. To him, part of her submission was that he would take care of her; not just right after sex, but as they moved through their day. He didn't want to take away her independence, but it was nice to wait on her for breakfast at least.

"So, what do you want to do today?" Ian asked as they snuggled back under the covers.

"I need to check my email to see if the office has power." Sarah said, pulling up her email on her phone. "It's not like I'd be able to log in or anything, but still."

"Ah, the joys of office work. Sometimes being able to work remotely isn't a blessing, you can never really get away from it."

"True, but my boss is really good about making sure people leave work for work hours. So it's not too bad. I'd rather have to log in at 7 pm to get something immediate done than have to go in in bad weather or something."

"True."

“Well, they don’t have any power back, not surprising.” Sarah tossed her phone to the end of the bed and snuggled back up against Ian.

“I wouldn’t think so with the storm just breaking”

“Yeah, but the office is on the same grid as a hospital, so we tend to get power back pretty quickly the rare times it does go out.”

“My last apartment was on the same grid as the firehouse so I rarely lost power for more than an hour or two.”

“Nice.”

“So do you want to do anything specific today?” Ian asked coyly.

“Sounds like there’s something you want to do.” Sarah replied, brushing her hand against his chest.

“Well, really, I always want to do that, but I do enjoy other things too.”

“Ok, fair. What do you like to do when you have free time? Like, what do you like to do on the weekend?”

“When I was working I’d spend my weekends watching TV or going out with friends. Recently I’ve been working on my house more than anything. None of those is an option right now though. What do you like to do with your weekends?”

“I like to read when I can, but half my weekends seem to be taken up with doing various chores, laundry, grocery shopping, all that annoying adulting stuff. My friends and I wouldn’t go out too often. We’re more likely to get together at someone’s place for dinner and board games.”

“Stupid adulting. So, I looked through your books a little the other day, but I didn’t recognize a lot of them. What kind of stuff do you like to read?”

“I like some period romance, but mostly I read literature. Books that don’t really fall into any specific genre. Stories about life in different places with all kinds of different people. It’s kind of like exploring the world on a human level. You can see a society and the people there in their daily lives instead of some dramatic situation. What do you like to read?”

“I don’t read that much. I prefer visual and audible storytelling. I never really got into audiobooks though. I do listen to some podcasts but mostly I like to watch things. Movies, TV, plays, stuff like that.”

“What genre do you like when you do read?”

“Usually adventure/action stuff. And I just got into this podcast about real life adventures and discoveries. It’s pretty cool.”

The conversation was easy and flowed naturally. They discussed books they liked and didn't like, which flowed into talking about TV and movies and ended up somehow on the pros and cons of various types of pens. After lunch, the topic of family came up.

"What's the age gap between you and your sisters?" He knew she had told him but he had forgotten.

"Lindsay is 6 years older and Iliza is 2 years younger. I was actually the only one who was planned." Ian gave her a quizzical look. "Like I said, they adopted Lindsay when she was 3. Though since her dad and my dad were best friends I probably would have grown up with her as an older sister of sorts anyway. And then Iliza was a surprise. They had only planned on raising 2 kids, but figured 3 would be fine."

"Were they hoping for a boy after having two girls?"

"I think they were a little, but it didn't really seem to matter. At least that's my impression. I never asked."

"That's fair. You ever think about adopting? When you're ready to have kids I mean."

"I never really thought about it actually. I always figured I'd have my own kids, but like I said, it really depends on who I end up with. What about you?"

"I never really thought about it. I figured if I had kids it would be the old-fashioned way. But yeah, like you said, I think I'll see who I end up with. Do you have to deal with your mom bugging you about giving her grandbabies?"

"With Lindsay having 5 already, and working on getting pregnant, there are plenty of grandbabies for my mom and dad to spoil.":

"Dang. And she wasn't a sixth?" Ian's eyes were wide thinking about such a big family.

"Yeah."

"Do you babysit very often?"

"Not too often. And thankfully they're great kids."

"What's the age range?"

"The oldest is 13 and the youngest is 3."

"Boys? Girls?"

"4 boys, 1 girl who is the youngest."

"Safest little girl around."

"Oh yeah. And they all take that job seriously. They'll still toughen her up though. Not so much yet cuse she's only 3, but it's coming."

"Do no harm but take no shit."

"Yeah, definitely heavily weighted towards the second part of that."

"You ever think if you want boys or girls?"

"I don't know. I guess that's why I would like to have a kid of my own. You don't have to make that choice. You just get what you get."

"Yeah, I think I'd like that surprise too. Though I think I would like to have both, and definitely more than one. Being an only child was kind of boring. I always wanted siblings. It always looked like so much fun."

"Well, as a kid, it was definitely a 50/50 thing. There were times when I wished with all my heart to be an only child. As an adult though I'm glad I have siblings though."

Over the next few days the same pattern continued. They spent their days playing card games, chatting, reading, making meals together, and having a lot of sex.. Most of the time Ian didn't dominate Sarah. Sarah loved to ride him, and he loved to let her, watching her beautiful breasts bounce in front of him; especially since there were now more than a few hickies on her body. Seeing them gave him almost as much pleasure as giving them had.

As the days went by Sarah knew more and more that she wanted this man for more than the amazing orgasms he gave her. He was so kind, thoughtful, and genuine. He didn't talk about his family or his past much, but that was fine. Not everyone liked to talk about their life as freely as she tended to. She hoped that in time she would be able to get to know Ian, that someday he would open up to her.

Ian did his best to not think about 'someday'. He stayed present in *this* day. The present was so much better than the past or the future, unless it was in regards to discovering more about Sarah. She had one of the biggest hearts of anyone he had ever met. He knew he was falling for her, and it scared him. But he just pushed that aside and focused on being in this moment with her. He knew moments ended, but there was no reason not to fully enjoy them while they lasted.

Chapter 5

It was Thursday in the early afternoon when the power came back on. Before Ian had gone back to his house he had helped Sarah put her living room back together; folding up the couch, taking all of her clothes back to her bedroom, and taking down the curtains in the hallway. It made her a little sad to do it all. It was like a wonderful vacation was ending. She didn't want to go back to her normal life yet.

It was early evening when Kathy called her. "Hey, you got your power back on?"

"Yep. All powered up." Sarah tried to sound pleased about it but wasn't all that enthusiastic about it.

"Oh? You don't seem too happy to have power back. Did your neighbor, 'Ian?' go home?"

When they had first lost power Kathy and Sarah had texted back and forth a little checking in on each other. Throughout the week they continued to do so, making sure one of them didn't need urgent help. Sarah hadn't gone into detail, but she had told Kathy that Ian had come over and was staying with her.

"Yeah. I mean he was only over here because he had no power so it's not like he was going to stay once the power came back on. He's got his own house to look after."

"But you miss him already?"

"Well, yeah." Ian's company had made being stuck at home without power bearable, but was it just his company she missed, or was it him?

"Real life is always more boring than being stuck in a snowstorm with no power trying to stay warm." Kathy had a laughing tone into her voice, knowing exactly how Sarah kept warm. "Was it good?"

Sarah's eyes rolled back in her head as she let out a satisfied sigh. "Girl, holy shit. It was fucking amazing."

"You gonna try to hook up again?"

"I'd like to."

"Well duh," Kathy interrupted her.

Sarah laughed at her friend's response. "But I don't know what he wants at this point. I think there could be something there. I'd like to see where things could go. I mean, don't get me wrong, the sex was fucking fantastic, but there was more there than just that. At least for me, there was."

“Too much to just be fuck buddies for a while?”

“Yeah. I mean he took me like no one ever has before. I don’t think I could do a casual thing with him at this point.”

“Took you? Do tell.”

So Sarah did. She didn’t go into full porno erotica storytelling detail, but she did tell Kathy everything. As Kathy listened to her, she could hear that Sarah was more than into this guy, she was starting to fall for him. Sarah told Kathy not only about the amazing sex but also about the conversations they had, telling her his reaction to her marriage and divorce from George. She told her about how easy it was to talk to him about nothing, and about such personal things.

“How long did you wait to tell him about that?”

“On the first day actually. He was, impressed is the wrong word, stunned in a positive way I guess is the best way to put it.”

“Oh fuck, so you told him everything.”

“Yeah. You know I love shocking people with that and watching them squirm and go wide-eyed.”

“Yeah, I know. You usually don’t link me and George that quickly though.”

“You ok that I did?” Sarah knew Kathy trusted her judgment, but she never wanted to overstep her bounds.

“Yeah, I am.” Kathy had paused for a moment before answering but was genuine with her reassurance. “But the fact that you just put it out there with this guy...girl, you have done lost your damn mind about him.”

“Yeah, pretty much.” Sarah couldn’t refute that.

“So are you gonna text him?”

“Yeah. Not right away though. I don’t want him to feel like I think he owes me for taking him in when we had no power. I would have gladly done it for him even if there hadn’t been any attraction. You know I’ve got enough food and supplies.”

“True. But it sounds like he already paid you back and then some.”

“Oh, I gave as good as I got. I’m pretty sure we’re even on that front. You know me.”

“True,” Despite the fact that she was gay as a man, Kathy had never been unsatisfied when she was with Sarah.

“But anyway, I just don’t want to give him the wrong impression. I don’t want him to come to me out of any sense of obligation. That would just ruin everything.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Well, my advice is to wait until tomorrow. Maybe send a text to check in on him, ask him if his place is working ok. Like a neighbor.”

“Yeah, I would have probably done that anyway.”

“Exactly. Don’t overthink this. If you really like him I think he knows, unless he’s dense as a fucking bowling ball. And it sounds like he likes you too. He’s obviously attracted to you. Not like that’s hard. All he has to have is eyes for that to happen. So don’t worry about it.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m still just coming down from the high of it all. I just spent nearly a week in orgasmic bliss. So anyway, how did you do? Have you fully defrosted yet?”

Kathy laughed and they talked for a while longer about the storm and what work would be like for each of them in the aftermath. Kathy worked retail and probably would have another few days off. Until the streets were clearer people weren’t going to be doing much shopping at the mall, and it was January. People were still mostly coming in to do Christmas gift returns.

It was late when they hung up, Kathy making Sarah promise to tell her what happened with Ian the next day. Before crawling into bed Sarah took a long hot shower. The wipes she and Ian had used had worked pretty well, but nothing compared to hot water. She wondered what it would be like to have Ian there with her, scrubbing her back for her. If they started seeing each other they would definitely have to try that.

As glad as she was to get to sleep in her bed again she would miss having Ian next to her. She hoped it would be as easy to adjust back to sleeping alone as it had been to adjust to his body snuggling next to her. Maybe it had been so easy because it hadn’t been in her actual bed. Being in your regular bed made a difference.

She didn’t have a hard time drifting off that night. It was so relaxing to snuggle back into her bed under her covers. It was when she woke up the next morning that she felt lonely, and a little disappointed to not see Ian next to her. She wondered if he missed having her next to him too. People made different connections when they were forced together out of necessity. Intense feelings like that had a hard time translating into the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

She looked at her phone to see if he had texted her. Nothing. It occurred to her that he might not even be awake yet. The only reason she was up that early was because she had to log into work. She was glad she didn’t have to go into the office. She knew she would have to go in soon, but she was putting it off for as long as she could.

Sarah hated driving in the snow. Between the slush on the road and the other people driving she just didn’t need the stress of it. She was very thankful that the grocery store was within walking distance. It wasn’t a quick trip, but it was doable, as long as she didn’t need to get very much.

Work was a little, make that a lot, nuts. It wasn't the first day the office had power, but it was the first day most people had power to their homes and were able to log in. Sarah spent her whole day reviewing emails and sorting through all her tasks, trying to prioritize them. Thankfully none of her bosses wanted to meet that day. Three had been scheduled for tomorrow, though not back to back thankfully, but close enough that if one ran long she wouldn't have a break between them.

Normally in January, everyone worked some amount of overtime, but only 3-5 hours a week. Sarah knew that for the next week or so, weekends included, everyone would be putting in more than that. She was not looking forward to it. She did realize, however, that she would be able to afford her gas bill this month without any strain on her budget. So there was that.

When Ian had gotten home the first thing he did was turn on the heater. It would take a while for his place to warm up, so he spent his time inspecting everything. He had shut the water off, so he turned it back on, and walked through the entire house turning on all the faucets, checking for leaks, and thankfully found none. Fantastic, shower time.

After he dried off he went into the kitchen to figure out what food in the fridge and freezer could be salvaged and what had to be tossed. He had taken most of it over to Sarah's, but he hadn't completely emptied his food stores. Normally the sight of a nearly empty fridge and freezer made him a little sad, but this time he was glad as almost no food had to be tossed. A few of the cans in his pantry had exploded when they had frozen, so he had a small mess to clean up there, but overall his house had weathered the storm as well as he could have hoped.

As he made himself some dinner his house felt too quiet, even with the music he had turned on. His house had never felt full, but now it felt empty. Which he thought was a little weird. He had gone over to Sarah's place, she hadn't filled his home with warmth and joy for the past week. Maybe he was just lonely, returning to his single living.

He wondered if she felt it too, or if she was glad to have her place back to herself. They had hardly known each other and he had just shown up asking to stay with her. She had seemed to be completely willing to take him in. From getting to know her he thought she probably would have taken him in even if they hadn't had any attraction to each other.

But she hadn't just taken him in from the cold. She had taken him in in so many other ways. He knew from the first time they had a short conversation that she was something special, now he knew just how true that was. He wanted to spend more time with her and get to know her even better. But did she?

The sex had been amazing, beyond amazing at times. And it had felt so natural to sleep next to her, to hold her next to him and wake up smelling her sweat musk. It had been a fantastic week. But was that it? Was it just a little vacation from the real world brought on by a storm and a power outage?

He wanted to text her, wanted to see if she would go on a date with him, or at least let him buy her dinner. But he didn't want her to feel like he was just doing it to pay her back; even

though to him it felt like he owed her so much. Not for the sex. He never wanted that to ever feel like one of them owed the other. Sex could be given and received, but it was a gift every time; even when it was a casual hook-up.

A thought struck him as he thought about all the things they had done together. More than any other woman he felt like the scales could be uneven with her. He was willing to give far more than he received. Oh shit, he was falling again. Fuck. Ok, enough of that.

As he got ready for bed he decided he would wait until tomorrow to text her and see how she was doing. Thank her for taking him in. Offer to take her to dinner, or maybe make her dinner. He had decided to offer it as a thank you, but hoped she wouldn't just take dinner and call it quits. He wanted to see where things could go.

He had slept pretty well, better than he thought he would. Ah, the wonders of sleeping in a real bed. He had woken up pretty early and had tried to keep himself busy. He didn't want to text her too early, even though she had said she would be up working, or come on too strong. When he finally decided it was time, he sat down on his couch and opened his phone.

Ian

- *Hey Sarah. Just wanted to thank you for taking me in. Pretty sure I owe you several dinners and probably a few breakfasts at this point.*
- *How's work going?*

Sarah

- *You are very welcome. And you don't owe me anything.*
- *It was nice not to be stuck here all alone.*
- *But I wouldn't say no to dinner with you.*

Ian

- *Well I'd love to take you out. You have any time this week?*

Sarah

- *No :(I'll be working 9-10 hour days thru next weekend at least.*
- *Gonna try not to work more than 6 on the weekends. Give myself a little bit of a break.*

Ian

- *Ouch*
- *Yeah, don't overdo it.*

Sarah

- *January is always our busy season, but having almost a full week to catch up on isn't helping.*

Ian

- *Well, I could always make dinner at my place. That way it wouldn't take too long.*
- *Or I could bring something to you.*

Sarah

- I'd love to come over. What day?

Ian

- Any day. Whatever works best for you.

Sarah

- Tomorrow?

Ian

- Yeah. 6?

Sarah

- I'll be there.

- Should I bring anything?

Ian

- Nope. Just yourself.

Sarah

- Ok. Looking forward to it.

Ian had been practically holding his breath after every text he sent, waiting for her response. He knew there would be lag time in her responses as she would be working, but nonetheless, he sat on his couch staring at his phone, waiting for her texts to come through. He had crossed his fingers when he had asked if she wanted to come over to his place for dinner. He had almost expected her to say no but was ecstatic when she not only said yes but suggested the next day. He had thought she would want to wait until the following weekend at least.

Sarah had replied as his texts came in. It was easy to reply quickly as she, thankfully, hadn't been in a meeting at the time. She was glad that he wanted to have dinner with her. While she was pretty sure this wasn't just a thank-you dinner, she still had that little worry that the days they had spent together were it.

On Saturday Sarah was clock-watching, wanting 6 o'clock to come quickly, and fortunately the day didn't drag out. She wasn't sure how close to 6 o'clock she should arrive. Should she be a little early? Or would that be weird? She didn't want to seem too eager, but she was eager, and a little nervous. Work ended up deciding for her. When she reached a good stopping point it was 5:45 pm. Perfect. Just enough time to put on "real pants", brush her hair, and walk over.

Ian had also been clock-watching that day too, eager for her to come over, but also because he needed to time things out so dinner would be ready at the right time. It had taken him the entire previous day to figure out what to do for dinner. Should he order out, basically

bringing the restaurant to her? Should he make something? And if he made something did he want to make it completely from scratch or get something from the store and just assemble it?

He decided to make her something, mostly from scratch. He went to the store and got some frozen scalloped potatoes, bacon-wrapped filet mignon, fresh green beans, some wine, and one of those little two-serving cake slices they had at the bakery. One thing he could cook well was steak and had learned that the most consistent way to get tasty veggies was to toss them in oil, salt & pepper, and put them in the oven. It was hard to fuck up roasted vegetables.

He decided to time the green beans and potatoes so they would be ready just after 6, but wait to put the steaks on until she arrived. He had set alarms for himself so he didn't start too early or worry he was starting too early, forget, and then be late. He wanted to impress her. They say the quickest way to a man's heart was through his stomach, but Ian knew from experience that it worked just as well with women.

Just before 6 Sarah rang his doorbell. Ian hurriedly answered.

"Hey, glad you could make it," Ian said, with a big smile on his face. He leaned down to give her a small hug and then just stood there for a minute, like a bit of an idiot, before the kitchen timer went off.

"Oh, crap." Ian hurried to the kitchen calling back over his shoulder, "You can put your coat on the coat rack there and come on back."

His entry, living, and dining rooms were clearly in the middle of the remodeling process. He had a couch, TV tray, and TV set up in the living room and a table and chairs in the dining room. The kitchen was finished though. Sarah thought it was gorgeous, dark woods set off by light gray counters and a deep blue backsplash. And she thought he looked good in it too.

"So, what's for dinner?" Sarah asked, leaning against the kitchen island.

"Bacon-wrapped filet mignon, scalloped potatoes, roasted green beans, some red wine, and German chocolate cake for dessert." Ian didn't look at her as he listed it all off. He put his focus on checking the potatoes and green beans. The potatoes were done but the beans weren't. Perfect. The beans would be done when the steaks were.

"Wow, fancy." Sarah was impressed. "Did you make the potatoes?"

"God no." Ian said, chuckling, finally looking over at her. "My potato cooking skills are limited to baking them."

"Nothing wrong with baked potatoes. Those do look delicious though."

"I'm gonna put the steaks on now. I like mine medium-rare. How do you want yours cooked? Do you want a glass of wine while I get them going?"

“Sure, and I like my steak medium-rare or rare.” She walked over to where he had already put the wine glasses, bottle opener, and wine on the counter. “Do you want a glass too?”

“Sure, thanks.” He kicked himself mentally. He should have already had it ready to go and served her.

She walked over to him and handed him a glass. “Nice glasses. I didn’t think you were a wine guy.”

“Not much, these were my uncles. A lot of my kitchen stuff I got with the house.”

“Ah, that makes sense.” She said, handing him his glass.

Before she could turn away to give him room to cook, and to watch him cook really, he encircled her waist and drew her to him for a proper kiss. She put her hand on his cheek as she kissed him back.

When the kiss broke Ian said, “Oh yeah, I’ve missed doing that.”

“Me too.” Sarah replied, pulling back so he could focus on not burning the steaks. The steaks sizzled as they hit the hot cast iron. “So, was your uncle a big wine guy?”

They chatted about wine for a little bit while the food finished cooking. When it was done she helped him bring it to the table, which he had already set. They sat down and began to eat. It was so good. Of course, bacon makes everything better, but he had cooked the steaks to a perfect medium-rare. The veggies and the potatoes rounded everything out making it an excellent meal.

“Do you like it? Do you want steak sauce or anything?”

“It’s so good. Doesn’t need anything. I love roasted veggies. It always sounds so fancy but it’s really one of the best and easiest. It’s so simple but turns out so good.”

“Yep, that’s why I do them most of the time. They’re hard to fuck up. I added some garlic powder to them this time. Good tip on that by the way, thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Garlic, bacon, and cheese make pretty much everything better.”

“Cheers to that.” Ian raised his glass and Sarah toasted with him.

They spend the rest of the dinner chatting like they had before. The conversation flowed easily. Ian asked about Sarah’s work and she told him how nuts it was. Some deadlines had to be pushed back, but it was a snowstorm. You did what you could. When they were done eating Ian took the plates back to the kitchen and brought out the cake. One plate, two forks. He set it between them and they slowly worked their way through barely half of it. They were both pretty full from dinner, but it was a nice finisher to the meal.

After they both decided they'd had enough cake they went and sat on the couch together, finishing the last of their wine. They kept chatting about getting back to regular life after the snowstorm. Topics came easy and the conversation flowed.

Sarah was feeling wonderfully sleepy in that way only wine and good food can make you feel. She knew she needed to go to bed soon as she had to get up for work in the morning, but she didn't want to leave yet.

After a stifled yawn and a time check Sarah said, with a resigned sigh, "I should probably get going. I have to get up for work tomorrow."

"Yeah." Ian was disappointed that the evening had to end but he understood. "Bummer though."

"I know. I hate alarm clocks."

"Well,"

"Yeah."

Ian took her glass and went to put them in the kitchen. Sarah stood up and headed towards the entry to put her coat on. She had just gotten it on but hadn't zipped it up yet when Ian came over and wrapped his arms around her under her coat. He pulled her in for a kiss. A lingering kiss that neither of them wanted to end. But it did, and he zipped her coat up for her, pulling the hood up over her head.

"We should do this again, soon," Ian said.

"Definitely soon." Sarah smiled, wanting to stay but also liking the way this felt like a date, that didn't have to end up naked. "Feel free to call or text anytime. Even if you just want to send a funny meme or something."

"I will. You too. Any time."

With one last kiss, Ian opened the door for her and Sarah walked back over to her house. When she got inside she went straight to her room, undressed, and took out her vibrator. She had been ready to jump him since she saw him standing in the kitchen cooking those steaks. And he had cooked them so perfectly. She had seen how nervous he had been, wanting to make sure she enjoyed everything. It was adorable how he had stood in the doorway when he greeted her, so excited to have her there he didn't quite know what to do. And when he had pulled her in for a kiss standing at the stove, she had to use her self-restraint to pull back and let him finish cooking. Before she fell asleep she texted him to thank him. She then fell asleep in a state of gentle bliss.

Ian watched her until she made it inside her house. After closing the door, Ian went into the kitchen to clean up. Once that was done he went to his room to 'take care of himself'. He

had been ready to burst when he saw her in his kitchen, opening the bottle of wine. She looked so natural there. It had felt so familiar to have her hand him a glass of wine as dinner was being cooked. As he lay in his bed enjoying the bliss after finishing he heard his phone ping.

Sarah

- Thanks again for dinner. It was amazing.

Ian

- I'm glad you liked it.

Sarah

- Do you want to do dinner tomorrow night?

Ian

- Tomorrow, yes.

Sarah

-Good. I'll bring dinner over around 6.

Ian

-You don't have to cook. I'm happy to make you dinner again.

Sarah

-No, it's my turn.

Ian

-Ok

-But I can come over so you don't have to haul anything.

Sarah

- No, we spent almost a week stuck in my house. I need a change of scenery.

Ian

- Fair enough. Around 6 again?

Sarah

- Yeah.

Ian

- Sleep well.

Sarah

- You too.

Chapter 6

The next morning Sarah put a dump meal in the crockpot for dinner. It was one of her best crock-pot recipes. It was one of the recipes that had been passed down through several generations. The only extra thing she did was go to the store to get some wine.

Ian spent his day taping and mudding the drywall in the living and dining rooms and getting a start on the tile work in the master bath walk-in shower. He wondered what Sarah would make for dinner. He hoped she didn't go to much trouble. He had gone all out because she was worth it, and it was kind of like their first date. And he had the time. She was working overtime at her job. He would be satisfied if she brought over grilled cheese and canned tomato soup.

At 6 o'clock she packed everything up and walked over to his house. He had been watching out the window and opened the door for her as she was walking up the front steps. Once she was in and he shut the door, he took the crockpot from her and put it in the kitchen. Once again he had already set the table. She brought the wine into the kitchen, white this evening. Ian retrieved his cork screw and two glasses for them.

"This smells amazing. Do you need to plug it in?" Ian asked.

"Nope, it's ready to go and plenty hot." Sarah was a little sheepish that she had brought a one pot meal over. "Sorry, it's not that fancy."

"Hey, don't apologize. It looks like it took more prep than what I did."

"Not really." Sarah blushed a little at that.

Ian smiled at her, enjoying the little bit of color rising in her cheeks. She opened the wine and he got a serving spoon.

"Should I put this in a serving bowl or something?"

"Naw, we can just bring our plates in and serve up."

"Yes, good plan." And Ian went and got the plates from the table. "Would bowls be better?"

Sarah looked at the plates, "Yeah, probably. It's not a soup or stew, but I usually eat it in a bowl. Of course, that's more because I usually eat sitting on the couch watching TV and a bowl is easier for that."

Ian got out the dinner-sized bowls and they both served up. Sarah poured the wine and they went out and sat at the dining table to enjoy another meal together. Ian took one bite and his eyes rolled back in his head a little.

“Wow, that’s fantastic.”

“I’m glad you like it. It’s an old family recipe.”

“Those are the best. Grandma?”

“Great-grandma actually. She had a few. And I didn’t have to wait for anyone to die to get them.”

Ian raised an eyebrow at her.

“It’s a tradition that every kid gets the secret family recipes when they get married or when they turn 30, whichever comes first. I think my grandma added the at-30 thing. She thought that if you weren’t married by the time you were 30 you weren’t ever gonna get married.”

That made Ian chuckle. “Nice that you don’t have to wait forever for them.”

“Yeah. This way we get to enjoy them as adults and don’t have to wait till someone kicks it to get them. It’s also a family tradition to put your own spin on it. I’ve got the original one, my grandma’s version, and my mom’s version.”

“That’s neat.”

“Yeah, and with each generation you get more variations. I have my mom’s variations based on her mom’s, but my grandma’s siblings’ kids and grandkids will have different ones. It’s kind of like a big family tree of recipes. It’s also nice cuse ingredients can change through the years. Originally this had lard, but I used butter.”

“Well, whatever is in it, it’s wonderful.”

They sat there silently eating for a little bit before conversation naturally started again. Once again the conversation wasn’t really about anything. At one point they debated the pros and cons of ridged potato chips vs smooth ones. They decided each had their merit and it was more about the flavoring than the shape.

Ian told her the story about the time he helped his buddy ask his girlfriend to prom in one of those ridiculous ways that would go viral these days. It had been a cross between a Disney Prince Charming and the horse riding scene from Monty Python and the Holy Grail. Ian’s job had been to follow his friend with the coconuts to make the horse clip-clop sounds. They had all felt, and probably looked, ridiculous, but she loved it and of course said yes.

“And then a week after prom she dumped him because he was, quote ‘too much of a nerd for her’.” Ian shook his head.

“Wow. Sounds a bit like a pot and kettle situation.”

“Eh, whatever. Makes for a great story now.”

“Are you two still friends?”

“Yeah.”

“And I bet you never let him forget it either.”

“Not for a second.”

When they were finished with dinner Ian brought out the cake, but this time they took it to the couch and set it between them. They slowly finished it off as they kept telling each other silly stories from their childhood.

When the cake was gone they snuggled next to each other, still chatting, sipping on the last of their wine. After finishing the last of his wine, Ian leaned over to put the wine glasses down and when he leaned back he didn't resume his spot. Instead, he faced Sarah, held her head with one hand, and kissed her.

She wrapped her arms around his torso, holding on to him. She loved the feeling of his lips, of his tongue dancing with hers, tasting him. It didn't take long before he pushed into her, making her lay back. He lay on top of her, his arms on either side of her head to brace himself. It seemed to block out the room around them, giving them this little dark space together.

“You taste like cake.”

“Huh, wonder why that is.”

He was starting to grind into her and she spread her legs to wrap them around his hips. Well, one leg. The other was pinned against the couch. But it gave him a better angle to grind against her. He brushed his torso against her breasts but didn't take his hands from around her head and she kept her arms wrapped around his torso.

After a little while it died down and they just lay there, looking at each other. He touched his forehead to hers, closed his eyes, and let out a sigh.

“I want you so badly.” He said, with a note of disappointed resignation in his voice.

“But.” Sarah felt it too.

“Yeah.”

“I know.”

She squeezed him and he wrapped his arms under her to hold her, resting his head next to hers, breathing in the scent of her.

"I should probably let you go. You having to work tomorrow and all." Ian didn't want to let go, but such was life sometimes.

"Yeah, I really should get to sleep sooner rather than later." Sarah didn't want to let go either but knew she needed to get to sleep soon to be functional for work the next day.

It took a few moments but eventually Ian shifted so he could stand up and helped Sarah to her feet. "Dinner again tomorrow?"

"Absolutely."

"Good. I'll cook."

Sarah had to sit down again to put her boots back on. She had taken them off when they had relocated to the couch. Ian walked away and to Sarah's surprise he came back in with his boots and coat on, and her coat held ready for her in his hands. She looked quizzically at him.

"I'll walk you home."

"You don't have to do that. I'm just next door."

"I know. May I please walk you home?"

Sarah smiled. "Of course. Oh, my pot."

"Here, I'll grab it." Ian handed her her coat and went to the kitchen to get her crock pot.

"Do you want to keep any leftovers? There are plenty."

"No, that's ok." Ian would love some leftovers but she had to work so hard she deserved to have excellent food ready to go.

"Let me rephrase that. Get a container, or your bowl and some saran wrap, and keep some leftovers."

Ian was halfway to the front door with the pot when he abruptly turned around. "Yes mam."

When he came back to the door he said, "I left plenty for you. You deserve to have plenty so you don't have to cook in the middle of your workday this week."

She tried to take it from him but he refused to give it over. She gave in. When they got to her front door she took the crockpot from him, he leaned over to kiss her and waited until she shut and locked the door behind her before walking back to his house.

She just stood there for a moment, her hand resting on the deadbolt knob. He wanted to take care of her. But in a way that let her keep her autonomy. She knew that if she had insisted

he not walk her to her door he would have respected that. The way he had phrased his request the second time, asking please, with such longing in his voice, had made her melt on the inside. She quickly put the leftovers away and went to her room. This time she pulled out her rabbit. She wanted him to be the one to fill her, but this would do until then.

He was willing to wait, wanted to wait. He had been the one to stop things. They had gone from 0 to 100 in a day, but now that they were back in the real world he was treating this like dating. Somehow it was better to her, having leaped at each other, onto each other, so fast, to now slowing down. Now they could see the other person for who they were; for who they might be together. Maybe it was easier to do because they had already done so much, they weren't crawling out of their skin desperate to fuck.

And yet, as she lay in her bed, her rabbit doing its job so very well, she felt like she had been ready to crawl out of her skin all night with longing for him. Longing, not just lust. That little glow and tingle set her off. Laying under her covers, the worm glow still running through her, she felt like she had only taken the edge off it. She wasn't about to jump out of her skin, but she still could have gone a round or two with Ian if he had come over right then. But she would gladly wait.

She had seen and heard how nervous the lust had made him. But it hadn't been just lust. Was that what had made him hesitate, made him want to slow down? She knew she was falling in love with him; had felt it that first morning waking up together in the snow storm. She knew it had likely been mostly endorphins and the joy of the multiple orgasms from the night before, but the feeling had continued. She had felt it as he helped her clear the snow away from the gas meter outside her house. As she drifted off to sleep she was glad things were going slow. It would give them a chance to move past the lust and endorphin rush to see what was really there.

When he had gotten back into his house Ian took out his own toy to take care of himself. But even with that release, he was still longing for Sarah. Longing, not just lusting. Well, a part of him was always lusting for her, how could he not? With a body like that, and her wonderfully warm laugh. And those lips, he loved her lips.

He was in love with her; had known it since she had let him dominate her. But it scared him, and he tried to dampen it down. He had fallen in love with Cindy, his ex-fiance, this quickly too. It hadn't been the worst breakup ever, but she had still burned him, badly. He couldn't deny his attraction to Sarah. Had no intention of denying himself the pleasure of her company. But loving her? Could he let himself love like that again? Oh, he had 'loved' other girls since Cindy, but this felt different.

He knew she liked him, knew she wanted him. Wanted to eat dinner with him and fuck his brains out. But was that it? Did she, would she....could she love him the same way? Would he still love her this way in a few more weeks, or months? Did it matter?

He decided it didn't, at least for now. She was here now, in his life. She was ready, dare he say eager, to be with him. But she hadn't pushed back when he put a halt to things that night. She seemed to be on the same page as him. He decided that was enough for now. She was letting him take the lead and set the pace. It relaxed him to realize that. But he didn't fall asleep for a while. He lay there, staring out his window, his mind blissfully blank. Eventually, he was able to close his eyes and fall asleep.

Sarah woke up the next day, not wanting to get out of bed. She never wanted to get out of bed, but she was especially disagreeable to the action since she had to drive into the office that day. Her alarm went off again and she resignedly dragged herself out of bed, got dressed, packed a lunch, and headed out to brave the traffic.

Most of the roads had been plowed so the commute was pretty easy, and not as crowded as she thought it would have been. Work also wasn't too bad. They were still busy as hell, but everyone seemed to be in good spirits about it. She had planned on staying till mid-afternoon and working the rest of the day from home so she didn't have to drive in the dark.

Unfortunately at 1:30, her boss called her into a meeting. The meeting had lasted for 2 hours and one outcome of it meant she had to stay at the office till that particular task was complete; which she estimated wouldn't be till around 6:30, so she texted Ian.

Sarah:

- *Hey, I have to stay at the office till 6:30 or so. Ugh.*
- *I'll text you before I leave so you have an eta.*

Ian:

- *Hey, bummer.*
- *Drive safe in the dark.*
- *Do you still want to do dinner tonight?*
- *I could bring it to you.*
- *Or will you just want to crash when you get home?*

Sarah:

- *No cancel.*
- *Want dinner.*
- *Yes please bring.*

Ian:

- *LOL, Ok.*
- *See you tonight. *kisses**

Sarah ended up working until 7. By the time she got home, she was starving. She didn't really care what dinner was, she was just glad she didn't have to figure it out. Chances were if she had had to figure it out, it would have been whatever she grabbed first out of the fridge. Ian must have been watching from his window because no sooner had she pulled into her driveway

than she saw him exit his house and walk over to hers. She parked in her garage and went to let him in.

When she opened the door he held out a pan saying "I bring Lasagna and garlic bread."

"Oh, yes. Food." Sarah took off her coat and boots, switching to her slippers.

"Of course. Any time. I'm always happy to bring you whatever you need, or want." Ian took the pan to the dining table and then returned to the entry to take off his outerwear.

She was still standing by the door and after he had gotten his coat off she grabbed him by the front of his sweater, pulled him in, and kissed him. "Need food. Want you."

He smiled and kissed her back. "Any time."

"Uh, don't tempt me." She winked at him. "Now, food. I'm starving."

"Sorry, no wine tonight."

"That's just fine. I actually rarely have wine with dinner. I don't tend to drink very frequently, really."

"I don't drink too often either. Well, ok, I'll have a beer more often than not, but that's mostly cuse I like it. Beer doesn't give me much of a buzz. A friend of mine introduced me to this really good NA beer recently, so I've been having that a lot."

Sarah ate with gusto. Ian chuckled about it and she gave him a 'really?' look. She did it well. He smiled and blew an air kiss at her. She smiled and blew one back to him, and dove back into her food. When they finished Ian asked if she wanted to just go to bed. He wanted to stay and cuddle, maybe make out a little, but could see how tired she was.

"Can we just cuddle on the couch for a bit? Maybe put on some TV or music or something?"

"I'd love to." Ian took the plates to the kitchen, wrapped the leftovers, put them in her fridge, and joined her on the couch.

They channel flipped for a bit before landing on reruns of Parks and Rec. She hadn't started with her head on his shoulder, but it didn't take long before she began to drift that way. It was halfway through the second episode that he noticed she had fallen asleep. He gently nudged her awake.

"Huh, or sorry." Sarah sat back up straight, trying to wipe the sleep from her eyes.

"Do you want to just go to bed? We don't have to finish the episode." He wanted to just scoop her into his arms and tuck her in for the night.

“No, I’m good, we can finish it.”

“You sure? We’ve both seen this before.”

She stared blankly at him for a moment, shook her head realizing she had just been staring blankly, and said “Yeah, maybe I better just go to bed. I just wanted to spend more time with you.”

“I know, I did too. But getting sleep so you can be awake for work tomorrow is more important. Here, I can even carry you in.” he didn’t give her time to deny his offer, he just stood and scooped her into his arms.

She wasn’t about to refuse, so she lay her head against his chest “Mmmm, comfy man.”

He sat her down on the bed and went over to her dresser. “What pajamas do you want?”

“Fuzzy ones, they’re in the basket in the closet.”

He opened the closet and pulled them out. As he did that she got up and went to brush her teeth. When she got back he had pulled back the covers and plugged her phone into its charger on her nightstand.

“Do you want help getting into these?”

“Naked?” She had a little hopeful chirp under the tired voice.

“Just to get you into your pj’s.”

“Aww, you’re no fun. But no, I can do that much. Thanks for offering. Oh, I should lock up behind you.”

“True.”

He held her hand as they went to the front door. He put his coat on, kissed her, and left her to shut the door behind him. She watched him walk down her front steps for a moment before shutting and locking the door. She wished there had been a way he could have just carried her to her bed and tucked her in; tucked himself right in next to her. Another time. Yeah, definitely another time.

He had his hands in his pockets and his head down as he walked home. He had wanted to crawl into bed next to her. Lay on the side of the bed between her and the door. Drift off to the sound of her slow steady breathing. He had missed that since he had returned home. It had only been a few nights, and while he had always liked having someone to sleep next to, he felt a pull to have Sarah near him.

It didn’t drive him crazy that night though, to leave her to sleep alone. She had always seemed to love having him in bed with her, but he wasn’t sure if him being in her bed would be

relaxing; or if she would spend the night out of sorts with this new presence in her bed. She had been so tired, he just wanted her to get a good night's sleep. A person's bed in their own bedroom was always a little different from any other bed, be it a hotel, a friend's spare bedroom, or a pull-out couch. At least he had always noticed the difference.

Though she did feel a little alone that night, Sarah did, in fact, sleep well. Thankfully, she didn't have to go into the office the next day. The day before it had gotten to a little above freezing and it had dropped below during the night. Driving on ice was 10x worse than driving on snow, or slush. When she looked into her fridge at lunch she noticed the lasagna was in there. She hadn't remembered Ian wrapping it up and putting it away. She actually had a few different leftovers now. It was her turn to cook dinner, assuming they would do dinner again tonight. Maybe it was leftover night. When she broke for lunch she texted Ian.

Sarah:

- Hey, dinner tonight?

Ian:

- Yeah.

Sarah:

- Oh good. How about we do leftovers?

- I've got another crock-pot dish I made Friday.

Ian:

- Sounds delish. When should I be over?

Sarah:

- Not your place?

Ian:

- Not tonight.

- I've had to move my dining table out of my dining room cuse I'm sanding the drywall today.

-And all the food is over there.

-Just give me 10 min notice and I'll come over.

Sarah:

- Those are all good points.

- I'll probably be done around 7. I'll text you when I'm ready.

Ian:

- Looking forward to it.

He had spent his morning prepping the room, moving out all the furniture, which, by himself, had been an adventure, and had hung up plastic sheeting to section off the rest of the house. He would have called a buddy over to help, but all his friends were busy on weekdays. Silly people with their jobs.

His friends had wanted him to come over that night to watch a game, but he had declined. They had given him a hard time about it, but he knew it was all in good fun. He did agree to see if Sarah wanted to join them that weekend, though it remained unclear to all of them if he would go out if Sarah was too tired to join.

Only two of his friends knew that he had stayed with her when he lost power. He had told them when they called to offer for him to stay with them after hearing about it on the news. When he got power back Max, his best friend, had asked how it had gone. Ian had given a brief overview. Max didn't need details to know what had happened. Max had asked Ian if he was ok, knowing how fast Ian tended to fall for women. Ian hadn't completely brushed him off, but it was clear that wasn't a topic up for discussion.

That night Sarah texted him at 6:45 that she had just clocked out from work and to come over whenever he wanted. Knowing she would be texting soon he had gotten to a stopping point about half an hour prior so when the text came in he just put on his shoes and went right over. She had a feeling he wouldn't actually take that 10 min he had mentioned and wasn't surprised when he came in the door 2 min later.

She came out of the kitchen to greet him with a hug and a kiss. "I'm just pulling all the options out of the fridge. There's the lasagna, grandma's secret recipe, a mushroom beef stew, and some crusty bread I picked up the other day."

"Gotta try the mushroom beef stew, and have some more of grandma's secret recipe. I finished off what you left with me for breakfast."

"Not your typical breakfast food."

"To me, breakfast food is whatever food you eat first thing in your day."

"Fair enough."

Over dinner, they largely sat eating in comfortable silence. Sarah had put on some music and both were content to just listen to the music. Sarah found it more relaxing to share a silent meal, with a little background music, with someone than to have a quiet meal alone. Having another presence there seemed to worm up her house that extra little bit.

As they were cleaning up Ian asked, "Hey, my friends invited me out on Saturday and I was wondering if there was any way you wanted to come too? I mean you don't have to if you don't want to. We can stay in and watch a movie if you think you'll be too tired or if you just want to, or I can go and you can have a quiet night to yourself if you want."

He was rambling a little. She found it kind of cute. She put a hand on his arm to stop him. "I do have to work Saturday, but I won't have to work all day. I'd love to come out and meet your friends, and get out of this house for a while. Assuming it's in the evening that is."

"Yeah, we don't usually get together till 5 ish. So, you really want to come?"

“Of course I want to come. If I didn’t I would have said so.” She could see he was still a little tense, like he still wasn’t sure she was just doing this cause he asked, not because she actually wanted to. She took his face in her hands and looked at him. “If I ever don’t want to do something I’ll tell you.”

She could see and feel him relax. He reached up and put his hand on top of hers, turned his head to kiss it, and replied “Ok.”

“Promise you’ll do the same?”

“I promise.” He replied. She looked like she didn’t quite believe him so he took her face in his hands. “I promise.”

They stood like that for a second before they kissed and went back to putting everything back in the fridge. They sat on the couch together and watched reruns of whatever sitcoms they found. It wasn’t long before they had stopped paying attention to what was on and started making out. This time she was on top, rubbing her hips atop his. He reached around and grabbed her ass, guiding the motion.

Ian could tell when Sarah’s energy started flagging. He slowed her grinding, softened the kisses, and let her rest against him. She wanted to ask him to stay but had promised herself that she would wait for an invitation or a request from him. Was he waiting for her to ask the question first though? She didn’t think they had ever actually said anything definitive about it.

“Hey Ian?” She decided, tired though she was, that she needed to know.

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to stay over?” She felt him draw in a breath and hesitate for a moment.

“No.” He paused, a little scared of the answer she might give. “Is that alright?”

“Yeah, of course it is. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to disappoint you.”

She lifted her head from his chest to look at him. “You’ve never disappointed me. Well, ok, on some level yes, I’m a little disappointed, but...we kind of did jump in the deep end head first. Slowing down is absolutely fine. It’s good really.” She could see the softening in his face telling her he was relaxing away from the fear that had shown a moment ago. “Ok, so I’ll let you set the pace. I’m ready, eager really, to sleep next to you; in my bed, in yours, whatever. And to fuck your brains out. But I’m also absolutely willing to wait. Ok?”

“Yeah, ok.” He sat up slightly to kiss her, a kiss of gratitude and thanks.

“Do you want me to keep asking, or do you want to let me know when you want to?”

"I'll let you know. Does that mean we're waiting on sex too?"

"Up to you. I've got toys, so I can wait. I mean, if you take 6 months we might need to re-evaluate things..."

Ian laughed, "Yeah, I don't think that'll be a problem."

"Good," She leaned over to kiss him, running her hands down his body to rub his semi-hard cock through his jeans. "Cuse I like your dick too much to wait too long."

"Maybe I'll make you wait for it. Make you beg for it." He said teasingly.

"Mmmm, could be fun."

They made out for a little longer, but Sarah was growing tired. "I don't want to stop, but I'm tired."

"I know you are. I should go and let you get some sleep."

"I both hate and love sleep right now."

Ian laughed and lifted her so he could sit up. He put his shoes on, then went to the door to put his coat on before giving her one last kiss goodnight. Once again she watched him for a moment before shutting and locking the door. She really was willing to wait for him. She could see that something was going on inside of him that shouldn't be rushed. She just hoped that he didn't try to rush it for her sake.

Ian walked home feeling better leaving her this time. She was willing to put her needs aside to allow him the time he needed to settle. Diving into the deep end hadn't seemed like the wrong thing to do. It was a unique situation, separate from real life. But now that they were back in real life he needed to pause and see things for what they really were, rather than what he wanted them to be. He wanted what they had that week trapped together to be reality, but had learned the hard way that intensity like that rarely translated into the real world that well.

As with all things only time would tell.

Chapter 7

“Hey, what’s the plan for tomorrow?” They were eating at Ian’s Friday night when Sarah asked.

“We’re going to meet up at The Back Street Inn around 6. Ever been there?”

“Only once. It’s like a pool hall pub attached to a hotel, isn’t it?”

“Yep”

“You like to play pool?”

“Eh, it’s fine. Fun to do with friends. A few of my friends are pretty good and love it though. Stacy actually competes in an amateur league. What about you?”

“I’ve only played a few times.”

“No worries, we’re all there just to have fun.”

“Do you want to do dinner first?”

“Naw, we’ll eat there. Their wings are amazing.”

“Sounds good. I’m looking forward to meeting your friends.” Sarah was a bit nervous in truth. It was almost as bad as meeting someone’s parents, though from what little Ian had told her, his friends were the more important people to meet. “Who all is going to be there? For warned is forearmed after all.”

“They’re not that bad. They’ll love you.” Ian knew they would like her, but would they all get along? Only one way to find out. “Anyway, Max and his wife Christine, Stacy, Tom, and Bruce I think. Allen said he’d come but who knows.”

“Max is the one you helped ask his girlfriend to prom?”

“Yeah.”

“And he’s married to Christina, right?”

“Yep.”

Throughout the rest of dinner, Ian told Sarah about his friends, telling her how he had met each of them. As usually happened, their conversation veered in many different directions, each telling silly stories of meeting friends.

After they finished cleaning up from dinner they hadn’t even made it out of the kitchen before Ian pulled Sarah in and started kissing her. He stopped only long enough to lift her onto

the counter, her legs wrapping around him. She put her arms over his shoulders and pulled him to her, matching the need in his kiss with her own.

He held her hips as he kissed her before running them up her back under her shirt. At first. He just rubbed her smooth skin, but it didn't take long for him to unclasp her bra and moved one hand to cup her breast lightly teasing her nipple. She arched into him, tipping her head back in pleasure.

He stopped only long enough to pull her shirt over her head and slip her bra off, tossing both to the floor. Once she was topless he bent down to take one breast in his mouth while his hand continued to play with the other. She held onto his head with one hand and used the other to brace herself so she wouldn't fall backward. She loved the feel of his lips on her hard nipple, his tongue lightly flicking them.

She pushed forward slightly, pulling his head up, so she could kiss him again before pulling his shirt off. She took a moment to press up against him, feeling the warmth of his chest on hers before she ran her hand down his chest and began to undo his belt. Before she could get very far he grabbed her hips and scooped her up. She held on, her legs still wrapped around his hips and arms around his neck.

She kept kissing his neck, nibbling on his ear as he carried her up to his bedroom. He opened the door and plopped them down onto his bed. She reached down between them and began to rub him.

She watched him as he began to kiss his way down her body, her hands running through his hair, as he licked circles around each nipple, worked around her belly button, and continued down. He kissed her inner thighs as he pulled her pants and panties off, tossing them aside. He wrapped his arms around the outside of her thighs and sank his face into her wet pussy, flicking her clit with his tongue.

He licked everything, moving until he could sink his tongue into her. He moved one hand to massage her clit as he flicked his tongue in and out of her until her legs squeezed against him and he felt the shutters of pleasure rush thru her body. He loved the way she tasted and drank up every drop of her he could get.

When her thighs relaxed he moved back up to kiss her. She could taste herself on his lips, and she liked it. As she kissed him she moved her hands to undo his pants and push them down his legs as much as she could.

She began to move to get his cock to her mouth but he pushed her back down, rubbing his now free, and very hard dick, against her wet slit. He took himself in his hand and guided his tip to split her lips, rubbing it up and down her against her. Her hips began to thrust towards him, wanting him to sink in her. She didn't have long to wait. He let go of himself, propped himself up on his hands, and pushed himself slowly into her.

Her back arched in pure pleasure. He felt so good filling her. Her body relaxed back down as he sank all the way in. She looked at him, breathing heavily, smiling seductively. He looked at her as he began to slowly thrust, gliding in and out of her.

He kept the rhythm slow but didn't hold back in intensity. Every time he thrust in he went hard. Each time she felt him hit bottom she let out a heavy gasp. It wasn't painful, it was intense, and she loved it. She was trying to keep her hips in rhythm with his but was having a hard time. She wanted to go faster.

He smiled down at her wickedly, feeling how much she wanted to just ride him. So he obliged. He rolled over onto his back and helped her straddle him. As she sank onto him she let out a very satisfied moan. He grinned up at her and grasped her breasts, massaging them as she began to ride him with abandon, her hips rocking back and forth as she bounced up and down. He was holding her breasts and began to thrust into her, meeting her down stroke with an upward one of his own.

He let go of her breasts and took hold of her hips with one hand and used the other to rub his thumb against her clit. She leaned over him to brace herself but he didn't move his thumb, he just used the new position to put steady pressure on her and rolled his thumb across her swollen nub.

He loved watching her ride him, watching her take her pleasure. As she began to crest again he sped up to take his own release. His nails dug into her hips as he held her down onto him, shooting his load into her.

She sat there for a moment, breathing heavily, watching him, feeling him still in her, his nails still gripping into her hips. Slowly she lay forward onto him as his hands came around to wrap her in his arms and hold her close. They just lay there, breathing heavily, letting him slip out of her as he softened, letting themselves come down from their high.

"For a minute there I thought you were going to take me right there on the kitchen counter." She said, breaking the silence.

"I did consider it, but the counter is just a little too tall to make that truly comfortable."

"You could have built them lower." She was teasing, but the idea of being taken in the kitchen did intrigue her.

"Having sex on them wasn't what I was thinking about when building them." Part of him kind of wished he had.

"Pretty sure the only people who consider that are people building sets for pornos."

"Probably. Though the thought of taking you in the kitchen, just bending you over the counter and pounding you does have some appeal."

“Yeah, it does.”

He bent his neck to look at her with delighted curiosity. She looked up at him.

“What? It’s the same kind of excitement that led you to have sex in the back of a car and me in the bed of a truck. And the back room of a nightclub.”

“Wait, what’s this about a nightclub? How is the back of a truck what you thought of when we were doing that drunk 20 questions and not the back room of a nightclub?”

“Because the bed of the truck was parked in the back of a drive-in movie theater and the nightclub was a strip club.”

“Ok?” He still thought she had things backward.

“Well, people could have seen us at the drive-in but walking in on two people going at it in the back room of a strip club would be less surprising, and you are much less likely to get in trouble for it.”

“True. Did the truck have a canopy or anything?”

“Nope.” She held no shame in what she had done.

“Well ok then.” His mind began to turn. “I’m trying to decide if I need to get a truck now or if we should go to a nightclub.”

She gave him a playful slap on his chest.

“What? Can’t blame a guy for fantasizing.”

She made a ‘fair enough’ gesture and lay her head back down on his chest. When she gave a small shiver Ian rolled her over just enough to pull a blanket over them. He held her, comforted by her warmth, feeling her heartbeat against his chest. He could feel himself starting to fall asleep and knew it was time to walk her home.

He nudged her, “Hey, we better get up so I can walk you home, I’m nodding off.”

“Ok.” Sarah was a little disappointed he hadn’t asked her to stay the night but knew it wasn’t her decision to make.

They got up and went to the bathroom to clean up a little before getting dressed. Sarah had to go to the kitchen to find her bra and top and Ian enjoyed watching her casually walking through his house topless. She gave him a dirty look when he said so but couldn’t entirely disagree.

The next day Sarah worked till 2 pm and decided she needed a nap before their evening out. She wanted to enjoy herself and not be struggling to stay awake all night. She slept longer

than expected, not waking till after 4 pm; but she still had plenty of time to get ready. After showering she had a hard time picking out what to wear. This wasn't a big event, but she still wanted to set the right tone. She wanted to look nice but not dressed up. She settled on a dark green v-neck sweater, jeans, and her favorite navy blue ankle boots.

She thought Ian looked delicious in his long-sleeve flannel button-up open over a graphic t-shirt and jeans. They drove to the Inn largely in silence. Ian could tell Sarah was nervous and thought it was sweet. Truth be told he was a little nervous too. Sometimes introducing your new SO to your friends could be worse than introducing them to your parents, had always been that way for him at least.

When they arrived he was thankful that they weren't the first ones there. Max and Christina were already there, sitting at a table near the pool tables on the upper level. The Back Street Inn was a hotel attached to an upscale pub. There were two levels, the lower level was the standard restaurant section and the upper level had more of a bar/pool hall feel to it.

When Sarah and Ian approached Max and Christina stood up to introduce themselves. Max was average in every metric. Average height, average weight, average colored brown hair and eyes. What stood out was his extremely wide grin and the fact that his hair went to his butt. Christina was a narrow woman physically, slightly taller than average, with a blond pixie cut and vibrant blue eyes. Her narrowness was limited to her physique though, as she greeted both of them with a warm smile and a big hug as did Max. Once they were seated Max got the waiter's attention so Sarah and Ian could order drinks.

"So who all are we waiting for?" Ian asked.

"Stacy and Tom for sure," Christina answered. "Bruce said he would try to come by later and Allen said he had other plans tonight."

"Oh good, we won't have to wait forever to order food."

"Which one is always late?" Sarah asked.

"Yes," Max responded to her.

Sarah gave a knowing smile and nod to that. A few moments later Stacy, a petite strawberry blond, arrived followed shortly by Tom, an average, if gangly, redhead. The waiter came by a moment later and, it being a favorite place of theirs, no one had to look at the menu except Sarah. However, since everyone raved about the wings, she decided to go with that. The only decision was what kind she wanted, eventually deciding on the sweet mango flavor.

As soon as the waiter left Stacy leaned in and, in a very serious tone, said, "Ok Sarah, first thing first. Very important question." Everyone groaned and rolled their eyes at this but Stacy ignored them and continued. "Are you team Edward or team Jacob?"

"Really Stacy?" Ian looked at her, an exasperated expression on his face.

“What, these are important things we need to know.” Stacy replied.

“I think ‘*you need to know*’ is the correct term.” Max chimed in. “The rest of us don’t care.”

Sarah chuckled and looked at Stacy’s earnest face. “Neither actually. I don’t have an opinion as I’ve never read the books, and don’t really have any interest in doing so.” Stacy seemed crestfallen to not find a kindred spirit. “My sister tried to get me to watch the movies and I made it mostly through the first one and bailed about halfway through the second one. She is team Jacob all the way.”

That seemed to satisfy Stacy. “Well, not everyone can have good taste I guess.”

Sarah wasn’t sure if Stacy was referring to her lack of interest or her sister’s affiliation with team Jacob, and she didn’t really care. That, apparently terribly important subject taken care of, the topic of conversation turned to how everyone’s jobs were doing since the storm.

Tom worked in construction building commercial sites. Apparently, the big issue currently was that they had installed but not insulated the water pipes and some idiot decided to use them right before the storm hit. No one knew so they hadn’t been drained and had promptly burst when everything froze over. No one had fessed up to it but they all had a good idea who it had been.

Stacy was an elementary school music and theater teacher. Thankfully she was between productions and concerts, a normal occurrence post-holidays, so she didn’t have as much to catch up on after losing a week to the storm.

Max and Christina, both software engineers, had nothing to report. Christina was between temp jobs, something she had started doing after her company had downsized. She and Max were trying to start a family and she wanted to be a stay at home mom. They had nothing to report there either.

When the food arrived they all dug in. Everyone had been right, the wings were fantastic. Sarah stole one from Ian, wanting to try the classic Ranch. He reached over and took one of hers, then swapped one with Stacy. Apparently this was a regular thing for them so everyone got to have multiple flavors.

With the second round of drinks, the waiter brought everyone several moist towelettes and cleared the plates of wing bones. Then he brought over artichoke dip and breadsticks. Christina said they liked to have their appetizer after their food so they could just munch for the rest of the night. Sarah saw the logic of this as the night wore on. They would get up, play some pool or darts, then come back for a bit or two of food.

To everyone's surprise, Sarah’s included, she trounced Tom at darts. Apparently, Tom was amazing at darts and almost no one could beat him. Sarah, being only an average player,

emphatically stated that she had just gotten insanely lucky. To no one's surprise, Stacy beat everyone at pool, but a good time was had by all.

They spent most of the evening trading work stories. A lot of the time they were told almost directly to Sarah as everyone else had heard them before. Sarah didn't have a lot of work stories worth telling, but she told the ones she did have to everyone's enjoyment. Tom and Stacy couldn't fathom why Sarah liked accounting; Sarah just shrugged saying 'to each their own.'

Towards the end of the night, after everyone had a few drinks in them, someone made a naughty comment about how Sarah and Ian had stayed warm when their power had gone out. Everyone gave them a bit of a hard time until Sarah asked if anyone else spent their week off in orgasmic bliss. Even Max and Christina shook their heads.

Ian had a bit of swagger in him after that comment and started the good-natured ribbing. Apparently, Tom was as vanilla as they came and Stacy knew no boundaries. Max and Christina, were the butt of more than a few comments about putting their practice to use.

Sarah had fun learning some of the inside jokes and Stacy tried to teach her how to do a trick shot in pool, but Sarah had had just enough to drink at that point that the lesson failed spectacularly.

Tom, who was the dad joke king, said he had some new ones. Everyone groaned, but to their surprise, they hadn't heard them before. Sarah, though, had heard them. Her sister's husband was also a master at dad jokes and Sarah was able to remember one or two that Tom hadn't heard, which impressed everyone.

Around midnight everyone decided it was time to call it. Hugs were exchanged all around, everyone saying Sarah needed to keep coming around. Sarah, for her part, had no intention of turning that invitation down.

She held on to Ian's arm as they walked back to his car. "Hey, you good to drive?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. You're the fuzzy one."

"You're not wrong bub." She grinned up at him, the rest of her thoughts wiped away.

When they got home Ian helped her to her house. She could stand on her own, but she didn't see any reason to not hold on to Ian when she had the chance. He felt so good to hold onto. He wanted to tuck her into bed but didn't have a key and would rather hear the lock click behind him. Before she closed the door she pulled him in for one long, slightly sloppy, kiss and grinned up at him with a dopey look on her face. Once she shut and locked the door he walked home and she shuffled off to her bed. He walked back to his place with a bit of a dopey grin of his own. She was so cute when she was fuzzy, and the night had gone so well.

Chapter 8

Over the next few weeks they settled into a nice pattern, eating dinner at one of their places before splitting to sleep in their own beds. Some nights they would have sex, some nights they would make love, some nights they would fuck each other's brains out, and some nights they would do all three. And some nights they were content to cuddle on the couch and simply kiss goodnight.

Even though they lived next door and spent most of their free time together, they both thought it was nice to have their own space. As much as things felt right between them, they still needed to step aside and get perspective on occasion. Ian knew that if he went too fast he would fall all the way, and he didn't want to risk it, not this time, not with Sarah.

Sarah, who usually moved fairly fast with lovers, was enjoying the autonomy of it. She had always stood on her own two feet, and always kept a sense of herself when in a relationship. But going to sleep each night in her own bed, alone, for so much longer than she usually did gave her a sense of who she was with him rather than just who they were.

Also, they had spent a week huddled together, sleeping, fucking, eating, and playing games. It was like they needed to make up for the lost 'get to know you' time. A time between seeing each other to reset themselves as an individual.

For Sarah's part she was feeling like that reset time was making her want to be with Ian even more. It gave time for each of them to decide what they wanted to share, and what they still wanted to keep to themselves. And it gave them time to truly see what was being given.

Unfortunately, their time together was less frequent and lasted for a shorter period than either would have liked. Sarah was working a lot of overtime, still trying to get caught up from the snowstorm and trying to meet their usual January deadlines; or at least not fall too far behind on them.

In early February Ian started to look at what jobs were out there. There were still enough big projects on his house that he didn't want to dive into job hunting just yet, but he needed to see what the market was looking like. It was good he didn't want to dive in yet, as it was slim pickings out there.

He had decided he wanted to go into home construction rather than find another handyman or commercial construction job. Sarah had pointed out that working on his house was different than working for someone building their house; and that he might not want to work on his own house after doing the same thing all day.

He responded by pointing out that that was why he wasn't looking actively yet. He wanted to get the house to a state where a few hours each weekend would suffice, and Sarah couldn't deny he was on track for that.

A few times she came over to help him with what she could. She didn't have many construction skills, but she could take direction and be a second pair of hands. And sometimes Ian just liked having her around to keep him company, occasionally handing him a tool. When she did help out it was so different than anything else she did that she actually found it relaxing. Not that she wasn't exhausted at the end of the day, but it helped her recharge.

Two weeks after she had met his friends her friends invited the two of them over for a game night. Sarah was a little nervous when she introduced Ian to Kathy because he knew about Kathy's past, but he just treated her like any other of Sarah's girlfriends. Kathy's opinion of Ian was expressed when she had a moment aside with Sarah at the end of the night. She just leaned over and said 'yumm'.

Kathy wasn't wrong. And whether everyone else's response would have been 'yumm' or not, everyone liked him, and he seemed to fit in well with them. **He had them all in stitches when, during a spirited game of charades, Ian tried to act 'snowing'. Apparently, his idea of snowing was Sarah and him fucking like bunnies.**

It had been her friend Dawn who had gotten closest, shouting out 'snowstorm' at the last second. They all agreed, knowing how Sarah and Ian had met, that it was close enough and awarded them the point. They ended up losing the game, but everyone agreed it was the best word combo of the night.

The following Wednesday was Valentine's Day and Ian wanted to celebrate on the day rather than move it to the weekend. Sarah was finally getting caught up at work and was able to take off a little early that evening and planned on going in a little late the next day.

Or rather her boss had told everyone he wouldn't be paying attention to when everyone showed up as long as they showed up in the AM. She figured that was as much for the fact that this was his first Valentines Day since he had gotten married as it was a reward for everyone working so much overtime lately.

Ian said he would plan everything and all she had to do was show up. He told her they were going somewhere nice and to dress accordingly.

Her black dress wasn't a man-eater little black dress, but when she opened the door for Ian that night he was still stunned. He stood there, his eyes wide and his mine blank. It was his first time seeing her all done up. He couldn't believe she was going to dinner with *him*.

She had accented her eyes with liner and mascara saving the punch of color for her lips, which were a deep seductive red. Her hair was piled on her head with a comb seeming to hold it all together, a few curled strands escaping and falling on her shoulders.

Her dress had capped sleeves that fluttered on her shoulders, a scooped neckline, and flowed out around her legs in a handkerchief hemline that hit just below her knees. A pair of 40's era Mary-Jane black pumps completed the look.

She smiled at him, a bit of a blush creeping up her cheeks as she watched him take her in. For her part, she was admiring him almost as much in his dark blue shirt open at the collar under a dark gray sport coat and black slacks.

He shook himself as she stepped forward to give him a kiss hello. When she stepped back he held up the rose he had been holding offering it to her. He wanted to say something suave but all he could manage was a husky,

“For you.”

She graciously accepted, giving it the customary sniff. It did smell wonderful. The florist must have added something because it smelled faintly of vanilla. She set it on the side table so she could put her coat on, an elegant long peacoat she had found in a vintage store, and grabbed her small velvet evening bag. Before locking the door she picked up the rose to take it with her.

He had asked to pick her up at her door like a proper date. He had even pulled the car around to the curb in front of her house. Once her door was locked he offered his arm and she gladly accepted. To her surprise, the car waiting out front wasn't his normal sedan. Instead, a restored, 1950's she guessed, muscle car waited at the curb.

“Where did you get that car?” She asked in awe.

“Borrowed it from a friend. I thought we could ride in a little style tonight.”

He held the door open for her before going around and slipping into the driver's seat. Sarah didn't know much about cars, but this one was beautiful. Clearly, someone loved this car.

“Must be a good friend. This car is gorgeous.”

“He restores old muscle cars as a hobby. I sweat-talked him into loaning me this one for the evening.”

“Well, I'm impressed.” And she really was.

“Thanks.” Ian beamed a little at that.

They chatted about simple things on their way to the restaurant. Sarah actively avoided talking about work. They could talk about that any old time. This night demanded simple but special topics. As did all their conversations, however, they found themselves discussing truly random topics, such as the various pros and cons of the different attributes of rocks.

When Ian pulled into the parking lot Sarah saw an old manor house that had been converted into a restaurant. When they both got out Ian came over to once again offer Sarah his arm. She gladly accepted. When they got to the front of the building she noticed the name on a plaque mounted to the railing of the porch: Vlinder.

"I haven't heard of this place. Where did you find it?"

"Google."

"It's beautiful. What kind of food is it?"

"Some sort of modern Dutch fusion I think. I saw a list of must-try places and this one looked interesting."

"Well if the food is anything as good as the building we're in for a treat."

That made Ian a little nervous. He hoped this place was as good as the review said, and that Sarah would like it. He had no idea what modern Dutch fusion was, but as long as he was eating across from Sarah, he didn't really care what the food was.

The host showed them to a table for two in a quiet corner. The decor was simple but not stark. The lighting wasn't dim, but it felt intimate and special, despite the fact that the dining room was packed with other couples. Ian wondered how every head wasn't whipping around to watch Sarah as she passed. Oh, people noticed her, but if he had caught a glimpse of her out of the corner of his eye as she passed, he might have broken his neck turning to see her.

For her part, she figured people were looking at Ian just as much. The cut of his jacket and pants made him look even more the elegantly powerful male specimen she thought he was. He hadn't been wrong before, men did look better with more clothing on. Or rather, Sarah though, with the right clothing on.

Their dinner was a delight. It was simple and bursting with flavor. TWhen they had finished their meals, Sarah had to get up to go to the bathroom. Ian watched her walk away, enjoying how her dress dipped down to show the smooth skin of her back. He did love to see her naked, but even the best artwork looked better when well-framed. He sipped on his wine thinking about the evening.

Just for that night, he was allowing himself to sink into the sensation of loving her. Oh, he wouldn't say it to her, he knew they weren't there yet. He knew that tomorrow he had to step back again. But, just for tonight, he let himself fall into the feeling that this was it, that she was it.

When he saw her walking back to their table he smiled and sat up a little straighter. When she was almost there he stood up to pull her chair out for her.

As she went to sit he said, "You are so beautiful."

"And you're a dream." She brushed her hand on his cheek, kissed him, and sat down.

She really did think he was a dream, standing there holding her chair for her. When she had walked away she had done her best to keep herself steady. They had ordered some wine with dinner, but it wasn't the buzz that was making her feel fuzzy. It was him. From the way he

looked to the way he offered her his arm, he was everything she ever imagined a dashing gentleman to be.

Another woman had been in the bathroom at the same time, and they were both standing in front of the mirror, making sure they didn't have any lipstick on their teeth when the other woman turned to her and said,

"Having a good night?"

Sarah grinned "Yeah. Are you?"

The woman shrugged. "It's ok. He's trying. I wish it was as good as yours appears to be going."

Sarah wasn't sure how to respond to that so she just patted the other woman on the shoulder and gave her a soft smile. She knew her night was amazing, but the look on the other woman's face when she commented about how happy Sarah looked told her the glowing flutter she felt in her stomach every time she looked at Ian wasn't just wishful thinking.

As she walked back to the table she spotted Ian before he looked over at her. He was sitting there, sipping on his wine, a soft smile on his handsome face. Was it because she knew how much lay beneath that made her never want to look away? Or was he truly that handsome? The end result was the same, so it really didn't matter.

When the dessert came. Sarah wasn't sure if that was something they were doing for Valentines Day or if the desserts were always meant to be shared. It was just a little too big for one person but perfect for two.

They ate slowly, savoring not only the flavors but their time together. Ian idly wondered if they were taking too long as a few tables that had sat down after them had already left, but the waiter had seemed in no rush to get them out, so he just kept savoring the moments.

On the drive home, the only time Ian let go of Sarah's hand was when he needed it to drive. He didn't want to ever let go if he could help it. He pulled into his driveway, shut off the car, and got around to her side in time to offer her a hand in getting out. He held her in one arm, shut the door, and pulled her in for a kiss.

He wished they could just fade right into his bedroom, not having to do the annoying reality bit of walking inside and up the stairs. Sarah didn't want to seem to let go either to get inside, and they ended up half walking, half carrying each other inside and up to his room, kissing nearly the whole way.

He kicked the door shut behind him and went over to stand in front of her, his hands resting on her hips. She slid her hands up his chest, across his shoulders, and down his arms, taking his jacket off in the process. Her coat had been discarded somewhere between the entrance and the stairs.

He stood there, facing her, wrapping his arms around her. She had put her arms up around his neck resting her hands on his back. He kissed her tenderly, but passionately before returning to resting his forehead against hers, breathing hard with desire.

“Stay tonight, here, with me.” He whispered.

“Ok.” she whispered back before he kissed her deeply, pulling her close, holding her tight.

She hadn't been expecting that, but she had hoped for it. And she was glad it would be at his place instead of hers. She felt like he was taking her in on a deeper level by opening his home, his bed, up to her. Letting someone into your home was always different because any other time you could just get up and leave, but it was much harder to ask someone to leave, and their presence would always be remembered in that space.

Slowly they undressed each other. When he unzipped her dress and let it fall to the floor he got a lustful grin in his eyes when he saw the midnight purple lace hugging her body. She bit her lower lip and grinned at him.

“A little something for you.”

“Wow” was all he could manage in reply.

They made love that night, with a passionate ferocity they had rarely experienced together. Ian waited till the last possible moment to take that lace bodysuit off her; he loved the color against the skin, the way it framed her curves. But peeling it off her skin made her body look even more sensual, slowly revealing all of her, all she was willing to give to him.

She held nothing back and gave all she had. He took it and gave all he could in return. No matter their position they remained face to face, looking into each other's eyes more often than not. There were no bite marks that night, no fingernail scratches. Just steady and strong passion, with a heavy dose of lust.

Ian sank into Sarah and she held on to him for all she was worth. They drove each other to the peak of ecstasy and fell off the cliff together. As they came down the other side their grips eased, but they did not let go of one another, preferring to come back to earth still tangled up together.

Ian was on top of Sarah, and as his breathing began to return to normal he leaned down and kissed her tenderly. He broke the kiss and rolled onto his side, laying one arm over her torso. She rolled slightly to her side to press into him, his body warm and comfortable. They lay that way for a while, simply being.

Sarah's small shiver was enough to bring them both back to reality. They got up and went into the bathroom for a quick clean-up before going back to bed. It occurred to Sarah that she hadn't planned on staying over and didn't have a hair or toothbrush with her. To her

surprise, a new toothbrush, comb, and even baby wipes were lying on Ian's bathroom counter. He had even thought of the fact that she might want to remove her make-up before going to bed.

Feeling clean, or at least cleaner, they both staggered back to bed crawling under his covers. Before curling into him Sarah checked her phone's alarm. She knew she would need one to convince her to get out of bed the next morning. That done she rolled to her side, back against him, his arm draped over her to hold her close.

They fell asleep quickly, wrung out from the joy and intensity of the evening. Ian woke up first because he had to pee. He gently extricated himself, doing his best to not disturb Sarah to head to the bathroom.

When he came back he saw the lacy bodysuit on the floor. He grinned. He thought it looked just as good on his floor as it had on her. As all good lingerie should in his opinion. As he crawled back into bed she seemed to be stirring a little. She had rolled over to face him and looked, to him at least, like she was wondering where her heater had gone. She wasn't quite reaching out for him, but when he pulled her into him, she did let out a small sigh.

Ian didn't fall back asleep. He just dosed. He didn't know what time he had gotten up, but it didn't feel like it had been that long before Sarah began to wake up. He leaned over and kissed her temple.

"Good morning, beautiful. Sleep well?"

"Mmmm," Apparently she wasn't completely awake yet. "Not done yet."

"Ok," he said, kissing her on the head and laying his head down again.

She was waking up, but she saw no reason to rush it. She let herself lay there, so comfortable in his arms. As she slowly returned to consciousness she remembered the night before. It had been one of the most magical she had had with a lover. Everything had been just right, from the way he had picked her up for dinner, to the choice of restaurant, to the deeply passionate sex, to falling asleep utterly spent in his arms.

She shifted her head so she could look up at him. He was lying there, his eyes open, watching her. She smiled and shifted to give him a long tender kiss. When her legs moved she felt a hardness against her thigh. She knew every man had wood every morning, but this felt a little stiffer than that.

And even if it wasn't, she saw no reason to let a good thing go to waste. She pressed her thigh against him a little firmer and rubbed it up and down, clearly indicating what she wanted. He responded by running one of his hands down her back to grab her ass.

The kiss turned quickly from a tender morning wake-up kiss to a fierce passionate one. They shifted around a little so he could get at her breasts with his mouth, playing with her

nipple, enticing her to want more. He ran one hand between her legs and began to play with her, feeling her quickly get so very wet.

She ran her hands over as much of his body as she could reach. It didn't take long before she shifted again to get atop him. She took his shaft in one hand and guided herself down onto him. She gave a satisfied sigh as she felt him glide in.

She began to rock back and forth, her hands running up along his stomach and chest. He reached up and grasped her breasts and began to thrust into her. She kept her hips rocking as he pounded up into her, neither taking their time. Before long Ian began to grunt and shoot his load into her. He noticed she wasn't quite there so he took one hand and used it to rub her clit until she arched her back and cried out in pleasure.

As her orgasm subsided she stayed straddled atop him. She liked the view, perched atop him as she was. For his part, as much as he loved to dominate her, this angle was pretty good too.

She smiled down at him, "Good morning indeed."

He sat up and kissed her playfully but grinned wickedly. "We'll have to shower now."

He had finished the master bath double shower that previous weekend and was eager to try it with her. She put up no objection. The shower wasn't huge so while they each had enough room to shower separately, they didn't feel like they were showering alone either. They enjoyed running the washcloth over each other, exploring the other's body in a sensual, almost non-sexual way.

When they were finished and had toweled off Ian gave Sarah a pair of his sweatpants and a sweatshirt so she didn't have to get dressed up to go downstairs for breakfast. Sarah's alarm had gone off but Ian had convinced her to stay for a quick breakfast. He had already planned one knowing she would have to work that day.

He pulled some sauteed veggies out of the fridge and cracked a few eggs over top of them in a hot pan. He scrambled everything together and served it atop toasted bagels with hot tea. He used to think tea was too bland, or too bitter, until Sarah showed him how to brew it properly, and the value in spending a few extra dollars on the good stuff.

As was his custom Ian walked Sarah to her front door and kissed her goodbye. She had taken her dress and purse with her, but when he got back to his place and went upstairs to change into work clothes he noticed the purple bodysuit still laying on the floor where he had tossed it the night before. He picked it up, running his fingers over it before placing it over the edge of his bed, right where she couldn't miss it the next time she was over.

Sarah for her part had completely forgotten about it until she was putting her dress away and changing into her work clothes. It was so nice to live next door to Ian. Forgetting someone at the other's house was a problem remedied with a text and two spare minutes. She kind of

liked that he still had it though, so she didn't text him and decided she would just grab it the next time she was over.

Chapter 9

Sarah spent her day in a soft bliss left over from the night before and the morning romp. When she got to the office mid-morning only about half the usual people were there. Either more people were working from home than usual, or they were all taking the boss up on his offer to take most of the morning off.

More people began to trickle in as the morning went on, Her boss was the last to arrive, looking completely blissed out. All the overtime they had all been doing couldn't be easy on a new marriage so she was glad he had taken the time for himself and his wife.

Either everyone had had a good Valentines' Day or the good mood was infectious. Regardless the entire office seemed to be reenergized from the long weeks they had all just survived. The fact that one of Sarah's coworkers had stopped by the store to take advantage of the after-holiday chocolate sale didn't hurt the mood either.

Sarah had texted Kathy that morning to ask how her date had gone, but it wasn't till mid-afternoon that she got back to her.

Kathy

- Hey, just got home. 😊

Sarah

- Guess it went well.

- Second date material?

Kathy

- Oh yeah.

Sarah

- Oh. do tell.

Kathy had gone on a date with a guy she had been flirting with at work. Bill worked in the store next to the one she did at the mall and Kathy had decided to take the initiative and had asked him out to dinner. She had been impressed when he had let her pay, agreeing to her logic that if you asked someone out, you paid. Kathy had stayed at his place that night and he had asked her out that weekend.

When Kathy was finished she asked how Sarah's night had gone. Sarah told her all about how Ian had picked her up in the fancy car, taken her to an amazing restaurant, and the fact that he had asked her to stay the night.

Kathy

- How was it? Was it just as good as when you two were snowed in?

Sarah

- Better cuse we were in his bed so it was more intimate, you know.

Kathy

- Yeah.

- Do you think this was just a one time thing?

- Or do you think you'll start spending the night together more often?

Sarah

- I think it was just for that night.

- I don't think he's ready to start staying over on regular nights.

- Which is kind of nice actually. It made it special.

Kathy

- I get that.

- Oh, did you wear the purple bodysuit we picked out?

Sarah

- Yep. 😊

Kathy

- Big hit I take it.

Sarah

- Not sure if he liked it better on me or the floor.

Kathy

- LOL 😂

That night Ian brought over meatballs and garlic bread, so Sarah cooked some pasta and tossed a salad. When dinner was finished they spent their evening snuggling on the couch watching TV. The night ended with them sleeping in their own beds once more. Neither of them had brought up the subject of staying over. It just hadn't come up. Though it had probably helped that they had spent the evening fully clothed.

Over the next few weeks, they fell back into their previous pattern - dinner at one of their houses, some TV and snuggles, and frequently a nice romp; usually in the bed. On the weekends they mostly spent the time together. A few times they would go out with one group of friends or another, or do a game night at someone's house. Their lives went pretty much as they had before they had met, they just now did those things together.

During those weeks Sarah could see Ian was both wanting to dive head first into their relationship but was holding himself back. He seemed to be struggling with what exactly to do. She didn't know what to say to him, and he didn't seem to want to say anything. She decided just being there for him, with him, was best. She would let him come to his own decision in his own time.

As March 11th approached, the 1st anniversary of his Uncle Ray's death, Ian didn't know how to deal with it. It seemed to sneak up on him. He had been so focused on Sarah and his

feelings for her that he looked up one morning and realized it was the 6th. When he realized what that meant he felt himself shut down.

Ian had started to look for a job but hadn't found one yet, which he was thankful for. The 11th was a Monday and he couldn't imagine having to go into work. He had planted most of Ray's ashes out in the forest to grow into a pine tree and the rest pressed into stones. He hadn't thought he would want to visit the tree, had thought having the stone around would be comforting. But as the day approached neither of those thoughts were holding true.

He had found he didn't like having them around. He decided that Monday afternoon he would drive out and bury the stones at the base of the tree. He wanted Sarah to go with him. It felt important that she be there. It was last minute but maybe she could get the afternoon off.

"Hey Sarah?" It was Thursday evening when he brought it up.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think you could take Monday afternoon off?"

"Yeah. Do you want me to take the whole day off?" She knew what Monday meant and had already told her boss he might need some time off.

"No, just the afternoon." He was touched that she was willing to take the whole day off, but felt he needed some time alone that morning.

"Ok. Is there something specific you want to do?" He hadn't talked about any plans, but since he asked for a specific time she thought he might have something in mind.

"Yeah, I want to go out to his tree and bury the stones under it."

"You sure you don't want to do that alone?"

Ian shook his head. "No. I want you there."

"Ok. I'll clock out at noon. I'm working from home so we can leave whenever you're ready."

"Thanks." He leaned over and kissed her.

They tried to go about the next few days as usual, but it was hard. Ian couldn't stay focused on anything. He tried to keep going with the projects on his house, but it felt wrong right then. He knew he would keep going with them, that he shouldn't feel that way, that it wasn't what Ray had wanted. But he couldn't help the feeling that he shouldn't change anything right then. He needed to honor the memory, at least for a few days.

Saturday they lounged around, reading, watching some TV. Ian pulled out the videos Ray had made during those last few months and he and Sarah watched some of them. It felt good to share him with Sarah. Ian felt like he was introducing Sarah to Ray. Sunday they watched a few more videos and then put on some music that Ray had loved. Ian had bought

Ray's favorite wine and they sat together on the couch just enjoying the wine and music. It felt like the best way to honor the man who had been more of a father to him than his father had been. Especially having Sarah there.

Monday morning Ian found himself just sitting on his couch in his living room, remembering all that had happened in that room. It was there that Ray had told him he had been diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer; a death sentence in 3-7 months. Ian had wanted to fight, to do something, but there was nothing anyone could do. There had probably been experimental treatments and medical trials that Ray could have tried, but he didn't want to.

Ray had worried about Ian so for their last Christmas Ian gave Ray a promise, written out on nice cardstock. A promise that he would be by his side till the end in whatever capacity he needed. A promise that after he was gone he would not dwell on not having Ray around anymore and would move forward with his life. A promise that he would not let fear keep him from finding love and having a family someday. It had given Ray peace to read those words. Ian had saved the promise, saved those written words, tucked away in a memory box.

Ray had suggested he record the stories of his life. Though he had never fully come out he had been on the edges of the gay community at a time when doing so was dangerous. He had loved but not being able to be open about who he was had ended any relationship he started.

It had broken Ian's heart to hear about how Ray had given up on finding a life partner. Their family wasn't homophobic, but Ian had understood why Ray had never wanted to come out. Ray said that when he had started to help raise Ian that was his family, but Ian couldn't help but think that there had always been a small hole in Ray's life.

Ray had died quietly in the living room, the two of them sitting together, watching old TV shows. Ian had just looked over and Ray was gone. Ian had never known what people meant by seeing someone's soul in their eyes until he looked over and saw how empty Ray's eyes were.

Ian just sat there, rolling the stones of ash thru his hands until Sarah knocked on his door. The location they were going to was further away than Sarah had thought, but to Ian, the drive didn't seem to last long at all. When they got to the closest access point Ian parked and they headed into the woods. There wasn't a trail exactly, but they found their way through the trees easily enough.

Ian didn't start to cry until he found his uncle's tree. They had ridden in silence and Ian had been worried that he wouldn't be able to find it, but once he spotted it he didn't know how he thought he could ever forget where it was.

They stood there, hand in hand for a few moments, admiring the Pine tree. It was doing well. Ian thought it looked good where it was; it belonged. When he was ready he handed Sarah a trowel and asked her to help him lay the last bit of Ray to rest.

It felt good to lay the stones in the ground and cover them in the wet dirt with their hands. It wasn't raining that day, but it was overcast and chilly so they didn't linger. Brushing the

dirt off his hands Ian said one last goodbye, took Sarah's hand, and headed back to his car. They drove home in comfortable silence and spent the evening listening to more of Ray's favorite music.

The next day Ian seemed to be mostly back to himself. Sarah thought he seemed like he was more at peace than he had been before. The healing from this kind of loss was never complete, but Ian looked like he was doing well. And he felt like he was doing well.

He had hoped the peace he was feeling about Ray's passing would extend to his fears about his feelings for Sarah, but they didn't. He was able to open up to her a little more, but he was still afraid of making a mistake again. But, as he had promised Ray, he would keep moving forward.

Late in March Max and Christina invited them over for dinner on a Wednesday night. Even though it was the middle of the week they saw no good reason to not go. Max and Christina hadn't been available to hang out much lately. Sarah knew Ian and Max talked frequently, but it just wasn't the same as being able to hang out in person.

Christina made a fantastic dinner of lemon roasted chicken with bacon roasted potatoes and vegetables. Christina said the secret was to get bacon ends and put them on top of everything. It was fantastic.

During a spirited game of Cards Against Humanity, aided by a few glasses of wine...

"I mean, we've only spent the whole night together once since the storm." Sarah said offhandedly.

"Wait, you've only spent the night together once since the storm?" Max was befuddled.

"Yeah."

"But you live right next to each other?"

"So? We've still got our own places. And lives and stuff." Ian tried not to sound defensive, but he wasn't sure Max bought it.

"Well yeah, but still. I mean, you've never waited this long."

"It's probably easier to spend the night at your SO's if you don't live right next door." Christina chimed in.

"That is true." Sarah agreed. "I never have to worry about packing a toothbrush or anything."

“This is the most NSA, serious relationship situation I’ve ever heard of.” Max was laughing as he finished off his glass.

Ian’s face fell a little at that. He knew what Max meant, but hearing his relationship with Sarah categorized alongside a no-strings-attached relationship bothered him.

Ian seemed unsettled at her response. Not angry precisely, but he didn’t seem pleased that Max had asked that. He muttered under his breath, “Fucker.”

“Hey,” Sarah leaned forward to get his attention. “What’s wrong?”

“He’s just being overprotective. It’s annoying, that’s all..”

“Ok.” She knew it was more than that. “I thought it was good that he asked me. I can see how most girls would get pissy about it, maybe feel like they were being accused of something, but all I saw was a friend who cared enough to take that risk.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Sarah could have left it there, but it seemed to be eating at Ian more than it should have been. “Why does it bother you this much? Has he done this a lot before?”

“He told you about Cindy didn’t he?”

“Just the basics, not much more than you’ve told me.”

Ian seemed to let out a slight sigh with his response. “Ok. He just seems to think that because it took ‘too long’ for me to see the issues that I can’t ever see the issues and that I’ll shy away from everything.”

“So he has done this before?”

“Only once since Cindy.”

“So why is this bothering you so much? You seem to be more than just annoyed that he pulled me aside for a 5-minute conversation.”

Ian didn't answer. They were almost home so she didn't push for an answer when they got home. Ian shut off the car and just sat there, not looking at her, not moving to get out of the car. She leaned forward in her seat to get his attention. She wanted to know what was going on in his head, but she felt like she needed to let him start the conversation. She would just stay with him till he did.

He was trying to figure out where to start. What could he say to her that wouldn't make her run? His past was a mess. He knew that. He had come to terms with it; hadn't he? When other women had found out about some of it, just some...they hadn't turned tail and run, but nothing had ever been right afterward.

"Did he say I was talking myself out of it?"

"Yeah, he did. He asked me to make sure you didn't."

"Figures."

She reached over and took his hand. "Hey, I'm right here."

"For now." He hadn't meant to say it out loud; had thought it had come out so softly that she wouldn't hear it.

"Ah," she understood that. She knew life could be unpredictable, but that shouldn't stop someone from trying to find their happiness. She also knew how hard it could be to let yourself be open enough to be able to grasp your happiness when you saw it. "I can't tell you I'll always be right here. We both know life can turn on a dime. We can make the best plans and then they all go to hell in a handbasket. What I can say is that it would take a lot for me to leave, to turn away from you."

He gave a slight chuckle that had a little hiccup of sorrow in his voice. He nodded and put his hand over hers. "Yeah, I know."

"Do you? Really?" She turned in her seat to face him directly. "Hey, look at me."

She waited until he turned and looked at her. She could see the little bits of moisture gathering in the corners of his eyes. They had both been hurt before, both knew what it was like to open up to someone and have them use that as a reason to turn away.

She took his face in her hands and said "I'm here. Things may not be moving at the speed I would move them, but what you have given me has been so good that it is absolutely worth waiting for you to be ready. But I'm also not going to let you hide away."

He smiled at her, the tears welling up as he put his hand on hers and turned his face to kiss it. "Ok."

She leaned in and kissed him gently. "I'm right here. I'll listen if you want to tell me, but you don't have to."

He hugged her, and after a moment to compose his voice, he said, "Yeah, let's go inside."

They went in and sat facing each other on the couch. She had her legs tucked up under her and they both had their arms draped over the back of the couch, hers on top of his. For a few moments, he just sat there, resting his head on her arm.

Then he started talking. He told her about how he had met Cindy. How they had fallen in love and moved in together within a few months and within six months they were engaged. There were always little things that bugged him, but he had always put them aside. No one was a perfect match for anyone. She was so beautiful and he loved her so much. And she loved him, at least that's what she said, and it looked that way to him. How could anything be wrong with that?

It wasn't until they were 5 months into planning their wedding, 4 months till their big day, when it all came crashing down and he started to see all the red flags for what they were.

She had been manipulating him to get what she wanted. She was playing games with him, using what he told her to mold him into who she wanted him to be. She always got him to do things the way she wanted, whether he wanted to or not. She had never really taken his opinion into consideration, about anything. He was an ornament to her.

It was his friends who finally got through to him. They got him to see what was going on. When he started to push back, to stand up for himself, she tried to twist him back around, to get him back under her thumb. It had taken five weeks; five weeks of screaming matches and sleepless nights for them both to realize there was no fixing it. She had thrown her engagement ring at him before storming out in a last-ditch effort to get him to come back to her. She thought he would be so stunned that she walked out that he would come back to her on his knees, begging her to forgive him.

She had gone to stay with her best friend across town that night. He hadn't tried to contact her and when she went back to their apartment he had packed up and moved out. He left a note saying he would pay his half till the lease was up but he was done. She tried to contact him, begging him, promising she would change. He almost caved. It was Max who had nearly had to beat him into standing his ground.

About 6 months later he started dating again. He felt the pull to be near women, the pull to be with them. Linda had been the first he thought might be falling for. **Max had stepped in the same way he had done with Sarah. She had exploded. She couldn't believe that his friend would do that, that he would let his friend question his choices like that. They hadn't yet moved in together but she had some stuff at his place. She immediately packed her things and left, yelling a few choice things at him as she stormed off.**

It took another few months until he started dating again, and a few women, until someone else started to look serious. He told her some of his past, why he was hesitant, and she had said it was ok but kept subtly hinting that she wanted him to hurry up. He had caved to her desires, and even though he did want it, the way he had done it had left a sour taste in him. They had gotten into a few arguments about it before he decided to end it, beginning to wonder if it was really worth it.

“And then I met you. I had seen you in passing once or twice when I was visiting Ray. And then we met when I moved in. You seemed really cool, and hot as fuck, and I thought that at least you would be a good neighbor to have and I wanted to get to know you. And I wanted to fuck your brains out. I figured that was an extremely long shot, but eh.

“As soon as my power went out and I looked out my window and saw the glow of your fire I wanted to knock on your door and ask to stay but thought that would be too presumptuous. We had barely had a real conversation. After spending the night in an unheated house though, I decided to hell with it. Sleeping on the floor of your kitchen would be better than this. And you took me in. In so many ways.

“I let myself be there, in it, for those few days. It was just a few days. I figured we’d just go back to being neighborly afterward. No harm in sinking into an experience, a little vacation from reality.

“But that first night after I got my power back, I wanted so badly to go back to you and ask if I could just hold you for a bit longer. Maybe you would even let me stay over. And that scared me. You had given me so much, I wondered if you would expect to be paid back, if it was actually anything more for you?

“I decided the next day that I would at least offer dinner. I needed to see how you would react. It took me so long to figure out how to ask you out. When I asked if I could make food for you at my place I expected you to say no, that you would wait till we could go out. And then you said yes. And well, you know what happened.”

“Yeah.” She had let him talk, wiping away her tears as she listened. “And you’re scared it’s all too good to be true.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No. That first night I wanted you to come back over. It was so nice to be back in my own bed that I ended up falling asleep ok, but I didn’t like waking up alone, without you. It felt like when you come home after a vacation, you know? You’re glad to be back in your own bed but it still isn’t as good and you wonder how you can get that feeling back.

“I was wondering all day if I should text you, or if you would think I was coming on too strong. If you would think I was expecting you to pay me back for any of it. I was so happy when you asked me to dinner, and that it could happen right away. I was worried you would think you needed to pay me back, or think I expected you to. But I just wanted to spend more time with

you. I've been just fine with waiting for you. I've had practice in letting people get there on their own time, on my side too. Letting myself get there instead of forcing myself there."

"How'd you figure out how to wait?"

"Lots of therapy. Before George and I separated we went to couples therapy. And when we split I was in therapy for a while on my own. I had lost a husband in a very unique way. I still had the person in my life, but I no longer had a husband. I wanted to be ok with it and just move on. But my therapist helped me grieve that loss. Some of it Kathy and I did together. A loss is a loss, even if the result is objectively better. Did you ever do therapy for any of this?"

"Cindy and I did a little, but it was so unhelpful and I felt like I was just sitting there playing a part. And I did a little on my own afterward, but it didn't seem to be any help. Figured with my friends around me I could manage and move on."

"Friends are great, but sometimes we need professional help too. Maybe you should find someone to go to. And don't be discouraged if you don't click with the first person you meet with. It took me 3 tries to find someone I worked well with." She could see the dubious look on his face. "Just think about it. There's no rush."

"Ok."

"Just let it sit in the back of your mind. I think everyone needs therapy from time to time. Just like we all need to go to the dentist from time to time."

"Someone to clean all the gunk out." Ian had a lighter laugh in his voice at that comparison..

Sarah laughed and smiled at him warmly. He had opened up to her more than she had expected. He was damaged, but he wasn't broken, even though he probably thought she would see him that way. She knew what it was like. She wasn't sure she loved him more for it, but she definitely didn't love him less because of it; she felt more connected to him. Everyone had scars. His were just still raw, probably more raw than he realized. She hoped he would accept her help. Hoped he would accept her.

She was a little scared that, having shown her his scars, he would expect something different from her. She didn't know what that was, but when people opened up things could change. Sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. As much as he said he feared her running from him, she feared him preemptively running from her.

She knew time changed everything. Would Ian realize how many ways she was truly there for him? Or would he turn and run, afraid of what falling in love could bring? She wasn't sure what to do next. Should she snuggle into him? Kiss him? Ask him to walk her home?

Ian didn't know what to do either. He sat there watching her. More and more she was becoming a bright light in his life. Everything in him said to trust her, but he didn't trust

everything in him. He had been looking at behaviors as well as words and she seemed different in the best ways from his ex's. But they had only been together for barely three months. How long did it take for someone's true colors to come out?

He looked like he wanted to say something but couldn't quite figure out how, so she asked "What is it?"

"Can we just sit here, can I just hold you?"

She smiled at him, "Of course."

She could see the relief in him as she snuggled into him, leaning against his chest. He repositioned her so she was sitting on his lap, his arms wrapped around her. She didn't put her arms around his neck, instead, she laid them against his chest and let her head fall against his shoulder.

She closed her eyes, laying her head against him and listened to his heartbeat. She could feel when the rhythm of his breathing changed as he started to silently cry. She just pressed her head deeper into him and ran her hand up and down his chest. He held her tight, laying his head on top of hers.

Ian wasn't sure what was going on in his head. Nothing probably. He just felt. Somehow holding onto her made him feel more solid, like he wasn't going to float off or fall into the abyss. He had almost stopped himself from crying, but she had started to breathe so easily, laying against him. She was just there. Making no demands. Just letting him be. When she noticed, she had snuggled deeper into him and started to stroke his chest. So he just let himself cry. Not about anything, just to let it out.

He had no idea what he should do next. He just knew he didn't want to let go. He hoped she would never make him. The fact that Max had taken her aside though. It nagged at him. Had he seen something that worried him? He must have. Or was he just making sure his friend didn't fall for the wrong woman again? Did Max think she was wrong? Or was it him that Max was worried about? They had come back smiling, and she was sitting here, now, on his lap, letting him soak her hair with his tears.

He loved the way her hair smelled. The way he could feel her eyelashes tickle his neck as she blinked her own tears out. That was all that he knew right then. He had put everything else in his mind away into its own little box for later examination.

He felt his body settle and relax, but hers didn't seem to. Then he realized hers didn't need to. She wasn't asleep, she was content. He moved his hand to brush the top of her head. She leaned her head back so she could look up as she reached up to wipe the tears off his cheek.

He sniffed, smiled down at her, and bent his neck just enough to kiss her. She kissed him back, gently holding his face, letting him do what he needed to do. When the kiss broke she lay her head back against him.

At some point, Sarah shifted and nudged him, "Hey, you're falling asleep."

"Huh? Oh, yeah." Ian hadn't realized he had been, but he had.

"Do you want me to tuck you in before I go home?"

"Can I walk you home instead?"

"Always."

He knew he wouldn't sleep soundly unless he knew she had made it home safe, the door locked behind her. They put on their coats and walked arm in arm to her front door. She opened the door, but instead of turning to him to kiss him goodnight, she opened the drawer in the entry table she had.

"Here, for you." She said, putting a key in his hand. For any time you need to, or just want to come over. Middle of the night, noon, whenever."

He looked at the house key she had given him, closed his hand around it, looked at her, and pulled her into a kiss trying to put everything into it that he couldn't say. When the kiss broke they stood there with foreheads together, a last little embrace.

"Sleep well." He said as he hugged her one last time for the night.

"You too."

He let her go and as he walked out the door he said "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Not if I see you first." And she closed and locked the door behind him.

More than any other night she wanted him to stay over. She didn't like the idea of him being alone right then. But maybe that's what he needed. As much as he seemed to need companionship when going through rough times, everyone needed to be alone with their thoughts and emotions on occasion, to find your own feet again, for yourself.

She hadn't planned on giving him her house key. It just occurred to her as they walked to her door. Maybe it would solidify in his mind that she really was there for him whenever he wanted, that she wasn't going to turn from him. She hoped it did. She knew she could say it a thousand times, but sometimes it was a gesture that made the difference. A physical object that you could see and touch to bring the memory back and remind you of what had been said.

She felt heavy, but not in a bad way. In that warm comforting way like when you get out of a hot bath and get into your comfy bed. She wasn't sure why, but she decided to sleep naked.

Even in summer she rarely did this. But she wanted to feel the weight of the blankets and sheets on her skin. Somehow it was easier to relax, not having any constrictions around her; no night shirt she had to adjust when she rolled over.

She lay there for what felt like a long time, thinking. She was remembering what it had been like to watch George become Kathy. As joyous and freeing as it had been, it had been so hard to lose her husband forever. In almost every way, he had died. She often thought that the way she had coped best was that she got to watch Kathy rise out of that death.

She remembered the look on Kathy's face when she had woken up from her bottom surgery. She had still been so out of it. But then Sarah told her it was done and Kathy reached her hand down between her legs. She was bandaged up but Sarah saw the moment when Kathy realized it was real. With that beautiful memory, she drifted off to sleep.

Happy as the memory was that she had fallen asleep and she couldn't quite settle. She tossed and turned a little through the night. She woke up in the middle of the night at one point, thinking Ian had come over, but that had to be just a really realistic dream. She had had that dream before, several times. She sank into that safe feeling and went back to sleep and slept soundly for the rest of the night

When Ian got back home and locked his front door he just sat down on the floor. He held the key she had just given him, staring at it. He still couldn't quite believe what had happened that night. He was feeling less scared than before. He had wondered why he had been holding himself back. He felt like he understood now. There hadn't been anything to indicate their relationship was any more permanent than any of his others.

He had had relationships where they each had stuff at each other's place, had spent nights and full weekends at the other's place, but they had never exchanged keys. Since Cindy, he had never actually lived with anyone he dated. Sarah wasn't asking to live with him, but getting the key from her, it settled something in him. After a moment he got up, went over to where he kept his keys, and added her key to his key ring. He would have to go make her a key to his home tomorrow. It was the very least she deserved. And he felt like he could now.

He had heard his phone buzz while they were sitting on the couch but had ignored it. Now he went over to check who had texted him. It had been Max.

Max:

- Hey, dude. You ok?

-You there?

-I don't know what Sarah said about what we talked about but I figure you can guess.

-Don't get all pissy at me for it, you know I had to.

-Well, anyway.

-Trust her. She's worth it.

Ian stared at what his friend had said. *He had planned on texting Max the next morning about the fact that he had taken Sarah aside. Even though it all seemed fine and Sarah said she*

was fine, even glad, with it all, it still irked him. Now though, now that Max had put his seal of approval on her? Ugh, he hated that his brain had phrased it that way, but that's what it was.

Someone else, someone he trusted, had just validated everything he had been feeling. It felt good in a way he hadn't realized it could. And he knew it hadn't been just Max. Knowing Christina had weighed in on it made him believe the words. He didn't text Max back. He just went to his bedroom and began getting ready for bed. He wanted to go over to Sarah's house but felt like they both needed a night alone to recover.

Max's words '*Trust her. She's worth it.*' kept playing in his mind. He lay in bed, staring at the wall. Then rolled over and stared out the window. He tried to sleep but Sarah's words 'middle of the night, whenever', and the gentle look on her face, kept him up. She hadn't been asking him to come over, just giving him the option. The option to go to her any time *he* wanted.

He didn't know how long he had laid there before he decided enough was enough. He got up, put his boots on, grabbed his phone and keys, and went over to Sarah's. He didn't know what time it was but he was sure she was asleep.

He unlocked the door and came in as quietly as he could. He took off his boots and coat, left them at the front door, and walked to her bedroom easing the door open. There she was, asleep in her bed. She was facing the door but was on the far side of the bed. He didn't know if she usually slept on one side or slept in the middle, but there was a space for him. He stripped and gently slid under the covers with her.

He wanted to pull her close, to brush the hair from her face, feel her skin against his, but she looked so peaceful sleeping. He didn't want to disturb her. She stirred a little and he thought she opened her eyes but then settled back into slumber. He lay on his side, facing her. He wanted to lay there and watch her, but it seemed that as soon as his head hit the pillow he was asleep.

Chapter 10

Sarah woke up the next morning when her alarm went off. As usual, she didn't want to wake up. Who likes waking up to an alarm? She went to roll over to hit the snooze button and realized she couldn't roll over. She opened her eyes and saw Ian there, sound asleep, his arm draped over her holding her close to him. So it hadn't been a dream. He had come over in the middle of the night to join her in bed. Then the alarm beeped again. She tried to roll over to reach it but Ian held on, not wanting to let go. She poked him in the shoulder gently and whispered in his ear,

"My alarm is going off. I need to hit snooze."

He didn't fully wake up but he gave a little sigh and his arm relaxed. She rolled over, hit the snooze, and turned back to him to let him secure her against him again. She draped a leg over his body to pull them a little closer together. The snooze was only for 8 minutes, but she wanted to wait as long as she could before disturbing him.

He looked so peaceful, at ease. It almost worried her a little. She knew that kind of peace and it could be hard to find sometimes, and it was easy to get lost trying to find it again. But she knew he would find it again; they would find it.

When her alarm went off again she knew it was time to get up. One snooze, that was it. Any more and it left her groggy all morning.

She leaned over, kissed him on the cheek, and whispered, "Hey, I have to get up now."

She gave it a moment before trying to roll over and get up. Once again he tightened his grip around her.

"Babe, I have to get up for work. Don't worry, I'm working from home today. I'll be in my office. I'm not leaving." She brushed his hair soothingly as she spoke to him.

"Yeah, I know." He opened his eyes and looked at her, not fully awake yet, and removed his arm from around her so she could move "Sorry, didn't mean to hold you captive."

"It's ok." She kissed him one more time and got up to get ready for work.

He had said it with a playful tone, but she knew that wasn't really the truth. He had come to her in need and he was feeling bad for imposing on her. He felt guilty that he had tried to keep her all to himself. She knew it for what it was; fear. He was still trying to believe that this wasn't going to be snatched away.

When she came out of the bathroom she saw him starting to put his pants on. "And just what do you think you're doing?"

He looked at her, a little confused, a little cautious, and a little something else. "Putting my pants on, I can't walk home naked."

"And just what makes you think you're going home?" She walked over to him sitting on the bed and stood in front of him, arms crossed.

"Well, I just...I don't want to disturb you while you're working." He wouldn't look at her when he said this.

"You won't. You came over here to sleep, and just because I have to wake up at fuck-o'clock in the morning doesn't mean you have to." She uncrossed her arms, put one hand on his shoulder, and tipped his head up to look at her with the other. "You are not an imposition. You are not a disturbance. And I might be leaving the room, but I'm not going anywhere. Please stay, so I can come in and see you? Let me take care of you a little."

He let out a shaky breath. He wasn't sure what was going on inside him. He wanted to stay, desperately, and he felt guilty about it. But somehow doing it for her made it easier. He let go of the jeans he had half pulled up his legs and pulled her in for a kiss.

"Ok."

She helped him pull his pants off again and tucked him in. She smiled when he reached over and replaced his pillow with hers. She finished getting dressed and kissed him one more time before going to the kitchen to make some breakfast.

Before logging in for the day she went in to check on him. He was sleeping soundly, his breathing even and steady. She wanted to curl up next to him. He was on his side, his body making that perfect shape to curl into. Maybe she could clock out early today.

Fortunately, work was light that morning. No big meetings, no urgent projects. There was always plenty to do, but no one was breathing down her neck about any of it. On her break, she went in to see if Ian was still asleep. He was, so she let him be. She was in the kitchen making lunch when Ian made his appearance. He looked tousled but rested. And the tousled look kind of made her want to rip his clothes off and make him look downright disheveled, but she held herself in check.

"Hey sleepy. Do you want some food? I'm making a turkey sandwich if you want one?"

"That sounds great." He went over to the counter beside her to start making his sandwich.

"I'm having sourdough, but there's a multi-grain too if you want."

"Sourdough sounds good right now. I think I will toast it though."

He seemed more relaxed; seemed comfortable working in her kitchen. She was glad. They finished making their sandwiches and put everything away before going to the table to eat. They didn't talk over lunch. Sometimes it was just nice to sit quietly with someone. No pressure to talk about anything if you didn't want to.

"Oh, I have cookies. Want one?" Sarah asked as they were finishing up their food.

"Sure. Cookies are always welcome."

As Sarah went to get them she asked, "Do you have any plans today?"

"I need to run to the hardware store for a few things, and I need to do more job hunting."

Sarah handed him an Oreo, one of her favorites. They ate their cookies in silence before Sarah looked at the clock and resignedly said, "Time to go back to work."

"Ok. I'm gonna go do my stuff. I'll buzz you later." He kissed her lightly before turning to head to the door.

She caught his arm and pulled him in to give him a proper kiss. "Have a good day."

"Humm, you sure you have to go back just yet?" He pulled her hips to him, grinding slowly.

"Oh, if I didn't...I wouldn't. But I think I can get off a little early today. Want me to buzz you when I'm done?"

"Always." He kissed her, hard, one more time before heading to the door.

She watched him put his shoes and coat on before he headed out, giving her one last wink. She went back to her office and back to work. Thank god work was light 'cause she had a hard time concentrating on anything. What she would have given to just take the rest of the afternoon off.

It was later that afternoon when Sarah was startled by the sound of someone coming in the front door, but then she heard Ian call out. "Hey, it's me."

She came out of her office to see him setting his laptop on the dining table. "I didn't expect you back."

"Yeah, I know." He was standing there, looking a little nervous. "I just thought that since you're in your office, I could bring my laptop over and sit in the dining room and look at jobs here. Unless you think it'll bother you. I can come over when you're all done instead."

She walked over to him and stopped him before he could say anything else. "That sounds great. I get so in the zone sometimes. I'm a little surprised I heard the door open." That wasn't entirely true that afternoon, but she wanted him there.

He pulled her to him for a nice kiss. "Well, you go get back in the zone then."

She kissed him one more time before going back to her desk to work. She didn't quite get lost in her work. She could hear him clicking away on his laptop. He wasn't distracting, but the reminder made her want to finish up that much quicker. She liked knowing he was just in the other room.

"All done." She announced as she shut her office door behind her and went out to the dining room, leaning over one shoulder to kiss him on the cheek. "Find anything good?"

"Yeah, I found a few good things. Applied to them so we'll see." He closed his laptop and pulled her around to sit on his lap.

"So, how ya doing?"

"Ok." He let out a sigh. "Better. Oh, I have something for you" He shifted to reach into his jeans pocket and pulled out a key. He held it up and handed it to her. "For you. For any time you want to come over."

Sarah took the key and looked at it. She hadn't expected this, for him to invite her into his home, to invite her to stay over any time, not just when he asked. She closed her hand around it, took his face in her other hand, and kissed him, trying to put everything she couldn't find the words for in that kiss. She got up and went over to her purse. She got out her keys and added his to the ring. He watched her, smiling and comforted she had accepted it so quickly.

She came back over and sat back on his lap. "So, what do you want to do with the rest of the afternoon? Need any help with anything at your place? Wanna watch a movie? There are a few shows I know we've both wanted to watch."

In answer, he slid one hand under her shirt and grasped her breast while the other pulled her head to him for a deep intense kiss. She let out a satisfied gasp and moan. Sitting on his lap she could feel his excitement quickly grow.

With her arms already around his neck, he took his hand from her breast, slid it under her knees, stood up, and carried her to the bedroom. He almost tossed her down, quickly climbing on top of her. He kissed her deeply, letting his body weight press against her. She wrapped her legs around his hips, holding on tight.

He broke the kiss and wasted no time pulling her clothes off. Then his came off almost as fast. He got on top of her again, holding her legs closed with his this time. Leaning to one side, he ran his hand up and down her torso, making circles with his fingers around her nipples.

Then he grabbed her breast in her hand, digging his nails every so slightly into her skin. She bit her lower lip and watched his face. He looked more feral than usual. It made her stomach flutter and she could feel herself getting wetter not completely knowing what was coming, but wanting whatever he was about to do.

He bent over to kiss her again; fiercely, passionately. He then began to kiss her neck, making his way to her ear. He took her earlobe between his teeth and pulled slightly. She moaned and arched into him. With a feral groan he whispered "mine" into her ear. Then continued nibbling his way down her neck.

Between her moans, she answered back "Yes."

As he made his way down her body to her breasts, using his teeth and much as his lips, he repeated 'mine'. In response to him, she moaned out 'yes'. She held onto his shoulders, occasionally running her hands through his hair letting him take her.

He took his time at her breasts. His hand working on one while his mouth devoured the other. He flicked her nipples with his tongue and rolled the other between his fingers. He grasped it in his teeth and pulled up. She arched up out of pleasure and in a vain attempt to follow her breast. When he did it a second time she let out a whimper.

His demeanor didn't change, he seemed even more lost in his own lust. He was leaning over her, watching her face. In the same growl, he said "green", as if daring her to say anything else back, but giving her the option nonetheless.

She let out a desperate "green" in response. "Please, green." She wanted him. Every part of him. She loves the feeling of his fingers gently running across her skin, leaving goosebumps in their wake. Loved the feeling of his hands, firmly grasping her breasts. Love the way he used his teeth to claim her and his lips to soothe her.

And his throbbing cock, which she could feel pressed against her abdomen, she loved every glorious inch of it. She wanted to touch it, to run her fingers up and down its smooth shaft, to wrap her lips around the tip and lick the precum she knew was moistening it. She wanted to take it into her mouth, her tongue pressed against it as it slid in and out.

And she wanted it in her. She wanted him to fill her aching swollen pussy. Wanted him to claim her in the most primal way possible. Pump himself deep into her, sending waves of pleasure through her body.

She knew he would get there, but he was taking his time. He was kissing her lips, his tongue playing with hers as his hands moved over her breasts. He could hear her breath shudder a little every time he brushed her hard nipples he had made so very sensitive. He delighted in it.

She had one hand resting against the side of his face and her other on his shoulder, nails digging in when he hit the spot. She wasn't doing anything with her hands, just letting them rest on him. He was something to hold onto. At one point one had gone to rest above her head and he placed it back on him. He wanted every part possible of her touching him at all times.

What felt like an eternity later, to her at least, he ran his hand down her belly and between her legs. It hadn't been so much as brushed against but her clit was already swollen and her lips soaking wet, ready for him.

He slid two fingers in her, pressing his thumb to her clit. She almost screamed out in pleasure. He slid in and out of her a few times before sinking as deep as he could go and curving his fingers up. He wiggled them while his thumb wiggled ever so slightly from side to side. She exploded in gasps of pleasure and she rode the wave.

He let out a groan of pleasure seeing her back arch and her eyes roll back. He didn't let up. He kept his fingers firmly in place. Her body bucked, trying to release the pressure but he made sure to keep them in place. He didn't let up until he heard her whimpering moans turn to true whimpers.

Slowly he released his grasp on her. He slid his fingers out and ran his hand slowly along her outer lips, soothing the parts he had just so gloriously inflamed. She relaxed down, her breathing still heavily. She could feel his hand, rubbing her. It soothed the ach and kept the need alive. When she opened her eyes to look at him he still had that feral grin on his face.

He leaned down and kissed her before moving enough to flip her onto her stomach. He positioned himself behind her, sitting back over her thighs. He ran his hands up and down her back a few times before switching to his nails, leaving red marks in their path.

She had arched her ass up against him as he did this. She could feel his cock pressed between her cheeks. He then pressed one hand down in the middle of her back and used the other to guide himself to her slit. He slid into her slowly, finding his position.

Once he was fully encased in her he pulled back and started to pound. Deep and hard, with one hand still holding her down and the other braced on the bed. This was a new feeling for her. He had never pinned her like this. Without him touching her arms she could hardly move them. So simple and so effective. The feel of his hard cock pounding into her, his hand pinning her so completely in place made her cum again.

She disappeared into her body, unable to take a full breath as she came; she felt giddy. Her orgasm wasn't as deep as usual. It settled in her body differently. It made her ach for more. Part of her wanted the hand to move, and part of her wanted to stay like this until he came.

He could feel her body going more limp as she shook under him. She couldn't see him but he smiled down at her nonetheless. As she came down from her high he removed his hand from her back, bent down to her ear, and whispered "good girl." She just let out a little whimper of pleasure, a smile creasing her lips.

He sat back and began to massage her ass, holding his cock in her. He used his hands to rotate her hips against him ever so slightly. He could feel her clenching around him, massaging his cock to the rhythm of his hands.

His hands went from firm pressure to one last sharp hard grab before he slid himself out and flipped her onto her back again. She looked out of it in the best way. Aware of every tiny touch of his, but of almost nothing else. Her eyes were open and she was looking at him.

There was something feral in her eyes now too. She wasn't challenging him, she was completely submitting to him. He grasped her thighs firmly and spread her legs. He slapped his hand once across her pussy. He had never done that before. She gasped and arched her back. When she looked at him again her eyes were almost daring him to do it again.

He grinned back at her. Instead of taking the dare he leaned over her, placed his hands on either side of her chest, and thrust his throbbing cock back into her. He watched her as he thrust deep into her over and over.

Grinning his maniacal grin he watched her, her face showing equal intensity back at him. He ground into her, pumping hard, but not fast. She could feel his strength in how he was taking her. No matter the strength she gave back she could never match him; and that excited her.

She lay under him, looking at his face, his broad shoulders, those powerful arms, that sturdy chest. She had her hands wrapped around his biceps, her nails digging in when he hit just the right spot. This was her man. She looked at him and mouthed the word 'mine'.

He grinned at her and leaned down to kiss her. He gave no warning, just sped up and pounded her with abandon. He watched her again as he went harder and faster building to his own release. As he did her back arched again and she began to scream out in pleasure, but she kept her eyes on his.

Then his thrusts stilled as he sank deep and pumped his seed into her. He grit his teeth and kept his eyes on her, groaning with the pleasure of it. When he was done he held himself there, just being in that moment with her.

They were breathing heavily, letting their bodies come down from the high of the orgasm. Slowly he lowered himself to rest on his forearms, letting his forehead rest against hers. They closed their eyes and just breathed.

"Mine."

"Always."

As he slowly rolled off of her, he pulled the covers from underneath them, rolled onto his side, and pulled her into him so he could curl around her. She tucked so comfortably into him. She was facing him and snuggled deeper into the feeling of safety in his warmth and strength.

"I love you." He breathed it out, putting it out there loud enough to be heard but softly enough that he wasn't sure if she would hear him. He wasn't sure if he was ready to say it or not, but he had to put it out there.

She shifted, and tipped her head up to look at him, "I love you too."

They sealed it with a deep kiss.

They weren't back in their minds yet, so they simply lay there, drifting. Eventually, they both drifted off to sleep. Neither of them dreamed, and neither of them moved as they slept. They just were.

Sarah woke up slowly. She had no idea how long they had been asleep. She didn't want to move but she had to pee. She started to roll over to get up but Ian's arms around her tightened, as they had that morning.

"I have to pee." She said softly.

With a resigned groan he released his grip and she went to the bathroom. No sooner had she gotten up than she was back, tucking herself back into his arms. When his arms went around her again he gave a satisfied sigh.

That made her giggle a little. He cracked his eyelid and looked at her. She just kissed him. The kiss seemed to bring him back to reality a bit more. He moved one hand to cup her head, and she shifted so she could see him.

He looked more settled than she had seen him before. She brushed her fingers across his face. His hand was brushing up and down the side of her body. They lay there for a little while, just being together. They both understood what had happened between them.

Ian had taken Sarah, and Sarah had given herself to him, completely and without hesitation. It healed something in him to have her trust him so completely, to so enthusiastically want to be his. Other women had trusted him, had been enthusiastic about being with him even submitting to him, but she had relished in his primal dominance. In a way no one ever had before.

She could see something had settled in him. And something had settled in her too. When all conscious thought was stripped away, he had taken what she was offering so completely that she never wanted it back. She had had amazing connections with other partners, but to be claimed on such a basic level felt more satisfying than anything she had felt before.

"Are you ok?" Ian was asking more out of form than true worry she wouldn't be.

"I'm wonderful. I'll have some impressive hokies for a while..."

He looked down at her body, at her breasts, and her neck. "Wow, yeah. I hope no one gets the wrong idea."

He brushed over them gently with the tips of his fingers.

“With the shit-eating grin that will be on my face if they ask about them, I doubt it.”

That made him smile. “You really do like having evidence afterward, don’t you.”

“Yeah, especially from you. It’s a reminder of you. When I see them I don’t just remember the big strong fierce man, I see the tender gentle soul who would stop in an instant if I asked. Who takes what is given, but never demands. It makes me feel safe. And loved.”

“I’m glad. The last thing I’d want is for you not to feel safe. Or loved.”

“I love you.” She leaned in and kissed him. “It’s kind of funny how equal such an unequal dynamic truly is.”

“That’s the best part. The giving and receiving is never one-sided. If a good time isn’t being had by all, then what’s the point? At least in my opinion.”

“Agreed.” Sarah didn’t want to switch topics back to reality, but the rumble in her stomach couldn’t be ignored. “Sounds like I’m hungry. It’s probably dinner time.”

“Yeah, food does sound good.”

They both got up and looked around to find clothing to put on. Once in the kitchen and looking over the options they decided on ordering in Chinese. They snuggled on the couch scrolling through the various streaming options trying to decide on what to watch. When the food arrived they still hadn’t decided, so they turned the TV off and the fireplace on. When they finished dishing up in the kitchen they went back to the couch and cuddled up together in front of the fire.

“It’s never a bad night when there’s Chinese delivery in front of a fire.” Ian announced.

“Mmmhmmm” was all Sarah could manage with a mouth full of broccoli chicken.

And it was a good night. After dinner, they chatted about whatever came to mind. Ian stayed over again that night, and Sarah stayed over at Ian’s the next two nights. After that, they began to settle into a new pattern. Whoever’s house they ate dinner at was where they stayed the night. There were times when they stayed at their own houses, but that quickly became the oddity instead of the norm.

Chapter 11

This year Ian's birthday, April 15th, was a Monday so they had his party the Saturday before. Sarah and Ian did most of the planning, and Max pitched in on a few things. Ian was turning 29 this year, so it wasn't a huge party, but they still invited everyone. Ian was hosting it at his place and while it was a potluck he and Sarah had cooked some food, bought a cake, and were providing drinks.

While it was mostly Ian's friends who had been invited, some of Sarah's friends had also been on the guest list. They were becoming friends with Ian, and they figured everyone would get along, and it was a birthday party. The more the merrier.

When everyone was pretty much done eating Sarah brought out the cake, with 29 lit candles on it, and they all sang to Ian, who sat there and endured. Sarah thought he looked adorably uncomfortable. When he went to blow out the candles he would have made it in one breath, if Max hadn't brought the trick ones that were next to impossible to blow out. Ian didn't even glance over at Sarah when he realized trick candles had been used. He glared right at Max.

As they ate the cake Ian opened his gifts. Ian hadn't asked for gifts or said no gifts, but only a few people had brought one, mostly his closest friends. Kathy had brought one even though Sarah had told her she didn't need to. Max and Christina had given him a card game called Killer Bunnies and Kathy gave him another card game called Exploding Kittens. Someone made a comment about not knowing this was an animal violence party and they would have brought his body armor if he had known. The rest of his gifts included two bottles of nice booze, a book on landscape design, and a few gift cards for music.

Sarah's gift was a pack of batteries and a note that said: "for later". Ian raised an eyebrow but Sarah just gave a wicked grin and a wink back. Everyone knew, but no one said anything.

There were too many people for everyone to play one of the two new games at once so they split into two groups and each tried out one of them. When they all had finished their games they swapped. Everyone agreed that they were excellent games. If for no other reason, they were fairly easy to learn and didn't take a lot of space to play.

As it got later into the evening people began to head home. They had had some drinks, but no one was too hammered to make it home. Though there were some rides offered to a few who had driven there. Once everyone was gone Sarah and Ian looked around and decided to do most of the cleanup tomorrow. The food did need to be put away though. Sarah started to help but then told Ian to finish up and she would meet him upstairs, telling him to bring his new batteries.

He grinned as he watched her saunter out of the room. He would do his best to give her the head start she had requested and make a start on what needed to get done. He quickly got things put away enough before grabbing his batteries and following her upstairs.

When he opened the door to his bedroom he saw Sarah kneeling on the bed sitting back on her feet, her hands resting on her thighs wearing a panty and bra set that tied in front of the breasts and around the ass in a big bow. In front of her lay two new toys and a bottle of lube. They had dabbled with adding toys into their play, but Sarah had decided to expand their collection in a new direction. One toy was silicone anal beads and the other was a vibrating anal plug that gave a rimming sensation.

“Happy birthday Ian.” Sarah said. “Come, unwrap your gift.”

He wasted no time in selecting his toy of choice and then unwrapping Sarah. He put the batteries in the vibrating anal plug and used it to great effect. Sarah exploded with sensation as he pushed her to climax and he thoroughly enjoyed the addition of the vibration he could feel in her ass as he wrecked her pussy.

Sarah decided anal play was actually kind of fun. She definitely found stimulation of the anis itself to be the most pleasurable. The fullness of having something in her was fine. It didn't really do anything extra for her, but it didn't detract from the experience as a whole either. Having something more for Ian to do to her, however, that did add something more to the experience. They weren't called toys for no reason after all.

They spent Sunday cleaning up from the party and getting reset for the work week ahead. Ian had landed a great job just two weeks prior and was still in the exciting new job phase of things. On Monday evening Sarah took Ian to a nice seafood restaurant for his actual birthday.

He had received a card from each of his parents and his mom called before they had left for the restaurant. His dad called after they had gotten home that night, which seemed to throw him off a little more than he had expected. It wasn't that his dad didn't call on his birthday, it just wasn't as predictable as his mom. And his dad seemed to be trying to reach out a little more lately than he had in the past, which unsettled Ian a little.

Having Sarah around helped. She would just sit there with him in silence, or listen to him talk, or let him change the topic completely. He had told her about his parents little by little over the last few months. Though he could tell she wanted to know more, she had never pressed for more information than he had been willing to give.

Ian's parents, Jesse and Mary, had gotten divorced when he was seven when his dad moved across the state with another woman. He had tried to explain to Ian what was going on at the time but Ian was too young to truly understand. His mom and dad's relationship had been uncomfortable. They seemed to love each other, but also couldn't stand each other.

It wasn't until Ian got older that he began to see what could have made his father leave. His mother was always trying to look a certain way to those around her, climb the social ladder as it were. It wasn't that his mother didn't love him, but he had always felt like more of a prop to her than a son. He figured she had been the same way with his dad and he had just had enough.

But the way he had left, it hadn't left Ian with a very good impression of him. He had sent a card every year for Ian's birthday, and Ian sent him one for his. They talked on the phone most birthdays and Christmases, but other than that they hardly spoke.

Jesse seemed to be building a new family and Ian didn't feel like he had any place in it. He had never been invited over to visit and Jesse had never come back to see him. For her part, his mother had never really encouraged it either. Ian had always thought his Uncle Ray had been better at being a dad than his actual dad had ever been.

Mary didn't start dating again right away. Ian was never sure if that was because she wanted time to settle into being a single mom, or if she didn't think anyone would want to date a single mom. Either way, she didn't start to date until Ian was in high school. She only introduced Ian to a few of the men, but none of them had been around that long.

It was when he was about to graduate high school and she met Dave that she got serious. Dave had the status Mary had wanted, and a year later they moved two states away. Ian didn't hold anything against his mom for her choice, but he saw no reason to keep in touch with her any more than she was already doing. They talked on birthdays, Christmas, and a few times in between, or when a big life event happened.

He didn't necessarily envy the way Sarah's family looked compared to his, but he hoped when he had kids his family would look more like hers did and not like his. She had told him about some of the problems that had occurred over the years, some of the fights she had heard between her parents, but they were still together; somehow they had always worked things out.

Sarah had introduced Ian to her parents a week before Ian's birthday. He had been so nervous knowing how close she was to her parents. She had done her best to calm him down, but it hadn't really helped. While he knew their opinion of him wouldn't impact how Sarah felt about him, he still wanted them to like him. He didn't want to be the reason a rift formed between any of them. Thankfully the dinner had gone wonderfully.

He hadn't met her sisters, or her niece and nephews yet. Sarah's only niece, Suzie, had a birthday in early March that Sarah had gone to, but Ian hadn't felt comfortable joining her for that. When it came time for Charlie's birthday, the middle kid, in May though, Ian accepted Sarah's invite to join them. He thought it would be a little weird of him, the boyfriend, to be joining them at a kids' birthday party, but Lindsay had been the one to offer the invitation, and Iliza would be there too. It was a chance to meet both her sisters at once.

The weekend prior they went shopping for a gift for Charlie. Apparently, he was all about Pokemon at the moment and Ian found a Pokemon evolution builder set where he could build all

the different evolutions of one Pokemon. Even though he had never been into them as a kid, Ian was excited about his find.

Sarah had agreed to go over early to help Lindsay set up and had told Ian that he could come over later if he wanted, but he said he'd go with her and help out where he could. When they arrived Lindsay's husband, Fred, greeted them at the door.

Fred was a shorter, average-built man with a mess of brown hair and thick glasses. He opened the door and greeted them both warmly calling out to the house at large that Aunt Sarah had arrived. Lindsay and Iliza both stuck their heads out of the kitchen and two kids came screaming into the room.

Charlie, the birthday boy, and Steve, a year younger, barreled into Sarah with delight. She gave them each big hugs and then introduced Ian. They both gave an energetic wave which Ian returned before Lindsay shooed them off to another part of the house till the party started.

Sarah was greeted with a hug from all three adults and Ian got handshakes all around. Seemed only appropriate this being his first time meeting them. Ian held out the gift and Fred took it to put it in the designated gift spot on the living room table. The house was more ready than Sarah had thought it would be. Lindsay and Fred were always on top of things like that, but there were still those last things to do.

Lindsay saw the look on Sarah's face. "The kids went nuts this week decorating."

"I can see that." Sarah replied. "Looks like you hardly need me."

"For decorating, no. To keep me from losing my mind, always."

"So, where do you want us?"

Fred was the one who had the to-do list at this point. Lindsay made the list and got them 90% of the way there before her mind started to fray. Fred then came in and finished up that last 10%. Both of them insisted that Ian didn't have to help out, but Ian was adamant that since he was there he would help.

While Lindsay, Iliza, and Sarah finished getting all the food and snacks ready, Fred and Ian went out to the yard to set up the giant ring toss game the kids had decided upon and made. Ian thought it was so cool and wondered where they had gotten it; to which Fred replied 'It's amazing what you can do with some pool noodles, hula hoops, and wooden steaks.'

They had all just finished making sure the prizes for the games were ready and the food set out when the first of the kids arrived. There were 10 kids in all, not including Charlie's siblings, though Aden, the oldest, spent most of the party in his room. Michael, the second oldest, joined in on occasion but mostly just chilled, reading a book off to the side. Steve, only being a year younger than Charlie, was in the thick of it with all the other kids. And Suzie was

around for the whole party but didn't participate much. She was only 4 and would rather be playing with her Barbies.

None of the other parents had stuck around. Sarah wondered how Ian would handle all those rowdy kids for a whole afternoon. She, Iliza, Lindsay, and Fred were used to it by now, but Ian didn't have any siblings or cousins with kids; and his friends hardly had any kids either. To her delight, he had no problem joining right in and running around the yard playing with them.

He also spent time chatting with Iliza, Lindsay, and Fred, getting to know them; or at least as much as you could when you were all also supervising little sugar rockets. When it was time for cake Ian had hoped he would get a corner piece of cake, but was beaten out by five of the kids. He did end up with a nice edge piece that had a big blob of frosting on it.

After all the gifts were opened and played with and the kids picked up by their parents Ian let out a big sigh. Everyone was exhausted, but they had had a marvelous day. Lindsay committed that Ian had done really well for saying he'd never been around that many kids at once. Ian just shrugged his shoulders. It had seemed easy to him.

They had all eaten hot dogs for lunch, but none of the adults wanted to cook, so Fred fired up the grill and put more on. The kids didn't care what was for dinner; they could eat hot dogs for days at a time and be perfectly happy with it.

Everyone sat outside enjoying the last of the day's heat before the sunset All the kids came out and Ian was able to get to meet them on a more one-to-one basis. They each took turns telling him about what they had learned in school and what they wanted to do over the summer break.

The sun was setting by the time Sarah and Ian got in their car and headed home. They had stayed long enough to help clean up enough for Lindsay and Fred to be comfortable leaving the remaining mess till the next day. Mostly it was the decorations that were left up 'cuse the kids wanted them to be.

"Wow, that was a day." was how Ian started the conversation as they drove home.

"Yep, that's pretty typical for a party. It's not that crazy when it's just the 5 of them though."

"I would hope not. It was a smaller house than I was expecting for having 5 kids though."

"Technically they could afford a bigger place, but our parents taught us to be self-sufficient, so they try as much as they can to live within their means and not spoil the kids."

"How could they afford a bigger house but not always be able to live within their means?"

"Lindsay is loaded. Inheritance from her parents. It's why I don't have any student loans and they could adopt all 5 kids."

“Did you say you grew up fairly modestly?”

“Lindsay didn’t get access to the trust till she was 20, except for a portion for college at 18. My parents did get some when they became her guardians, but they didn’t believe in having more than they needed, so even without that we probably wouldn’t have lived much differently. Probably made paying for childcare and new clothes easier though.”

“So that’s why she volunteers instead of having a job, and why Fred still works, working for what you have?”

“Fred also loves what he does and Lindsay wants to give back, and it gives her something to do to keep her busy.”

“With 5 kids I’d think she’d be busy enough.”

“You’d think. But most of the volunteer work she does involves the kids in some way, like PTA or chaperone for a field trip and such. She likes to stay busy. Though now that Aden is older he’s started to help out with the younger ones so it’s been a bit easier for her and Fred. Which is probably why they are trying to get pregnant.”

“I’m impressed they have the time to *try*.”

“Lindsay believes in the saying ‘if it’s important you make the time.’” Sarah shrugged. “Too much for me. I love to visit, but I also love that I can go home at the end of the day.”

“Amen. I’m gonna sleep soundly tonight.”

“I always do after a visit like that.”

“Your place?”

“Sure.”

They spend the rest of their evening telling stories about their favorite childhood birthdays. It was a short evening though as they were both so exhausted once they were in bed they were asleep in minutes.

The following weekend Iliza joined them on a pool night with Ian’s friends. Sarah had invited her after Iliza had asked if they wanted to do something but they had already agreed to meet up with Max, Christina, Bruce, Allan, and Stacy. To everyone’s relief, both Bruce and Allan arrived not long after everyone else.

Quiet though she could be at first, Iliza quickly warmed up into the firecracker she was. Only standing 5’1” and 100 lbs soaking wet, Iliza was a classic redhead with pale skin and a personality to match the stereotype. She wasn’t loud or overbearing, she just stood her ground and bent you to her will with her kindness and sultry smile.

Sarah had thought Tom, who hadn't made it that night, was a really good darts player, and everyone agreed he was. Bruce, however, was apparently in a rivalry with Tom for the top spot. To everyone's amazement, Iliza trounced Bruce. Even though she won games 1, 3, and 4, Bruce insisted they play a 5th, and then a 6th game to try and restore his honor. Iliza won them both, though Bruce came daringly close to beating her in those last two games.

Ian was able to get to know Iliza a bit better too. Small though she was Ian got the distinct impression she could snap him like a twig if she deemed it necessary. She probably could too. She had spent the last few years traveling around India teaching in small rural towns. She could take care of herself in pretty much every sense.

She had come back home just three months ago and was planning on staying a few years at least. She wasn't ready to settle down, permanently, but she felt like it was time to come home for a little while. See what adventures she could get up to with her family.

It was Stacy and Iliza that really hit it off though, and not just through their shared love of all things Twilight. They genuinely seemed to mesh well together. Though Ian and Sarah had picked her up, Iliza got a ride home with Stacy. Though this was the most practical option as Stacy lived near where Iliza was currently staying, Sarah wondered if that could be the only reason.

Iliza had never shown any tendencies towards attraction to women, but a lot could happen in a few years abroad to open one's mind to life and all its possibilities. And she had no idea which way Stacy leaned. In the end, it didn't matter. It had been a passing thought that didn't stick around to be further analyzed.

Chapter 12

It was hot for early June, meaning the low 80s, so Sarah was sitting on her front porch reading while Ian worked on his yard. In truth, she was watching Ian work as much as she was reading. He wasn't shirtless, but the tank top showed off plenty for her to enjoy. When it was time for lunch she made a taco salad and he came over to join her on her porch.

They were just finished with their food, sitting there chatting when they saw a car pull up in Ian's driveway and a woman stepped out. She was medium height and carried what little weight she had on her hips. Sarah guessed she was about her age, her darker skin and black hair evidence of a mixed heritage. The woman shut her door, went around to the other side, and got a child of about 3 or 4 years out of his car seat. With his hand in hers and a large purse over one shoulder, she marched up to Ian's front door, a determined look on her face.

Sarah noticed Ian go stiff when he saw her. He looked worried and a little angry. Clearly, he knew who the woman and child were. Sarah recognized her face but couldn't place where she had seen it before.

"Hey, you ok? Who is she?"

"Cindy. Wait here." Ian was stern as he got up and walked over to his house.

"Okay." She watched him approach the woman but couldn't hear what they were saying.

When they started to go inside Ian looked over at her. She couldn't tell what was beneath his expression, but she decided to ignore his request and go over. Ian had left the front door open so she stood in the doorway, watching them. Cindy was facing away from her, still holding the hand of the little boy who clutched a stuffed hippo to his chest. Ian noticed Sarah standing there but kept his attention on Cindy.

"So, what do you want?" His arms were crossed. He didn't want this conversation to last any longer than it had to.

"What, not even a hello how are you?" Cindy seemed insulted he didn't inquire as to her well-being.

"Why are you here Cindy?" Ian repeated only slightly more politely.

"Well fine then." Cindy was in a huff. "Ian, I thought it was time you met Daniel, your son."

"My what?" Ian was doing all he could not to explode. Without looking over at her he asked, "Sarah, could you take Daniel outside so Cindy and I can talk?"

Sarah entered the room and knelt next to the little boy. "Sure. Hey Daniel I'm Sarah. I live next door. Will you go outside with me? We'll be just out there in the grass. You can see your mom through the window the whole time."

Daniel looked up at his mom for permission, which she hurriedly gave. A little too hurriedly in Sarah's opinion. She sat them on the grass and asked him about his hippo, which he had named Po-po. He was shy and Sarah could tell he was confused and a little frightened. She did what she could to comfort him, talking about whatever he seemed to perk up at.

It didn't take very long for Cindy to come storming out, grab up her child, and leave. Sarah watched them go before looking up at the house to see Ian in the doorway, arms crossed, an angry scowl on his face. Sarah walked up to him and followed him back into the living room.

Shutting the door behind her she asked, "Ian, what's going on?"

He looked like his anger was all that was keeping him together. "She says that boy is my kid."

"Yeah, got that." She went over to stand in front of him but didn't reach out to touch him. "Why did she come over now?"

"She wants me to pay child support, back to when he was born."

"Is he yours?" Sarah was puzzled. Ian had never mentioned even the possibility of having a child, and it wasn't something he would have hidden about.

Ian let out a huff, tears threatening to start as his anger subsided. "I don't know, maybe."

Sarah stood there for a moment, watching him. He was staring at the floor. He couldn't bring himself to look at her. When Sarah reached out to stroke his arm, he put his hand on hers and she could see the tears start to flow. They just stood there for a moment, neither quite sure what to do next. Ian abruptly walked over to the couch and sat down, in her own daze Sarah followed.

They sat right next to each other, feet flat on the floor, forearms resting on their knees, but not touching each other. After a moment Ian put his head in his hands and began to cry; so overwhelmed with the whole situation. Sarah reached out her hand and began to stroke his back, leaning her head against him. After another moment Ian sat back and looked at her.

"Oh, god, Sarah." Ian seemed like he just realized she was there. "I'm so sorry."

"Why? This isn't your fault." Sarah paused her hand on his back, genuinely puzzled.

"This isn't what you signed up for..."

“Hey, stop. No.” She gripped his hand tightly to cut him off. She was stern and a little offended that he thought she would want out. “The only way this would make me turn around and leave is if you had been lying to me about it and I know you aren’t.”

“How are you so certain?” It wasn’t that Ian didn’t believe her, it was just that he couldn’t figure out why she could be so confident in her belief.

“‘Cuse I asked Daniel if he knew who you were and if he ever met you. He said ‘mommy says he’s my real daddy.’ Then he asked if you were his real daddy why hadn’t you ever visited before. Kids that age don’t know about lying yet.”

Ian looked pained when she mentioned Daniel asking why he hadn’t visited. “I would have visited.”

“I know you would have. This is not your fault.”

“Yeah, but still.” He squeezed her hand, feeling more steady since she had shut the idea down so quickly.

“So,” Sarah started. “When I was outside with Daniel I asked him how old he was. He told me he was 3 and a half, which doesn’t add up to when you and Cindy broke up. So, what happened?”

Ian was a little scared to tell her about it but knew he had no choice now. “Well, almost four and a half years ago now, I guess, Cindy and I hooked back up for a weekend. I was just off a bad break-up and she said she was too. We had both ended up at the same bar and, well, one thing led to another and we spent the night and most of the next day fucking each other’s brains out. She tried to get me to stay, to try and rekindle things, but by that afternoon I felt disgusted with myself. So I left and never looked back. We used protection the whole time, but, well, I guess it didn’t completely work. I never told anyone. Not Max, no one.”

“Did she tell you why she didn’t tell you back then that she was pregnant?”

“Yeah.” He was bitter about the response Cindy had given. “She didn’t think I deserved to know; that I wouldn’t be a good father since I wouldn’t get back together with her.”

“Huh, she seems like she would have used that to try and get you to come back.”

Ian shrugged, “Yeah, I would have thought so, but ... I don’t know.”

“So what’s next?”

“She gave me the legal paperwork to get the child support and got pissed when I asked for a DNA test to prove he’s mine. I asked her what she put on the birth certificate in the father section. She said she left it blank.”

“Sounds like you need a lawyer.”

“Yeah.” Ian sighed heavily and reached over to take Sarah’s hand.

Their lives had just changed dramatically. She had never considered dating a single parent before, but now that she was here, she couldn’t imagine turning away. Was she about to become a stepmom of sorts, or would Daniel view her as an aunt? Would he want her around at all? Would she be allowed to be?

“Did you tell her about us?”

“Yeah, I told her. When you went outside she turned to me and said ‘Oh really, your neighbor?’ Ian put finger quotes around the word neighbor. “I just said ‘yeah, and she’s my girlfriend.’ She didn’t like that I hadn’t risen to the bait.”

They sat there in silence, just letting things process. Ian thought Cindy was right, that Daniel was his son. That little boy looked so much like Ian’s father as a baby it was scary. He was still going to get the DNA test to be sure, and to make sure Cindy couldn’t pull anything in the future. If he was going to be this boy’s father ... thinking that word made him pause. He was a father. He felt a small smile tug at his lips at that word.

If he was going to do the testing and all the legal paperwork to be this boy’s father then he was going to *be* this boys’ father, not just a name on a piece of paper. He knew Sarah loved her nieces and nephews and wanted kids one day, but was she really going to be ok with this?

He knew she had promised to always tell him if she didn’t want to do something, but that had been about smaller things. Something this big, he had to make sure she wasn’t just going to stay by his side because she felt she had to; because she had said it would take a lot to make her turn away. Well, this was a lot. He looked over at her and she was silently staring at her hands.

“Hey, Sarah?” He had to ask.

“Yeah?”

“I know you said that the only way this would make you leave is if I had been lying to you about it all,” She lifted her head like she was going to say something but he held his hand up to stop her. “But, please don’t make any decisions right now, no promises. I’m not saying we have to be on our own for a while and then decide, we can just continue as we have been, but please take your time to really think about this.

“I think Cindy is telling the truth and he is my son. He looks just like my dad as a little kid. And if I’m going to be a father I’m not going to just be a father on paper. Cindy is dramatic when it comes to relationships, I can’t imagine she’s gotten better over the years. Kids deserve to have some stability in at least one of their parents, and if that’s me, then I’m going to do that. But I don’t expect you to jump in with me. We haven’t even been dating a year yet.” Ian paused and lifted her chin to look at him. “I want you to take some time and consider this. If you want to take a step back for a little bit now, or a week from now, or a month, that’s ok. If it becomes all

too much for you I get that too. I feel selfish that if he is my son I'm putting him before you, but I have to."

"Hey, if you had put me first over him, that would give me a big reason to consider not staying with you. And yeah, I need some time, but I don't want to take a step back, not right now. Right now I have no intention of leaving, and what you just said, about being there for this little boy, makes me want to stay with you that much more." Sarah let out a long sigh. "But yeah, it's a lot. He deserves stability and I'm glad you want to give that to him. I also don't want to be another unstable thing in his life either. I don't want to be around so much that he gets used to me as your girlfriend and then if things don't work out between us..." She gave a heavy sigh of resignation. "But I think we're getting a little ahead of ourselves. There's a lot to get through before we have to face any of that."

"True." Ian pulled her into a hug and just held her. "I know you have plans tonight. Do you want to go home and rest and recenter before you go?"

"Oh, yeah, those. No, I'm gonna cancel. I can't deal with being social right now."

"Do you want to go back to your book?"

"Not really. What do you want to do?"

"Can we just sit here for a while?"

"Yeah, I'd like that." She brought her feet up on the couch to curl into him.

He kissed the top of her head. "I love you."

"I love you too."

They didn't talk about anything, they just sat there, being with each other, listening to the world pass by out the window. Such a different world than it had been barely an hour ago. A bomb had gone off and now they had to deal with the aftermath. For better or worse, Cindy was back in Ian's life and likely would be for a very long time. Ian knew Sarah was strong enough to handle whatever Cindy threw their way, he wasn't worried about that. And he knew he could deal with whatever b.s. she tried, but still, if things went the way he thought they would, there was no avoiding her.

"Hey, would you rather I stay at my place tonight; give you a little space?" She didn't want to, she desperately wanted him close, but she had to make the offer.

"No." He was emphatic and squeezed her tight, feeling her relax.

"I do need to go get my phone and text Dawn to cancel." Sarah got up from the couch trying to shake things off a little so she could deal with the practical needs of the rest of the day.

"Yeah, I should finish up outside and put things away."

“Sounds good.” They started to head outside before Sarah stopped and asked, “Hey, what do you want to do for dinner tonight?”

“Ugh, I had planned on cooking, but...” Ian didn’t feel in the mood to do any more work than he had to.

“Yeah, me too. Pizza?”

“Yes, extra cheese.”

“Ok, I’ll order.” Sarah kissed him and headed back to her place.

She had planned to go to a game night at her friend Dawn’s house so the first thing she did was text her to cancel. She didn’t go into detail, just saying something happened with Ian and she wasn’t feeling up to socializing. When Dawn asked if everything was ok Sarah assured her that everything was fine and she’d tell her about it another time.

Then she texted Kathy.

Sarah:

- Can you talk?

Kathy:

- Yeah, what’s up?

Sarah called Kathy and told her the whole story. Kathy listened in stunned silence.

“Do you need me to come over?”

“No, not tonight. Maybe tomorrow. I feel like I need to hold on to him right now. I know he doesn’t feel like it, but he feels so steady to me. Oh god, Kathy, he’s got a kid. I mean we have to wait for the DNA test to be sure, but Ian doesn’t think his ex is lying. He said Daniel looks just like his dad did at that age. I’ve never seen a picture so I don’t know, but if he says he does then I believe him.”

“Yeah, that’d be a weird thing to lie about.”

“We’ve both talked about wanting kids someday, but this is just...” Sarah trailed off, not quite sure how to describe it.

“Unexpected.” Kathy finished the thought.

“Yeah. And it’s not going to be an easy road. I mean, I always considered adopting, but not like this, when the mom is still in the picture. Being a step-parent when the other parent is still around is so much different.”

“Hey, chill out. You’re getting a little ahead of yourself. I know you have to think about the long-term effects, but you don’t have to think about that yet. You’re an amazing aunt, so act like his aunt.”

“Yeah, that’s what I figured I’ll do.”

“See, you can figure this out as you go. It’s not like you have to make a permanent decision right now. Wait, you don’t do you?” Kathy was suddenly concerned.

“No, not at all,” Sarah said with a sigh of relief. “Ian is being wonderful about it. He has made up his mind about what he’ll do, but told me to take my time and do what I needed to do, including taking a step back from him if I needed space.”

“Knowing you, I doubt that will happen.”

“Yeah, I doubt it too. I’ll give him some space, especially when Daniel starts to visit and stay over. They’ll need time alone together, especially at first. But I’ll be just next door any time Ian needs.”

“I know you will. And remember, if you ever need, I can be over there in 10 min. Day or night. Just like always.”

Sarah chuckled a little. “Thanks.”

They kept chatting for a while, easing into simpler topics, giving Sarah the time she needed to relax, as much as she could anyway. When they finally hung up Sarah felt more herself again. She looked out her back window and saw Ian putting the last of the gardening tools back in his shed. It was still a little early for dinner, but she didn’t know what to do with herself. She went back outside and tried to read a little, but couldn’t stay focused.

Ian had gone inside, presumably to shower. He came back out a little while later holding a beer for him and a hard soda for her. She thanked him but set it aside. She didn’t want to feel fuzzy just then. They just sat there, side by side on her porch bench, enjoying the breeze that cooled off the last heat of the afternoon. When it got towards dinner time Sarah got out her phone and ordered from Papa Murphy’s. It wasn’t either of their favorites, but it was their favorite together.

Sarah went to pick it up on her own, leaving Ian with his thoughts for a little while. Ian was still sitting on her porch when she got back. As she pulled into her drive he got up and went inside. She came into the kitchen to find Ian setting the oven to preheat.

“Can we stay over here tonight?” Ian asked.

“Sure. Want to let things clear out a little more?”

Ian just nodded his head. He didn't have to go back over to his place as he had already locked up. He had brought over more of his beers too. When the pizza was done they sat in front of the TV, ate, had their respective drinks, and watched Indiana Jones. Halfway through the second one they both started to nod off and decided they could finish the movie another time.

They both slept restlessly, so many emotions going through both of them. Ian was excited, scared and worried. It had felt so easy to decide what to do when presented with the situation. It felt good to think he might be a father, and it scared him. He hadn't been around when Daniel was born, and hadn't been given that chance. He knew he couldn't make up for that lost time, but he wanted to try. He wanted to make sure Daniel never felt lacking from here on out.

He hadn't felt this steady in himself, on his own two feet in a long time. He knew rough times were ahead, but he knew he could face them. Though the thought of it terrified him, he knew he could do it without Sarah if he had to. He felt, now more than ever before, he could truly move forward in his life, in whatever direction it happened to go.

Sarah's mind and emotions were all over the place. Joy in watching Ian get to become a father. Anger at Cindy for keeping Daniel away till now. Sadness for the little boy who was caught in the middle. Fear about how this would change things between her and Ian. She loved him, and she knew he loved her. But a child changed everything, it had to. The fact that he seemed so sure in what he wanted to do, so steady in his resolve, so happy at the possibility of being a father, gave her hope.

If he could walk this path on his own two feet, they could figure out the rest together.

It was the next morning as they were cleaning up from breakfast that Sarah brought up the topic of Daniel again. "Hey, so since you need a lawyer, I was thinking I could call Lindsay and see if she has any good recommendations. The one she's used before may not be what you need since she used her for adoptions, but maybe her lawyer could point us in the right direction."

"Yeah, that'd be great. Would certainly save some time."

"How much are you comfortable with me telling her?"

"Whatever you think she needs to know. I'm not going to spread the word, but I don't see any reason to hide it, especially since we're asking for legal advice."

"Ok. I'll give her a call."

"I'm gonna go do some more work on my yard." Ian went over, kissed her, and went to get his tools out of the shed.

Sarah stood there for a moment. He hadn't been gruff, but he had been a bit abrupt. Not that it was an unexpected response. He seemed like he couldn't figure out more than the basics, one thought, one concept at a time. Frankly, she couldn't figure out much more than that either. She went to her living room and sat on her couch to call her older sister.

"Hey Lindsay, do you have a minute?" It was a Sunday morning and Sarah could hear the kids in the background.

"Yeah, just a sec, the kids are just headed outside to play in the yard," Lindsay said before pulling the phone from her mouth and shouting after them 'no squirting water through the open windows please.' It made Sarah smile. "Sorry about that. Yesterday they decided it would be fun to see who could get the water gun to reach up through the second-floor bedroom window."

"Did they make it?"

"Unfortunately, yes. Charlie's mattress got soaked so because he had to sleep on a blow-up mattress, they all decided to camp out in the yard last night. Except for Suzie. She didn't want to be outside where all the bugs were."

That made Sarah laugh. Suzie, the youngest and only girl, was truly a little princess. "So, anyway."

"Yeah, what's up?"

"What's the name of the lawyer you used when you were adopting the kids?"

"Why?" Lindsay drew out the word, suspicious.

"Ian's ex came by yesterday with a little boy and said he was Ian's."

"Holey shit, what?"

"Yeah. Just showed up out of the blue. She's demanding he pay child support back to when the kid was born. Left a bunch of legal papers."

"Is the kid his?"

"Ian is pretty sure he is, but he's gonna do a DNA test to be sure. He wouldn't put it past his ex to pull something like this just to get money from him."

"How old is the kid? What's their name?"

"Daniel is three and a half. I took him outside so Ian and his ex could talk and he's a shy kid but sweet. I've never seen a picture but Ian says he looks just like his dad when he was that age. So, obviously, he needs a lawyer and I thought I'd start with you. At the very least maybe your lawyer can point us in the right direction."

“Us?” Lindsay didn’t miss a thing.

“Yeah, us.” Sarah replied, letting out a heavy breath with it.

“Ok. I’ll text you her info. Ian should meet with her before deciding though. I talked to 5 different lawyers before I decided to work with her. They were all good, I just wanted to find the right fit.”

“Ok, good advice. I’ll let him know.” Sarah heard a scream of ‘Mom’ in the background. “Sounds like you need to go.”

“Yeah, I should see what they’ve gotten into. That’s not the ‘something wrong’ mom, more the ‘he took the blue one and I always use the blue one’ kind of thing. But call me soon, okay? I wanna make sure you’re holding up ok, and let me know how the lawyer turns out.”

“Will do. Thanks again. Kiss the kids for me. Love you.”

“Love you too, bye.”

For the rest of the morning, Sarah sat on her porch playing games on her phone. Around 1 pm she made sandwiches and brought them out to Ian with some iced tea and a picnic blanket. They sat under the shade of a tree in her yard and ate their lunch. She told Ian that she had gotten the lawyer's info so he could call tomorrow if he wanted. He copied down the info so he could call the next morning. He didn’t want to delay at all if he could help it.

That night they slept in their own beds. They both had to get up for work the next morning and needed a little space to get ready to function independently at work the next day. They spent the next few nights sleeping apart as well. They would go to one of the houses for dinner, watch something, or sit and read, and then they would go to bed in their respective houses. This was unusual for them, normally spending almost every night together, but they both felt like they needed a little time to steady themselves.

It was Thursday night when Ian changed that. They had eaten dinner at his place and Sarah had gone home earlier than previous nights. Work had been crazy that day and she wanted to soak in the bath for a while. Ian was fine with that, she had looked haggard. He spent his evening watching TV.

He had called the lawyer that Monday morning on his first break at work. She had been helpful and had given him the name of her colleague who had more experience in his type of situation than she did, as well as a good place to look if things didn’t fit right with him. Ian had called him on his lunch break and they were able to schedule a meeting for Friday afternoon.

Ian wasn’t nervous about meeting the lawyer the next day, it was more what meeting the lawyer represented. With each step, things were becoming more and more real. The further down this path he went the harder it would be to turn back. Not that he wanted to turn back. He

needed to take the DNA test. He needed to know if this was his son, and he wanted to do it in a way that would give him legal rights that Cindy couldn't mess with later.

He had gone to bed early but tossed and turned. He couldn't seem to find a comfortable position or turn his brain off. He hadn't thought it a big issue to not have Sarah next to him in bed these last few nights; had felt comfortable with it. But now he couldn't stand being alone. He got up, put on his boxers and robe, slipped his sandals on, and went over to her house.

When he entered her room she was sleeping more in the middle of the mattress, laying on her side, but that didn't matter. When he saw her lying there, sheet half kicked off her naked body he didn't want to sleep yet. They had talked about him walking her up with sex and it was something they both wanted to try. This didn't seem like quite the right time though, it being the middle of the night and all.

He stripped down, pulled the sheet completely off, and lay next to her. He brushed the hair from her ear and began to nibble on it in the way that drove her so wild. She began to stir and moan. He started to run his hands up and down her body.

As his hand found her breast he let go of her ear long enough to whisper "Green?"

She wasn't fully awake but she became aware of his hands on her breasts and his teeth on her ear, and his hard cock pressing against her. She grinned and replied "green."

He shifted down, lifted her top leg, and buried his face between her thighs. She must have been having a good dream because she was already wet. As his tongue began to work its way into her slit she began to shift and moan, rolling fully to her back. He shifted with her, putting her legs over his shoulders, and holding her hips as they began to grind into him.

He held her tightly to him, working his tongue over, in, and around her now-dripping pussy. He stuck his tongue in her as far as it would go and began to fuck her with it. She could feel her climax building and when he moved his lips to suck her clit she exploded. He held her down, not letting her twist away, keeping firm suction on her clit.

She writhed in pleasure and as she started to come down he gave her swollen nub a little flick with his tongue that made her gasp. Now almost fully awake she looked down at him, directly into his eyes looking up at her.

She didn't say anything, she just smiled. He gave her clit one last good flick before moving up her body to kiss her. When he broke the kiss she started to say something but he put his finger to her lips and just shook his head. She bit her lower lip and nodded. The green light had already been given.

He repositioned himself off of her and with one quick motion flipped her onto her stomach. He knelt behind her, her ass lifted into the air, ready for him. He squeezed her cheeks together then pulled them apart revealing her wonderful holes.

He took his now very hard cock in his hand and guided it into her sopping-wet pussy. She let out a moan of sheer bliss as he sank into her. He started to work with slow gentle thrusts, grinding his pelvis around against hers as he hit bottom. He loved the way her breathing got heavier when he sank himself so deeply into her.

With one hand holding her hips he put his other hand on her lower back, slowly running his hand down until his thumb could run circles against her puckered anus. She loved the feel of him in her, grinding against her, his hands rubbing along her body, his thumb working circles around her ass.

She felt his thumb press against her, slipping just the barest way into her. He gave it a little wiggle and she responded with a deep moan; so he did it again. She arched her back as he hit the nerves around the entrance she had always thought of as exit only. Her response drove him wild.

He took his hand from her ass, grabbed her hips with both hands, and began to truly pound her. She raised up slightly on her elbows allowing her breasts to hang down, moving in time with his thrusts. She built to another orgasm and lowered herself back down as the waves of pleasure shot through her.

When he put his hand on her back she flattened under him and he sped up with abandon for only a moment before he felt his climax begin to run through his body. He could feel her pussy grip his dick as he pumped his load into her. Her muscles were so luscious, milking him dry.

When the last pulse subsided he collapsed on top of her, breathing heavily. He let himself slip out of her as he worked his arms under her, holding her close to him. He could feel her heart still pounding and her breathing heavy. He lay there a moment more before rolling off her and laying on his side, leaving one arm under her and the other draped across her back.

Her arms were tucked underneath her. She turned her head towards him, pulled one hand up just enough to brush the hair from her face, and smiled at him.

“Hi.” She was still breathless

“Hi.”

“I’d give you a hard time for waking me in the middle of the night, but you already gave me a hard time, so...”

He gave a small chuckle and sighed contentedly closing his eyes. She closed her eyes too for a moment before shifting to get up.

“I need to clean off before I fall back asleep.”

“Yeah, I probably should too.”

They went sleepily into the bathroom, cleaned up quickly, and then crawled back into bed. Ian pulled the sheet up to their waist and pulled Sarah in close. Sarah pressed her back into him, fitting comfortably into the curve his body made. They both fell asleep quickly, not stirring until the alarm clock went off the next morning.

Chapter 13

“So, how did the meeting with the lawyer go?” Sarah was sitting at Ian’s kitchen island as Ian cooked dinner Friday night.

“Really well. I think I’m just going to go with him.” Ian felt relaxed about his decision.

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” Ian nodded. “I’m sure. I feel so comfortable with him and he took the time to explain everything and every process to me. I had gone in with a list of questions and I only had to ask one. He had covered all the others in his explanations about things.”

“That’s great. So what’s next?”

“We do the DNA test. He’ll set it up at a lab, Cindy and Daniel will meet me there and we’ll all get out cheek swabbed. He said the results should take about 7-10 days. Then he submits them officially and we start the next phase.”

“About how long does he think the whole process will take?”

“Only a month or two.”

“Wow, that’s quicker than I was expecting.”

“Yeah, me too. I’m glad it won’t drag out though, for everyone’s sake.” Ian turned to the stove to stir the pasta in the pot. “This is really happening, isn’t it?”

Sarah got up and went to stand next to him. “Yeah, it’s really happening. Do you want me to do anything? Go with you to the lab or something?”

“No,” he paused with a heavy sigh. “I don’t mean to sound like I’m shutting you out, but I want to keep you out of this whole thing, at least legally. I don’t want Cindy to think I’m trying to replace her with you or anything.”

She knew he was being extremely careful, probably overly so, but she would respect his decision; and really, she did agree that it was the right decision. “Ok, just let me know if you do. Even if I just go with you and sit in the car outside.”

“I will, thanks.” He leaned over and kissed her just as the timer went off. “Food’s ready.”

As they ate dinner Ian walked Sarah through what the lawyer had laid out to him. How long things would take, what he could expect to happen or not happen, and what the typical speed bumps were. Since he was seeking joint custody there might be bigger issues to deal with, even a home visit from a social worker and references from friends and family were possible. That would mostly depend on how Cindy responded, however.

Ian didn't want to start right off with Daniel spending half his time at his place. He wanted to ease into things, let Daniel get to know him, and get comfortable before he started staying over for extended periods of time. And he thought it would be easier on all the adults involved as well.

That Tuesday, first thing in the morning he went to the lab to get his swab done. Cindy and Daniel were there as well as both lawyers. Ian didn't know how he should interact with Daniel if he should at all. When Daniel looked at him he settled on a small wave, which the little boy returned. Cindy wasn't completely ignoring him, but she was doing her best to not have to talk to him.

No one did much talking. The whole process didn't take very long and everyone went their separate ways. Ian hadn't asked Sarah to come with him but he had promised to text her to let her know how things had gone. He sent her a quick message letting her know everything had gone exactly as expected, and as smoothly as he had hoped.

For the next week, they spent their time trying to do normal things. Ian had another meeting with the lawyer to get more paperwork ready to go, but he mostly tried not to focus on the waiting. That became harder the more days that passed. He knew there was no use in getting anxious. The results would come when they would come. He clung to that though as the days passed. And he clung to Sarah, who was right there ready to reassure him when the waiting became a little too much.

It was the next Thursday after the meeting at the lab that Sarah walked into Ian's kitchen after a long day at work.

"Ugh, you would not believe what Samuel did today." Sarah said. "Hey, what's going on?"

She stopped when she saw Ian standing in the kitchen staring at a letter in his hands. She went over and stood next to him. She could guess what was in the unopened envelope.

"The results came today. I've just been standing here staring at it. I can't open it. I'm almost certain of what it says, but what if I'm wrong? I've kind of been getting excited at the idea of having a kid. What if he's not mine?" Ian looked over at her, fear evident on his face.

Sarah reached over and put her hand over his, which had started to tremble slightly. "Do you want me to open it?"

"Yeah." he said, handing the letter to her.

She took it from him, put her finger under the flap, and tore the envelope open. She took the report out and began to read. It only took a moment before she looked up at Ian smiling. He had an eager and hopeful look on his face. She handed him the letter.

"You were right. He's yours."

He snatched the letter from her and began to look it over. He looked up at her with a stunned grid. His eyes had only glanced over most of it, only truly seeing the part that confirmed what he had been hoping for.

"I'm a dad." He said it quietly, waiting for it to sink in. "Holey shit. Sarah. I'm a dad."

He pulled her to him and hugged her tightly. She wasn't sure what to say to him so she just hugged him back, feeling his tears start to flow. Or were those hers? She pulled back and looked up at him. They were both crying out of relief and joy.

"Yeah, you're a father." She leaned back into him for another hug.

When he released her he stood there, leaning against the counter.

Sarah wiped the tears from her face and asked, "So, now your lawyer files it officially?"

"Yeah. He said that if the results came back positive he would immediately file them with the courts and get things going. He said it shouldn't take too long before visitation is granted. Cindy said I should have come over already. But it just didn't feel right until I knew for sure."

"Do you want to call her?" Sarah knew he wanted to see Daniel, properly introduce himself.

Ian shook his head. "I'm worried if I go over before legal rights are granted she'll try to use me showing up against me at some point. I'm still not convinced she wants me to be his father beyond the money."

"What did your lawyer say about that?"

"He said she could try and get me to pay back to when Daniel was born, but she didn't put my name on his birth certificate, let alone contact me, so it's a ridiculous long shot."

"You still planning on going for joint custody?"

"Yeah. I don't think she'll put up a big fight on that once she realizes how serious I am."

"Good." Sarah was pleased he hadn't changed his mind or was wavering about it. "Oh, I have to text Lindsay. I promised I'd keep her updated. And Kathy. You good with that?"

"Yeah, yeah. I gotta text Max." He paused a moment before continuing. "And my parents. They've got a grandson after all."

Sarah was glad he was contacting his parents. She knew they weren't close, but with Ian being an only child his having a kid would be especially exciting for them.

Sarah:

- Well, It's official. The battle beings!

Lindsay:

- *Holy shit, really?*
- *Tell him congrats from all of us.*

Sarah:

- *I will, thanks.*

Lindsay:

- *And the lawyer worked out?*

Sarah:

- *So far so good.*

Lindsay:

- *I'm so glad.*
- *Oh, I need to ask you. Can you take Steve and Suzie for a few hours Saturday afternoon?*

Sarah:

- *Probably. Let me check with Ian.*
- *I think he wants to start getting Daniel's room ready.*
- *I'll let you know.*

Lindsay:

- *It would be from 1:30 to 5, maybe 6 at the latest.*

After Lindsay she texted Kathy. She was equally excited for both her and Ian. She was at work but promised to call later. She went out into the living room where Ian was on the phone with his mom, judging by how he was talking. He turned his head and saw her and used it as a reason to end the call.

"You're mom?"

"Yeah, that woman. Almost impossible to get her off the phone."

"Hey, Lindsay asked if I'd be free to watch Steve and Suzie Saturday afternoon but I told her you would probably want to start setting up Daniel's room."

"Yeah, but you don't have to say no just on my account. It's gonna be a little while before he starts staying over. And I don't have any idea where to even start."

"Well," Sarah walked, slightly coyly, over to join him on the couch. "I may have started a 'Daniels Room' Pinterest board."

Ian grinned. "Of course you did. Actually, I think having the kids over could be helpful. Help me get in the mindset as it were."

“Good point. I’ll let her know we’re a go.”

After texting and calling a few more people they spend the rest of the evening looking at Sarah’s Pinterest board, getting ideas about how to fix up one of the bedrooms for Daniel.

Saturday, just before 1:30 pm, Lindsay knocked and announced herself at Ian’s front door. Sarah had left it open for her since that’s where they would be spending the day. Sarah came out from the back bedroom and started to greet her sister when she stopped short. All five kids, her sister, and her husband were standing there. Charlie rushed in to give his Auntie Sarah a big hug.

“Well, well. What are all of you doing here?” She hadn’t been expecting all of them to show up.

Charlie held up a toy he was carrying and said “Auntie Sarah, look what I brought for Ian now that Daniel will be staying with him sometimes.”

Sarah looked at it, then saw one of the others also holding a toy, and Lindsay holding a large bag. Something was up.

“Auntie look. Do you think he’ll like it?” He asked, handing over the toy dump truck.

“That’s so sweet of you. I’m sure he’ll love it.” As Ian came into the room she added, “Hey, go show Ian.”

“Here you go Ian. It’s for your little boy.” he handed the toy over and scampered back to his siblings.

Ian was confused. “What’s going on?”

Sarah shrugged as Lindsay stepped forward holding out the bag. “Well, we know you’re brand new to this whole parenting thing and figured you could use a few things. All the kids went through their toys and picked out which ones they wanted to give to you.”

Ian started to choke up a little. “Aww, guys you didn’t have to do this.”

It was Aden, the oldest, who spoke up. “We know he’s not coming out of foster care and he’s probably got all kinds of toys at his mom’s house, but this way he can have his special dad’s house toys.”

“When I mentioned to Fred what was going on, Aden got curious, and before I knew it they were all asking if they could pick out a toy to give to.” Lindsay just shrugged.

Ian couldn’t speak. It had been the kids’ idea.

“Do you think he’ll like them?” It was Charlie asking, looking a little worried he hadn’t picked out a good enough toy.

In answer, Ian went over to them, knelt down, and put his arms out to hug as many of them as he could. "I'm sure he'll love them. Thank you so much. This is wonderful."

While Ian thanked the kids Sarah went over and hugged her sister and brother-in-law. "You guys are the sweetest. Is this why you asked me to watch the kids? To surprise us?"

"No, we really do need you to watch the kids. Steve and Michael both have games today and Aden is going over to a friend for a gaming marathon. It's been planned for a few weeks, I just totally spaced it."

"No problem. We're glad to have them."

"Hey kids," Fred said, getting their attention. "Time to say goodbye to Ian and Aunt Sarah. We have to get going."

"Don't I get to stay with Aunt Sarah?" Suzie asked, clearly not wanting to go to her brother's games."

"Yes, you and Steve are going to stay here."

Suzie's face lit up and she grabbed Ian's hand. "Good. I can show you how to put his room together."

Ian looked up at Lindsay inquisitively. She just shrugged at him letting him know he should just accept it. With a shrug in response, he led Suzie off to Daniel's bedroom. Sarah could hear her little voice telling Ian all about how the room should be set up.

"Our little designer in the making." Lindsay said resignedly, and a little proudly. "Well, we really do have to go. Thanks for taking them. Fred will be back around 5 to pick them up. Here's the necessities bag, and thank Ian for us too."

With a big hug, Lindsay left, ushering her two into the family minivan. Fred gave her a hug before he took his charge to his SUV and headed out. Sarah shut the door behind them and turned to her nephew asking if he wanted to come help with the room too. Predictably, he wanted to stay in the living room and play on his tablet. Sarah got him set up before going to join Suzie and Ian.

As she approached she heard Suzie say, in her most grown-up exasperated voice, 'boys like glitter too.' Ian seemed to be trying to reason with her that he didn't know what Daniel liked yet but agreed that boys could like glitter too. Sarah entered the room to see Suzie and Ian on the floor, all the color options and other design ideas spread around her. Some had clearly been dismissed as not worthy while others seemed to be the superior options.

"You two making a good start?"

Ian just looked up at her with a pleading look on his face and mouthed the word 'help'. Suzie launched into her explanations of how she had started to organize everything around her. Sarah sat down with them and tried to direct Suzie's energy.

"Suzie, why don't you pick out which combinations of ideas you like best and rank them in order of best to worst. That way when Ian looks through them later he knows what the absolute best and absolute worst things are."

"Oh, I can do that." She went to work with enthusiasm, sorting through all the piles again.

"You ok?" Sarah was trying not to laugh at the look on Ian's face. "Have you looked through the bag of toys yet?"

"Didn't have a chance to. Here, go through them with me."

Ian had already set the dump truck to one side so they placed each toy next to it as they pulled them out. There were a few toy cars, a backhoe to go with the dump truck, a rainbow-patterned stuffed penguin, a few superhero action figures, and some simple books. Sarah knew the books were probably Lindsay and Fred's contribution.

Lindsay had also included a list titled 'things you don't think of but absolutely need'. Sarah looked over the list with Ian. They had thought of most of it, mostly because Sarah had helped out with the kids so much; like however many packs of wipes you think you need, double it, and put them everywhere. There were a few things however she had forgotten about, like extra special kid band-aids, she confirmed that they helped all bobos, and a travel kids toilet seat. Ian was dubious but Sarah said it had been a game changer for Lindsay.

"There are urinals for kids though." Ian stated.

"Well, even boys sit to poop. At least I hope so." Sarah said, making her point even more obvious.

"Right, kids can't time things like that for when they're at home."

"I know darn well you don't hold it till you're home either."

Ian bowed to her valid point.

Suzie spent the rest of the afternoon sorting out all the options and then going over them again just to make sure she had gotten everything just right. She then went through things with Ian so he understood exactly what things were supposed to go with what things and what things absolutely could not go together.

Sarah spent some time with Steve, letting him tell her about his new game and playing a game on her phone keeping him company. Fred arrived just after 5 pm and whisked the kids off to get dinner, allowing a moment to commiserate with Ian who looked haggard from spending

several hours with Suzie. When they had gone Sarah looked over at Ian and chuckled, trying to keep the pity off her face. She didn't succeed.

"I know I've spent time with them before, but how the hell is sitting around with just one of them so exhausting?" Ian asked, slumping onto the couch.

Sarah laughed sympathetically and joined him. "You aren't used to the mental energy some kids can require you to have."

"No shit. Give me kids running around outside any day. So much easier. She did give me good ideas though."

"Well, that's good." Sarah watched him as he lay his head back and closed his eyes for a minute, trying to regain what little energy he could. "You want something for dinner? I think there are some leftovers at my place."

"Yes, dinner. Leftovers. No cooking. Sounds wonderful." Ian opened his eyes and looked at Sarah, but didn't even try to move.

"It does mean you have to get up." Sarah saw the dubious look in his eyes. "Or I could go get it and bring it back to you."

"Have I told you lately how wonderful you are?"

"Yes, but I could hear it again." She leaned over and kissed him before getting up to go get the food from her fridge.

When she got back Ian hadn't moved. His eyes were closed but he didn't appear to be sleeping. It took him a moment after hearing her enter for him to look over at her.

"It's the goddess who brings me food."

"You do at least have to walk yourself to the table."

"Fine, I guess I can manage that."

They ate dinner and spent a quiet evening watching a new show they had found. When it got towards their bedtime Ian was clearly ready to sleep. No sooner was Ian in bed than he was asleep. Sarah didn't fall asleep right away though. Everything that was happening was starting to pile up in her mind. Eventually, she drifted off but she didn't sleep as well as Ian did.

The next morning Sarah had to get some normal chores done so she left Ian to keep working on Daniel's room. Suzie had given him a lot of ideas so Sarah figured he would spend most of the day sorting through them, trying to figure out what would be best for a boy he knew nothing about.

Sarah also wanted to go over to see Kathy. They hadn't seen much of each other over the past few weeks and she missed her. Also, she needed her friend right now. Things were starting to get to her. She hadn't tried to hide it exactly, but she also didn't want to saddle Ian with any of it. She needed a different perspective, from someone she trusted and who knew her.

When Kathy answered the door they greeted each other with their customary hug, but Sarah held on for longer than usual. She could feel the stress of it all starting to come up as she held on to Kathy. For her part, Kathy had figured this was coming so she just held Sarah. When Sarah pulled back they went into the living room and sat down.

Kathy went to the kitchen and came back with a glass of water for Sarah and set it on the coffee table. "Ok, tell me, really, how are you holding up?"

Sarah still wanted to be strong, to be ok with all of this, but this was Kathy asking. "Mostly I'm doing ok. But Kathy, he's got a kid and he's seeking joint custody."

Kathy just sat there, letting Sarah continue or not as she needed.

"As much as we've said I won't be involved with Daniel's life for the time being, it's almost hard not to be to some extent. I mean, Ian and I have become so ridiculously close over the last few months, and this hasn't really changed that, but...I don't know." Sarah was struggling to find the words. "This little boy's world has been turned upside down. I want to be there to support Ian but I don't want to get too involved with it all in case Ian and I don't work out for some reason. And as much as Ian says he wants to spend time with Daniel on his own for a while before I start being introduced, I'm questioning how much he'll stick to that."

"You're worried he'll move faster than is healthy to not lose you."

"Yeah. At the same time, I'm also worried he'll do the opposite. Honestly, I don't know what he's going to do. I don't know if he really knows what he's going to do. And really that's fine. Everyone is just trying to keep their head above water and keep moving forward. We're all just figuring all this out as it happens."

"So why not just let things keep going like that? Figuring it out as you go?" Sarah gave Kathy a dubious look at this. "Yeah yeah, I know, you don't have the easiest time with that. As much as you like to go with the flow, you also like to have an overarching plan for things. But babe, there just isn't one for this."

"I mean there is..."

"With the legal stuff, yeah there is. But with the dynamic between you and Ian, between Ian and Daniel, between everyone involved, there just isn't, and there can't be. You know that."

"Yeah, I know. It's still frustrating."

"Yep, it is. Which is why we have friends and therapists."

They were sitting on the couch, facing each other. Sarah reached over to take Katy's hand and give it a squeeze, so grateful to have this friend. Kathy gave a strong squeeze back wanting to provide some solidness to Sarah in this moment.

"So, are you worried you'll fade into the background with Ian? That your relationship will just kind of fizzle out?"

"Yeah." Sarah felt the tears start in the corner of her eyes. "The last six months have been some of the best I've ever had. I feel like we've known each other for years. Things are so easy with him. As much as I'm willing to give him whatever space he needs to be the kind of father he wants to be, Kathy, I don't want to lose him. I love him."

Sarah started to cry in earnest now. Kathy moved over to sit next to her and took her in her arms. Sarah could feel all the fear begin to ease out of her

Kathy reached over to her end table to grab a tissue for Sarah. "I will say, I've seen you together. That man is head over heels, ass over tea kettle for you. So don't worry about that. Let him pull away from you a little. Hell, give yourself some space. Just because you two spend a little less time together over the next few weeks or months, doesn't mean you are any less committed to each other."

"I know. It's just hard because we live right next to each other. It's so easy to just pop over anytime. As much as we don't actually live together, we kind of do."

"Which is why I think taking a small step back for each of you, on occasion, as things get settled, won't cause any rift between you two. You two could spend weeks apart, hardly talking, and come back to each other as though no time had passed."

"Well, maybe not like no time had passed. But I get what you mean."

They spent the next hour talking. Sarah expressed her fears and worries, not just about her relationship with Ian but with the idea that it was looking more and more like she was going to be a stepmom of sorts. It didn't scare her, but it was still just starting to settle in on how it would be different from being an aunt.

Kathy continued comforting and reassuring her, about all of it. One thing Kathy convinced Sarah of was that she didn't have to always be the strong one. She needed to tell Ian her fears so they could figure it out together. As much as Sarah knew how important open and honest communication was, as much as she had built that up with Ian, even she needed to be reminded of it sometimes.

When Sarah finally left to go grocery shopping she felt both more and less stable, but overall felt better. She was nervous about talking to Ian, about admitting how scared she was. But maybe he was stronger than she thought. He had been so vulnerable with her in the past, needing her strength. But Kathy had made her see that even with all the turmoil of the whole

thing, he was on solid footing when it came to his role with his son; and appeared to be unwavering in what he wanted with her.

Of course, their dynamic would change. All people's relationship dynamics changed over time. They had to. Situations demanded they adapt. Sarah was just scared that the adaptation this time would mean she would no longer get to wake up to Ian holding her close, or not be able to kiss him. Or wrap her lips around his luscious hard dick, either of her lips.

She brought her groceries and drove home in a daze. She finally broke out of it when she got home and was putting her food away when she kicked herself for forgetting she had made a list and hadn't used it. She had forgotten to grab a few things she was completely out of. Nothing dramatic, but still annoying.

For the rest of the day she threw herself into her chores, letting the physical mundane tasks relax her mind away from everything. She had never been a stress cleaner, but that day she finally got to a few things she rarely did, like cleaning the light switches and door knobs. She looked for every little thing she could to fill the time.

That evening Ian fired up the grill and put on some hotdogs and veggies. They sat on his back deck and ate, not talking much. This time though the silence felt a little strained. They had just finished their last bites when Ian decided to break the silence.

"Hey, you ok? You've been quiet."

"Yeah. I went over to Kathy's today."

"Yeah, you two talk about anything in particular?" Ian had known something was up, that this whole situation was getting to her, he just hoped she would let him be there for her as she had been there for him so many times.

"I'm scared." She hadn't planned on blurting it out like that, but it just kind of fell out of her mouth. "Sorry, I didn't mean to just lay that on you like that. I'm just scared of what's happening, what it might do to us. What might have to happen to us."

"That we might have to step back for Daniel's sake." Ian took a sip of his beer and nodded his head. "Yeah, I've been thinking about that too. But the thing is, as much as I'm going to put him first, that doesn't mean I'm going to let you, let us slip apart. You mean too much to me."

She met his eyes. She hadn't been looking directly at him, but he had been looking at her. He looked so stable. She could see that he had settled into things and was ready to hold her up.

"Come here," He repositioned their chairs so they were facing each other, knee to knee. "You've been the strong one through so much. You're allowed to break and be scared. I'm scared too. But I'm not going to let this drive any kind of wedge between us. Hell, knowing

you're willing to help in any way, including stepping back, is half the reason I can do this. Yeah, when Daniel starts to stay over we'll spend less time together, but it's not like we'll never see each other."

"Yeah, I know." To her surprise, Sarah's words didn't sound like there should be a 'but' at the end of them.

"I don't know when I'll want to bring you into his life, but he's already met you and knows you're my neighbor, so it's not like we'll have to avoid each other. Maybe sometime when you have the kids over and Daniel is over they can all play."

"Yeah, that'd be good."

"But I promise you this, I love you too damned much to not work just as hard for you as I am for Daniel." He was looking straight into her eyes as he said that.

"I love you too. More than you know."

He smiled and pulled her to him, sitting her on his lap so he could give her a long kiss. She could taste her tears as they slid down her cheeks and hit their lips. When the kiss broke he reached up and gently used one thumb to wipe them off her cheek.

"And I'm gonna need your help. You've got a lot more practice with kids this age than I do."

Sarah chuckled. "Any time. But you've helped with the kids, so it's not like you're being thrown completely in the deep end with no idea how to swim."

Ian nodded, considering. "You'll still probably be getting a random frantic phone call or two."

"Well yeah, that's normal. Every first-time parent has a few random frantic phone calls to someone who knows more in the beginning. And then a few more when they add in a second and everything shifts."

"Lindsay made a few phone calls, I take it?"

"Oh yeah. Remember, they all came to her at different ages at different times. My mom got some very random calls."

"Oh, hey, let's get this all put away and then I want to show you what I figured out for Daniel's room."

It was so cute how excited he was to show her what he had done that day and she was just as excited to see it. Ian showed her every little thing, getting her input on it all. At that point, there wasn't much more to do except to actually do it all.

For the rest of the evening, they watched kids' movies. Sarah picked out the ones her nieces and nephews had liked best at that age that she had also enjoyed watching. While she said that kids will decide on their own taste it never hurts to introduce them to things that you also enjoyed. It made everyone's life better and kept the parent's sanity a little more intact.

That night they made love tenderly in Ian's bed. Sarah felt more like he was taking care of her more than usual. Even though their dynamic was generally a dom/sub one, the feeling of being taken care of was slightly different this time. It was a more sensual connection than a primal one.

When the alarms went off the next morning Ian was the one who had to help Sarah let go of him to get ready for work. Not that she didn't regularly whine about having to get up from laying next to him, but this time she was the one who didn't want to lose the strength she found in the connection they had.

But the alarm buzzed and she knew she had to get up to go to work. There was a department meeting she had to go into the office for. Ian made her breakfast before she left to get dressed at her place. It helped steady her, and the playful slap on the ass as she headed out his door helped bring her back to daily life.

Chapter 14

Over the next two weeks Sarah helped Ian paint and assemble Daniel's room, getting it as ready as they could for when Daniel would start to come over. They wanted it ready for him even before he would start staying the night to show him he had a place there. Ian's lawyer had also indicated that there might be a home visit before everything was done so having the place ready to go would help make the process go that much quicker.

Initially, Cindy did drag her feet about giving Ian more than visitations, but once Ian started to push back and she saw he wasn't going to cave she didn't fight him about joint custody. They both agreed that things should start slow, Daniel visiting for the afternoon, then for the whole day a few times, before he would start staying over every other weekend.

It was towards the end of June when Ian's first visit with Daniel was scheduled. They would all meet at Daniel's favorite park on a Saturday afternoon. Ian had asked Sarah to come with him and she had agreed. There were benches set off a little ways from the playground where she could wait.

Sarah had stayed over at Ian's the night before and he had tossed and turned most of the night. He got up before Sarah did and went downstairs to look over Daniel's room again. Even though Daniel wouldn't be coming over, knowing everything was ready when he did help Ian settle down.

They spend the morning watching TV, Ian continuing to look over at the clock. Sarah decided he needed more of a distraction so she straddled him, blocking his view of the TV, and began to kiss him. At first he wasn't really into it, making out with her because she was there. It was when she started to grind her hips against him that everything else in his mind went away and he was able to focus on just what was in front of him.

When he began to take her shirt off he glanced over to the front window. The curtain was open and the street outside was clearly visible. Instead of going to the bedroom, Sarah got up and shut the curtain. When she got back to the couch Ian had taken his pants and shirt off. Before she could sit back down he pulled her pants and shirt off and directed her to kneel in front of him.

She didn't hesitate. When she thought he was ready she climbed back up and straddled him once more. She rode him and he let her do as she wanted. Only when he was about to finish did he stand up, lifting her with him so he could set her on the couch, ass facing him. It only took him a few moments of hard pounding to finish.

When they were done Ian lifted Sarah over his shoulder and carried her to the shower. Sarah gave only a token protest, mostly laughing at his playful attitude. They had both already showered that morning so only took a few minutes to clean off. When they were dry and dressed again it was time for lunch, and then it was time to go.

When they got to the park Cindy and Daniel were already there, sitting off to one side of the playground. When they saw them Sarah glanced over at Ian, put a hand on his arm, walked around the other side of the playground, and found an out-of-the-way bench to sit at. She was able to watch as Ian approached, greeted Cindy, and knelt in front of Daniel to introduce himself.

Sarah watched as Ian sat down next to his little boy and began to talk with him. Cindy didn't move from her spot, but she got out her phone and started to do something on it, giving Ian and Daniel time to themselves. Occasionally Daniel would glance over at his mother, but she was engrossed in whatever was on her phone so the little boy turned back to Ian. From where Sarah sat it seemed to be going well.

As time went on Daniel seemed to be relaxing, looking up at Ian more often as they spoke. He held the same stuffed Hippo, Po-Po if she remembered correctly, he had had when he had come over to Ian's place. Sarah smiled as Daniel showed Po-Po to Ian, seeming to tell Ian all about him. Ian looked so wonderful sitting there, talking to his son. He looked happy in a way she hadn't seen before. But she had never seen him as a father before, so it made a certain amount of sense.

It was a little while before they all had to say goodbye. Sarah watched Ian fist bump Daniel as Cindy stood up, putting her phone away and making sure she had everything. Before he got off the bench Daniel paused a moment and leaned into Ian for a hug. When he hopped down from the bench and took his mom's hand he looked over, spotted Sarah, and gave a wave. Sarah waved back, seeing a little more joy on the boy's face than when they had all arrived.

Ian stayed seated, watching Cindy and Daniel leave the park. It took him a moment to stand up and start to walk towards Sarah. Sarah had gotten up and had begun to walk towards him, meeting him halfway. He had a soft warm grin on his face and he kept glancing back to where Daniel and Cindy were, just exiting the park to get to their car.

"So, it looked like it went well." Sarah said.

"Yeah," Ian said quietly, looking at her again. "He's such a sweet kid. And he gave me a hug." He seemed a little giddy about that.

"I saw." Sarah took his hand and began to walk them to their car. "Do you want me to drive home?"

"Huh?" Ian had gotten lost in his head slightly. "Oh, no, I'm good."

"You sure?"

"Yeah,"

"Ok, tell me all about it. What did you two talk about?"

They got in their car and Ian started telling Sarah all about meeting his son. He told her about how Daniel loved to paint, his favorite color was pink, and his favorite ice cream was strawberry, mostly because it was pink. He told her about how Daniel had loved hearing about how Ian built houses and buildings. Daniel figured that Ian could build them and he could paint them. He told her about what Daniel told him about growing up with just a mom.

“Sarah, he asked me when I could start being his dad.” Ian sounded sad at that.

“What did you tell him?” Sarah knew how Ian felt, but wondered how he had responded, especially with Cindy sitting right there.

“I told him I already was his dad and whatever dad things he needed or wanted me to do I’d do them.” Ian paused for a moment, remembering the joy in the little boy’s eyes and how it had broken his heart. “Cindy has done her best, but he said he always wanted a dad just like the other kids, to do dad things with.”

Sarah reached over and gripped his hand, acknowledging the storm of emotions that she knew had gone through Ian with those words. “What are dad things?”

“He shrugged his shoulders and said he didn’t know, but obviously his mom couldn’t do dad things cause she was his mom.” That made them both laugh. “I get the feeling that he doesn’t like to do a lot of outdoorsy things like sports, more that he wants a second parent to do different things with, cause that’s what he sees with his friend’s parents. He asked about you too.”

“Oh?” Sarah had hoped that was the case when Ian had pointed over to her.

“Yeah, he asked if my friend had come too, the nice lady who took him outside when he had come over. Apparently you made a bit of an impression on him.”

Sarah just smiled, silently thankful that it had been Daniel and not Cindy or Ian who had brought up her presence. “I saw when you were saying goodbye that you guys gave a fist bump before you hugged.”

“Yeah, I told him he didn’t have to hug me if he didn’t want to. We could just do a fist bump like friends since we had just really met.”

“I guess you made an impression on him too.” Sarah was smiling at him, her heart melting watching him beam as he talked about his son.

They kept talking as they pulled into Ian’s driveway and went inside. They sat on the couch and Ian kept talking, telling Sarah every detail about his first meeting with Daniel, talking to her about the things he was looking forward to doing. For her part, Sarah loved listening to him, loved watching his excitement about his future.

But it wasn’t just his future, it was their future. Ian had included her in his plans and intentions for what was to come. She had never doubted it, but it was still nice to hear. She

hadn't realized she needed to be reassured till he had said 'us' when talking about things they could all do together. She felt herself relax when he said it, and Ian noticed. They were sitting on the couch and he pulled her to him.

"Hey, remember, he's the one who asked about you. And even if he hadn't, there's no way you're not a part of this." He gave her a squeeze and a kiss on her temple. "And thanks for coming with me today."

"Thanks for letting me come with." Sarah lay against him and let out a sigh. "Did Cindy say anything about the fact that I was there? I saw she noticed me when we arrived."

"No, she just gave me a look and rolled her eyes. I wouldn't worry about it. You can take her." Ian gave her a playful squeeze.

"Eh, maybe. I don't know. I'd rather not have to find out."

"Me too. But I don't think we'll have to worry. I trust you."

"Thanks." She tipped her head up so she could look him in the eyes and kiss him. "Oh, hey, do you still want to go to my parent's 4th of July party? I know Bruce was talking about wanting to do something."

"Yeah, Bruce's plans fell through. So your parent's party it is. And honestly, I think I'd rather go to your parents. The kind of parties Bruce throws...they can get a little...crazy at times."

"You've mentioned that. I'll text my mom and let her know we'll be there."

"Who else is coming?"

"Lindsay, Fred, the kids, Iliza, Kathy, and a few of their friends. And knowing them, a neighbor or three might end up there too."

"Good thing they've got a big yard."

"The size of the yard is half the reason they got that house. And growing up we all thought half the reason our parents wanted a big yard was to give us kids something to do every weekend." Sarah had told Ian more than a few stories about times she and her sisters had had to help maintain the yard their parents loved so much.

"How many family events does Kathy usually come to?" Ian knew Sarah and Kathy were best friends, but was wondering how much Kathy was still a part of her family.

"Same as if we were married. Since her parents disowned her, my parents just kept her in the family. She comes to most Christmases and Thanksgivings."

“Nice.” The more Ian heard about her family, the more he wanted to be a part of her family.

Though Sarah had told her mom about Ian and Daniel, and she knew it had probably come up between her mom and Lindsay at least once, she was curious to see what would happen at this BBQ now that Ian was on such firmer footing and had gotten to meet Daniel. They hadn’t spent any time with Sarah’s parents since Ian found out about Daniel and she was curious who would bring it up first.

They arrived at Sarah’s parent’s house around 3 pm with the requested dessert and drinks; a tray of brownies and 6-pack beer Ian enjoyed. So far about half the expected people were there: Lindsay, Fred and three of the five kids, their old family friends Sam and MaryJoe, and their neighbor Brandon. Hugs and handshakes were given all around, and Ian was introduced to those he hadn’t met before.

It wasn’t long before Kathy arrived followed by three more of Susan and Lucas’ friends and lastly to arrive was Iliza. To Ian and Sarah’s surprise, Stacy was with her. Iliza looked nervous and it wasn’t like her to bring friends to these things, the few times she was actually in the same country as everyone else.

Susan was the first to greet them when they came in the side gate. “Iliza, you didn’t tell me you were bringing a friend. Hi, I’m Susan.”

“Mom, this is my girlfriend Stacy.”

Sarah was close enough to where they were that she could hear what was being said and saw her mom’s stunned surprise. To be fair she had about the same reaction. Loving and warm as her mom always was though she recovered quickly and greeted Stacy with a hug.

Ian had seen them come in but hadn’t heard what was said. Seeing everyone’s reaction he went over to where Sarah was. “What’s going on? Why is Stacy here?”

“They’re dating apparently.”

Ian’s eyes went wide. “Really? I mean I knew they hit it off when they met, but I didn’t know Stacy swung that way.”

“I didn’t know Iliza did either. But here they are. And they did really hit it off when they met.”

Ian just shrugged and they both walked over to greet the couple. Neither of them said anything about not knowing the sexual preferences of others but did comment about the fact that they were surprised that they were dating at all. Both Stacy and Iliza were not ones who typically got into long relationships; they dated, casually. Both women just looked at each other and shrugged.

It was Sarah's dad who was the first one to ask Ian about Daniel. "So how are you doing with becoming a father?"

They were standing aside after Ian had finished running around with the kids. "Huh? Oh. I mean I've only met him once, but he's such a sweet kid. I'm really looking forward to getting to see him more often."

"That's good. You nervous?"

"A little. But I've got Sarah for that." It then occurred to Ian who he was talking to. He didn't think her dad would have an issue with his daughter dating a new single parent, but...

"Yeah. Sarah's good at that." Lucas smiled at Ian, pretty sure what had just run through his mind. "And for what it's worth, from what I've seen with you and the kids, you'll do just fine. And if I know my daughter she'll be right there to help you anytime you need it, whether you ask for it or not."

"About that, are you..."

Lucas held up his hand stopping Ian's question. "The fact that you feel like you need to ask that tells me everything I need to know. And besides, it's not my approval you should be seeking, it's Kathy's. You know who she is to Sarah, like their past?"

"Yeah, she told me."

"Good, then you know her mother and I follow her lead, not the other way round."

Ian smiled at that, relaxed about that topic. The idea that Kathy would have a strong opinion about whoever Sarah dated was something he had already considered and accepted. Such was the way with a woman and her best friend; even without their particular history.

"So, tell me about your son?" Lucas could tell Ian was itching to talk about Daniel, like any new father would. Fred had been the same way.

Ian didn't hesitate and launched right into all about his first meeting and all the things he had planned and prepared; also asking Lucas' opinion since he had gone through this with Lindsay and Fred. Lucas was happy to share any tips he could and to reassure Ian had things well in hand.

A little later Lindsay, Sarah, and Iliza were all standing together chatting when the topic of dating came up.

"So, Iliza, Stacy, huh?" Sarah asked.

"Yeah. We hit it off that night, and then she drove me home, and we stayed up all night talking."

“Talking? Really?” Was Lindsay’s response.

“Yes, talking,” Iliza responded, scoffing at her sister’s implication. “I’ve never been with a woman before and I didn’t think things would go that way, but we ended up chatting over the phone the next day too, and went out that next night, and well, one thing led to another.”

“So how long have you two been officially dating?” Sarah asked.

“Three weeks.”

“Huh, never thought you’d date women,” Lindsay said.

“Neither did I. But, well, it just kind of happened.”

“Well, I for one am glad you let it happen instead of shying away from it.” Sarah put her stamp of approval on it. “You two are adorable together.”

Iliza actually blushed a little at that.

Lindsay did the only thing a big sister could, she pointed it out with glee. “Oh my god! She’s blushing! I didn’t think you did that, ever.”

“Oh shut up.” Iliza blushed a little further and smiled even wider, hiding her face behind her drink as she glanced over to where Stacy was.

“Well, now that we’ve all got significant others, we should all go on a triple date sometime,” Sarah suggested.

“Yeah, that’d be fun. You know there’s a trivia night at Ma and Pa’s next Saturday.” Lindsay suggested. Fred loved trivia nights.

“Yeah, that’d be fun. I’ll ask Stacy if she’s free.”

“I’ll check with Ian to see if he will be up for it after visiting with Daniel.”

“Won’t that be during the day?” Iliza asked.

“Yeah, but last time he wasn’t up for socializing afterward,” Sarah responded.

Lindsay nodded knowingly. “Yeah, I get that. Fred and I were the same way when we were first starting to visit with the kids. Well, let us know. We do need to let the pub know we’ll be participating ahead of time. There’s usually room, but I’ve seen some nights where it fills up.”

Kathy and Lucas worked the grill turning out burgers and hot dogs for everyone as dinner time rolled around. Grilling was one of the ways Lucas and Kathy had initially bonded when she was George and that bond had remained through the years. They were both damned good at it too.

As the sun set and darkness began to fall everyone went out front to set up for the fireworks. The kids were all given sparklers, and more than a few adults joined in the joy of waving sparklers and making shapes in the air.

Other neighbors came out to watch as Lucas set off fireworks. He started small with the little flowers that spun across the ground, working up to the big fountains of sparks, and ending with the ones that look like small mortars. Sarah, as always, was in charge of the hose. Another neighbor also brought out one and Charlie had fun joining her in dousing each finished fireworks to make sure they were safe.

On the drive home, Sarah asked Ian if he wanted to go to trivia night.

“Yeah, sounds like fun.”

“You sure? I wasn’t sure if you would have the energy for it after visiting with Daniel that afternoon.”

“There’s enough time between that and if I need to I can take a nap.”

“Good point. I’ll let Lindsay know.” Sarah took out her phone and texted Lindsay that they were in.

Chapter 15

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Sarah had walked into her kitchen Saturday morning to find Ian looking at his phone. He had just hung up from talking with Cindy.

“Cindy just canceled the meet-up today.”

“Why? What happened?”

“She just said something came up and they couldn’t make it.” Ian sounded both pissed and defeated.

“You don’t believe her?”

He just gave her that ‘oh please’ look.

“You still up for going out tonight?”

“Yeah, I need something to look forward to. And to take my mind off things.”

“Ok.” Sarah walked over to him to give him a hug and a kiss. “Do you want me to make some pancakes today?”

“Sure.” He hugged her back. “Do you want any help?”

“Sure.”

There wasn’t much for Ian to actually help with. Mostly he kept Sarah company as she cooked pancakes, putting chocolate chips in some, blueberry in others, and leaving a few plain. Ian put a few sausages in a pan to add a little protein to breakfast. When everything was done they set the table with butter, syrup, and jam.

After breakfast, Ian went back to his place to bury himself in the next project he had to work on. Sarah tried to keep her mind off worrying about Ian. He had been looking forward to seeing Daniel that afternoon so much. To have Cindy just cancel at the last minute, Sarah was pissed at her for that. She worried about Daniel too. Sarah wondered if she had told Daniel at the last minute or if she had told him ahead of time and just delayed in telling Ian because she could.

Or had something really come up? Ian thought she was just flexing her power, but something could have happened. Sarah thought it might actually be better if something had happened. Even though it might be emotionally easier on everyone, she hoped it hadn’t been anything serious.

Ian threw himself into his work for the rest of the morning. When Sarah came over at lunch to check on him his anger seemed to have ebbed away a bit, but she could tell he was still hurt. She left him to himself for the afternoon, giving him time to clear his mind.

That evening they met up with Fred, Lindsay, Stacy, and Iliza. Between the six of them, they had a wide range of knowledge and almost won at trivia. It was the section on the hidden meaning of flowers that tripped them all up. Nonetheless, a good time was had by all. By the end of the evening, Ian seemed much more relaxed and at ease.

That didn't seem to last once they got home though. It was late enough that by the time they got back, they went right to Ian's room to get ready for bed. They hadn't discussed whose house they would stay at that night but more and more they were staying at Ian's place instead of Sarah's.

Sarah noticed that Ian seemed to be withdrawing as they got ready for bed. She wanted to help him but she wasn't sure how, she wasn't sure what he needed. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, gripping it with his hands. Sarah got on the bed and came up behind him, wrapping her arms around him.

"Hey, how can I help?" She didn't need to ask what was wrong, that part was obvious.

"I wish you could. I've only met him once and I already miss him so much."

"Why should you only seeing him once make a difference in how much you miss him?"

"I don't know."

"He's your kid. It's ok to be sad, angry, disappointed when you do get to see him. Especially since you don't get to see him that much."

Ian reached up and put his hand on hers. "Yeah. I wish I didn't have to wait for her to say so to see him."

"You'll get there. You'll get to see him more and more as things settle out."

"Yeah, I know." He leaned his head against her arm and kissed her hand. "I just hate waiting."

"Patience is a virtue." She whispered it to him.

"True," he turned towards her and crawled onto the bed "but sin is so much more fun."

They repositioned their bodies so Ian was atop Sarah as they kissed. Before they could get going Sarah stopped them and reached over to the side table on her side of the bed and pulled something out of the drawer.

"I was saving this to celebrate with, but I think you could use some control over something right now." She held out a roll of bondage tape and safety scissors to him.

The only restraints they had used so far, beyond Ian's hands, had been the leather cuffs Ian already had. Bondage opened up a whole world of options. Since it only sticks to itself it was a much easier option to rope to bind the body in all kinds of ways.

Ian grinned a grin that lit Sarah on fire. He took the tape and scissors from her. First, he set them aside and got her to a kneeling position in front of him. He then pulled her nightshirt over her head. Tossing it aside he crawled around her on the bed. He pulled her arms behind her, putting her hands on her elbows. He used the tape to secure her forearms together so her arms were pinned against her back.

He took his time with her, running his hands across her body as he worked. He helped her lay on her back, putting a pillow under her shoulders to help support her so she wasn't lying just on her arms. He slid her panties off and tossed them aside. He then brought her legs up and bound her calves to her thighs.

She watched him as he took control over her, his eyes admiring every inch of his skin as he went. She could feel herself start to tingle and get wet as she felt her power disappear. When she noticed how hard his cock had gotten in his boxers she bit her lip and felt butterflies begin to flutter in her stomach knowing what she would soon get.

Her body's response to his every touch wasn't going unnoticed by him either. As he ran his hands along her body he made sure to not touch those spots that were becoming the most sensitive. He knew she was starting to ache for it, for him. When he had her legs bound just how he wanted he smiled at her. He bent between her knees, bent over where her thighs met and gently blew. He felt his cock twitch as he watched the shiver run through her body.

He moved to kneel next to her and ran his hand up the middle of her torso, passing between her breasts, carefully not touching them yet. When his hand reached her chin he bent over and gave her a tender kiss. The tenderness of the kiss lit up through her body. She could feel the power he was holding back in it.

He spoke softly to her, that same contained power beneath his voice, telling her how much fun he was going to have with her tonight. He helped her get to her knees. When she was seated comfortably he pulled his boxers off and stood in front of her presenting his hard dick to her lips.

She moaned as she saw it, letting her lips part as he brought it close enough for her to kiss the tip. She put out her tongue and licked as much of it as she could reach, making circles around it. He moved in and she thrust her head forward taking him fully into her mouth.

He put his hand on her head but let her work. She pulled back and tilted her head so she could kiss and lick her way down his shaft. He reveled in watching her work him with nothing but her mouth, his cock sliding over her face.

This beautiful woman was his, and she wanted him. But more than that she wanted to give up her control to him. She looked up at him as she took him into her mouth again. She

began to work him in and out, her head bobbing up and down against him. When she went balls deep he felt her swallow and the sensation made him close his eyes and moan. When she pulled back he pulled back and knelt in front of her. He took her face in his hands and kissed her deeply.

To her surprise, he didn't flip her to her stomach or lay her on her back. Instead, he lay on his back and helped her get atop him. She had to focus on balance with her legs tied as they were. He took his cock in hand to guide it to her slit so the tip pressed against her entrance. He wrapped his hands around her upper arms to steady her as she sank down onto him with a moan of sheer bliss.

She began to rock her hips back and forth against him. As she rocked he moved his hands to her breasts. He ran his thumb over her hardened nipples making her moan. He grasped her breasts tightly in each hand as she leaned forward into him.

Leaning into him she was able to begin to bounce a little up and down him, sliding herself along his shaft. He rolled and thrust his hips to meet hers, enjoying the visual of her bound body trying desperately to ride him.

She leaned into him harder as her hips rubbed frantically against him and her body began to shake as an orgasm pulsed through her. As her orgasm subsided he thrust into her causing her to gasp from the intensity, leaving her mentally off balance. He squeezed his hands around her breasts, digging his nails in further driving her brain out of order.

He then tipped her over to one side, and she fell, unable to catch herself she landed on her side. She tried to toss her head to get the hair out of her face but couldn't quite manage. He leaned over and brushed it off her face for her, giving her a soft kiss in the process. She looked up at him, dazed, but with a longing look in her eyes.

He helped reposition her, his little limp, bound doll, so she was bent over, her breasts resting on her knees. He got behind her and gazed at her ass, presented for him. He reached out one hand and began to trace it along her round ass. She let out a soft sound, enjoying the subtle sensation. He then raked his nails and slapped that same spot and she took a sharp breath and flinched slightly. So he did it on the other side.

She let out a slight whimper. He knew that whimper. She wanted more. She had disappeared into her body, into the sensations. He leaned over, spread her cheeks with his hands, and began to lick around her asshole. He took one hand off her ass so he could put two fingers in her pussy and not so slowly glide them in and out of her.

As his tongue worked her ass, his fingers worked her pussy, and his thumb found her clit. He rubbed it fast, speeding everything up until she began to shake. He held his hands firmly in her, his thumb pressed against her clit and his tongue trying to penetrate her puckered anus. He didn't let up until her body was shuttering from the relentless stimulation.

He sat back and gazed at her, his hands running along her outer pussy lips, soothing them. He listened to her soft sighs as she enjoyed his touch. He then leaned across the bed to grab the lube out of his side of the nightstand. He leaned over her, brushed the hair from her neck, and nibbled on her ear. She moaned in earnest and her hips began to rotate of their own volition.

“I’m gonna fuck your ass tonight.” He whispered to her, letting his hot breath flow against her cheek.

Her head was turned towards him and she looked at him. He couldn’t discern the look in her eyes, there were too many emotions flowing through them, and none of them were bad. He nibbled on her ear and down her neck, making her smile as her eyes rolled back and her lids fluttered closed again.

He ran one hand down her back, over her arms, and down over her ass. He poured a generous amount of lube over her ass and spread it around, using one finger, then two to open her up for him. He felt her tense slightly at first. His fingers were smaller than the toys they had used before, but his cock wasn’t. As he moved his fingers in her he felt her body respond and begin to relax.

When she was good and lubed up he took his rock-hard cock and placed the tip of it against her opening. He pushed with steady but gentle pressure. He saw her head bow forward, heard her gasp, and felt her muscles tense up. He soothed her by rubbing his hands along her hips and ass.

He felt her relax as he pressed deeper into her, stretching her out. He sank all the way in and held there for a moment, letting her get used to the sensation of being so full. He began to slowly pump her, savoring each thrust into her tight hole.

She disappeared into the sensation of everything as he sped up, pumping faster and faster, holding firmly onto her hips. He could feel the pressure build inside of him. He looked down at her bound arms, her bound legs, her head that she couldn’t quite hold up anymore. It excited him.

He sank his nails into her hips, grabbing them, and thrust for all he was worth until he felt his cock pulse and the ropes of cum shoot into her ass. As he pulled out he saw cum and lube trail it out of her ass. He rubbed his cock against her hole, spreading everything around. He felt sated and spent.

Slowly he rolled Sarah onto her side, bringing her knees down from her chest. He looked at her, brushing hair away from her face. She looked at him, still very much out of it, but her lips curled into a slight grin when her eyes met his. He leaned in and kissed her tenderly, holding her face. He held the kiss longer than he normally would have, bringing her back to herself a little further.

When the kiss broke he stroked her face for a few moments before reaching over and grabbing the scissors. He went about cutting her bindings off. First, he cut her right leg free, then her left, straightening it out and rubbing down where the tape had bit in slightly.

Then came her arms. He did the same thing, rubbing where the tape had been and gently straightening them out. He came back around in front of her and helped her roll slightly to bring the arm that was under her around to her front.

He pulled her to him, tugged a blanket up over them, and wrapped his arms around her. She curled up into him, her legs intertwined with his, her arms tucked against his chest, and her head lay on his bicep.

He just held her like that, letting her slowly drift back to reality. Being so restrained had been a completely new experience. She had been at his mercy before, but he had to help her move around this time. With her totally under his control, she felt as though he was taking care of her with every motion, and using her to his pleasure at the same time.

Letting go she had drifted in her body, reveling in the orgasms he gave her, sinking into the feel of being unable to move, surrendering to the sharp bites of his nails and the fullness of his cock in her ass. When he had said he was going to fuck her ass she hadn't really heard the words, more she understood what was going on. Giving him the power to satisfy himself any way he wanted had satisfied her, as it always did, but not being fully aware made it that much more blissful.

"I love you." Sarah sighed out.

"I love you too." Ian kissed the top of her head.

"And thank you."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you. I am so lucky to have you, more than you could possibly know." He squeezed her tightly.

She shifted so she was face-to-face with him and gave him a deeply passionate kiss. They lay there together, kissing each other, reveling in the sensations passing between them. Sarah could feel herself wanting to drift off to sleep as the kisses slowed down.

Ian nudged her. "Hey, we need to clean up before we fall asleep."

"Oh, yeah, practical shit."

They got up and Ian looked down at himself, "No shit this time."

Sarah looked blankly at him. He herded her towards the bathroom.

"I just had my dick in your ass sweetie. Shit happens."

“Oh, right.” She chuckled at herself.

They both stepped into the shower and Ian washed them both clean, helping support Sarah as her legs weren't quickly back to normal yet; and she was just that worn out. When they were toweled off they went back to bed and crawled under the sheets and covers naked. They lay facing each other, their arms reaching out to touch the other, their legs intertwined. They both fell asleep quickly and slept soundly.

Sarah awoke first, slowly drifting into consciousness. She looked over at Ian, who had rolled over at some point in the night. He was now facing away from her. She scooted over to him and draped an arm around his chest, pressing up against his back. She lay there, listening to him breathe, feeling his chest rise and fall.

She thought back to the night before. She had done something she would have never thought she would ever want to do. And yet, as they had tried more and more things, she had wanted to try more and more things. He wasn't pushing her boundaries so much as opening her mind to new possibilities.

And she was loving all of it because she loved him. Doing things with him, for him, was as satisfying as the multiple orgasms that he always made sure she had. Giving him the power to deny her seemed to make him want to give her that much more pleasure. She wondered, in the back of her mind, if she would have any real boundaries with him when it came right down to it. She thought there would be, but had a feeling they would be the same as his.

She felt his breathing change and he shifted so he could lay on his back. She moved to press up against him and leaned over to kiss him good morning.

“Good morning.” She lay her head on his chest and felt this squeeze as he wrapped his arms around her in a morning hug.

“Mmm, good morning. You sleep well?”

“Mmhmm.” Sarah responded with a big yawn.

They lay there for a little while longer before Ian's stomach growled and they decided it was time to get up for the day. They were sitting at the dining table eating their oatmeal when Ian's phone rang.

He looked at the screen then up at Sarah, “It's Cindy.”

Ian clicked on it to see what she wanted. Sarah, only able to hear Ian's half of the conversation, watched and listened for clues as to how bad this might be. Then she saw his face light up as he said “Yeah, of course I can take him for the afternoon.” Ian's tone became suspicious when he asked, “What changed from yesterday?”

Her answer made him roll his eyes in exasperation. "Ok. Do you need me to pick him up or drop him off?.....Ok, see you then."

"So, what's the plan?" Sarah was excited.

"She's going to drop Daniel off at 2 and pick him up when she's done with whatever she's doing."

"Did she give you a reason she needed him watched today after canceling on you yesterday?"

"She just said something else came up." Ian rolled his eyes again. "I mean I don't want her to think she can yank me around, but I also want her to know I'll always take Daniel."

"Do you want any help getting anything ready?"

"No, I've got it. We won't get to have a lazy day together though."

"No worries. I have chores I've been putting off, and I need to go grocery shopping."

"Ah, adulting, such fun."

"When you get to hang out with your son you hardly get to see it is."

"Fair point."

After breakfast Sarah did help Ian tidy up a little. Not having expected to have Daniel over his place did need a little extra polish. Sunday was the normal tidy-up day for Ian, but he appreciated Sarah's help in getting it kid-tidy. And didn't want to give Cindy any ammo against him when she saw his place.

After lunch Sarah headed home to get her own chores done. She didn't want to be around when Cindy showed up. She wanted to say hi to Daniel, but it wasn't her place to be there; not yet. As 2 pm rolled around she did keep glancing out the window to watch for them though.

She saw the car pull into Ian's driveway just before 2 pm. Ian was standing on the porch as Cindy helped Daniel out of the car. When Daniel saw Ian he got a big grin on his face and hurried up to him to give him a big hug. Sarah couldn't help but smile and feel a warm glow as she saw the joy on Ian's face as he came down the porch to greet his son.

Cindy handed over a big bag, said a few words, bent over to kiss her son goodbye, and then left. Ian held Daniel's hand as he led him into the house. Sarah watched them go in and then went back to her chores.

She was at the store when she got a text from Ian.

Ian

- Hey, have you gone to the store yet?

Sarah

- I'm there now. What do you need?

Ian

- Fruit snacks and apple sauce

- If you wouldn't mind

Sarah

- Sure. What kind?

Ian

- No clue. Daniels just said fruit snacks and apple sauce.

- I checked the bag and Cindy didn't pack any.

- We've got goldfish but that's it.

- I didn't think to get snacks.

Sarah

- It's ok, I'll pick some up.

Sarah picked out the kinds her family had always liked, the ones she had on hand for her niece and nephews. It was a good thing when she thought about it, she was out of the stock she usually kept on hand.

When she got home she texted Ian to ask him if he wanted her to drop them off on the porch. Ian told her to come over with them. When he had mentioned her to Daniel, Daniel had asked if she was going to come over and visit.

Sarah usually didn't knock when she came over, but this time she did. She opened the door and announced herself. Daniel got up from the couch and came over to say hello. Sarah showed him the snacks she had brought and his eyes lit up.

"Thank you Ms Sarah. Dad, can I have apple sauce?"

"Sure, let's take everything into the kitchen and we can get you all set up."

"Here, will you take these in for me?" Sarah held out the apple sauce to Daniel.

He eagerly took the box from her and almost ran to the kitchen, clutching it to his chest. Sarah stood up and greeted Ian.

"Thank you."

"Of course. I needed to restock anyway. Seems like I got the right brand too."

They followed Daniel into the kitchen and joined in the snacking. Ian had fruit snacks and Sarah had some applesauce. They spend the rest of the afternoon together working on a puzzle Ian had gotten for him. Sarah asked Daniel how he liked his room and he said he really liked it.

He seemed surprised and excited that he had his own room at his dad's house. He told Sarah about all of the toys he had, the books, but the rainbow-patterned stuffed penguin seemed to be his favorite.

When it got towards dinner time Sarah went back to her place, letting the boys have some more time to themselves. She had loved seeing them together and getting to spend some time with them together. She was glad that things seemed to be going so well and Daniel liked being at Ian's. Watching Ian interact with Daniel was also sexy as hell. She hoped he would want to get together that evening once Daniel went home.

Ian was supposed to text her when Daniel went home. When he still hadn't texted her by 6:30 pm she decided to text him to see if something had happened.

Sarah

- Hey, how did the pick-up go? Was Cindy ok?

Ian

- She hasn't come to get him yet.

Sarah

- I thought she said she would be back at 6.

Ian

- Yeah. I texted her and I'm waiting to hear back.

- We finished dinner and Daniel is watching a movie now.

Sarah

- Does he seem worried?

Ian

- No, he seems fine.

- I'll let you know when I hear back from her.

Sarah

- Ok.

- Don't stress too much, you've got this.

Ian

- Thanks

Ian had texted Cindy when she hadn't arrived by 6:15 pm and then again at 6:25 pm. He was about to call her after texting with Sarah when he heard his phone ping from an incoming text. It was from Cindy. Reading it made his blood boil. Not about what the outcome would be,

but how she had gone about it. When he was done talking to her he went over to sit next to Daniel on the couch, pausing the movie.

“Hey buddy, guess what?”

Daniel looked at him, a little worried showing on his face. “What?”

“Your mom says she wants you to spend the night here. Is that ok?”

Daniel just nodded. He looked like he already knew that. “Yeah. Mommy asked me yesterday if I wanted to and I told her I did. Can I? Is that ok?”

“Of course it is. You can stay any time you want. And in the morning we can make oatmeal and I’ll drop you off at daycare. How does that sound?” Ian pulled Daniel into a hug, comforting his worries.

“Can I have jam in mine?”

“Is raspberry ok?”

“Yeah.”

“Ok, oatmeal with raspberry jam it is.”

He turned the movie back on and remained on the couch with Daniel. He sent a text to Sarah telling her that Daniel was staying the night and he would call her after he put Daniel to bed. When the movie ended it was slightly later than Daniel’s usual bedtime, but Ian had always hated when his mom had made him turn off the movie just 15 minutes before the end because it was bedtime. He saw no harm in being a little late to bed to see the end of the story.

When he had tucked Daniel in and read him one of the short books he went back out into the living room and called Sarah.

“Hey babe, how are you holding up? How’s Daniel holding up with the change in plans?” Sarah was astounded at what had happened.

“Oh, he already knew. Apparently Cindy asked him yesterday if he wanted to stay over tonight.”

“Wait, what?”

“Yeah.”

“Is she trying to test you or something? See if you really are ready.”

“I don’t know, maybe. I asked what came up yesterday and she said her mom came into town. So that might at least might be true. Her mom did have a habit of just coming by and expecting everyone to drop everything and change their plans for her.”

“Sounds like she’s picked up that habit a little too.” Sarah was astounded Cindy would leave her child somewhere and not tell the person watching them that they would be staying the night. “But to not tell you till you asked why she hadn’t come get him....what the fuck? I’m glad she at least let Daniel know so he wasn’t scared his mom wasn’t coming for him.”

“Yeah. When I told him he would be staying he seemed more scared that I wouldn’t want him to stay than anything else.”

“Good thing you’ve got everything all prepared then.”

“Yeah. I’m going to drop him off at daycare in the morning on my way to work. It’s in the opposite direction, but whatever. It’s close to where they live.” Ian ran a hand over his face and let out a sigh. “I mean I’ll always take him at the last minute if she needs, but she should at least tell me as soon as she knows.”

“Yeah. You’ll need to set up some boundaries there.”

“Hopefully things will get better when the visitation and custody are finalized.”

“Hopefully. Given that he’ll still live with her most of the time she’ll still be able to pull this stuff to a certain degree, but hopefully, she won’t try it as things progress. How are you holding up?”

“Ok. Stressed, but ok.”

“Really?” She didn’t think he was lying but wanted to make sure there wasn’t anything else underneath.

“Yeah, really. We’re gonna have oatmeal with jam for breakfast.” It cheered Ian up to think of how Daniel had asked for something specific that he wanted.

It cheered Sarah up too. “Good.”

They stayed on the phone for a while, just talking. It gave each of them time to let the stress dissipate before they had to try and sleep. Eventually, each did feel like they could fall asleep without too much tossing and turning.

As Sarah got in bed she went over things in her head. The fact that any parent would leave their child with someone without telling that person exactly what the plan was astounded her. Had Cindy been testing Ian? Seeing if he would demand she come pick up Daniel and then use that to keep him from being in his life as much?

She knew Ian wouldn’t let that happen. He loved Daniel too much to let him be a pawn in any game. Ian would do everything in his power to make sure whatever agreement was reached would be honored. Sarah hated that she had to wait on the sidelines, but she knew it had to be that way. Nothing could be allowed to interfere with Ian’s ability to be the kind of father he wanted to be.

Chapter 16

The next evening after dinner Ian had it out with Cindy over the phone. He made it abundantly clear that she was to make all plans crystal clear to him as soon as they were made or changed. But also that she couldn't change things at the last minute all the time. He understood that things came up, but when arrangements were made he expected her to do everything to keep them.

When he had compared Cindy to her mother she got all huffy, to which he responded 'Oh, you mean like Sunday?' Realizing he wasn't going to budge she let it go. She never apologized, but he hadn't expected her to. He didn't expect her to make any promises either, and to no one's surprise she made none; she simply made agreements.

Sarah had been sitting next to Ian through the whole conversation. He had put the phone on speaker so she could hear everything, but she made sure to not make a sound the entire time. Before they hung up Ian confirmed with her that they would be meeting up on the Saturday after next. Cindy confirmed and they hung up.

"Well," Sarah started. "That seems like it went about as well as could be expected."

"Yep. Now we'll just have to wait and see." Ian ran his hands over his face as he leaned back into the couch.

Sarah reached over and stroked his arm. He lay his hand over hers and gave it a squeeze. As he had said, now they just had to wait. Waiting is never fun. Whether you are excited and want something to come sooner or you would rather something never come at all, not having any power to make the thing happen is always frustrating.

Sarah thought Ian was handling it well overall. He kept his mind focused on what was in front of him, what he could control. Sometimes that was cooking dinner, sometimes that was Sarah taped-up and ready for his use.

They both loved the bondage tape but agreed that more permanent re-usable restraints would also be good to have around. If nothing else they were faster to put on; you weren't starting from scratch each time after all. Ian already had a spread-eagle restraint system that you put under the mattress and left there. They decided setting that up at Sarah's palace was the better option.

Sarah's birthday party was that weekend. At her party with all her friends and family, he gave her a new pair of fluffy slippers that she could keep at his place since she kept complaining about forgetting them at her place. He then surprised her on Monday evening, her actual birthday, after taking her out to dinner with a new restraint. It was a wide leather belt that had cuffs attached by short chains that were attached just above the elbow. They broke them in with enthusiasm.

When the next visit with Danial arrived Ian was nervous. Sarah could tell he was worried Cindy would call again and say that 'something had come up'. They were meeting up at a playground on a Saturday afternoon. Ian had put the car seat in his car just in case Cindy decided to change the plans at the last minute.

Sarah didn't go with him this time. Knowing she wouldn't be able to sit at home and wait patiently she had called up a few friends for a girls' lunch. It was herself, Kathy, and Dawn. They met up at a nice diner for a late lunch and then spent an hour or two browsing the bookshop down the street.

Despite having gone out as a distraction she kept looking at her phone to make sure she hadn't missed a text or call from Ian. She hadn't realized she was doing it that much until Dawn pointed it out when they were in the bookstore.

"Why do you keep checking your phone? I saw you check the volume on your ringer when we sat down for lunch."

Sarah put her phone back in her purse. "Yeah, I know. It's just, after what she did last time."

"Hey, he'll be ok." Kathy came over and put her arm around Sarah. "We're in a bookstore. You'll hear it if he calls or texts."

"True" Hearing that fact helped her settle.

"Ok, so chill out a little."

Sarah didn't totally relax, but she didn't feel the need to keep checking her phone. Kathy had been right. There was no way she wouldn't hear a call come in. And she knew Ian, there was no way he wouldn't call to let her know if something happened. This was definitely a 'no news is good news' kind of situation.

Knowing Ian would probably be either still too hyped up or too tired from spending the afternoon with Daniel, Sarah looked through her fridge to figure out what to make for dinner. She settled on clearing out the leftovers. She had a few half servings of stuff and combined it was enough for two of them. She wasn't sure how she had ended up with so many little portions of meals at the same time, but it made dinner easy.

Ian texted her around 4:30 pm and asked her if she had dinner plans. She told him it was fridge clear-out night and to come over whenever he was hungry. Around 5 pm he came in the front door, a big grin still on his face. When she went over to hug him, he swept her into his arms, almost literally.

"I take it you had a good afternoon." She was giggling as she tried to catch her balance.

“It was wonderful. Cindy was already there when I arrived, and she left Daniel with me so she could go do something, and then came back when she said she would.”

Sarah was delighted at the news. “So you got to spend time alone with Daniel then.”

“Yeah. I’ll admit, it was a little nerve-wracking when she said she’d be back to pick him up, but we had such a good time.”

Neither of them was hungry yet so they sat on the couch and Ian told Sarah every detail of his afternoon. He had only gotten about halfway through when Sarah got hungry enough to pause to dish up their plates for dinner. Ian didn’t actually pause. He continued his re-telling of the afternoon as they dished up and ate their food. When was finally done he asked Sarah how her afternoon with her friends had gone. Her re-telling of her afternoon took much less time. Ian’s chipper mood was contagious though and as she told him about lunch and browsing of the book store it all sounded more fun than it had seemed at the time.

Over the next few weeks Ian continued to have every other Saturday with Daniel. After their third visit to a park, Cindy started to bring Daniel over to stay at Ian’s for the afternoon, or even the whole day. One Saturday Sarah was watching Suzie and they all hung out together in her backyard.

Daniel and Suzie hit it off and had a great time playing and painting with their hands and feet. Since it was summer Sarah had gotten some big paper and finger painting paint and let the kids go at it. When they were all done she just turned the hose on and they seemed to have just as much fun getting the paint off as they did getting it all over themselves.

Daniel hadn’t stayed over again, Cindy picking him up each time. It did seem like it had been a test to see what Ian would do. Ian wasn’t sure if she was pleased or not that he had been so ready and had stepped up, but she hadn’t been putting up much of a fight about him seeking joint custody. She tried to assert her power where she could, and there were times when she genuinely did have the power.

Overall Ian felt like he was going to be able to be the kind of involved father he wanted to be. He did think it helped that he wasn’t trying to have Ian stay over all the time right away. Daniel seemed to like the idea of staying with his dad though. He wasn’t much of a talker, but what little he did say was said with enthusiasm.

Most of the time Sarah didn’t join them. She wanted to let them have their time to really bond and to not interject herself into Daniel’s life as more than his dad’s girlfriend who lived next door. They tried to keep things casual around Daniel so he wouldn’t feel like she was supposed to be his parent too.

Things seemed to be going well. The few times she had been around when Cindy dropped Daniel off or picked him up she mostly glared at Sarah. She didn’t seem to distrust her, but she didn’t like her either. Sarah was just glad she was keeping things civil.

Sarah's earlier fear about what would happen to her relationship with Ian was quickly drifting away. While they did spend less time overall together, when they did it was almost exactly the same. It was comfortable, familiar, and easy to be together. Sarah, at least, did look forward more to the weekends they had to themselves a little more now though.

It was early in September and Sarah had been looking forward to that weekend with Ian. The week overall hadn't been horrible, but there had been enough little things that by the time Friday evening came around Sarah was ready to be done. She had only done a half day in the office Thursday and worked from home as normal that Friday, much to the delight of her friend's 1-year-old mutt Trix. She was watching him for a few days while her friend had to go out of town.

She wasn't usually the one asked to take Trix, but when the usual dog sitter couldn't Sarah was happy to help. Mostly Trix was content to lay in the same room with her and chew on a toy. Despite his age, Trix was pretty chill. They had no idea what breed he was and her friend didn't really care. They thought there might be some boxer or pit bull in there given his size, broad chest and head, and sweet nature, but he wasn't a zoom machine, so there was some other breed working its magic.

When 5 pm rolled around Sarah couldn't log out fast enough. Trix was just as happy that she was done as now it was time to go play with the ball in the yard; not for too long as they both wanted dinner. Earlier Sarah had pulled out two steaks, seasoned them, and left them to rest on the counter. Now she got out the broccoli, chopped it up to steam it, and put a pot of water on for the angel hair pasta that would get a shiitake mushroom dressing.

Since everything took about the same amount of time to cook so she got things going. She decided to try out a new silicone drip mat she had gotten and put the steaks on it. She put the meat thermometer in and set the broiler to high. Despite the fact that she was a very good cook, the perfect steak eluded her if she didn't use her probe thermometer.

She put the steaks in the oven, the pasta in the water, the broccoli in the seamer, and the vent hood switched on. Then she went to set the table. She went over, stirred the pasta, got out the dressing and the romano cheese, and put the cast iron on the stove to heat. She did a reverse sear technique with steaks. Everyone thought she was crazy, but it had never let her down.

She stepped out of the kitchen for a minute and when she came back she could smell more smoke than she would have expected. She reached up, turned the vent hood too high, and opened the oven door. She would be forever grateful that Trix was in the other room sniffing around and not trying to get to the good-smelling food.

Too much smoke came out and she saw flames. She couldn't tell what exactly was on fire, but something that wasn't supposed to be was. Her mind immediately went into emergency mode - grab the baking soda, and put out the flames.

She kept a huge tub in easy reach for just this kind of thing. She flung handfuls over the flames. She tried to avoid getting the steaks, but there was no use. As the flames died down the smoke increased and set the smoke detectors off.

Trix had already sensed something was wrong from the smell but when the shrill piercing hit his ears he panicked, peed where he stood, and ran around whimpering, before making his escape into the backyard - through the closed screen door.

When the flames had died away Sarah tried to look to see what the damage was but the timers for the broccoli and pasta were going off. All she could think to do was turn everything off. She took the lid off the broccoli pot. The broccoli would just get cold, it wouldn't overcook. She glanced over to the sink, where she had already put the calendar, so she drained the pasta.

Then the fact that the smoke detector was still going off hit her and she could hear Trix out in the yard panting and whining. She noticed the hole in the screen door but all that really registered was that the door was already open, so she went to open the front door and windows.

She had a broom in hand, trying to punch the button on the smoke alarm when Ian came running in.

"Sarah, are you ok?"

"I can't get this stupid button." She was at her wit's end and only noticed that someone had spoken to her, not who it was or what was asked.

Seeing she wasn't hurt and there were no actual flames, Ian went over to where she kept her step stool and brought it over. He climbed up on it and took the smoke detector off the ceiling so they could take the batteries out of it for the time being. He then repeated the process with the one in the living room. Thankfully Sarah had all the other doors in her house shut so no others went off.

Sarah's eyes were watering from the smoke and she still hadn't come down from the adrenaline high so all she could do was look over at Ian and then look over at the kitchen. "I need a drink. Fuck."

Ian went over to her "Hey you ok? What happened?"

She was starting to come back to reality. "Shit, Trix." She turned and saw her screen door. "Fuck"

She put it aside, and pulled the screen door open to go comfort the poor dog. He wasn't pacing as much, but he was still whimpering a little. She went over to him and tried to comfort him the best she could. It didn't seem to do much, so she let him be, figuring he'd calm down in his own time.

When she came back inside she shut the screen door out of habit, saw it, and groned throwing her hands up in the air. She looked at Ian, beginning to collapse from everything that had happened all week now culminating in this. "I think dinner is ruined."

Ian had pulled the tray with the steaks out of the oven to look it over. She came over and stood next to him, leaning her head against his shoulder as they surveyed the damage. Everything was covered in baking soda and the silicone mat had several melted and burnt holes in it. She wasn't sure if she wanted to laugh at the hilarity of the image or scream at her own stupidity.

Ian looked down at her. "I think we can just rinse off the steaks and give them a quick sear."

Sarah didn't respond. She just nodded and went over to get the pasta out of the sink. She tested it to see if it too was salvageable. "Well, the pasta turned out perfect."

She put it in the serving bowl and added the dressing and cheese. She would just need to heat it in the microwave before they ate. Same with the broccoli. Ian worked his magic on the steaks, heating the cast iron back up to full and giving them a good finish on both sides.

While he finished up the food she cleaned up where Trix had peed. Trix eventually wanted to come back in, but he didn't come through the hole. Instead, he scratched at the entry mat asking to be let in. That helped lighten Sarah's mood, seeing him be so good about asking to come in. She gave him an extra treat.

When they finally sat down for dinner Sarah had pulled a hard cider out, added a shot of vodka, and set a beer at Ian's place. All she had was his NA beers. She offered to mix him something stronger, but he declined. She downed half her drink before cutting into her food. Ian had indeed saved the steak. It was closer to medium than either of them liked, but it was still delicious.

After a few bits she looked over to him and, with a 'fuck the world' grin on her face, she asked, "So how was your day?"

He almost didn't want to answer. "Well, it was great actually. I had the meeting with my lawyer and we're almost done and things are going smoothly. Other than this," he pointed to the kitchen, "how was your day?"

Through a mouth full of food she pointed to the kitchen as well, "about like that. Well, maybe not the whole day, but it certainly is a fitting end to my week." She was pissed, exasperated, and wrung out. She was so glad he was there with her, and that things were going well for him. "I'm really glad things went well for you though. Really."

He reached over and took her hand, "and thank you for making dinner." He motioned to her glass, "Do you want another?"

“No, I’m ok.” She was actually. The one very stiff drink had hit the spot. “I know we were going to maybe do something tonight...”

Ian held up his hand, “Let’s just stay in tonight.”

“Thanks.”

They ate in peace and Ian helped her clean up the kitchen. She took a picture of the ruined matt as a record of the ridiculous events. Later that night she posted it on her social media page with the heading of ‘note to self, do not put silicone mats under the broiler’.

After dinner, they went into the living room and tried to relax with a TV show but Ian could tell Sarah was still a bit tense so he positioned her in front of him and began to massage her shoulders and back. At first he just worked her muscles and she began to sink into his touch. As he felt her relax he let his hands wander beyond where it was strictly necessary to test the waters, as it were.

She responded positively, tilting her head back and to the side, exposing her neck for him in that way he loved. He kept his pace slow and langued, working his hands over all of her shoulders and upper back, slipping the straps of her tank top and bra down, leaning forward to kiss her neck as his hands slipped down the front of her shirt.

He didn’t play with her nipples or grab her breasts. He rubbed them in the same motions had been working her shoulder with. He could feel her nipples grow hard under his touch and she arched into him slightly. He pulled his hands back up and then ran them down her back, dragging her shirt down with him. Her arms were almost pinned to her side as he had left her bra where it was, the straps around her biceps, the tank straps now at her elbows. He leaned over her again and kissed her on the lips, his hands holding her on either side of her ribs.

She had her eyes closed and relished in his touch. When he kissed her lips she responded with all the need that had been building in her. It wasn’t that they hadn’t had sex all week, but the stress of everything that had happened hadn’t found a release yet. She wanted this to be it, needed this to be it. She tried to put all her need and desire for the kind of intensity she desperately needed into that kiss.

He understood. He had understood since she had poured that extra shot into her hard cider before dinner. He also knew that wasn’t the time to dive head first in though. He had needed to relax her into it so she could really sink in and feel everything she needed to feel. For his part the joy of what was happening for him made him want to celebrate. He felt so lucky that his celebration and her relaxation could be accomplished together.

He tightened his grip, letting her know he understood. He firmly moved his hands up to the top of her bra and pulled it down, settling it under her breasts. He had her exposed and slightly restrained. Her breath quickened.

He pulled her closer against him and she could feel the bulge in his pants wanting to be freed. She couldn't reach though, so she just rotated her ass into him just a little; she didn't want to move too much from where he had placed her after all.

He used his right hand to reach across her body and cup her left breast as his left hand unbuttoned her jeans and went exploring. As his hand slid into her pants and beneath her lace panties he found her already wonderfully wet. He wanted her sloppy wet though. Her jeans were too snug for him to truly play with her, but he did what he could.

He slid his middle finger between her slit and rubbed, giving little flicking motions as he went. He worked his ring finger next to his middle and used his pinky and index to keep pressure on the outer lips while his fingers gilded and flicked her up and down.

She began to move and tried to arch her back but his arm across her chest prevented her from moving much. He gave a small groan of satisfaction as he increased his hold on her letting her know she wasn't going anywhere. He wasn't trying to make her climax, he just wanted her ready to beg for it.

He gave just enough play so she could twist around and meet his lips. Their tongues danced, tasting the remains of dinner on each other, tasting the need they each had. They devoured each other with their kisses, trying to satisfy with their lips what their bodies were demanding.

Slowly, Ian pulled his fingers from between her legs, ended the kissing, and got Sarah to her feet. He left her as she was, arms snuggled to her sides, breasts hanging out, pants open at the waist, and walked her to her bedroom.

Once there he closed the door and took her clothing the rest of the way off. Before he stripped himself he went over to her dresser and got out what was fast becoming one of their favorite items. It was the restraint belt and cuffs he had given her for her birthday. It gave her enough play with her arms to do things, gave him something to grab on to when needed, and restricted her enough that she was at his mercy without being totally helpless.

He helped her onto the bed and laid her on her back, her head facing him at the foot of the bed. He then stripped. She grinned when she saw his hard dick come out. He brought it to her lips and she held them together with just enough pressure so he could press his way in. She lay her tongue along his length and closed her eyes, feeling his cock sink into her throat. They had been working on getting her to deepthroat and she was getting good at it. And loving it. Especially since the best position to do it meant he had easy access to her breasts.

He leaned over slightly to pinch her nipples and she used what little play she had to suck him, moving her tongue from side to side along his shaft. One of her hands was flung out to the side, gripping the bedspread. The other was reaching between her legs to start rubbing herself. When he saw this he decided to go for it, balls deep.

He thrust in, held for a moment, then pulled back just enough to make her think he was pulling out before going all the way down again. This time he gripped her head with one hand and held her there. She gagged and spluttered a few times before he pulled out to look down at her. She had a wicked grin on her saliva-streaked face.

He grinned back at her and decided she needed a good face fucking before the main event. As he worked her throat he let her keep playing with herself. When her body tensed and she let out a small moan from an orgasm he gave one last thrust and pulled out.

He told her to get up and turn around. She wobbled slightly as she did this, her arms strapped to her sides. When she got into position, ass in the air, he buried his face between her cheeks. He licked greedily at the juices that had dripped down onto her puckered little asshole. As his tongue worked he took two fingers and thrust them into her.

He didn't hang out there for very long though. He got on his knees behind her and took his dick in his hand to guide it to her wet slit. When he had the tip pressed to her entrance he grabbed the belt at her waist with both hands and thrust forward. He didn't take his time nor was he subtle about it. He pounded into her.

With her hands bound her face was buried in the pillows muffling her cries of pleasure. Sometimes he would release her arms after he had his initial thrusts, but this time he kept her as she was and kept pounding.

She was loving every glorious second of it. It was all she could do to keep her knees under her. He was taking her, hard. Occasionally she would turn her head to the other side, but that was all she did. Her arms were useless. She had one of them on her ass and the other gripping the bedspread beside her knee.

She could feel herself building to a climax and when she crested her knees gave out and he came down on top of her, remaining buried in her, still thrusting hard. As her body began to still he pulled out and repositioned her onto her back.

She looked up at him, grinning, seeing her pleasure echoing in his face. He leaned over and kissed her. She brushed her fingers along his chin, returning his embrace. She wrapped her legs around his hips and he sank into her once again, slowly this time.

They kissed as he made steady even thrusts in and out of her, her hips matching his. Slowly he began to pick up the pace before he sat back, pulled her ankles over his shoulders, and began to pound once more.

Her hands were at her sides and he reached down with one of his to take it, using the other to keep her legs in place. They held on as long as they could like that. As he felt himself begin to crest he splayed her legs open again, braced himself on his hands to either side of her, leaned over, and took his release.

She had already had hers and she relaxed in her afterglow watching him, bent over her as he was, reach his own climax. As his thrusts slowed and his grunts quieted he lowered himself to rest on his forearms and looked at her. They didn't say anything, they just looked at each other for a moment, enjoying the sensation of their spent naked bodies against one another.

He leaned over and kissed her softly, running his hands along her face, down the side of her body, admiring what was his. She lay there, her hands resting on his abdomen, feeling at peace. She had gotten her release.

He slid off to one side of her, unbuckled the restraints, and tossed them aside. He then pulled her to him, face to face, and kissed her. Despite the fact that she had full use of her arms again she kept them tucked up against his body, allowing him to wrap his arms completely around her. She loved being held by him.

As they came down from the high of it all their bodies relaxed and they shifted slightly further apart. They repositioned to a more comfortable lounging configuration, still facing each other.

"Feel better?" Ian asked.

"Much," Sarah replied with a very satisfied sigh.

They lay there for a few moments longer before they heard a scratching at the door. Trix wanted in. He didn't know why the humans had shut him out.

"I guess we better get up and give him some attention." Sarah laughed.

"I guess so. He was very good about not trying to interrupt us after all."

Chapter 17

Daniel's birthday was coming up. Ian was both excited and nervous about it. Daniel's birthday, September 20th, was a Friday so the party was that Saturday. Being that he was turning four it made sense that the party was at his house, Cindy's house, which made Ian more nervous than if it had been at a park or a family fun center. There was no way he was going to miss it though.

Sarah wouldn't be going with him. He felt bad that she couldn't go but they agreed it wasn't appropriate for her to attend, even if it had been in a public place. Even though Ian had never given any indication that Sarah would be attending, or that he wanted her to, Cindy had still worded the invite to make it extremely clear that Sarah wasn't invited. It made Ian's blood boil.

Though it made her blood boil too Sarah told Ian to let it go. It wasn't worth getting into it with Cindy over her rudeness. Really Sarah didn't care what Cindy thought of her. She seemed to trust her enough with her son and really that was all that mattered. Sarah did sign Daniel's birthday card though, and helped Ian pick out his present.

Ian had stayed over at Sarah's house that Friday night. It seemed easier somehow for him to leave her place to go get ready than for her to have to leave his place. Somehow that felt like he would be kicking her out, like he was leaving her behind instead of going without her.

The party was in the afternoon so they spent their morning together; a movie playing in the background and a puzzle between them on Sarah's dining room table. It was one Sarah had had for years and she had decided the other day to pull it out of the closet. Neither of them were big puzzle people, but it was a nice quiet activity to do together.

When Ian left Sarah switched off the TV and got out her book. She had only intended to read it for a little bit before doing some things around the house, but she ended up getting lost in it. She was a little over halfway through the second book of a trilogy a work friend had suggested to her. While it wasn't her usual type of book, she was enjoying it.

She didn't realize how much time had passed until finished the book and set it down next to her. She was just sitting there letting it all sink in. There had been themes of loss and rebirth that had hit home for her emotionally. Not in a bad way, but she still had to sit with them for a moment.

When Ian walked in he saw her sitting there, looking lost in thought. She didn't seem to be in distress but he could tell a lot was going on in her mind. When he shut the door she looked up at him and smiled. They greeted each other as he walked over to join her on the couch, spotting the book sitting next to her.

"Hey, you finished your book. How was it?" He wanted to give her the opportunity to express whatever was going on in her head before he told her about how the party had gone.

“It was really good.” She took a deep breath before she continued. “It was just a lot. Good a lot, but a lot. Makes me want to immediately pick up the third one, but also makes me want to take a short break first.”

“Anything you want to talk about?”

She was grateful that he had given her that moment to come out of her head. “No, I’m ok. How was the party? Did Daniel have a good time?”

“It was really good and Daniel had a great time. And thankfully Cindy was too busy playing hostess to give me a hard time about anything.”

“Well, that’s good.” She could see the exhausted joy on Ian’s face. “What all did you guys do? Were there other parents there?”

“There were a few, moms mostly but there was one other dad. I got to chat with a few of them.”

“And how’d that go?”

“It was good for the most part. They seemed to know who I was, which made things a little easier. However one of them was surprised to find out that Cindy and I weren’t trying to get back together. It didn’t seem like she had gotten the idea from Cindy, I think she just assumed we would. It was nice to meet some of Daniel’s friends and a few of the parents.”

“And to introduce yourself as his dad felt good too I bet.”

Ian grinned, looking down at his hands. “Yeah, I liked that.”

Was Ian blushing slightly? Sarah leaned in and kissed him. “I’m proud of you.”

“For what?”

“For all of it. For stepping up like you have. For putting all your discomfort aside and doing what you feel is best for Daniel.”

“Thanks.” He said, looking her in the eyes. Hearing she was proud of him for what he considered a basic thing meant more to him than he had thought it would.

“So, what games did the kids play?”

“Oh, the usual. Pin the tail on the donkey, musical chairs, stuff like that. He was happy you signed his card too. He asked why you hadn’t come so I told him you were busy.”

“Is he still coming over next weekend?”

“Yep. And Cindy said she might need me to take him overnight. So that’ll be fun.”

“When will she let you know?”

“She just said later this week. I’m just trying not to get my hopes up too much.”

Cindy ended up texting Ian the next day to say she would need him to take Daniel overnight on Saturday. She didn’t say why and Ian didn’t ask. It wasn’t any of his business and he really didn’t care. He was just glad to have the extra time with his son.

Since it was a normal visit weekend Sarah had known she would have to day to herself. But when Ian said Danile would be staying over she felt a little disappointed, and then felt guilty about being disappointed. Getting to watch Ian become a father had been so wonderful, and she knew she had to step back to let that happen. But she was starting to feel a little left out at the same time.

She and Ian had spent so much time together since they had started dating that it was odd to now have to step aside. She didn’t want to take away any of the time Ian had with Daniel, she wanted to join them. She didn’t want to be Danie’s stepmom, per se, but she wanted to be able to hang out with them. It was one of those things that she knew would come with time, and once again she was reminded that waiting sucked.

Ian felt similarly. He didn’t feel like he was having to choose between the two of them, but he didn’t like that he couldn’t spend time with Sarah and Daniel together. Well, he could, but he and Sarah had decided it was best if she wasn’t around too much at first. So far that seemed to be working well.

Daniel liked Sarah, and every time they saw each other things seemed so easy. Sarah was every bit the cool aunt to Daniel that she was with her niece and nephews. The idea of having children with her someday passed through his mind from time to time when he watched them together. She would make such a good mom. He let those thoughts happen but didn’t let them linger.

The old fear of how things could change, how badly good things could go wrong was still there, lurking in the back of his mind. He had been working on it with his therapist, and it was getting better, but it was still there. He hoped someday it would go away completely, that he could look at Sarah and just see a happy future.

She had stood by him through all of this, encouraged him, and he had seen how tough it had been for her sometimes. He had done his best to reassure her that he wouldn’t let their relationship whither, and he felt like he was doing well at that. But sometimes he worried about it. It seemed to be a recurring theme for them. They knew what they wanted, but also knew rushing right into it was not the right thing to do. To make what they wanted last it had to be done right; had to be done slowly.

That Saturday he invited Sarah to go out to lunch with them. Sarah brightened when Ian asked and Daniel seemed to light up when Ian told him Ms Sarah was going to come with them. They had a wonderful time out at a pizza place that had a play place attached. It was one of

Danile's favorite places. Sarah and Ian couldn't disagree; it was a great place to go. There was a big play structure as well as some arcade games and a small mini golf course. And the pizza was also really good. When they got home Sarah said goodbye and went home, leaving the boys to the rest of their time together.

Much as she would have loved to stay over with them, joining them for lunch had given her the included feeling she had needed. The only downside was that every time she watched Ian's joy and love as he played with Daniel her libido seemed to sit up and take notice; aggressively. If she could have jumped him that night it wouldn't have been an issue, but she couldn't. She had to wait or take matters into her own hands. Which helped, but it just wasn't the same.

Kathy texted her shortly after they had gotten home asking if she wanted to go out that night just 'cuse. Sarah replied asking when and where. Kathy had offered to pick her up but Sarah declined. It was out of the way for Kathy and she didn't usually drink that much. She would be fine to drive.

It was a Karaoke night at Ma & Pa's, a dive bar they loved. A few other friends joined them and it hadn't taken long before Sarah realized she wasn't going to be driving home that night. Kathy said she would drive her home, but she would have to find her own way back the next day to get her car.

She was, overall, in a good mood, so the drinking wasn't to drown any sorrows. But once that first drink hit her lips and that fuzzy feeling hit her brain, she decided she wanted more fuzz and wanted it to last all night. It was a good night all around. She updated her friends on what had been going on with Ian and they all gave her a hard time when she told them how damned sexy he was as a dad. She sent Ian a few texts to tell him that as well, and was pretty sure they were ledgable.

It was last call when Kathy managed to get Sarah to the car and home into bed. Sarah said she was fine to walk, mostly, but did decide to take Kathy up on her offer to help her out a little. The next morning she didn't regret her choices from the night before, but she did feel them.

She wasn't sure how late it was and was surprised it was almost 11 when she checked her phone. She also saw a text from Ian.

Ian

- *Sounds like you had a good night last night.*
- *Text me when you're up and I'll bring you some breakfast.*

Sarah

- *Ooo, sexy man brings food too?*
- *Yumm.*

She lay in bed and read over the texts she had sent last night. For drunk texts, they really weren't too bad, but they definitely read like drunk texts. She was just coming out of the bathroom when she heard him coming in the front door.

"Hey sleepy. I bring bacon, eggs, and toast." He looked up at her as she walked into the dining room. "Wow, you look like you slept hard."

Sarah gave him a 'hardy-har-har' sneer as she plopped herself down in a dining chair and grabbed a piece of bacon. Ian went into the kitchen to cook up the eggs and put the toast in her toaster. When he placed the plate of food in front of her she picked up a fork and started to eat slowly. She didn't feel nauseous but she didn't exactly want to dive into her food either.

"So, how did things go?"

"You saw the texts."

"I did." Ian nodded, then grinned at Sarah. "And the video."

Sarah stopped eating. "What video?"

Ian pulled out his phone and opened the video Kathy had texted him the previous night. She had titled it 'Sarah won battle of the power ballads' and it was of Sarah singing 'Total Eclipse of the Heart'.

"I'm gonna kill her." Sarah tried to reach for Ian's phone but he moved it out of her reach. "You're gonna delete that."

"No way. I love it. You're good. I see why you won." Ian did stop the video and put his phone away though.

"Fuck."

"What did everyone else sing?"

"Jessica did Take My Breath Away and Dawn did Girls Just Wanna Have Fun. God, I can't believe she filmed that, and then sent it to you." She was exasperated at Kathy, but when she thought about it she had to admit she wasn't that surprised Kathy had sent it to Ian. "So how was your night?"

"It was good. We watched a movie and did a puzzle."

Sarah spent the rest of the day recovering at Ian's so she could hang out while he got some work done around the house. She texted Kathy about the fact that her performance was now immortalized on video and Kathy simply replied with a big grin emoji. Oh well. That's what she gets for drunkenly agreeing to the contest in the first place.

That following Thursday was the last court date for custody. When Ian came home that evening he had a big grin on his face. It was done. Joint custody was official. It didn't really change anything in the day-to-day of things but Sarah noticed it took a weight off of Ian's shoulders. He now had full legal rights to his son that Cindy couldn't mess with. He was sure she would try, but he felt he had the power to push back now.

It was also agreed that Daniel would start staying over Friday night through Sunday evening every other weekend. Ian wanted to have him more, but this was all still so new and he was so young. Ian wanted to move slowly so his son's little world wasn't tossed about too much.

Over the following weeks, Cindy continued to try to assert her power, calling on Ian to babysit at odd times without warning. Ian stepped up every time, rearranging his plans as needed. He didn't see it as an imposition. To him, it was just what you did as a parent. It did annoy him that Cindy seemed to be taking advantage of that fact. What had she done before he was around?

Through all the inconveniences Sarah stood by him. She was disappointed when their plans were canceled at the last minute but she wasn't about to make a fuss. She knew what it would do to them if she tried to make Ian choose between her and his son. And every time she got to see him with Daniel just reinforced that decision. Not the least because she found it so fucking hot to watch him with that sweet little boy.

She didn't spend a lot of time with them but she adored Daniel, and he seemed to love having her around too. She and Ian's relationship was still moving forward. He was relaxing into it, but he hadn't hinted at anything like moving in yet. She wanted to move in with him, wanted to be a family with him and Daniel in whatever way that looked. She knew he would get there, that he was working towards it. And she would be there waiting when he was ready.

Halloween was a Thursday that year and the weekend closest wasn't Ian's weekend. He was bummed that he couldn't take Daniel trick-or-treating, but he knew there was a party Daniel was going to at a friend's that he had been looking forward to.

So he and Sarah spent Halloween weekend passing out candy and that weekend they went to the party Sarah's sister Iliza was hosting. Since the invitation said there would be a costume contest they spent a while trying to decide on what they wanted to go as. After much debate Sarah was dressed up as the slutty firefighter and Ian was the pole.

They didn't end up winning the costume contest, but they did come in second. They couldn't really complain though as the winners were Ken and Barbie, only he was Barbie, she was Ken, and it was done to perfection. After a rousing game of Do or Drink (a drinking card game) about half of the guests ended up crashing on the floor or various other surfaces for the night. Sarah and Ian got lucky in that Iliza had a king-sized bed and so the two of them joined Iliza and Stacy, with Iliza and Sarah being the two in the middle. At that point, everyone was so tired and wasted that it really didn't make much of a difference who was where.

Chapter 18

It was midnight on Friday when Sarah's phone rang, waking her up. It took her a moment to fully recognize what she was hearing. It was Ian's ringtone. Her eyes flew open. Ian had Daniel this weekend. What was wrong? No one called at midnight for something good.

"Hey, what is it? Is everything ok?" Sarah did her best to keep her voice calm.

"Daniel came over this evening and Cindy said he hadn't been feeling well all week but it was probably nothing. But he's running a fever, he says he's cold and everything hurts. I gave him the Tylenol, and I covered him in blankets..." Ian's words were tumbling out of him.

"Ok, slow down. Do you want me to come over?"

"Could you?"

"I'll be right over."

"Ok." Ian said, letting out a sigh of relief.

Sarah pulled on some pants, shoes, and her coat before hurrying out the door. Ian was waiting at the door for her and he had the harried look of a concerned new parent.

"Thanks for coming over."

"Of course." Sarah took her coat and boots off. "You said you already gave him some Tylenol?"

"Yeah, I think it's helping, he doesn't seem to be as warm as he was before, but he's still coughing. Can you just check on him?"

Sarah nodded, knowing she was doing this more to reassure Ian than anything else, and headed to Daniel's room. She opened the door and saw him lying on his bed, eyes a bit glassy. "Hey bud, your dad says you aren't feeling too well."

Daniel shook his head and coughed. It was a deep rattle in his chest. Sarah went right over to him and felt his forehead, he was still warm but not burning up. Ian had already set up the humidifier and she could smell the vix on his chest. It looked like Ian had done everything he could, but it was never easy to have a sick kid.

"Well, it looks like your dad has given you all the good stuff, now you just need to sleep. I know it's no fun being sick. Do you want him to read you a book until you fall asleep?"

Daniel nodded. "Will you stay too?"

"Of course I will."

Ian had come into the room and stood next to Sarah who had sat on the edge of the bed. She looked up at him but he had already walked over to the other side of the bed where a book lay on the bedside table. Sarah helped prop Daniel up so he wasn't laying completely flat and Ian began to read. Slowly Daniel's breathing became a little easier and he drifted off to sleep.

Ian carefully got up from where he had been sitting next to Daniel while Sarah pulled the covers up and put Po-Po, the stuffed hippo, next to Daniel. They slipped out of the room making as little noise as possible. Ian slumped as they walked out into the living room.

"Thanks for coming over. I know it's late."

"Hey, it's ok. It's a little scary when you've got a sick kid for the first time, but you did everything right. You gave him the meds, you got the humidifier set up, you just needed someone to let you know you hadn't missed anything."

"Yeah. Cindy made it sound like it was just the sniffles."

"It might have been just the sniffles all week. Kids are weird that way. And he could be sick all weekend or he could wake up and be racing around the house like an over-caffeinated snot factory."

That made Ian laugh. "Will you stay tonight? Just in case?"

"You're doing just fine, but I'll stay." Ian pulled her to him, holding onto her. She could feel how weary he was as his worry began to ebb. "Now let's get you to bed."

When they got upstairs Ian looked at the baby monitor screen connected to the camera he had set up in Daniel's room. His little boy was still sleeping soundly. He let out a sigh and crawled into bed. He rolled over and pulled Sarah to him. With her body tucked against him, they both fell asleep quickly.

Ian woke up when he heard Daniel coughing then softly calling "daddy" early in the morning through the baby monitor. Sarah stirred at this too but Ian bent over her head and told her he had it and she should go back to sleep. She nodded at him and gave a big yawn, but didn't fall back asleep. Instead, she looked over at the monitor's screen and watched as Ian entered Daniel's room.

"Hey bud, you're up early. You feeling any better?"

"I'm thirsty."

Ian reached over to the nightstand to grab Daniel's little sippy cup for him. "Here you go."

Daniel took a big drink and then laid back down. "Is Ms. Sarah still here?"

"Yeah, she's asleep right now though."

“Ok, that’s good. Can she stay over today?”

“Do you want her to?”

Daniel nodded.

“Ok, I’ll ask her if she can stay over.” Ian answered, his heart warming at his son’s request. “Do you want to sleep a little more now, or do you want to get up?”

“Can we watch cartoons?”

“Sure, do you want some breakfast?”

Sarah watched as Daniel shook his head to breakfast and then followed Ian out to the living room. She rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling. Daniel had always seemed to enjoy it when she joined them for some activity or another, but to hear his little voice ask if she could stay over that day...made her feel accepted in a way she hadn’t expected.

She felt some tears begin to gather at the corners of her eyes. She had loved that little boy since the first time she had gotten to hang out with them, putting a puzzle together. She loved that he called her Ms Sarah. Giving her a title made it feel more special than if he just used her name. In the back of her mind, she idly wondered if he would ever call her mommy Sarah. She quickly dismissed that thought. That possibility was far enough into the future that he would be old enough to not want to attach anything special to anyone’s name.

She rolled onto her side and closed her eyes. She intended to sleep for a little while longer but ended up only dozing for a little bit. She could hear the TV going, playing some cartoon or another. She could picture Ian and Daniel, cuddled up together on the couch under a blanket. Even though Daniel had wanted her to stay it still felt weird to join them on the couch, but she wanted to.

After a while she couldn’t sleep anymore, so she got up and went to the bathroom. She put her PJ pants on, put on one of the shelf-bra tanks she kept at Ian’s, and grabbed one of his sweatshirts. She didn’t have slippers, so she patted downstairs in her fluffy socks, doing her best not to slip on the floors.

When she entered the living room Ian looked over at her. “Good morning.”

Daniel sat up and looked over at her and grinned. “You wanna watch cartoons with us?”

“I’d love to.” She started to move to one of the chairs but Daniel scooted over a little and lifted the blanket he and Ian were under, indicating she should join them on the couch.

She sat down next to Daniel and let him arrange the blanket over all three of them. When everything was just right he settled against Ian again. Ian had his arm draped over the

back of the couch, and she was close enough that he could reach her shoulder and give it a little rub. Sarah smiled at him warmly, putting her hand atop his and giving it a gentle squeeze.

Sarah laid her head back, resting it on Ian's hand, and enjoyed the wonderful little moment, all of them snuggled on the couch together. When the episode they had been in the middle of ended Ian looked down at Daniel. He had fallen asleep. Sarah looked down at him and gently brushed his hair from his face.

"He seems to be breathing easier this morning," she whispered to Ian.

"Yeah."

"Do you want to put him back in bed?"

"Yeah, he'll sleep better in there." Carefully Ian shifted so he could pick up the sleeping child and carry him back to his room.

Sarah followed behind, watching Ian tenderly place him in his bed and make sure the blankets were covering him up well enough. He checked the humidifier, which still had plenty of water in it, so he turned it back on. When he exited the room, pulling the door shut silently behind him, he looked at Sarah. He looked tired, but he looked more at ease than he had the previous night.

"I gave him some more Tylenol before we settled onto the couch, so he should be good for a while." Ian pulled her into his arms. "Thanks again for coming over. I don't know what I would have done without you."

She wrapped her arms around him and tilted her head back so she could look at him. "You didn't need me. You've done great."

"But still, having you here helped." He kissed her softly before guiding her back to the living room. He grabbed the remote and turned the TV off as they sat back down on the couch. "He asked if you could stay over today."

"I heard. I was watching on the monitor."

He could practically see the warm glow she felt, and he felt it too. "He really likes you."

Sarah just looked towards Daniel's room and nodded. "Do you think it's too soon for me to be around this much though? I mean, it's only been a few months since he started staying here on weekends."

"He lights up every time I tell him you're going to spend time with us. I know what you're worried about, but don't be. You've never tried to replace his mom or anything like that. Just keep being around as his friend and it'll be fine."

"Ok." She leaned over and kissed him.

They snuggled together and drifted off to sleep. Sarah knew that when you had a sick kid, especially when they were little, you took your sleep when you could get it. They dozed for about an hour before Ian stured, which woke Sarah. Snuggled against him she could hear his stomach growl.

“Mmm, time for breakfast I think.”

“Humm,” Ian wasn't quite awake yet. “Oh, yeah. Breakfast does sound good. I don't want Daniel to feel like he missed out though.”

“We can have something small and make pancakes when he gets up.”

Ian nodded and they both stretched and walked into the kitchen. Ian put the hot water on for tea while Sarah put two slices of toast in the toaster oven. When they were done they each added some almond butter, Ian topping his with honey and Sarah with blackberry jam. With their black tea in hand and toast on plates they went to sit at the dining table, each getting out their phone to scroll as they ate.

Daniel woke up an hour later, feeling better and sniffing less. Ian made pancakes which they ate all together at the dining table. While they ate Daniel asked Sarah if she was going to stay for the day and was extremely pleased when she said she was. They spent a lazy Saturday mostly watching cartoons and coloring. Daniel took a long nap after lunch, his energy clearly flagging as the day went on.

Sarah hadn't planned on staying over that night, but Ian had asked her to, and with no good reason to refuse, she did. She told Daniel that she couldn't stay all day Sunday though as she had adult stuff she had to do. Daniel made a face at that. She couldn't disagree, but she had put off cleaning her shower for far too long and her fridge looked far too bare for her liking. Daniel did agree that having appropriate food was important, so adulting wasn't all bad.

She wasn't there when Cindy came to pick Daniel up that evening, she was rarely around when she dropped him off or picked him up. It wasn't that Cindy wasn't aware that she was spending time with Daniel, but it just felt awkward to be there at the beginning and end of each visit. It wasn't her place to be there for that; not yet.

The next weekend was Thanksgiving. They went over to Sarah's parent's house Thursday morning so Sarah could help her mom in the kitchen. Lucas, however, was in charge of the turkey. Years ago he had discovered the wonder of bringing your turkey and then had bought a smoker. No one was allowed to do the turkey after that, and none of them wanted to. His turkey was amazing.

Everyone else who came brought something, whether it was store-bought rolls and wine or homemade green bean casserole and dressing. Ian had made candied yams, a recipe of his uncles that he had always loved. Sarah bought far more potatoes than he thought they would need, but when she told them there were going to be 14 of them, he decided she had been right.

Ian started to count out everyone in his head but was a few short. "Who all is coming? I can think of 11."

"My mom and dad, obviously, Lindsay, Fred and the kids, that makes 9, you and me, Iliza and Stacy, and Kathy."

"Oh, Stacy's coming?"

"Yep."

When they arrived that morning Ian was dubious that everyone would be able to fit, but after Lindsay and Fred arrived with the extra tables, it looked like everyone would have a spot. Fred told Ian about the time they had managed to accommodate 22 people one year. After that 14 didn't seem so bad; hell, at this point it was almost normal.

Everyone had outdone themselves with the food, at least from Ian's point of view. But then again Ian had always been accustomed to having such small gatherings. He now understood why Sarah had grabbed several containers to take leftovers home in.

With so much food and so many people, they set the food up in a buffet style and everyone went down the line and dished up. The only food items on the table were the assortment of drink options, salt & pepper, and butter.

Once everyone was seated a small blessing of gratitude was said, a small toast was made, and then everyone dove into their food. Ian had tried to get a little bit of everything onto his plate and he had mostly succeeded. He knew he had to leave room for pie, but everything was so good he had to exercise self-control to not get seconds.

When everyone was finishing up the last of their food Lindsay called everyone's attention to her. "Well, since you're all here, Fred and I have an announcement. I'm pregnant!"

Everyone cheered and clapped and exclaimed. Lindsay told them she had confirmed things with her Dr that Tuesday and was due next August. Susan, Lucas, and the kids knew she probably was pregnant but she hadn't told anyone but Fred that it had been confirmed. She thought it would be best to just tell everyone all at once since they were all getting together anyway.

"Well, here's to the happy family. Cheers!" Everyone echoed Susan in a big 'cheers' to Fred and Lindsay.

The good mood continued as the pies were brought out and sliced. There were two kinds of pumpkin, two kinds of apple, a pecan, and a cheesecake. Fresh whipped cream and canned coconut whipped cream were passed around so everyone could top their pies as desired. Almost everyone had at least two kinds of pie on their plate. None of the adults finished what they had dished up, but all of the kids did. It wasn't that the adults had taken less, more that the kids were all bottomless pits, especially where desserts were concerned.

After all the food was cleared away, and take-home containers filled, the games were brought out. Since there were so many of them half decided to set up a puzzle in the living room and turn on a movie while the other half played Apples to Apples.

When the kids started to show signs of needing to go to bed everyone decided to call it a night. In truth several of the adults would have called it earlier, but were all having too good a time to want to leave.

Sarah and Ian spent the next day lounging around nibbling on the leftovers. There had been enough for both of them to take almost a day's worth of food home. Which was good because neither of them wanted to do anything. Ian was glad Sarah didn't want to go shopping on Black Friday. Unless there was something specific he wanted he avoided stores when they were that crowded.

Sarah, her mom, and her sisters did go out for Small Business Saturday though. Apparently, Susan had started the tradition when a good friend of hers had started a small business. The four of them loved going to all the little shops and seeing what unique goodies they could find. It was a great day for the four of them to do something together too.

Chapter 19

It was the weekend after Thanksgiving Daniel was scheduled to stay over. As usual, Cindy dropped him off on Friday around dinner time. Sarah was out with friends that night and so wasn't joining them. Friday night was their time as father and son, a nice night alone to catch up on what had been happening since they had seen each other last.

They had planned to do a pizza and movie night that Saturday though, so a little before 5 pm, Sarah walked in the door carrying two pizzas and a giant cookie from Daniel's favorite pizza place. To her surprise, Daniel didn't run up to her to greet her like he normally did. He still looked pleased to see her, but he was more subdued about giving her a hug.

She handed Ian the pizzas and gave him a big hug. "Hey, looks like you had a fun day decorating for Christmas."

Daniel just nodded his head.

"Hey, why don't you go wash your hands, and we can have pizza and start the movie," Ian said to him.

Daniel scampered off. Sarah stood up and gave Ian a quick kiss hello before taking off her coat and hanging it up. She followed Ian into the kitchen where he had already gotten out plates and cups for everyone.

"Hey, is he ok? He seems quieter than usual."

"Yeah, he's been like that since last night. I don't know what's up. He hasn't said anything. Maybe all the holiday stuff last weekend and the decorating today wore him out."

"Yeah, maybe." Sarah wasn't quite sure about that. "Did he perk up helping decorate and pick out the tree?"

"A little." Ian shrugged.

While Daniel was seldom rambunctious, he was more subdued than normal. She didn't say anything further about it as they dished up their pizza, grabbed drinks, and headed into the living room. When they sat down Daniel just held his pizza plate in his hands; he didn't seem to want to eat it yet. Sarah tried to ask him about how it had been going to the tree farm with his dad. He just shrugged his shoulders.

"Hey Daniel, what's up? You ok bud?" Sarah asked him.

"Ms Sarah, why don't you live with Daddy?"

She was taken aback by the question and wasn't quite sure how to respond. "Well, we haven't decided to do that yet."

“Oh.” He sounded so sad as he responded.

Sarah set her pizza aside, took Daniel's pizza, set it next to hers, and turned to face him. Ian had set his food aside as well, but let Sarah take the lead on the conversation. Daniel seemed to want to talk to her about whatever was going on in his head.

“What's wrong bud? You know me not living here doesn't mean I don't want to hang out with you, right?”

“Yeah, but if you don't live with daddy you won't stay.” He wouldn't look at her when he said this.

“What do you mean I won't stay?”

“Mommy said that because you don't live with daddy you won't stay around. You'll just go away and not come back.”

Ian was shocked at what he heard. What the hell had Cindy been telling Daniel? Daniel was sitting on the floor in front of the couch so Ian got off the couch and sat beside him. He wasn't sure if he should hold Daniel, rub his back, or leave him be. Sarah, on the other hand, picked Daniel up and sat him on her lap.

“Hey, com'ere. Just because I don't live with your daddy doesn't mean I'm going to go away. I love you both very much and I love being around you.”

“But if you don't live here you won't stay,” Daniel repeated resignedly.

Ian scooted closer and reached out a hand to rub Daniel's back. His son was so scared that this woman he adored would just leave, and disappear, and he would never get to see her again. Ian knew those fears, but he also knew Sarah.

“You know how you live with your mom most of the time and then come over here to visit with your dad?”

“Yeah.”

“And you know that just because you don't live with your dad, he'll always be there for you, he'll never go away?”

“Yeah.”

“And do you remember you didn't start staying the night every time right away, you waited a little while?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, it’s the same thing with me and your dad. It just takes longer for grownups to get comfortable with each other before we decide we want to live together. Cuse, remember, when adults live together it’s more than just for a weekend, it’s all the time.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. All the time is a lot.”

“And just because I don’t live here doesn’t mean I’m leaving. No matter what happens, remember that. There’s no way I could ever stop thinking about you or loving you. And no matter what happens with your dad and me you can always come visit me, or I can come visit you. Ok?”

Daniel looked up at her, nodded, and threw his arms around her neck in a tight hug. “Ok.”

She hugged Daniel tightly to her. Sarah looked over at Ian, letting out a heavy, but relieved, sigh. She could see the warmth and love in his eyes, but just under that she could see the seething anger towards Cindy. She couldn’t blame him. She was angry at the woman for whatever she had done to make Daniel feel like this. Cindy had never shown any warmth towards her, but she hadn’t been hostile to her either.

Daniel broke the hug and looked at Sarah. “Can we have pizza now?”

“Yeah, I think it’s time for pizza.”

Ian scooted over so Daniel could sit between them. All night Daniel made sure both Ian and Sarah were right next to him. When he fell asleep halfway through the second movie he was leaning against Sarah. He had all already changed into his PJ so she scooped him up and carried him to his room. Ian watched as she tucked him in, waiting his turn to kiss Daniel on the forehead after she had.

As she quietly shut the door she looked at Ian and said “Well, I think I should stay the night.”

“Yeah, I think it’d make him feel better if you were here in the morning.” They walked back out to the living room and sat back on the couch.

“What the fuck did Cindy say to him?” Sarah was exasperated at the woman’s actions.

“I have no idea. But I’m damned sure gonna find out what the fuck she’s trying to do. I will not let her play these kinds of games with him.” Ian was fuming. He wanted to call her right then and have it out but decided it was better done in person the next day.

He and Sarah made a plan for when Cindy arrived so Ian could talk to her and Daniel wouldn’t hear any of it. When Cindy arrived Sarah would stay with Daniel in the living room while Ian took Cindy to the spare back bedroom to find out what was going on. Ian texted Cindy

to let her know he needed to talk to her when she came over. Since it was usually just a quick grab-and-go he wanted to make sure she was forewarned.

The next afternoon Cindy arrived earlier than expected. She was abrupt when Ian let her in so he took her straight to the back bedroom to talk. Sarah figured it was more that he would have it out with her, but she knew Ian would keep his voice down so Daniel didn't hear any of it. Even though it was about him, Daniel didn't need to hear any of what would be said in anger between his parents. More time passed than Sarah had expected before Cindy came storming out. She looked on the verge of crying.

She grabbed up Daniel's hand pulling him up beside her, glared at Sarah, and spat "He's my son, not yours. Never forget that."

Sarah was stunned, but the fire those words lit gave her her voice quickly. "I have never said or done anything to the contrary."

"Oh really?" Cindy didn't sound convinced.

"Yeah, really. You're his mother and I never want to take that away from him."

Cindy actually seemed to be a little calmed by Sarah's stern but calm tone.

"I would never try to replace you. That wouldn't be fair to Daniel. His well-being is all I've ever cared about. He loves you and no matter what you'll always be his mom. No matter what happens that will never change, nor would I ever want it to."

Cindy still looked at Sarah with dislike but seemed to be satisfied with Sarah's firmly stated intention. "Ok. Daniel, say goodbye to your father, it's time to go."

Daniel looked a little scared and ran over to Ian to give him a big hug and kiss goodbye, then ran over to Sarah to do the same. Sarah could see Cindy was restraining herself from saying anything. Sarah told Daniel she loved him, that she would see him next time he was over, and then ushered him back to his mom.

Sarah stood there and watched as they left, Ian shutting the door behind them. "So, what did she say?"

"About what you'd expect from what she said to you. I don't know what fucking games she was trying to play. I did politely remind her that I knew what was in our custody agreement too after she tried to use it against you."

"How'd she take that?"

"Not too happy when she realized she couldn't push me around. But she relented. She knows she doesn't have a leg to stand on and that Daniel is perfectly safe and happy when he's with me."

“She just doesn’t like the control being taken away.”

“Yeah, I think that’s a big part of it. And it’s her son. For better or worse, she wants to protect him.”

That irked Sarah. Parents who used the reason of ‘protecting their child’ as a way to maintain total control over everything had always rubbed her the wrong way. There was nothing wrong with watching out for who your child was with when you weren’t around, but it was not okay to use that for your own personal reasons at the child’s expense.

Ian walked over to Sarah and put his hand on her upper arms, rubbing up and down to calm her. “Hey, you ok?”

“Yeah, it’s just parents who abuse their power as a parent...it just pisses me off.”

“I know. Thankfully we probably won’t have to deal with it again. I think she got the message that you aren’t trying to replace her and you also aren’t going anywhere.”

“I just hope Daniel holds up ok through all of this.”

“I’m starting to think I need to talk to Cindy about getting him some therapy or something. This is a lot for anyone, let alone a four-year-old.”

Sarah laughed sarcastically “How do you think she’ll take that?”

“I think if I frame it carefully it won’t take too much convincing.”

“Very carefully.” Sarah let out a long sigh and ran her hands over her face. “Can we do something? I need to do something.”

They ended up cleaning the house and putting up more of the Christmas decorations Ian and Daniel had started putting up the day before. It was too late to start putting up the lights outside that day, but they still made good progress on the inside. Ian didn’t actually have that many decorations to put up inside. It was mostly decorating the tree, which was what Daniel had helped him with the day before.

Ian had gotten a larger tree than Sarah had expected. He didn’t seem to have that many ornaments; though there were a few empty packages from the new ones he had bought. Sarah wasn’t getting a big tree this year. She didn’t get one every year since she never really hosted any gatherings at her place, it didn’t seem like it was worth the time and effort. She had a small 3’ pre-lit tree she would put up in her front window. It gave her a place to put all the gifts as she wrapped them, and she felt like she didn’t have to do as much decorating with it up.

More often than not Sarah was spending the night at Ian’s rather than him staying with her. Wednesday was one of the rare nights when they were at Sarah’s place for dinner when

Cindy called. Ian picked up and listened for a moment before lowering the phone and asking Sarah,

“Hey, is your work thing Friday or Saturday night?”

“Friday. Why?”

Ian spoke into the phone. “Yeah, I’m good for Saturday. ... Ok, I’ll be there by 4. ... You know this isn’t instead of my normal weekend, right? ... Just making it clear. See you Saturday.”

“Cindy need you to take Daniel?”

“Yep.” Ian had a big grin on his face. “He’ll stay overnight. I guess her sitter fell through and it would just be easier for him to stay over than have to come get him at 11 or whenever.”

“Nice.” Sarah paused for a moment thinking. “And you know, even if my work party was Saturday there are plenty of people we could call as a sitter if needed. Lindsay for a start.”

“I know. I was going to say yes regardless, I just figured it would be easier if I knew the plans when I told Cindy yes instead of figuring it out after the fact and having her get all huffy about it.”

“You make a good point.”

Sarah’s company Christmas party was Friday night and Ian was her plus one. She was looking forward to introducing him around. It was held at a country club and had a casino theme. There were games set up after dinner with some very nice prizes to be won. Between the two of them, they did well enough that Sarah went home with the Bose sound system.

They spent the next day putting up Christmas lights on the outside of Ian’s house. They had both been watching the time so Ian wouldn’t be late picking up Daniel. It was Sarah who noticed it was time for him to go.

“Hey, you gotta get going to pick up Daniel.”

Ian checked his watch. “Oh yeah.”

“Hey, you head out and I’ll put the boxes away and head back to my place.”

“Ok. But hey.” He came up to her when he climbed off the ladder. “Stay over tonight, with us. We can watch Christmas movies. And make waffles in the morning”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.” Ian pulled her in for a kiss.

“Ok. Now get going or you’ll be late.” She gave him a quick kiss and a smack on the ass as she went inside to get his keys.

While he was off getting Danile she put the boxes that had held all the outside decorations back in the garage and then ran over to her place to grab something. The idea had occurred to her as she thought about how he had asked her to stay over with him when Daniel was there.

She had just gotten back over to Ian’s when he pulled into the drive and helped Daniel out of the car. Sarah came out to greet them. When Daniel spotted her he had a big grin on his face and he raced up the steps to give her a big hug. Sarah scooped him up into a big hug.

“Ms Sarah!”

“Hey bud. You excited to stay at your dad’s tonight and watch Christmas movies?”

He nodded with enthusiasm. “And you’re gonna stay too right?”

“Yep, I’m gonna stay too. Oh, and I’ve got something to show you.” She looked up at Ian who was coming up the stairs with Daniel’s bag in hand; she gave him a quick wink. She carried Daniel into the living room where she had set an ornament box next to the tree. “Can you help us finish decorating the tree?”

“Yeah!”

Sarah sat down with Daniel and opened the ornament box while Ian put Daniel’s bag in his room. When he came back out he sat down with them to help finish decorating the tree. Daniel pulled out a big hot air balloon ornament. The strings that connected the basket to the balloon were a little tangled and Sarah reached over to help him untangle them.

“That’s one of my favorites. My mom got it for me when I was 10 to commemorate that we had all gone on a hot air balloon ride for my birthday that year. Can you find a good place to put it?”

“But what about your tree?” Daniel looked a little concerned that her tree might not have ornaments.

“I’ve got a small tree this year. This one wouldn’t fit on my tree, so I thought it would be better to hang it here so it wouldn’t have to sit in the box.”

Daniel gave a big grin, nodded, and proceeded to find a good place to hang the ornament. Ian smiled over at her as she unwrapped another ornament, this one an old-fashioned shoe.

“You didn’t have to do this.”

"I know." She paused for a moment to give Daniel another ornament, a squishy one this time, to place near the bottom. "But your tree did look pretty barren, and this way I can see them when I stay over."

Ian leaned over and kissed her. Ian helped decorate the tree for a little bit before heading into the kitchen to make dinner. Sarah stayed with Daniel to keep working on the tree. As he worked on dinner Ian looked over at them, Sarah holding Daniel up to put an ornament up high, and smiled. It felt right to have her ornaments over here. It felt right to have her over here; it had for a while. And watching her interact with Daniel, that felt right too.

Dinner was ready shortly after the tree was done. They all sat around the dinner table and ate together. Then they cuddled on the couch to watch Sarah's favorite Christmas movie: The Muppet Christmas Carol. Neither Ian nor Daniel had seen it before and Daniel delighted in all the music.

When the movie was done it was time for Daniel to go to bed. Ian got him ready and was about to settle in to read him a story when Daniel asked why Sarah wasn't joining them. So Ian called out to her and she came in to join them for Good Night Moon.

They both kissed Daniel good night and quietly slipped out of his room. Ian went over and stood by the tree. Sarah started to go to the kitchen to finish cleaning up from dinner but went over and put her arm around Ian's waist instead. He put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her into him.

"Thank you." Ian said with deep warmth in his voice.

"You're welcome." Sarah replied with equal warmth.

"So I was thinking. When it comes time to put everything away you could store them here."

"Oh?" She hoped she knew where this was going.

"Yeah." He turned to face her. "Move in with me."

She smiled up at him. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. I've been thinking about it for a while, and then when you brought the ornaments over... I think it's time."

She leaned up and kissed him. "Ok."

He pulled her into him and kissed her deeply. "Is that why you brought the ornaments over? To tell me it's time?"

Sarah laughed. "I mean, I've been ready to move in with you for a while, but no, that's not why I brought them over. You needed them here. I mean we spend most of our time here. It

genuinely felt silly for me to have a box of ornaments sitting around when you have a big bare tree.”

Ian nodded. He couldn't fault her logic. “And now it feels like home.”

Epilogue

When they told Daniel the next day he was overjoyed. When Cindy came to pick him up that evening Daniel ran right over to her and told her that Ms Sarah would be living with Daddy now. Sarah could see Cindy wasn't quite succeeding at not scowling at her, but she was trying so that was progress.

They started moving Sarah's things over that day. Just the basics at first. Since she stayed over there so often not much had to be brought over right way. They decided not to do any of the big items until after Christmas, but little by little they sorted through all of their belonging deciding which ones to keep and which ones to get rid of. Sarah had nicer pans and a nicer mattress, but Ian's bedframe was far superior to the dinky one she had.

They spent Christmas at Sarah's parent's house and it was a wonderful time. Ian's mom had come for a visit the previous weekend to see him and Daniel and it had actually been a really good visit. His mom still made him a little on edge, but with Sarah there, he was able to relax more easily afterward.

Once Christmas was behind them they were able to finish moving Sarah in and by New Year's Eve, they had finished. They spent the evening at home, their home now. They would have a housewarming party later, but they wanted to ring in the new year together, just the two of them. And they did just that, in spectacular style.

The next thing on their agenda was to clean out Sarah's old house to get it ready to rent. They had decided to rent out the house instead of sell it because it would provide another income stream and living right next door would make any landlord duties easy. They even already had a renter.

When Iliza had approached Sarah about what she was going to do with her house Sarah thought it was because she wanted to rent, or possibly buy it, but that hadn't been the case. Iliza had a co-worker who was trying to leave an abusive relationship but was scared as she didn't have any place to go and didn't think anyone would rent to her and her daughter, despite having a full-time job.

Although they both trusted Iliza's judgment, Sarah and Ian still met with the mother, Irena, and her daughter, Youlanda. It was quickly evident that they would make great tenants. It gave everyone some relief. Irena and her daughter would have a place of their own, and Sarah and Ian wouldn't have to slog through potential tenant applications. Knowing Irena was going to be moving in without much beyond clothing, Sarah and Ian decided to leave the place fully furnished.

Youlanda was just the right age to start babysitting and since they lived right next door it made things that much easier. Irena was there if anything happened, but it was also a chance for her to have some alone time. She and Daniel were both quiet and seemed to mesh quite well together. Mostly they watched movies or colored.

Sarah didn't want to bring up the idea of getting married. It wasn't that she thought Ian didn't want to get married at some point, but broaching the idea right after moving in seemed like it was too much. But she so badly wanted to marry him. She wanted to be his wife and wanted him to be her husband. She wanted that permanence between them.

Ian didn't want to bring it up either but for a different reason. He knew he didn't want to ask her to move in and marry him at the same time. He wanted those to be separate events. But once he knew it was time to ask her to live with him, he wanted to slip a ring on her finger. He went back and forth about when and how to ask. And he debated about using his grandmother's ring. He wanted to use the family heirloom, but he felt it was tainted by Cindy somehow.

When his mother had gotten the ring she had altered it slightly, adding some extra stones on either side of the main diamond. He decided to get it changed back to the way it originally looked. He had never really liked the extra stones anyway. He always thought they were too much. And the simple elegance of the original design would suit Sarah so much better.

He had called Kathy to talk to her about it and to see if she remembered Sarah's ring size so he could get it sized beforehand. Once he put it on Sarah's finger he didn't want her to have to take it off again. He also wanted Kathy's blessing. Kathy gave her blessing enthusiastically and did remember Sarah's ring size.

He also asked Daniel his opinion, though really he already knew the answer. Daniel was elated and asked if he could call her Mommy Sarah now. Ian grinned and told him once he saw Sarah with the ring on he could, but made him pinky promise to keep it a secret until then.

He decided to ask on their first anniversary. They had already planned to have a nice dinner out but when Sarah came downstairs, ready to head out, Ian took her arm and led her over to stand in front of the fireplace, which he had lit.

"Sarah, a year ago I knocked on your door asking for shelter and you took me in. I knew almost right away that I loved you, but I was scared. And to my amazement you were patient, you waited for me to be ready."

"I'd have waited 100 years for you." She wondered if things were going where she thought they might be.

He had to take a deep breath to compose himself before continuing. "After everything you've done for me, after all the waiting, I finally don't feel guilty in asking if you'll take me in one last time. Will you marry me?"

He had pulled out the ring box, opened it, and sank to one knee. Sarah was already nodding, holding back tears before he had completed the words. As soon as his words were done she got out the word she would always say to him - Yes. He slipped the ring on her finger, stood up, and kissed her.