



Daddy's Little Drummer Boy (DKAG Christmas Daddies)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Christmas used to be my favorite time of year. That was before...

If only I could run off to a cabin in the woods for the holidays and pretend they don't exist. Except I can't. Instead, I'm stuck wearing a Little Drummer Boy costume while pretending everything is merry and bright for extra cash.

I didn't always hate the holidays, and I still don't, not really. I hate the memories they bring back, the memories of a time when my daddy was alive and it was us against the world. Now it's just me, a pile of bills, and my raccoon stuffie.

When the manager of Chained, a local club, sees me in my costume and asks me to be a part of their Little Christmas, I agree. The money is great, and so is the free guest pass that comes with it. Maybe it's time to take out my little things again.

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Bobby

Two years earlier...

“I know we said we were going to make this place work and that it would one day be ours. I’m sorry, Daddy. I tried. I really did.” I blinked back the tears, hugged the photo of our first date a picnic at the park—and then placed it on top of the box before taping it closed.

As much as I didn’t want to move, I didn’t have a choice. It was eviction day tomorrow. I tried all I could to keep up the payments, but my job didn’t cut it, and even picking up gig work doing food delivery at night didn’t keep me afloat. After Daddy died, the first money that went was the insurance proceeds then my savings then I maxed out three credit cards, and now it was just time to give up. I should’ve done it right after he passed. It had been foolish to think I could handle this place on my own.

The people we’d leased to own from had already submitted all the paperwork to the sheriff’s office and gone to court. It was an easy win for them. Daddy and I hadn’t been married when we made the arrangement, making the contract far more in their favor, even if I weren’t that far behind. Had we been renting, I’d have had some more time. But with this contract, time was up.

Basically, I was screwed.

If I were being pragmatic, it was probably going to be a lot easier living in my new studio apartment, at least financially. Even so, leaving this place was going to be

rough. It was filled with all the what could have beens , like the room we were going to turn into my nursery, the patch we were going to clear in the back for a garden once it was fully ours, the bathroom we had planned on doubling in size by moving a wall and giving ourselves one of those showers that felt like water was coming at you from all angles and steam galore. The home had so much potential. And it still did, just not for us.

We had oh-so many dreams once upon a time—but how quickly they fell away with one single word: cancer. At least it was quick, and Daddy didn't suffer long. It could have been much worse in that regard. For me, it was going to be horrible no matter how it progressed, but I felt solace in knowing he went from diagnosis to peace in only a few weeks. I'd seen people suffer for years on chemo, always living a half-life. I wouldn't wish that on anyone.

But now, with this move, I was mourning all over again.

“Come on, Rooney.” I grabbed my stuffie off the mantel—he'd been supervising—and held him close to me as I fell into the beanbag chair and curled up into a ball. At one point, Rooney had looked like the raccoon he was, but he was so loved and so worn out now that people would be hard-pressed to know what he was meant to be. I didn't care. He was mine.

He was there by my side before Daddy and I met. He was there by my side before we moved into this house. And he was going to be there when I moved into the studio apartment—the one I was grateful to get now that my credit was shot to shit. If the landlord hadn't been friends with my boss at my main job, I was pretty sure I wouldn't even have that. I'd be going straight to car living.

But really, this was good. Sad, but good.

Finally, I was going to be living within my means. I still had debts to pay, but with

the house payment so far outside my range, it had never been feasible. Daddy's job had paid so much better than mine that we hadn't struggled at all. In fact, it had been on the lower end of our price range. You didn't consider how different things would be if somebody died when you bought a house, especially when you were young. You didn't think about how most of the insurance money would go toward a burial and funeral and then medical bills or calculate what you could afford on the lesser of the two incomes. You didn't think about the C word.

How quickly life changed.

"It's okay, Rooney." I kissed the top of his head. "We're going to do this, and it will be great."

I stayed like that, curled in a ball, until a knock at the door let me know the movers were here. I had hired a local company, just two guys in their box truck, but that was okay. I didn't really have much left here. I'd sold off all the nicer furniture, piece by piece, to pay bills. Now my couch was a beanbag chair. There were mostly just boxes to be moved.

They knocked again and I got up and let them in then watched as my entire life was taken out, box by box, beanbag by plastic tote, until everything was gone. Or so I thought.

"That's all of it." The boss of the two handed me a clipboard to sign.

Before I grabbed the pen, his coworker called from the other room. "Wait, I found some more!"

As we walked into the bedroom, my stomach dropped. Christmas. I'd forgotten about all of the Christmas things we had stashed.

Christmas had always been Daddy's favorite time of year. We had so many decorations—from trees to realistic holly garlands to a nativity set the size of the entire mantel, filled with animals that really weren't very nativity-related and a few elves, to candy cane lights.

If it made the place feel like Christmas, Daddy collected it. And the entire stash was kept in the closet behind my bed. We didn't need to get in there often, so putting the bed there made sense. It allowed us to arrange the room as we wanted.

But it also meant I'd forgotten all about it. Or maybe it was less forgetting and more my brain protecting me and blocking it. Nothing made me miss Daddy more than Christmas, which was fast approaching.

My initial instinct was to tell them to leave it for the next people to deal with. But I couldn't do it. They meant everything to Daddy, and throwing them away felt wrong. Instead, I thanked them for finding it and watched them pack it all into the truck.

I'd figure out where to store it later. It wasn't going to fit into my apartment; that was for sure. But I couldn't let it go—not yet, maybe not ever.

At the end of November, most people would be setting all their decorations up. But that wouldn't be me. Not this year. Maybe not any year.

I would not be celebrating Christmas. It was too hard alone, and it wasn't like I could go to bunches of parties to stave off the loneliness. I didn't have extra money to even bring a dish to pass or a Secret Santa gift, much less get a new suit.

But that was okay. I was going to just stay home with Rooney, throw on some of my little clothes, and watch a marathon of my favorite TV show while eating enough chicken nuggies and boxed mac and cheese to feed a family of nine. Was it the healthiest way to handle the holidays? No, but I was still in survival mode. Healthy

could wait until later.

Maybe next year I'd be more in the mood—or the one after that. But right now? Yeah, it wasn't going to happen. I was too numb.

Which was better than last year, when I spent the entire time crying. How sad is it when numb is a step up? A step in the right direction. A step toward healing.

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Nick

Chained was the ideal place for a daddy to meet other daddies and share experiences. Or just eat the delicious food and have a drink. Of course, the little room was a home away from home for many. And I spent my share of evenings in there playing with the single littles who wanted someone for a night or a couple of nights.

With all the travel I did for work, I didn't have time for more. Each year, when I received my hire-date review in December, I hoped for a promotion that would allow me to stay closer to home. The supervisor level, just above mine, had recently become vacant. It was one involving no more than one trip a month, meaning, I'd be close to home and spending far less time breathing airplane air and eating in restaurants.

Of course, I enjoyed a good meal out as much as the next man, but I missed home cooking. Even mine. Which nobody would ever call gourmet.

"Hudson has been all about those new ducky-nuggies lately," Bridger was saying. This evening, my first day back in town, I was lounging in the conversation area of Chained. Several groupings of sofas and chairs and low tables housed those who wanted to socialize more than play.

Although I joined for the daddy/little activities, the club provided a haven for just about any kink a person could imagine. Their only real rules were that all activities be consensual and no harm allowed. I had never seen any of the very unhygienic scenes, likely due to their concern for members' health.

From where we sat, a few other daddies and their littles and I, I could see the St. Andrew's cross, the spanking bench, and the fire play station. Although none of those things were to my taste, the artistry of the doms and their willing subs was infinitely watchable.

"Lane is off nuggies entirely. I haven't ever known a little to do that, but I wonder if he'd like the ducks? He ate so many dinos, he probably just overdid. But he does like boneless wings with different dipping sauces." Elio took a sip of his martini, shaking his head. "Right, my sweetest boy?"

Lane, cuddling a kitten stuffie, smiled up at his daddy. "And apple slices."

"Ah yes, I can't forget that. If an apple a day keeps the doctor away, you should be safe from medical appointments for about twenty years."

His little bobbed his head. "I don't like getting sick."

The conversation naturally merged into taking care of littles and their varying needs while Hudson and Lane and their friends pushed trucks around on the floor. A server brought a tray of nibbles and set it on the low table in front of the daddies. Half was more geared to the grown-ups and the rest to the littles.

Everything at Chained was nicely done, including their food, and I reached for a cracker topped with goat cheese and red pepper jelly. It wasn't home cooking, but it was very good. And the big/little platter tonight had a holiday theme.

"Tiny hot dog reindeers!" Hudson held one up to show Bridger. "Look, Daddy, they have antlers."

His daddy bent down to admire the mini dogs wrapped in biscuit dough with pretzel antlers and a face made out of some sort of veggie bits. "Looks tasty."

“Have a bite!”

Having a little in some cases meant sharing “bites” of just about everything, and Bridger was a good sport about it. Of course, they also had a big relationship, so they had a higher degree of intimacy than many. Watching them together was such a pleasure, it threatened to topple my independence. I spent a whole lot of time convincing myself that I was perfectly fine without having a little of my own. And mostly I believed it.

How fair would it be to a little who had to be alone most of the time while his daddy traveled the United States and even farther afield than that. And that would be bad enough if it was just a daddy/little relationship. I wanted more. I wanted what my friends had. Before I came to Chained, I’d only known people who separated the aspects of their lives. And some of those here did as well, but most of my close friends had a complete relationship with their littles.

Something I couldn’t do with someone I played with once or twice.

We all sat around for a while, sipping cocktails and talking about daddy/little stuff but also our jobs and world news and all the things anyone discussed with friends. These were my friends. We had a lot in common beyond our interest in the lifestyle.

The club was decorated for the holidays with a subtle elegance, but the little room stood out for its bright colors and complete lack of subtlety. And glitter. So much glitter. For much of the year, Miss Lily and her staff tried to keep the sparkly bits to a minimum, but as the holidays neared and excess ruled, there was nothing the littles demanded more of than their very favorite craft item.

This meant the daddies would have their work cut out for them when they got home. And their cars would need a post-holiday detailing.

“Shall we go to the little room?” Elio stood and held a hand out to Lane. “I think there are some fun games tonight.”

His little hopped up and accepted his hold. “Yes, please, Daddy. I want to play with my friends. And with you, of course.”

“Of course.” Elio shook his head. “It’s hard to compete with a dozen or more excited little boys and girls with Christmas on the horizon.”

“Will Santa be there?” Hudson asked, tucking the cars he’d been playing with into his pockets. “I need to tell him what I want for Christmas.”

Bridger also stood up. “Not tonight but soon. Do you have a long list?”

“I was very good this year.”

The two pairs disappeared into the middle of the main club room, the littles completely adorable. Hudson’s holiday duckie onesie paired with knee socks and jingle-bell sneakers was every bit as cute as Lane’s holiday kitty tee and short shorts. He also had knee socks, his patterned with candy canes and polar bears.

What would a little of mine wear? Some daddies would say whatever he told them to, but I liked the littles I played with to express their own creativity. After all, it was their personality that drew me. Why wouldn’t I want that fully expressed?

The other daddies and their littles drifted off to the little room, leaving me alone with the empty platter and a lot of glassware. Our server came over and piled everything on the tray and took it all away, leaving just my solo glass.

Talk about emphasizing my solitude. Oh, there would be single littles in the little room, but watching the interplay between my friends and their littles, I just didn’t

have the heart to go play with a rando. They would be cute, too, but it wasn't the same.

So, I headed for the front door and retrieved my phone on the way out. I checked the received calls and texts to find a notification that my review would be the next morning. I looked over my shoulder, although my friends were in the little room by now. If I got the supervisor position, I'd be more stable and travel so much less. What might that mean for my life?

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Bobby

The woman waved at me from her open door and bent down to grab her Chinese food. It was my last delivery of the afternoon, and I needed to get home and get ready for my next gig.

When I moved into my studio apartment, I told myself I wasn't going to keep delivering food for much longer, that I was going to relax and slow down for a while. I'd worked nonstop trying to save the house for so long, and it was time to relax.

Unfortunately, that didn't work out. The first year I was here, I spent tons of extra shifts just keeping up with the credit card payments. But as I paid them down and got rid of one then two then a third, it had become a habit. And now, I was trying to save up enough to get a one-bedroom apartment.

Funny how dreams changed. Once upon a time, my dream had been about building that garden with the little gnomes and the covered swing. Now, it was hoping that I could sleep in a different room from where I cooked my food, ate my food, and watched television.

My place wasn't awful, just small.

I didn't mind working all the time either. Delivery was kind of fun. Most of the people were like the lady I just delivered to—big smiles on their faces, grateful for the food I brought. And while the money was sometimes better than others, it was always worth doing.

Two years later after my big move, I was pretty close to debt-free and had most of a down payment for a new place saved up. I called that pretty good. By the end of this season, I was going to be financially solid. That was, if “solid” didn’t include having a savings account because once I moved, that would be gone too. But I was better off than I had been since Daddy died, and I was proud of it. He would be too.

Daddy made me promise that I would be okay without him, that I would find my place in this world, would accept the help of others, and wouldn’t stay alone. I’d managed to do most of those and maybe one day, I’d meet someone to make my promise of not being alone come to fruition. I hadn’t been ready for years, but lately I’d been thinking it was time.

I went home, showered, and got into my costume for the new part-time gig I’d picked up. I was a Drummer Boy at the mall’s Christmas-with-Santa pavilion—well, one of them. I looked more like a toy soldier with a drum in the getup they gave me than a drummer, but the money was pretty good and, while I still wasn’t a huge fan of Christmas, I was having a great time. Christmas wasn’t ever going to be my favorite season, but this year I didn’t mind it so much. That was pretty huge, if you asked me.

Would I rather be whisked off to a cabin in the woods, sitting by the fireplace, wearing my little clothes, playing with my blocks with Rooney, and drinking hot cocoa while eating copious numbers of cookies and candy canes? Absolutely. But I was doing okay.

I arrived at the mall for my shift, taking over for Ron, the daytime Drummer Boy. He looked exhausted—he always did by the time I got there. He wasn’t good with the kids and found them very stressful. If a child tugged on my drum, wanting to give it a whack with the stick, I’d just kneel to their level, give the drumsticks to them, let them hear how bad the fake drum was, and they’d be on their way. Easy peasy.

Ron felt this unnecessary need to protect the drum—a fake drum at that—and would

try to talk kids out of doing it. That didn't make him a fan favorite and made it more far more stressful for him than it needed to be. I tried to explain that to him numerous times but eventually gave up. If he wanted to work extra hard for the same money, let him.

I made the motions of hitting my drum— boom, boom, boom, boom —as the kids lined up, ready to see Santa and tell him all their wishes and dreams. From where I was, I could hear a lot of the lists. Most kids wanted a toy—not always one that existed but a toy. A few wanted electronics, like a computer “like my dad’s” or a video game “like my brother Stan’s.” All of those were expected, par for the season.

Santa would tell them he had to check his naughty-and-nice list and that he wasn't sure if he had enough of those items in stock, but he'd see what he could do. It was a nice way to let the kids down easy if those weren't things their parents wanted them to have—or if budgets decided they were out.

But today had been particularly difficult. I heard one little boy ask Santa for a kidney for his grandma. Another asked if Santa could bring his mommy back from deployment. Yet another asked for an apartment instead of sleeping in their car.

How I longed to be the one to grant them any of those wishes. But I couldn't. All I could do was give them smiles and let them beat my very off-sounding drum.

“Hey, soldier man!”

I looked down to see a young girl, maybe five, looking up at me with big blue eyes. I didn't correct her that I wasn't supposed to be a soldier—it didn't matter. This was all pretend, not a school lesson.

“Yes, honey?”

“I see drum?” Maybe she was less than five, given her question. I was really bad at guessing ages.

I squatted to be more at her eye level. “Did you want to give it a hit?”

She looked at her mom, who nodded, and then grabbed the offered sticks and banged away on it for a few seconds.

“That is beautiful music.” I was lying. It was more thud than any drum should be. If I did this next year, I needed to find a secondhand real drum to use, one that didn’t sound like a kid banging a plastic bowl on their high chair.

She twirled around. “I a princess drummer!”

“Yes, you are, sweet girl.”

The elf to my left cleared his voice and tilted his head to the line to show me she was up next.

“And I think it’s your time to see Santa,” I told her.

That had her dropping the sticks and running up to her spot in line.

“You like your job, don’t you?”

I turned to see a woman standing there, one without a child. In one hand, she held a shopping bag, in the other, a cup of coffee.

“Yeah, I don’t mind it.”

“Do you ever do any side gigs?”

That caught me off guard. I had a feeling she didn't mean food delivery, but still, the offer was unclear.

"It depends on what you mean." I was careful with my words. If she meant something Christmas-related, I was possibly interested. If she meant something adult-related, odds were not so good. I hated to be so jaded, but I'd been propositioned by enough people while wearing this outfit here to know it could be either.

"We're looking for people to dress up for a Christmas party. We have Santa already and a couple of elves too, but I've never seen a Little Drummer Boy before."

I wasn't sure if, technically, I was allowed to use my costume off-hours, but I was intrigued enough to worry about that later. "I could probably do that, if my schedule works."

She took out a card and stuck it in my front pocket. "Now, do me a favor and don't let the name of my job make you think it's something it's not."

Now I was really curious.

"We just want people to be ready for our 'little'"—she put it in air quotes—"Christmas party."

And off she went. I didn't know what the event was, but I sure knew what she meant by little. The odds were good she was talking about Chained, the local club Daddy and I talked about checking out years ago when we had enough money.

Later that night, I reached out to her. The gig was offering great money, a free pass to come back whenever I wanted, and lunch. There was no way I was turning this one down. I'd been little alone for so long that just the day pass was worth doing it for.

Maybe playing with some other littles was exactly what I needed for Christmas. One thing for sure; I was about to find out.

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Nick

As I parked at Chained, I could not get my review out of my mind. Not that I got any negative comments. Rather, Stephanie in HR handed it to me with a beaming smile and lounged in her chair while I read it.

“Someone had a good year,” she commented as I set it back on her desk. “According to this, you’re quite an asset to the company.”

“Mm-hmm.” I didn’t need them to tell me that. My job technically should have involved about a third of the travel I did, but my supervisor knew he could rely on me whenever he had an emergency, which was almost all the time. Although the word had been put out that he left the company for “another opportunity,” rumor had it that he’d been encouraged to go with a little exit bonus. As the nephew of the CFO, he was never going to get dumped without a golden parachute and likely another position in one of their other companies. He’d land on his feet.

And, before leaving, he’d taken the time to pen a glowing review of my work, which should assure me the promotion that would keep my feet on the ground for most of my workdays. I smiled and nodded as Stephanie complimented my work, leading up to the final conclusion. The one I’d been waiting for.

“And that’s why you are getting a 3.5 percent raise at the start of the year.” From her pleasant, expectant expression, she thought I was going to be responding to that comment in a positive way. She could not be more wrong. My hands closed into fists, and I struggled to keep my breathing under control. As long as I did that, I’d be able to get through this meeting without doing anything that might put me on the local

news. I wasn't going to do anything violent to Stephanie, of course. It wasn't her fault that I'd been repeatedly lied to. Promised that whenever a position on the level above me opened up, it was mine.

Still...there was a chance that the initial pay for a non-family-member supervisor was 3.5 percent more than I was making presently. Seemed unlikely, but before I did anything like quit or stalk out in a huff, I needed to ask. "Did I or did I not get the promotion I've been promised?"

I knew the answer before she said a word. No longer meeting my eyes, she dropped her gaze to the desk. "There is no record of such a promise in your file, but with your reviews, you're certainly on track to do well here."

What the hell?

I wanted nothing more than to quit, to tell them to take their job and shove it as the old song went, but saner heads prevailed. I hadn't spent all these years in business dealing with all sorts of people without learning how to control my temper. "I see. That's clear, then. How much vacation do I have saved up?"

I never took time off, not because I didn't want to but because every time I planned a vacation, something came up at the office, and I had to cancel. I'd learned only to make refundable plans after losing deposits on resorts and the price of a few plane tickets. So...I knew how much time was on the books for me.

"I-I'll have to check." Okay, so she knew too. It was in my file, on the screen she had been consulting while we spoke. And she was afraid I'd take it all right now and leave them scrambling for someone to do my work for three months. She should be concerned. It was sounding like a really good idea. "Can I get back to you?"

"No need. I can tell you. Twelve weeks. I haven't had a day off in years. And since

you seem to be having trouble figuring this out, may I remind you that I can either take the time off or request a full payout on the hours instead—to be paid within the calendar year of the request. So...before the end of the month.”

“Are you going to do that?” She was wheezing. “I mean, either of those things?”

I stood and shrugged. “I don’t know. As you can imagine, I’m quite disappointed that I got such a glowing review—again—and am still not being granted the promotion I was promised.” I held up a hand as she began to speak. “Whether it is in the file or not, it was a verbal agreement, and any attorney would drag my old boss back from wherever he’d been moved and bring him in for a deposition. Not that I’m saying I will do that either. I’m just very”—I stood up and turned toward the door, calling over my shoulder—“very disappointed.”

I stood outside in the hallway, my heart pounding harder than I could ever remember. I prided myself on my self-control, and I’d ridden frighteningly close to crossing a line. I still had a job—probably. But I needed to make a lot of decisions because I’d clearly hit a dead end at this company.

Decision one: I would do my job but nobody else’s. Their emergencies and lack of planning were not my issues. No extra trips, no stepping up to be temporary supervisor, something I’d seen happen in other departments. Where you did the job without the actual title or benefits of any kind.

The rest could wait until after the holidays.

I went back to my office and tried to work, but my mind was reeling at the betrayal. Who would be the next supervisor? The president’s cousin? The CEO’s daughter? Whoever they were, they would find a smiling cooperative person ready to fulfill their job description. And not one iota more. And maybe I’d take at least a few days off to enjoy the holidays.

But where? My family was far away and they all had their own plans for the holidays. My parents, for example, were going on a long-desired cruise. They'd talked of visiting tropical islands and partying on shipboard ever since I gave them the trip as a holiday gift last year. And with me always too busy to go home, it was even more of a dream come true. Next year, it would be different. I'd spend it with family instead of in a hotel eating room service or delivered Chinese food.

I decided to spend the evening at the home I'd found here in this place, Chained. It was sure to help me lighten up and appreciate the holiday season. A chat with friends, maybe an hour or so in the little room were just what the doctor ordered.

If it had been decorated before, it looked like a troop of elves had paraded through here, filling the place with the Christmas spirit. The entry area was hung with garland and even had a tree in the corner. It was charming, and I paused to take in the lights surrounding the doorway to the rest of the club. Gorgeous!

"Welcome, sir," the subbie manning the front desk this evening said. "I hope you enjoy your night."

"I do too," I replied, smiling despite myself. "Are you one of Santa's elves?" He wore a pair of red shorts trimmed with fur, and red leather straps crisscrossed over his chest.

"Santa isn't here tonight, but if he were, I'd be the first to sign up to go over his lap." His perky grin had probably gotten him more than one trip over someone's lap, but it was not my business to correct him. His dom, who I knew was quite strict, would handle that situation.

"And that would no doubt attract a crowd." The sub was also known to be quite the exhibitionist. "So I will wish you a fulfilling evening after you finish your shift out here."

“Thank you, sir.” He accepted my phone and locked it up then I paraded on into the club and found my friends in our favorite conversation area.

The group was all abuzz about something, daddies and littles alike, and I took a seat and placed an order for a drink from a passing server, settling in to figure out what they were so excited about.

“It’s going to be so much fun, Daddy.” Hudson, wearing red short shorts and a tee emblazoned with the face of the daddiest Santa ever, bounced on his knees in front of Bridger. “I am going to eat all the candy.”

“Maybe not all of it,” his daddy chided. “But I’m sure there will be plenty to go around.”

“What is this candy event?” I asked. “Is it something I would like to go to?”

Hudson turned toward me, eyes wide and sparkling. “Oh, yes, Daddy Nick. It’s the Little Christmas, and you have to come, too.”

“You sure there will be candy?”

Lane, whose daddy Elio had stepped away to the bar, nodded. “So much candy and hot cocoa, and Santa is coming.”

“Well, if Santa will be there, how can I say no?”

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Bobby

I woke up before the sun, excited about the party at Chained. I'd looked it up on their website, and everything about it sounded like it was going to be a ton of fun. Sure, I was working and not a guest, but that was a good thing.

Today was me stepping into the club without any pressure—no worrying about whether I had to find someone to play with, or what would happen if a daddy asked me to play and I didn't want to, or what to do if nobody wanted to play with me. All of that pressure was gone. All I had to do was be a good Little Drummer Boy. That was easy.

All I had to do was look like a Christmas drummer, probably guard Santa the way I did at the mall, and let some littles bang on my drum. It was going to be great.

What wasn't great was waiting for it to be time to go. I had originally thought it was an afternoon gig, but no—it was in the evening, running into the night. That wasn't a problem though. It meant, in theory, I could deliver lunches, but I was so antsy that sitting in my car sounded like torture.

"Rooney, I don't know what to do." I grabbed my stuffed raccoon. Of course, he didn't answer, but at least I had someone to talk to.

"What would Daddy tell me to do?" Still no answer. There had been a time when I made him talk back to me or Daddy did. That time had passed.

When I got overly anxious, Daddy usually took me someplace—the park, the zoo,

somewhere with fresh air. I suppose I could do that now, but it was winter, and nothing sounded too appealing about being outside in the cold.

Chores were another option. Except my laundry was done for the week. My refrigerator was stocked. I'd cleaned the bathroom the night before. There really wasn't anything I had to do, and the place was too small for there to be any waiting projects.

That left taking a shower and starting my day. The stall was tiny, and I never managed to wash my hair without my elbow hitting the door. Today was no exception, but the hot water felt good against my skin.

Instead of putting my regular clothes on when I got out, I opted for a fitted crop tee that said Daddy's Boy and my cutoff sweatpants. Some little time would do me good, and it was one of the last things Daddy gave me. It functioned as a hug in some less-than-healthy way. I tried not to think too hard on that one.

For breakfast, I filled a divided dish with sugar cereal, cheese—because Daddy always said I needed more protein—raisins, pretzels, and a cut-up banana. It was hardly the breakfast of champions, but it would do.

I plopped in my beanbag chair with Rooney and put on *March of the Wooden Soldiers* for character inspiration. At least that was the excuse I gave.

I hadn't seen that movie in years. It was one my grandma had watched with me every year, and I thought it might help me get into the spirit. I ate and watched as Laurel and Hardy did all the silliness they were known for. Then came the part with the wooden soldiers. I finally realized why the kids all thought I was a soldier who happened to have a drum. I looked pretty close to one—even the makeup I used at the mall matched.

After the credits rolled, I thought about watching it again but instead opted to find something new. And that was how the day went—one Christmas movie after another after another until it was time to get ready to go.

It was a pretty sluggish kind of day but snuggled up with Rooney, the mindless movies did their job. By the time I had to get ready to leave for the Christmas party, I was very much in the mood.

I got dressed at home, including my makeup. I toned it down slightly since I'd be around grown-ups, not small children, but kept it authentic to the way I looked when hired.

Miss Lily met me at the door, telling me she had changed up some of the original plan she had for me, not that I'd fully known what that was. Santa had called in sick and wasn't able to be there. But she assured me that was fine. My job was basically to mingle, let people bang on my drum, and, if I was so inclined, read a book or two.

She was very understanding when I said that wasn't my thing. I wasn't a daddy type, and in a room full of littles, I wouldn't be confident enough for that.

"Oh, I know you're not a daddy," she said with a smile. "But I thought I would offer, since that was one of Santa's duties. And please don't take offense, but I got you a better drum."

She led me to her office, where, sitting there, was a stunning drum. She had probably paid far more for it than she was paying me. I put it on, and off to the little room I went.

The party was fun. There were crafts for the littles as well as snacks, cookie decorating, and special games. Christmas music filled the air. If it was Christmas-related and something littles would love, it was there. Some little boys and girls

attended with their mommies, daddies, and caregivers. Other littles came alone or with friends.

There were some mommies and daddies wandering around, too. I knew from the rules that they had to be approved to be there. This was not a place where random caregivers could show up and try to take advantage of littles. That was one of the things Daddy had liked best about Chained when we'd researched it. He said it didn't have any of the toxicity that the club we'd gone to before we moved here had.

Mostly, I wandered around, walking like a soldier—embracing the imagery from the movie earlier—and interacting with people as they wanted. But the entire time, my eyes kept wandering to one particular daddy.

Something about him was different. He was there and paying attention, but he wasn't really being Daddy. He was more a spectator, and that intrigued me. Was he one of those people interested in the lifestyle who hadn't quite gotten to try it? Was he waiting for someone? Had his friends dragged him there? He was Daddy; that much was clear. But beyond that, he was a mystery.

I kind of liked that.

Miss Lily called everyone's attention to talk about a game she had created with stickers, which, of course, got the littles all very excited. As they went about their scavenger hunt, she came up to me and told me to take a break. I agreed and decided to try and find a chair in the adjoining room.

"You can do the sticker scavenger hunt if you want," she said.

"I'll think about it. Thank you, Miss Lily." It sounded fun, but I could use the time to decompress for a minute.

The next room was mostly filled with racks of chairs and some tables. It wasn't part of the event, so I was surprised when the daddy I had noticed earlier came in with cocoa and cookies.

"Hey, I don't want you to feel cornered, but I thought maybe you could use cookies and cocoa on your break."

I was immediately taken by how quickly he addressed what might have been my concern, making his intentions clear. Had I been there not for work, I might have felt cornered by a daddy coming into a room I was alone in. But it wasn't that he was being pushy or trying to push his advances on me. He was being sweet and very daddy-like.

"Hi, I'm Nick. I don't mean to step on toes if your daddy is here. I just thought..." He set the cocoa and cookies down and picked up one of the cookies.

"I'm Bobby and no daddy. I mean, no, he's not here." What was I doing? I wasn't sure why I was telling him this—or anything other than thank you. But then, before I could stop myself, everything came else out. "He had cancer. He died. It was a while ago."

He stared at me, his eyes wide.

"I'm gonna eat my cookie now." I took a big bite. All sense of professionalism was gone, leaving behind this awkward silence.

"I'm sorry," he said, turning to leave.

"Please, you don't have to go," I called after him.

I wasn't sure if he heard me or not because Miss Lily came back in to tell me she had

a task for me and break time was over. Even if he had decided to stay, it was too late. I had ruined everything.

No. Not me. Cancer. I can never get away from it.

Fuck you, cancer. Fuck you.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am

Nick

The evening was going so well, then I had to mess it up.

The Little Christmas was sparkling with fun, all sorts of crafts and treats, and Santa, of course, and I had agreed to go as much to be there for the single littles as for myself. But once I was in the door, I was swept up in the excitement. Our usual gathering spot at the couches had been completely deserted, the littles not wanting to miss a minute of the fun.

And, if they were honest, the daddies would have to admit the same. No grumbles about glitter on a night such as this. Their littles would fall asleep in the car on the way home, shedding sparkles every time they moved, visions of sugar plums or at least Santa's sleigh in their heads. This was one of the times I wished there was someone going to be wrecking my upholstery with glitter and finger paint and cookie crumbs.

I'd been so hopeful about the promotion, being home more and able to have my own little, if I met one who wanted to be mine. Probably just as well that I'd made such a bad impression on the Little Drummer Boy. What did I have to offer him? A daddy once or twice a month and having to get by on his own the rest of the time?

That would be unfair.

I should go home and not risk making him feel any worse than I already had.

Still, I'd stepped into a joyful situation and taken the shine right off it. He had been so

happy when I brought him the cookies and cocoa.

“Nick? Where are you going?” Bridger laid a hand on my arm. “Come and sit for a minute.”

“It’s okay, Bridger. Go back to Hudson and the others, and I’ll just head home.”

He guided me to the conversation area and pushed me down on the sofa. “Sit.”

The server stopped by and he ordered us two of their holiday special cocktails. “Grapefruit gin fizz for me and I think...bourbon punch for my sad daddy friend here. Sound good, Nick?”

“Sure, since you’re determined to keep me here.” I slumped in the seat. “After my gaffe.”

“I overheard the Little Drummer Boy asking you not to leave. So he couldn’t have been as offended or upset as you seem to think.”

“Why are you so concerned?” Bridger had never been one to interfere with anyone’s relationships, in my experience.

“Because we’ve been friends for a long time, and for nearly all of it, you’ve been alone.” He held my gaze, not letting me get away with anything. The daddy way.

“That’s true.”

“And every little you play with thinks you’re great. So why are you going home all by yourself every night?”

“Work?” It was no secret that I spent most nights in hotel beds. “And, while I had a

hope that would change this year, it's not going to."

"Oh. I'm sorry." Bridger accepted the glasses from the server and handed me mine. "You did mention that a while back. How long are you going to let those people take advantage of you? Everyone is entitled to a personal life."

"We can't all be self-employed." Bridger's crochet pattern business was way more successful than I'd believed such an enterprise could ever be. "But you're right. I can't continue on the way I have been. In the new year, I'll be looking for something else."

"Good idea. But let's talk about tonight. That adorable boy asked you to stay, not to accept him as your little or to marry him. You're not going to ghost him, are you?"

I took a sip of my drink, savoring the smooth bourbon, spices, and a citrus finish. "That's delicious."

"Mine, too." He held up his glass. "So, about the ghosting? You should ask him out instead."

Of course, put that way, I couldn't leave. I didn't even want to. "No, I..." At that moment, it became moot because I found myself looking at the person we were discussing. "Bobby, nice to see you again."

"I'd better get back to the little room." Bridger finished his drink and set the glass on the table. "Enjoy the rest of the evening, you two." He disappeared in the direction of the little room, while Bobby still remained standing at attention in front of me. Or at least his Drummer Boy outfit gave that impression.

"Thank you for waiting," he said in a quiet voice. "I'm sorry I was so emotional before."

“You have nothing to be sorry for. I didn’t mean to bring up something so private when I’d known you five minutes.” I hadn’t exactly, but without meaning to, I’d led the conversation that way. “Can I do anything to make you feel better?”

“No, I’m all right now. Usually I am, but every now and then something or someone will make me miss him all over again. I don’t know if that makes any sense.”

“I think that’s how it works when you’ve cared deeply for someone. It’s an entirely different thing, but my father has been gone for ten years, and sometimes something will just open that pain up again.”

“He must have been a very good man.”

“Thank you. Will you sit? I’m getting a crick in my neck.” I scooted over a little to make more room, in case he didn’t want to sit right up against me.

“All right.” He sat, keeping that space there, a little reserved.

“Did you have fun being the Little Drummer Boy this evening? I heard a lot of buzz. People loved you.”

“Oh, that’s great! I enjoy making people smile.” The server passed by again, and he asked for a soft drink.

“So, how did you end up doing this, anyway?”

As the server returned in a very short time, he was telling me all about how Miss Lily got him to be the Drummer Boy at the party. “I got paid, but even better, I got a pass to come another night. I’m looking forward to that.”

“Maybe I’ll see you here, or, if you have a free evening in the holiday season, we

could go out for a nice meal?”

An odd expression crossed his face, and he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Oh, I don’t know about that...”

Some boys preferred to do little activities on dates with daddies rather than big things. “Or, I have an idea. There’s a tree lighting ceremony coming up. There will be music and all kinds of fun. Could I convince you to join me for that?”

The shadow disappeared from his features, and his eyes lit up. “Oh, I’ve heard about that. I’d love to come.”

We made our plans and sipped our drinks together, chatting about this and that until he had to go again. I was fairly sure I had no trips planned around the lighting ceremony night, but if I did, I’d change them. It was time I had a life, and this adorable Drummer Boy was a great reminder of that fact.

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Bobby

“I’m going on a date, Rooney. What do you think?” I twirled around in front of my stuffie. I was wearing jeans and a sweater—nothing fancy. It was an outside date, so my coat and scarf were going to be over it anyway.

It wasn’t the first time I’d gone on a date since Daddy, but it was the first time I did it because I wanted to. A year after he passed, I’d been pressured by people at work to “take a step out there.” When someone in my apartment building asked me to dinner, I agreed. It was fine—or as fine as it could be. We’d barely started talking before I realized we were complete opposites.

And not in the “opposites attract” kind of way. He liked to go hunting and was looking for someone who wanted to do that with him. That was never going to be me. He thought of home as a place to sleep, which was also never going to be me. It was really easy for us to say goodbye that night and move along.

The second date I went on was an accident. I wasn’t even sure it counted as a date. Someone at work mentioned happy hour, and I thought everybody was going. It turned out, it wasn’t everybody. It was just my coworker and me. Embarrassingly, it took me at least an hour to realize they thought it was a date and another half hour to think to tell them I didn’t. What a disaster that had been.

In a lot of ways, tonight felt like my first real date. Even before I left the house, it was already a thousand times better than the others. For one, I knew we had one thing in common that mattered a lot to me: He didn’t look down on me for being little. If anything, he liked it.

I'd thought a lot about it over the years, even before Daddy—thinking about whether a person not being into the lifestyle was a deal breaker for me or not. I decided long ago that it wasn't about whether someone could or would be my daddy. That didn't really matter. What did matter was if they minded me being little. Did I prefer having someone to take care of me? Absolutely. But parallel play was okay too.

In theory, at least. I hadn't tried it yet, but I'd been playing alone for a long time and it hadn't been awful. Parallel play could work...probably.

I gave Rooney a hug and put him on the bed. Then I pulled on my coat, zipped and buttoned it, and wrapped my scarf around my neck. It wasn't the warmest outfit ever, but it would have to do.

Checking the clock, I ran out of the apartment and down to the corner. I planned on taking the bus down to the tree lighting and needed to be there on time. Parking prices were jacked high to the sky in the city. Though I had a car and drove when I needed to, I much preferred not spending all my money on parking.

Even with the cash I pulled in from working at the club, I wasn't sure I was going to meet my goals. I really couldn't spend anything, especially since I got my new lease statement. My landlord wanted me to sign now, and I needed to be sure I had the money to move out, or I'd be forced to sign on for another whole year with significantly higher payments. No thank you to that. The bus it was.

I rode it to work every day, so I already had a pass, making it a double win. I made it to the stop just in time to climb on. It was pretty crowded, probably full of people going to the same place I was. Usually, weekend evenings weren't like this.

We stopped at every single stop to let people on. I watched the time, hoping I'd get there before he arrived. In theory, I would, but something told me he'd feel bad about me taking the bus, and I didn't want to have to explain being late, which was looking

increasingly likely.

Maybe I was just embarrassed. I was a grown adult who wasn't doing very well in the finance department, and he... I'd seen him in his suit. That wasn't something off the clearance rack.

When I got there, I met him at the statue as we'd arranged. He had a big smile on his face.

"It's good to see you."

"Good to see you too." I wasn't sure if a hug was appropriate, but he looked so snugly.

I went for it, and he hugged me back. Some guys were weird about public displays. They were fine dating a man, but letting strangers see that? Not so much. I was glad to see he wasn't one of those, though I would have understood if he was. Society wasn't always the kindest.

"I hope you weren't waiting long." I barely made it on time, but he could be one of those people who thought fifteen minutes early was late.

"No, I got here a few minutes ago. I lucked out with a good parking spot."

I didn't respond, not wanting to mention the bus.

"Did you want to wander through the Christmas village first?"

There was a Christmas village? "Yes!" I didn't even hide my excitement. Why should I? "Is Santa there?"

“I don’t know. I’ve never been. Let’s find out.” He held his hand out in an offer, and I took it. I couldn’t feel his skin—our hands were both gloved—but it was nice to have the connection, especially in the crowd.

One of the cobblestone streets to the side had been turned into a little Christmas village, shut off from traffic. There were tents with everything from ornaments to cocoa to roasted chestnuts to displays by different charities. We wandered from one to the next, saying what we liked best and would want Santa to bring us.

I learned about his work; he learned about mine. We talked about why I had a drummer costume, which led us to talking about Santa at the mall and how fascinating it was from a people-watching perspective. He didn’t let go of my hand the entire time. I loved it.

More than once, he asked if we should stop for cocoa, cookies, or s’mores. Each time, I declined—not wanting to admit that an eight-dollar cup of cocoa wasn’t in my budget. I also didn’t want to assume he was paying. We hadn’t really discussed it, and I wasn’t sure how best to respond. So instead, I said I wasn’t thirsty or hungry, and let it go.

I didn’t think too much of it until we were nearly through to the other side, and he stopped and asked, “What did you have for dinner?”

I stared at him. “I haven’t yet.” It would’ve been so easy to lie—to say I’d had a sandwich or cereal or ramen. But there was something about Nick that made me not want to.

“Boys should eat,” he said and then lowered his voice. “Is there something I need to know about your eating? Do you have allergies or a medical thing?”

I realized what he was getting at, and now I was triply embarrassed. He thought I

wasn't eating because of some food-control issue. Not that it would be weird if I did—it just wasn't true for me. I lacked funds. I had to decide then and there: spend money I didn't have to ease his worry or tell him the truth?

I opted for the truth.

“Money is really tight right now, and the prices are just...not really something I can manage.”

“I feel bad.” He reached up with his other gloved hand and cupped my cheek. “I thought I'd made it clear that I wanted to take you out. I didn't mean to put you in a position where you felt like I was asking you to spend money. That's on me. So here's me asking you: Will you go out on a date with me? May I take you out?”

The words weren't any different than when he'd first asked, but now I understood that, to him, they were.

“Yeah, I'd like that.”

He gave my hand a squeeze. “I'm sorry I put you in that position. But just so you know, right now I'm going to get kind of pushy.”

“Really?” I tilted my head, amused. “And how's that?”

“Come with me.” He started walking, our hands still linked as if I had a choice. He led me around the corner and down a small street.

“We're having dinner,” he said, opening the door to a restaurant. “And I'm making sure you eat a real meal.”

He was being so daddy, and I liked it.

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Nick

How did I not realize what the issue was? Communication was one of the most important factors in any relationship, kink or not, and even in a scene or an evening, it avoided misunderstandings. This little was a bit closed down, and I understood why. He'd obviously loved his daddy, and the loss of him had thrown him for a loop. I could have nothing but respect for someone who cared so deeply.

But it was my job to be aware of the little's needs, to encourage them to share them. It had been very fun to walk around the booths and shops near the Christmas tree lighting area, but I hated the idea that he might have been hungry the whole time we were there. I hoped he wasn't. But judging by his enjoyment of dinner, he definitely could use that meal.

I swore I'd do my very best to make sure he felt comfortable in sharing what he wanted and needed. Of course, it took time to build trust and the kind of relationship where such confidences came easily, but Bobby had already shared his biggest heartache, and I appreciated that more than I could say.

"Have you had enough? Because the dessert menu here is really extraordinary." Also...he could use the calories.

"I don't usually order dessert," he protested, eating the last bite of food from his dinner plate. "Really, it's fine."

"Well, if you don't, I won't feel like I should." I patted my belly, very full from my own dinner. I never ordered dessert. With all the restaurants I ate at while traveling,

I'd weigh a ton if I did. But it was different tonight. I wanted Bobby to have a good meal, including something special and sweet to end our first dinner together. "I'll feel self-conscious." I sighed. "But I guess I'll get the check."

"No, wait!" He rested a hand on my arm, eyes wide with alarm. "I'd never want you to feel like you can't have dessert because of me."

Crap. I took it too far. "Well, it's not that exactly, but I have an idea. How about we check out the menu then maybe split one?"

His smile told me I'd said the right thing. "All right. I mean, so you get to have dessert. I can support that."

I waved for the server, who came right over, holding a leather-bound folder. "Can I talk anyone into something sweet?"

"You can indeed." I flashed her a grin. "We're calling this a cheat day, so we want something extra. What do you recommend?"

She set the folder on the table and opened it. "Right here. The tasting plate has a small serving of eight of our desserts. It's definitely extra. You want?"

A glance at Bobby told me that he very very much did want. "Hmmm. It's that or a scoop of vanilla ice cream. Bobby?"

He gaped at me. "I-I...vanilla?"

The anathema of kink. "We'll have the tasting plate." I rubbed my hands together. "I can't wait."

She nearly skipped off and came back a few minutes later with not just a plate but a

tiered set of them, and I was pretty sure there were more than eight. I'd ordered it with the sweet Drummer Boy in mind, but my sweet tooth awoke as well. "Okay, gentlemen, let me give you the lowdown. On the bottom level, we have the salted-caramel blondies made with coconut sugar and Irish butter and the 75 percent chocolate brownies with a bittersweet ganache filling and raspberry coulis. Next..."

We sat there like two kids at a birthday party while she described all eleven items ending with... "And on the very top are two scooplets of our handmade Madagascar vanilla bean ice cream with softly whipped Chantilly cream. It may be vanilla"—she cast us a stern look that made me feel very seen—"it's incredible." She giggled. "Good luck!"

"We should have skipped dinner and gone right to dessert," breathed Bobby. "I'm not sure we can tackle this."

"I have faith in us." Picking up a spoon, I eyed the display. "But we can take home whatever we don't finish. It would be a crime to waste it."

"And we don't want to go to jail."

"Right." I chuckled. "But we agree it's fine to doggy-bag it if we are too full instead of making ourselves sick."

His solemn nod was more little than big. Way too cute. "Yes, Pa... Yes, Nick. I don't like being sick."

"Me either." So, we did not eat the entire display, but we did justice to it, little pastry cream horns with a matcha drizzle, included. Everything was delicious, especially the ice cream, vanilla or not.

When we had the remainder bagged up and stood outside on the sidewalk, I took a

breath of the chilly air. Holiday music from the Christmas village lent a festive feel even here, and I turned to Bobby and held out my arms. “Thank you for coming with me tonight. I’ve always wanted to come down here, but never managed it before.”

“And I didn’t even know about most of it.” He stepped into my arms and tipped his face up. “Best night I’ve had in a very long time.”

“For me too.” I took advantage of his position to press my lips to his and hold him closer. His parted under mine, inviting me to deepen the kiss, which I did. We stood there like that for a long moment before a passing group of revelers jostled us, and we parted, breathing a little harder than when we started.

I took his hand again. “Let me walk you to your car.”

“Oh no, I’m fine,” he said. “I don’t want you to go out of your way.”

“I’m enjoying your company. Which way are you parked?”

He flushed, and I wondered what mistake I’d made. “I took the bus,” he said finally. “So, I’ll catch it right on the corner. I usually leave my car at home when I’m going places downtown.”

“Smart.” I suspected it was money again, as well. “Parking is a real pain down here. But since I did drive, why don’t I give you a lift home. It’s too late and there are too many partiers out there to have to put up with them on the bus.”

I watched his face as he considered then said, “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

We walked hand in hand to a nearby parking lot, and it absolutely was no trouble to spend more time with him. I’d be glad to sit up all night talking and get to know him better. But I didn’t want to be pushy on our first date, so after he directed me to his

home, I got out and escorted him to the door, never suggesting he invite me in.

But he did say, “Next time, I can make you dinner if you’d like that?”

“Home cooking? Count me in. I’d enjoy that.” After another long, sweet kiss, I watched him go inside and, after the door was safely closed, I headed back to my car, wondering how soon I could call and set up that next date.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 1:39 am

Bobby

The beeping of my alarm ripped me from the most wonderful dream. Nick and I had been at the amusement park of all places. It wasn't even the right time of year, but that didn't seem to make a difference to my sleepy brain. We were on a Ferris wheel, the old-fashioned kind where you faced forward, not in a car, and we stopped at the very top as they let someone off. Nick held my hand and was pointing out all the rides he was going to take me on next.

As far as dreams went, it wasn't overly exciting. Not really, but something about it had me all warm in the middle. Stupid alarm had to go and ruin it.

I reached to grab my phone to turn it off and saw a message notification I'd missed from the night before. I tapped it, and it was Nick. Did he have a dream about me too? If he did, I kinda hoped it was a dirty one. Whatever that said about me, so be it. It was true.

Hope you have a wonderful day.

It wasn't the first message we'd exchanged in the few days since our date. We'd actually been talking and texting quite a bit. Between his work schedule and mine, that was all we had time for. He was actually in another city for two of those days. After Christmas, I'd be able to see him more often. And yes, I was already planning for after the holidays. Apparently, I was jumping in with both feet.

I was glad Nick wasn't the playing-games kind of guy, like so many I dated when I was younger. They all did the thing where they didn't call for a specific number of

days, kept things short, or left me hanging. Whatever the logic was behind making people think you didn't really like them, I never understood it.

With Nick, it was pretty clear he enjoyed our time together and wanted to get to know me. I scrolled up to read our messages. I'd probably reread them a thousand times. They weren't anything too serious, but they still made me smile each and every time.

How was your day?

Martha brought in cupcakes to work for their birthday.

The snow was beautiful this morning.

I think my boss is going to make us do a Secret Santa this year.

They weren't anything too personal or even that interesting, yet every single one was special.

"Rooney, I don't want to get up. I just want to stay here and read the messages."

But I did have to get up. Work waited.

I sent a message back, telling Nick I hoped his day was good, then got ready for my morning. After showering, dressing, making coffee, and packing my lunch—if throwing a package of ramen into my lunch sack counted—I was off.

Coffee in hand and backpack over my shoulders, I stepped out of my warm apartment building and into the cold. The wind was really ripping through the streets today. If I had PTO, I would've been back up in my apartment under my warm blankies, but I didn't, so off to the bus stop I went.

At least I didn't have to wait long for the bus. Not the first one, at least. My transfer stop though? I had the usual fifteen-minute wait there, and it was too cold for that.

I took out my phone to check the weather, crossing my fingers and toes that it would warm up as the day went on. It wasn't going to, but I did see that Nick sent me another message, making the news less hard to take. I turned my notifications back on to make sure I wouldn't miss any others and opened it up.

He'd sent me a picture of his car all covered in snow. From the looks of it, the wind had given him more than his share. Either that, or his side of the city had been slammed a lot harder than this one.

Hope you have a scraper.

I wasn't sure I had one for my car. I needed to check on that. I was going to need to drive to the mall later, the bus routes to that stop ending too soon for me to get home via public transport.

He replied with a selfie, holding one up like it was a fish for a dating profile. I couldn't help but chuckle.

He looked good. But of course he did—it was Nick. I had a feeling that even first thing in the morning he looked like a full-ass six-course meal. Wait...were six-course meals even a thing? They had to be because he was that delicious.

Nick asked if I was on my way to work, and I told him I was. Then he asked if he could call. Instead of replying, I phoned him.

“Morning, Nick. What's up?”

“I was calling to see what your schedule was this weekend and to ask if you might

want to go on another date with me.” It was so good to hear his voice.

“I’d love that.” Which probably sounded more believable before I gave him my schedule, thwarting most all times we could get together.

I was working double shifts as the Drummer Boy when my day work schedule allowed it. Ron had quit the drummer gig, and I didn’t mind adding his hours to my own schedule money wise, but socially? It was not so great for starting a new...dating-ship. Was that what we were? It wasn’t a relationship—not yet. Yeah, dating-ship. I was going with that.

We made plans, and as my bus pulled up, I said goodbye and headed to work.

It was a long, boring day in the office, and when it was finally time to leave, I nearly bolted for the door. I stopped home just long enough to change into my costume for the mall drummer gig. Work there was getting hectic as Christmas drew closer and at least that made the time go more quickly than my day job.

Today was particularly chaotic. One of the elves had called in sick, which meant, I was on Santa-line duty. On weekends, the kids were generally better about waiting their turn, but during the school week, they were often overtired, their grumpiness shining through. At least it was an early night.

When I got home, I was burned out. After the world’s fastest shower to get rid of my makeup and sweat, I changed into my favorite dinosaur pajamas, filled a sippy cup with milk, and grabbed Rooney.

I dug through my little drawer until I found my rubber blocks. They weren’t as fun as the large set of building blocks I used to have, but they came in a small container, were easy to move, and didn’t make much noise. They worked for apartment life.

Sitting on the floor, I stacked the blocks one on top of the other. When I got to five high, Rooney would “knock” them down, and I’d start all over again. One time then another and another. I sipped my milk in between and, for the first time in a long time, slipped deeply into little space.

It was exactly what I needed.

Climbing into bed that night and hugging Rooney close, I told him all about Nick and how much I liked him. As I fell asleep, part of me felt guilty for falling so deeply for someone this quickly, especially after Daddy. But it had been years since he passed—not days.

This was what Daddy had wanted for me. He didn’t want me to be alone forever. He’d made sure I knew that.

This wasn’t about me replacing him or anything like that. Nick wasn’t very much like Daddy at all. Daddy had been stern and controlling, and I liked that. I thrived on it. But it wasn’t the only thing I liked or the only way I thrived.

The truth was, I liked Nick’s softer approach too.

Once upon a time, that wasn’t what I needed. But now...now, I was beginning to think it was.

I fell asleep thinking about him.

When I woke up, I was hard, and once again, I was thinking about him. It wasn’t the first morning I’d woken up that way, and it probably wouldn’t be the last.

Nick had that effect on me, and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t like it.

Nick

We hadn't had dinner at Bobby's apartment yet, but with the number of hours he was working, there was no way I would agree to him going to all the trouble I knew he'd go to for such an event. Instead, I suggested something he'd mentioned in passing that he'd loved to do when he was a child.

A boat parade on the river outside the city. I'd never been to it, but Bobby was so excited that when I picked him up, he flung his arms around my neck and kissed me, making all the arrangements I'd managed worth every minute. I had a big surprise ready for a certain boy, and I hoped he'd be as thrilled about it as I was.

When we got down to the marina, I walked him right past the seating area where people were getting ready to watch boats decorated with lights and ornaments go by. "Nick," he said. "Aren't we going to sit in the stands?"

"Not tonight, we're not." I looped an arm around his waist and guided him down to the dock where a friend from Chained's boat was tied up. It was a forty-foot motor-sailboat, decked out from bow to stern with more decorations than were probably legal. As we approached, I saw a dozen or so people on deck, all from the club.

"We get to see one of the boats up close?" he marveled. "Wow."

"Are you two coming aboard, or do we have to leave without you?" called Ernie, the boat owner. "It's time to get in line."

"Sorry, there was traffic," I said. "Well? Bobby? Would you like to ride in the

parade?”

“Hey!” Hudson hung over the side, waving, his daddy holding onto the back of his shirt. “It’s the Little Drummer Boy from the club. I didn’t know you were coming. This is going to be so much fun.”

We boarded and soon were waiting downriver from the parade route. People were shouting back and forth from boat to boat, exchanging holiday greetings and already having a great time. There were snacks and drinks available on our boat, and the excitement level from all aboard was high.

Then, at some signal from the front of the line, the lights strung over every deck and sail blazed to light and Christmas carols began to play. Bobby and most of the littles were standing by the rails, waving to the people lining our path. In addition to the stands we’d seen at the marina, there were people outside houses and along the banks, all waving back.

“Here.” Bridger handed me a mug of hot cider. “There’s stronger stuff if you want.”

“I’ll be driving, so I think this is perfect.” I took a sip, breathing in the scent of apples and cinnamon. “Delicious.”

“How’s it going with our Little Drummer Boy?” he asked. “You look positively cheerful.”

“Thank you for the pep talk that night. Things are going well. We’re just getting to know one another, but I’m really enjoying that.”

“I can see.” He smiled in the direction of Hudson. “What a great way to celebrate the season, isn’t it?”

“It’s the very best.”

It was also cold, but thinking we’d be outside just watching, Bobby wore a couple of extra layers, and on the way back to the dock, we all squeezed into the cabin and got warm again. There weren’t quite enough seats to go around, giving me the opportunity to have Bobby on my lap, snuggling close while everyone laughed and talked and Ernie bragged about the Most Spirited award he and his vessel had won.

As we drove away, Bobby leaned back in the seat and sighed. “I don’t want the evening to end.”

“Want to stop at my house for a nightcap?” I suggested. “We have to drive right back on the way to your apartment.”

“Okay, sounds perfect. You really surprised me back there. I would have been very happy just to watch, but to be on the boat? When my parents took me, I used to pretend I was on board one of them, riding along with the lights and music and waving at all the people on shore. How did you know?”

“I didn’t, really. I just thought if you enjoyed seeing the boats, you might like this even better.” I parked and climbed out, going around to open his door. “Right this way.”

Once inside, I led the way into the kitchen. “Would you like coffee or tea? I think I also have sparkling water,” I said. “Are you hungry?”

“Water is great, sparkling or flat, either way, and I stuffed myself on the boat. There were so many things to eat. All the chips and dips and cold cuts. Oh, and that delicious curried butternut squash soup. I had two bowls.”

“It was good.” I poured us each a glass of sparkling water, added a couple of ice

cubes, and handed Bobby his. “Then let’s go sit on the couch and talk.” I couldn’t resist kissing him, though, and when his body melted into mine, I couldn’t help whispering, “Or the bedroom?”

He nodded. “Bedroom.”

Kissing all the way, we eventually ended up beside my bed. I helped him out of his layers of clothes, glad they’d kept him warm but frustrated at how long I was taking. Finally, I tucked him under the covers to be cozy and warm while I undressed as well. Seeing him there, his head on my pillow, brought a lump to my throat. I had it bad for Bobby, not just physically. But that too.

Joining him, I folded him into my arms and kissed him, his lips warm and firm under mine. We lay facing one another with nothing between us, cocks brushing together, both hard as steel. Our kisses grew more frantic as we explored one another’s bodies, growing more frantic with each stroke. When I didn’t think I could wait any longer, I fumbled in the nightstand drawer for some lube and a condom.

Bobby rolled onto his back and reached for me. “I’m clean. I haven’t been with anyone since...well you know. And I took a test in case...well, in case of us.”

“I did the same.” I kissed him again and tossed the condom back into the drawer, keeping the lube in my hand. “Because of us.”

Kneeling between his legs, I squeezed lube on my fingertips and worked one into his hole. My other hand I wrapped around his cock, rubbing my palm over the head and down the shaft. I didn’t want to hurry him, although all I could think about was being inside him. A second finger joined the first, gliding in and out, preparing him for me. Bending, I closed my lips around the head of his cock and sucked, tasting him and growing harder. Taking my time, wanting him to feel how much I needed him. I bobbed up and down, sucking, licking, and nibbling, taking him into my throat

until...

“I’m going to...ohhhh,” he groaned, gripping my hair and bucking his hips. “Yes!”

I drank him down, salty and hot and sexier than anything.

“Please,” he gasped, panting, “I need you inside me.”

He didn’t have to ask me twice. I reared up and, pulling my fingers out replaced them with my cock. His body welcomed me in, tight as a glove but much hotter. In and out, faster and faster. I was already so close before I even entered him that it took all I had not to spurt before I fully impaled him. He was magnificent, and all too soon I reached my own peak, his muscles milking me of every drop.

We cuddled up together for a while, and I was just enjoying his company, his warmth, and the kisses we kept exchanging. “You can stay over, can’t you?” I asked finally. “We can wake up early enough for me to take you home to get dressed for work.”

“I wish I could,” he said, yawning. “But...”

“But?” I encouraged. “You can tell me. If you just like your bed better, that’s fine.”

“No, this bed is so much nicer, but I-I always sleep with my raccoon stuffie.”

“Oh, in that case we’d better go get him.” I rolled out of bed and to my feet. “We don’t want him to be all alone all night. He might worry about you.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

I reached down and pulled him up. “Get dressed and we’ll be back in bed together in

no time. I miss you already.” Which was silly since we were kissing again on the way out the door. And when we got to his apartment, we ended up right back in bed again. Rooney had to wait a while before he could join us.

Bobby

I woke in Nicks's arms, my own wrapped around Rooney, a smile lifting my lips at the memory of the night before. It had been so perfect, so beautiful, so...hot. And then, as I fell asleep, he handed me Rooney. I was happy he didn't judge me for my stuffie. It was one thing for daddies to like little things when they were playing; it was another to accept that some little things were more than just for little space. Some were for every day, and that was how it was for me with Rooney.

Nick had been so sweet on our date, it wasn't surprising that he'd been sweet about my stuffie. Still...it meant far more to me than he could know. I'd try and tell him, but not now with him still quietly snoring away.

I wanted to roll over to look at his sleeping face. But more than that, I didn't want to wake him up because that would mean our time was over. As much as I loved our night together, it was a workday and that meant, the two of us had places to go that weren't out to brunch or a walk or another round in bed. We both had work, and it sucked.

The sun was starting to rise and I was already dreading my alarm going off, and it would go off soon despite my wish for time to stop for just a little while. And when it went off, I had to get up. There was nothing I could do about it because, as wonderful as it was to be in Nick's warm embrace, feeling his body pressed against mine, I needed to go to work. He did too.

Instead of risking waking him, I stayed where I was and listened to him breathe, trying to recapture sleep.

I was just about there when the stupid alarm went off. I grabbed my phone and turned it off then tried to sneak out without waking him.

It didn't work.

He pulled me close. "Are you a snooze kind of guy?" He pressed a kiss to my shoulder.

"No." I rolled over this time, no longer worried about waking him. I wished I was because it would mean we had more time together, awake time anyway.

"You're the kind of guy who sets his alarm exactly on time to avoid stealing sleep from yourself?"

"Yeah." I still had Rooney in my hands and was surprised when Nick reached over and gave him a scratch on the head, like he was a kitten or a puppy.

"Well, then, you need to get up," he said.

Why did he have to be right?

It felt like he wanted to say more, but what more was there to say? It was time to go to work. Nothing was going to change that unless I won the lottery last night, which was pretty hard to do when you didn't play.

"I know." I kissed his cheek, padded into the bathroom, and took my shower, wishing it was significantly larger. If I couldn't even wash my hair without bumping my elbows, there was no way the two of us would fit in there together. But gods, how great it would be to stand under the warm water with him, grabbing a few extra moments together.

When I came out, he was already dressed. I hated that. I hadn't wanted him to rush, but that was the way of it. It wasn't like he didn't have places to be too. He was just finishing putting on his shoes, and as I stepped out, he went into the restroom.

I grabbed my clothes and got dressed, noticing Rooney sitting in the same spot on the bed I always kept him when I wasn't there. Nick—remembered. Too sweet.

After putting on a pot of coffee, I threw on my clothes, made a cheese sandwich for breakfast, and tossed a frozen meal into my lunch sack. I poured coffee into my travel mug and was ready to go.

"You didn't have to rush," I said, pulling my coat off the hook and buttoning it. "You could have stayed here."

He shook his head. "Actually, I need to get to work too. Can I drive you to yours?"

I thought about saying no, telling him the bus was fine and not to go out of his way. But as I was forming the words, he reminded me that my job was actually on the way to his house. I gratefully accepted. It meant more time with him. There was no turning that down.

The city wasn't fully awake yet, which made navigating the streets much easier. We didn't hit as much traffic as we could have, and he dropped me off outside earlier than usual. I'd never wanted traffic before, but extending our time together sounded wonderful about then.

"See you soon?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'd like that." With our schedules, I wasn't sure how soon it could actually be, but if it was possible for me to make the time, I was going to.

I leaned in for a quick kiss then hopped out before people started honking at him for stopping in a no-stopping zone. It wasn't like he was even in the way, but people had a tendency to get really pissy on this street for some reason, the sound of their honking often reaching the windows on my floor.

He waved and pulled away.

Work wasn't too busy, but there was enough to keep the day moving. At closing time, just like almost every night this month, I went home with just enough time to get ready for my job at the mall.

I wasn't doing a full double shift for Ron today—my work schedule didn't allow it—but I put in enough hours that when I got to my building, all I wanted to do was fall into bed and sleep for a week.

When I reached my door, there was a box in front of it.

I couldn't remember ordering anything, and I would have remembered. Ordering always cost money—something I was sadly lacking. But when I picked it up, it had my name on it.

Once inside, I dropped my backpack on the counter but didn't bother taking off my coat before opening the box. I was far too curious to wait that long.

Inside the cardboard box was a beautifully wrapped present. The paper was covered in Santa Clauses. The tag said, Open now . There wasn't a name, and, thankfully, it wasn't one of those Don't open until Christmas tags because that would have been hard.

I tore the paper off and lifted the lid. Underneath was tissue paper folded over with a sticker on it—a sticker of a raccoon. I peeled it off gently and stuck it on the dry-

erase board that lived on my refrigerator, where I kept notes about what I needed to buy or restock. It was adorable, and I didn't want to risk it getting ruined as I finished opening my gift.

I went back to the box and unfolded the paper to reveal a card and a golden envelope. Underneath the card was an adorable pair of pajamas—Christmas pajamas covered in tiny raccoons. Half of them wore Santa hats, and the rest long red underwear. I wasn't sure which ones I loved best.

They were ridiculous—ridiculously awesome.

I opened the card, expecting it to be a random Christmas card, but it wasn't. Inside was an invitation.

Not just any invitation, either. This was a special invitation, one just for me. An invitation from Nick. It wasn't for a Christmas party or a dinner at a nice restaurant. No, he was asking me on a proper play date.

He hadn't played with me little yet, though I supposed he got a glimpse with Rooney. But he was about to because there was nothing that could possibly get in the way of me accepting.

My answer was absolutely, positively yes.

I couldn't wait.

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Nick

After our first night together, the next logical step was to see how we worked as daddy/little, and the best place to take that out for a spin? Chained, of course. It wasn't easy finding a night when Bobby was free and I was in town, but we managed, and he was so excited. Me too. I reserved a changing room I thought he'd like and drove over to pick him up. Bobby carried a backpack holding whatever he thought he'd need for the evening. If our relationship progressed, I'd be helping him pack that other times, but for tonight, I wanted him to do everything in a way that made him as comfortable as possible. He said he had clothes he wanted to wear. I said good deal. One step at a time.

The fact it was so hard to find a night to do this was a big reminder of why I had not tried to have my own boy for so long. After Christmas, Bobby was going to have more free time, but my job was going to accelerate again. I had been holding back, refusing any work but my own, but even that would have me away a lot.

Would he want that?

Was it even fair to ask?

I tried to shrug that away for the moment and just take things as they came. Changing jobs would help a lot, and it was something I would look into as well. Bobby was just too special to walk away from without trying. He liked me, I liked him, and I was over the moon to walk into Chained with him by my side.

"Hello, sir," said tonight's subbie at the desk. "Welcome."

Bobby pulled out the free pass he'd been given, but I waved it away. "I have a visitor pass for you, so hang on to that for another time."

"Are you sure?" he asked. "I don't mind using it."

"Positive."

"Okay." But his voice sounded off.

"What's wrong, Bobby? Tell Papa."

"You want me to use it without you?"

Oh no. "If you want to come when I am out of town, for example. Until you have your own membership, you need me with you to use the others."

"My other daddy would never have wanted me to come without him..."

"I want you to have freedom to come and go and do everything, but I hope we'll be here together most of the time."

"Not because you don't want to be here with me?"

"Absolutely not. But you are getting to know people, and they are our friends. If I am working, why shouldn't you be able to visit?"

He smiled. "Yes, that's good. I should be able to." Bobby didn't comment on my remark about having his own membership. He couldn't afford it on his own, but if we were a couple, I could add him to mine for a much lower additional fee.

I handed over my phone and waited while Bobby did the same. He had been through

the background check before his temp job here, so all he had to do was sign in. “Let’s go to the changing room.”

We proceeded down the hallway, and I stopped him halfway down. “This is us.”

“The main room is farther,” he said, looking puzzled. Then his expression cleared. “What did you do, Papa?”

“I think you know. I reserved us a private room for the night. Come see if you like it.”

Eagerly, he followed me in. Bobby loved all animals, and the one I chose featured a full-wall mural of wildlife, including... “There’s a Rooney!” He darted across the room to get a better look at the raccoon. “So cute!”

He loved it, and even joked that he was willing to spend the whole evening in the room, but he was also excited to get out to the little room.

“Let’s get you changed and then we can decide what to do next,” I told him, unzipping his backpack. “What did you bring?” I laid out the clothing he’d packed. A fitted tee embellished with a raccoon wearing a baseball cap, thick training underwear, blue short shorts, white knee socks, and light-up sneakers. “Very nice!”

“Thank you, Papa.”

There was a changing table, so I helped him up onto it and undressed him. As I pulled his shirt over his head, he was starting to sink into little space in the most charming way. His muscles relaxed, and his smile softened. “Papa, can we build blocks? I used to have big blocks, but there’s no room at my house so I only have little ones.”

“I’m sure the blocks will be out. What do you want to build?”

“A high high tower.” He grinned. “And then we knock it right down. Rooney helps at home, but he isn’t here.”

We’d discussed bringing the raccoon, but he decided it would be too easy for him to get lost, so he’d stayed at home on Bobby’s bed where he lived most of the time.

“Well, you can do it for him.” I patted his hip. “Lift up so I can get your underpants on.”

“Yes, Papa.” He did as requested, and I pulled the thick cotton underwear up his legs. “Now my shorts. I want to play!” He wriggled then looked down in dismay. “Oh no. Look, it’s all stiff.”

“Oh, I see that.” I tsked. “We need to take care of that before we go out to play.”

“Papa, fix it.” His lower lip thrust out.

“Don’t worry. I will. Want me to kiss it? Or rubbies?”

“Rubbies, Papa. So we can play!”

I closed my fist around his very hard cock and gave him a good squeeze and another, rubbing and stroking until he spurted all over my hand and sighed. “All better now?”

“Yes, Papa. Now we can play.”

I cleaned him up with a wipe from the box provided in the room then pulled his underwear up the rest of the way and then put on his shorts and shoes and socks before holding out a hand. “The little room awaits. How high do you think we can build the blocks?”

“So so high!”

We paraded through the club together, stopping to greet some friends at the conversation area before continuing on to the little room. It wasn't a special event day, but of course the room was still decorated and everything going on was holiday themed. Chained even had a set of holiday blocks, which Bobby immediately ran to.

We spent a good part of the evening playing with blocks but also visited the coloring table and other games and crafts. It was the best evening I'd ever had at Chained. Maybe anywhere.

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Bobby

I'd been doing so well this holiday season. Even before Nick came into my life, I'd been holding my own. Sure, I'd been working a lot, and that distracted me from things, but it was more than that. I didn't wake up every day with a weight on me like I normally did. And the sorrow that usually came with this time of year hadn't seeped in.

That was until this morning.

When I woke up, my alarm went off as normal. I grabbed it and shut it off, just like every other day, but as I went to put it back down, I saw the date across the front of it. It was like a slap to the face. Suddenly all of the pain and sorrow that surrounded Daddy's death came hurling back at me.

I grabbed Rooney, curled into a ball, and sobbed. And sobbed. And sobbed.

It was the anniversary of the day Daddy died—the day I sat in the hospital room with him, holding his hand, watching him take his last breath as all the monitors started to beep and the nurses rushed in. And then I had to do the most difficult thing I ever had. I stopped them from trying to save him, reminding them that he had an order in place to just let him go.

It was what he wanted. And even if they had managed to restart his breathing and his heart, it wouldn't have saved him. Not really. His diagnosis was terminal. Full. Stop.

Even knowing that, the guilt of those few moments still came back to haunt me. Not

every day like they used to. But once in a while, like this morning, it would come barreling back to me and turn me useless.

I missed him. I did. And part of me always would. My mourning no longer took up most of my life, but it would always be there to some extent. It wasn't as painful as it had been in those early days, or even during those years when I was numb and living a half-life.

But the thing was, today wasn't just about missing him. This was about replaying those last two weeks—watching him in pain, suffering, scared. Remembering those last minutes when I did what I had to, even if my heart hated it.

It was too much for me and I gave myself over to the tears, letting my body physically try and sort it all out. Was that the healthiest way to handle it? Probably not, but it was the best I was going to be able to do.

I eventually pulled myself together enough to call in sick. My boss must have remembered what day it was because he didn't ask me what was wrong, how many days I'd be gone, or the ever-popular, Did you go to the doctor? All he said was, "I hope tomorrow is better."

I hoped so too.

Holding Roonie close, I cried until I didn't have any tears left then struggled to get myself ready and out the door. A couple of times, I'd considered calling Nick. He'd be there for me. I had no doubt about that.

We'd talked about Daddy and how hard it was to lose him. I didn't hold back. That time in my life shaped who I was now, and pretending it didn't happen wasn't good for either of us. And it wasn't like I wasn't ready to move on. This wasn't about that. Sometimes memories hurt. That's all there was to it.

In the end, I decided not to bother him. It was a workday for him and it was asking a lot to have him call in so he could help me. Maybe if we'd been together longer, but we hadn't. We were still really new and, while I felt really great about us and saw us having a future together, that didn't mean we had a commitment.

Instead, I attempted to deal with the pain on my own. And I handled it, but it sucked. I felt like I'd run a marathon instead of staying in bed for hours.

Every year on this day, I brought greenery to the grave, usually in the form of a grave blanket or a wreath, depending on what looked best. I wasn't sure why I bothered—it wasn't like he was there to enjoy them—but for whatever reason, it made me feel like maybe, just maybe, he was getting some Christmas joy too.

I barely got to my car when the phone rang. I answered it, assuming it was my boss asking something about a project I was working on, but it wasn't. It was Nick.

“Hey, I wanted to catch you during your break. Did I time it right?”

My company was one of those places where everyone had the same breaks at the same time. In theory, I understood why that might work, but in practice, it was awful. You always had to wait for the bathroom, the microwave, and the coffeepot. Staggered breaks made the most sense, but when did big business ever decide to make sense? One thing it was good for was that Nick knew when he could best reach me. But more importantly than that, he wanted to know when that window was. The man was such a green flag.

“I didn't go to work today.”

“Are you not feeling well? I could bring you chicken soup or take you to the doctor, or—”

I cut him off. “It’s the anniversary of the day...the one where...” I was already choking up. There was no way I was going to get the entire sentence out. Thankfully, I didn’t need to. He knew what I meant.

“Oh. I’m so sorry.”

I was so glad he didn’t press for details. I wasn’t sure I was strong enough for that. No. That was a lie. I knew unequivocally that I wasn’t. Not today anyway. I was barely holding on as it was.

“I was going to ask you out to dinner tonight,” he said, “but if you’d rather just go home, I’ll understand.” It was my one night off this week.

“Actually...” I hesitated. I never wanted him to feel like he was living in someone else’s shadow. He wasn’t. It wasn’t like that. “I was going to grab some greenery and go to the graveyard. Do you want to come?”

He turned it back on me. “Would you like me there?”

“More than anything.” It was easier to admit than I thought it would be.

I offered to pick him up since his office was on the way to the place I was going to get the greenery, and, surprisingly, he agreed. I’d thought maybe he’d want to meet me there so he didn’t feel trapped in the graveyard. Some people got kind of weird about that, but not Nick. He promised to meet me outside and, as I pulled up, there he was.

We drove to the Christmas tree lot where I always stopped in near silence, the low sound of Christmas music on my car radio the only thing either of us commented on. I appreciated it.

The lot sold Christmas trees, but his big sales were always the greenery. He was one of the few places that had them readily available for house and business doors, gravesites, and he even had garland for banisters or around windows. They were all pretty spectacular.

I found a beautiful memorial blanket. The owner reminded me how to keep it looking fresh, but I wasn't planning to do any of the things they recommended. This was going on a burial site. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust and all that. I'd be leaving it there and letting Mother Nature take care of it. For some reason, that felt better than remembering the dead by trying to keep cut leaves looking alive, and that's basically what these were.

Being polite, I listened, nodded, and smiled. That was the best they were going to get out of me.

The graveyard was about twenty minutes south of the city. We drove in almost complete silence, the radio even off. It didn't feel like it was because he thought he was intruding on me. At least that's not the sense I got. It was more that he was letting me take the lead on this.

When we arrived, I parked the car, and he carried the blanket. We walked together to Daddy's grave.

"This was William." I laid the blanket down. "Only I called him Daddy, always." He'd preferred it, even in public. "I think you two would've been friends, even though you are very different from each other."

"I'd love to hear how." The two of us stood there holding hands as I told him happy story after happy story about Daddy.

"Sounds like he was a wonderful man." He kissed the top of my head. "I'm glad he

got to have such a wonderful boy.”

“Just like you do?” I leaned into his side.

“Yes, just like I do.”

Nick

Our company party was always held at the office—until this year. I’d been glad about that because it meant I could hang out awhile, eat some food, have a couple of drinks, and generally then make a break for it. With all the travel I’d had to do over the past several years, I hardly even knew anyone anymore, so I didn’t feel the need to stick around.

But this time, the powers that be deemed that we would be gathering in the bar on the first floor of our office building. It was convenient, at least, and also the first time when we were encouraged to bring a plus one. Another convenience since it was the first time in my tenure there where I had a plus one.

“You really don’t have to come if you don’t want to,” I told Bobby for the hundredth time when I met him outside the building. “We can just go out to dinner and forget the whole thing.”

“Don’t you have to be there?” he asked. “Won’t it look bad if you skip out?”

“I’d have said yes before, but I don’t actually care that much now. Since they chose not to give me the supervisor’s position, and I’m no longer allowing them to walk all over me, it’s a little tense in there.” We’d talked about all of this more than once, but remembering it made me feel that much less obligated to show up.

“In that case, we definitely should go.” He linked his arm with mine. “I spent time looking this good and everyone will be jealous.”

A chuckle burst out of me. Bobby never talked about himself that way. I loved that he did. Besides. “You do look spectacular. I’m just glad you realize it.” He wore black jeans, boots, and a black cashmere sweater under a deep-maroon blazer. None of it was new, but all of it looked incredible on him. “You even got your hair styled.”

“I had to put the effort in if I was going to match your splendor. I want to make you proud.”

“You always make me proud.” I kissed his cheek. “How could you ever think otherwise? Let’s go in there and make them all jealous.” I’d bought a new jacket for this, to go with my favorite pair of jeans that made me look better than I was and a long-sleeved T-shirt with a faint pattern of Christmas trees on it.

The party was in full swing when we entered, everyone drinking and laughing and making off-color jokes. So not our scene, but it was so nice to have Bobby at my side. He handled the whole thing like a pro, meeting everyone and making them feel comfortable right away. It reminded me of the night we met, when I observed him being the Little Drummer Boy, letting the littles bang on his drum but also making everyone he encountered smile.

It was the first thing I noticed about him, although not the last.

“Come over here, Nick. Have a drink with us.” That particular request came from the executives seated in a booth along the front wall of the bar and was quite a surprise. And not really a welcome one. “And bring your date.”

“You up for this?” I murmured. “I haven’t exchanged five words with any of those old guys in years... I didn’t think they’d even remember who I am.”

“Of course they do, Papa,” he whispered close to my ear. “You’re a real asset. Wasn’t that what the HR lady said when telling you you were screwed out of the job you

earned?”

“Have I told you how awesome you are, lately?” I kissed him on the cheek. “Come meet the big shots.”

We approached the table and took a seat. A server zoomed right up and took our orders, which we had in front of us in about three point five seconds. Coworkers were lined up at the bar waiting for their drinks, but when you hung out with the bosses, the service was much better. I’d ordered a cranberry martini to sip, and Bobby had a holiday mojito, whatever that was, and the table was laden with a variety of appetizers.

“I wanted to take the opportunity to thank you for your hard work.” This came from the CEO. “It has come to our attention that the supervisor in your department was struggling, and you picked up the slack again and again.” His gaze lit on the CFO whose nephew he was talking about, before returning to me. “I have increased the raise you were given accordingly.”

Bobby sat beside me, quiet but alert. He linked hands with mine under the table, giving me a supportive squeeze. To someone who didn’t know the whole story, what I was being told would be amazing. And it wasn’t awful. But it still was not fulfilling the promise I’d been given. And I wasn’t sure what to do. More money was a good thing. And we were at a party. The smart thing to do would be make an appointment to meet with him later, since he did seem to know I was alive.

But somehow...it wasn’t happening. I’d been trying not to take on extra work since my review, with limited success. And I had resisted doing the supervisor’s job without the title—which left that job open and undone. Since its previous occupant had not left the department in good shape, that was a huge problem.

One I hadn’t done a thing to fix.

Before I could decide what to say next, the CEO beat me to it. “I also understand certain promises were made without being recorded in any way.”

“That’s correct.” My teeth were so clenched, my jaw throbbed.

“That’s not how our company operates. It is not our policy to treat loyal employees in a way that might have them choosing to leave us.”

“I-I have always tried to do my best here. But I was disappointed.” Bobby’s fingers stroking mine helped to keep me calm.

“As you should have been. I only hope it’s not too late for us to make it right.”

“Sir?” I didn’t want to assume anything at this point. I’d been lied to once. Really more because a sooner promotion to another department had been hinted at many times.

“If you want to take on the mess your former supervisor left behind, we’d like to offer you that position effective immediately. With whatever help you’ll need to clean up the mess.”

I felt like I won Secret Santa. How could this be happening? I’d envisioned myself quitting and going elsewhere as soon as possible. My brain was recalculating like the GPS on my car when I did something unexpected. Did I still want to stay? Could I believe what he said?

“I have a question before I answer yours,” I said.

“Go on then, ask.” The CEO was sixty but looked several years younger, probably because he had the money to make that happen. It also meant his face was a little less mobile and harder to read than most. “I’ll try to answer honestly.”

I should hope so.

“Who told you about what happened?”

“It was in your supervisor’s exit interview. He admitted to using you and keeping you hanging and swore that you were the right man for the job.”

“So why did it take so long to offer me this?”

He sighed. “Because it was coming from someone who was such a mess, we just had to dig in and research to be sure it was all true.”

I glanced at Bobby, who was still calm and quiet. Then I said, “Can I sleep on it?”

“Of course.” He nodded. “It’s always a good idea to consider a big decision. But I hope you will accept our offer.”

We talked a little more and then Bobby and I left the table. We mingled for an hour or so and then exited the bar and headed for my car.

“You are taking the job, right?” he asked once we were out of earshot of the company people.

“You bet. With almost no traveling, it means I’ll have a lot more time to spend with a certain person who is not only the sweetest boy but who was a rock for me when I needed him back there.”

“I’m glad, Papa, because you’ve been that for me.”

My heart swelled three sizes bigger with pride at hearing that from my boy.

Bobby

It was my last day at the mall—the last day Santa would be there, taking pictures, listening to lists, and...getting grumpy. Santa had been so jolly at the start of the month, but now that it was Christmas Eve, his jolliness had been depleted. He was done. D-O-N-E.

I didn't think the kids noticed. Most of them were so sugared up and excited about Santa that they barely stuck around long enough to give him their entire list. But I sure noticed, and I was ready to take off my uniform costume for the last time—at least for this year. Even if the money situation for me was better next year, I probably would do this gig again.

It had been fun and, when all was said and done, it was the reason I found Nick. What was not to love? Maybe I'd even get a promotion to Elf. That could be fun.

When I got to the parking lot, Nick was pulling in, too. We walked in together. He was carrying a large take-out bag with our dinner, and I was there for it. My stomach had been growling for the past hour. Best of all, the bag was nondescript, with no restaurant name on it, which meant it was Chinese—my favorite.

“How was work?” He held the outside door open for me.

“I don't know, really. It was wild and chaotic because Christmas Eve, but also...I kind of wish it wasn't over just yet.”

I unlocked my door, and we went inside. Not for the first time, I was sad at how tiny

my shower was. I needed to get clean, but I didn't want to leave Nick long enough to do so. In the end, there wasn't an option. I was stinky, and I wanted to be all cuddled up with Papa. A shower was my only option.

When I came out, Nick had set the food containers on the counter. He'd even taken out a plate for him, and it was sitting beside a dish I didn't recognize. When I looked more closely, I realized why—it was Christmas-themed divided dish, and I loved it.

“Papa, did you get me a new plate?” I bounced on my toes.

“I did. And there's a matching sippy cup.”

I squealed and hugged him tight. “I'm gonna go real fast and get my clothes on!”

“Okay, you do that,” he said with a quick peck on my lips.

I ran off to change into my raccoon pajamas—the ones he'd given me. We didn't have any real Christmas Eve plans, deciding that Christmas would be our day to do the celebrating. But that didn't mean we weren't going to spend some time together tonight and have fun. And if that meant Christmas jammies, then that meant Christmas jammies.

“Did you get chicken nuggies?” I walked over to the counter.

They weren't really chicken nuggets—they were sweet-and-sour chicken without the sauce—but he knew what I meant.

“Of course I did. And I got you crab rangoons and noodles.” Noodles being the pork lo mein I loved. He'd really gone out of his way to get the perfect dinner, and I was there for it.

We ate standing by the counter. There wasn't really enough space to eat anywhere else unless one of us sat on the bed, which was hardly ideal.

I was in a weird spot as far as my apartment went. I hadn't handed my paperwork to the landlord, but I also hadn't told them no. Someone down the hall did the same thing last month, and when they didn't sign, they were offered a three-month lease at the same price. I was kind of holding out for that. It would be easier than needing to move right at the New Year and much better than paying so much more in rent. And I hadn't found anything worth taking that wasn't more expensive than I wanted. A three-month lease was perfection. Maybe I should've asked Santa for that before he got all grumpy.

"Papa, this is the perfect dinner." I grabbed another piece of chicken.

"I'm glad you like it. I brought some other things for you for after dinner too."

"How did you do that? You only had the takeaway bag." I was there. I watched him come all the way in.

"That's where you're wrong." He pointed to his backpack against the wall.

I hadn't even seen him wearing it. He wasn't a backpack kind of guy, so I probably should have noticed. I was too busy drooling over the Chinese food, I guessed.

"Were you being tricky, Papa?"

"Tricky or filled with the Christmas spirit. One of the two."

"It was Christmas spirit."

I set my now-empty plate in the sink. I was eager to see what else he'd brought but

clung to my Christmas sippy cup. He asked me three times if I was sure I was done eating and not stopping because I was worried about prezzies. I promised him I was. Besides, there was plenty of food to go back to later, including the more traditional Chinese dishes I hadn't touched yet.

"Well, go sit down on your bed or your beanbag chair, then." He ruffled my hair.

More than once, Papa had told me I needed to get a couch, but there wasn't room for it. We went to his place sometimes, but with my schedule, this apartment tended to be easier with that one caveat. Either we were sitting on the bed together, or we were sitting on the bed together. If I stayed here, I needed to reevaluate the furniture situation. Maybe a lounge chair would do?

I grabbed Rooney and plopped into my chair, which was angled more like a bed currently. Papa pulled out a box wrapped in paper covered with tiny Rudolfs.

"Now, I know we're doing presents tomorrow, but this is a Christmas Eve present. Which means, you can open it today."

I wasn't sure where that logic came from, but I wasn't going to argue with it if it meant I got to open my gift now. I took a long sip from my cup, set it down, and grabbed the present. The paper was almost too adorable to rip, but my excitement made the decision for me. I tore it open with abandon.

Inside the box was a movie, some microwave popcorn, folded-up popcorn boxes, a box of my favorite candy, and a little stuffed popcorn box from my favorite stuffie company. I'd seen them in bookstores, hugged them, and wanted to take them home, but I could never justify the price.

Now, not only did I have one, but it was the cutest thing I'd ever seen.

“Are we having a movie night, Papa?”

“We are.” He took the DVD collection out of the box.

I was probably one of the only people in the city who still had a DVD player, but of course, Papa knew that and planned accordingly.

“This is a collection of all the Christmas ‘classics,’” he said, putting the word all in quotes. “There are some cute ones missing, but there’s a lot here. We can watch movies all night long if we wanted to.”

I had other things I’d rather do if we were staying up all night, but movies sounded fun...at least for a little while.

“Do you want your snacks now?”

I shook my head. “My tummy’s still full from dinner. Can we watch on the bed so I can snuggle you, Papa?”

“Yeah, I’d like that a lot.”

He turned off the light over the stove, put the DVD in the player, and climbed into bed with me. I snuggled up close, hugging him tightly as the opening credits rolled.

I wasn’t sure what it was about the moment—all the sweet planning that went into it, the feel of his arms around me after a long, hectic season, knowing this was the first Christmas I’d had any joy in years, or what.

But as I looked up at him, the words flowed from my mouth. “I love you, Papa.” They felt natural and true and perfect.

When he met my eyes, he said, “I love you, my sweet Bobby, so very much.”

I snuggled back into him as *The Night Before Christmas* filled the screen. It was officially Christmas, and I was spending it with Papa. What more could a little ask for?

Nick

The sun was not yet up when I woke on Christmas morning. With Bobby in my arms and the sweetness of the day littles and lots of big people waited all year for, I didn't want to waste a moment.

And I didn't consider my sweet boy nestled in my arms to be wasted time, so as he slumbered on, I just held him and considered all the changes that took place in our life in the last few weeks. I'd met him when I was hoping for a promotion that I was denied and then given. Now I recognized I'd used my job as an excuse not to live a full life. And I was positive I'd be having that now with Bobby.

"Are you awake, Papa?" his sleepy voice asked. "I'm hungry."

"Then you're in luck because we have a big breakfast planned, remember?"

He rolled on top of me. "Cinnamon rolls and sausages and eggs and...everything."

"And then presents."

"Maybe first presents?" he asked. "I waited all night."

"We agreed, didn't we?"

He let out a huff. "I didn't know it would be so hard."

"How about we take a shower and put on our new Christmas shirts and then cook

breakfast together?" I suggested.

"I'd argue that it would take longer, but I really like the idea of the shower." He grabbed my hand and tugged me out of bed with him. "Let's get all clean."

And we did get clean...after we got messy, so it was an hour before we got to the kitchen to put the cinnamon rolls that had been rising all night in the refrigerator into the oven to bake. Soon the sausages were sizzling, the eggs scrambling, and we were ready to eat. Fortunately, we'd burned enough calories in the shower that we were both able to do justice to our breakfast before turning our attention to the rest of the day's activities.

Starting with prezzies.

I was so excited about the gifts I'd bought for Bobby, both big and little. He hadn't asked for anything in particular, but I'd taken note of all the things he admired as we spent time together. And the first thing I handed him was his stocking.

"When did you fill this?" he asked. "It was just empty when we went to bed."

I shrugged. "Don't look at me. Santa must have come and done it."

Eyes sparkling, he plopped down on the floor and spilled the contents of the red velvet stocking into his lap. It was a drugstore stocking, nothing too fancy, but he loved it, and judging from all the cheerful oohs and aahs, he loved what Santa had found to stuff his stocking with.

"Santa shopped at the candy store we saw in the Christmas village!"

He certainly had, buying all sorts of Christmas candies that Bobby had pointed out. Including the chocolate reindeer that was "almost as good as a raccoon." I'd also put

in a top and a ball that sparkled when you bounced it, a couple of toy cars, and a crayon that drew in three colors. And then we got to the packages. I knew Bobby had to pare down so much when he moved, and he'd given up a lot of things he really missed, but until we got to the moving-in stage, which I hoped would be very soon, I didn't want to overwhelm his apartment with anything too big. So small toys, some little clothes, a warm, lined hoodie, and a better drum for next year were my choices. After he opened each one, he came over and kissed me and thanked me. I'd also kept it not too expensive because I didn't want him to feel like he couldn't reciprocate.

"Okay, Papa, your turn!" He brought a box over to me and set it on my lap. "It's only one thing, but I hope you like it."

"I'm sure I will." I would no matter what it was because of the giver, but when I opened the box, I found an antique pocket watch inside. Something I'd seen in the Christmas village and which he had spent far more than he should on. But I would never insult him by saying so. I just hugged him tight to me and promised to carry it with me always.

"Turn it over, Papa," he said.

On the back it said, simply, Best Papa . My eyes filled with tears. "You had it engraved."

"No, it came that way. It belonged long ago to someone else who was the best papa then. I thought it was kismet."

I held out my arms, and he came into them again. "I love you so much, my sweetest boy."

"I love you, my best Papa. Merry Christmas."

We spent the rest of the day relaxing together taking a walk and talking about the future. One that looked very merry and bright.

Bobby

Miss Lily had arranged a little New Year's Eve party. I was so excited. I'd never been one to do the whole New Year's Eve thing, but this year I was all in. After seeing the little Christmas party, I was ready to be part of the fun.

The Christmas party had been such a success, Miss Lily decided to add tonight's event to their schedule, and unlike the Christmas party, I could come to this one. I wasn't an employee this time; I was simply a guest. And I was thrilled.

Papa even got us another fancy dressing room. On such a busy night, it wasn't one of the over-the-top ones, but it had a private space for us and was designed for littles and their caregivers, and that was enough. I didn't need a changing table or a daddy-and-me rocking chair. I just needed help getting ready. The real fun was going to be the party itself.

We checked in, and Miss Lily showed us to the room. Papa had picked out my clothes for the night, and I still didn't know what he brought, but I was excited to see what he wanted to dress me in to show me off to his friends.

I had met most of them and their littles before, but I didn't know most of them very well—at least, not yet. I was hoping tonight would help change that.

“Have a seat.” He tapped the lounge chair.

I obeyed, and he set the backpack on the counter and opened it up.

“It’s New Year’s Eve, and you know what that means?”

I had no idea and told him as much.

“It means sparkling like the sun—”

“Glitter!”

He nodded.

“Did you get me the kind that goes on your face?” I’d seen it on the internet, and it looked like tons of fun.

“We’ll get to your face later. First, I want to show you your fabulous clothes.”

The first thing he pulled out was a pair of itty-bitty shorts that sparkled like they were made of glitter but were somehow still soft. I didn’t know what sorcery went into that, but I was there for it.

Next, he pulled out thigh-high socks with a similar vibe, only they were blue and sparkly. I was going to be the cutest little at the party.

Then came my thick underwear. Nothing special there, but I was still waiting for the shirt. Was Daddy going to put me in a onesie? Had he bought me a different kind of top? Would the glitter be on my chest with no shirt, or maybe he planned to leave me bare?

All the possibilities rolled through my head, and each one sounded good to me.

I was surprised when he pulled out a gift bag and handed it to me.

“I got you this, but know that if it’s not something you want, I have other clothes in here. There’s zero pressure. But I saw it and... Just open it.”

He seemed nervous, which caught me off guard.

I pulled out the tissue paper, reached inside, and pulled out what looked like a normal T-shirt—until I unfolded it.

It was anything but normal.

The skin-tight crop top was pretty close to the same design as my Daddy’s Boy shirt. Only this one said, Papa’s Boy .

He’d told me once that I’d always be Daddy’s boy, and that he was glad for that because that time in my life had made me who I was now. Seeing him give me this...it had me tearing up.

I threw myself at him, wrapping my arms around him.

“Is that an I like it hug, or a Why did you do this to me hug?” he asked.

I reached up, grabbed his cheeks, pulled him close, and kissed him soundly. Then, mumbling against his lips, I said, “It’s an It’s perfect kiss and hug. Put it on me.” I held my hands up, and he pulled the shirt down over me.

It was snug, and, when I looked at it in the mirror, paired with the rest of my outfit, I knew I was officially the best-looking little in the house. I didn’t need to see any of the others to know it for a fact.

He helped me into some sneakers that also sparkled and gave me glitterific freckles and we were ready to go. The last time we came, I picked out all my own clothes, but

this time, he'd asked if he could surprise me...and I was so glad I said yes. We walked out of the dressing room hand in hand to find our friends at the party.

Miss Lily greeted us warmly. "It's so good to see you!" She handed me a little book. "Remember last time when I had the scavenger hunt?"

I nodded. I hadn't participated, but I remembered it.

"It was such a hit that I decided to do another one. This is your sticker book. When you find one of each of the stickers on the list, you put it in your book. When your book is filled, you can hand it in for a prize!"

I clutched it close to myself. "Or I can keep all the stickers in my beautiful book."

She laughed. "That's true."

There was no prize worth giving up a full sticker book. She'd learn that soon enough.

Papa and I looked at the list then went around the room finding the different stickers. They were all themed for the holiday: Baby New Year, the ball drop, a clock, etc. Even though they were thematic, they were cute. I loved finding one then another. There was something so satisfying about putting them in my book.

We ran into friends along the way, saying hello and talking stickers. But we were on a mission, and we succeeded. I wasn't sure if we were first or not, but we made good time. Miss Lily discovered pretty quickly that those sticker books were coming home with us. I didn't see one little who wasn't clutching theirs for dear life. It was the perfect party favor.

With time to spare before the big countdown, I played with cars with my new friend Hudson while his daddy talked to Papa. We had snack time, listened to a couple of

books, and played some games—all before the timer on the wall lit up, letting us know midnight was near.

As it reached ten, we all counted down together.

“Ten...nine...eight...”

When we hit one, Daddy brought his lips to mine.

We kissed, a kiss so filled with promise, hope, love. We kissed until the cheering slowed and both of us were breathless. It was the perfect way to bring in the new year.

He pressed his forehead against mine. “Happy New Year, my sweet boy. I’m looking forward to spending it with you.”

“Happy Birthday, Papa.” I kissed him again, unable to stop myself. How could I not after he said something that sweet. “I love you.”

“I love you, Bobby.”

“Take me home and show me how much?” I nibbled on his bottom lip.

“I’d love nothing more.”

Everyone around us started shouting, “Happy New Year!”

New Year’s Eve is when everything begins again. People have plans and goals. New things start—new classes at the gym, new crafts at the hobby shop. New beginnings are everywhere.

But for me, it wasn't January.

My new beginning wasn't tonight.

It was at the little Christmas party at Chained—the one where I met Daddy. The one where I began to allow myself to live again. The one where I first began to open my heart.

The one that changed everything.

Nick

Next Christmas...

Bobby didn't take on the Little Drummer Boy job the next year after all. At least not full-time. He offered to take any shifts that needed a fill-in, just because he enjoyed it, but we had so many plans for the season together, there just wasn't time.

After a full year of my new job, I had things under control, and the new guy in my old position only had to do his work. I'd learned a lot from my former boss. All about what not to do. So I did the opposite. I didn't procrastinate. Scheduled work in advance. Checked in with all of my employees to see that they were on top of things instead of waiting until they were in trouble and needed bailing out.

I loved the work, and upper management even checked with me from time to time to make sure I had all the resources I needed. Night and day! And I had time to spend with my sweet Bobby. Time to work on all the projects we wanted to do on the Victorian we bought and were restoring. A year ago, all I did was work, sleep in hotels, and breathe airplane air. Now, I was home almost every night for dinner. We had weekends away and evenings spent replastering ceilings.

We still had a lot to do before we'd call the house done—maybe we'd never call it done, but what we did have was a beautiful finished living room to invite our friends over to for the holidays. A tall tree rising in the center of the room with presents underneath it, and one of my favorite things. All the decorations Bobby's late daddy collected were being used to beautify our home. I believe love never really dies. The person just steps into another place, and the one left behind has to find another way to

go on. But that love is still there to be built on, and when we went to the cemetery to decorate his daddy's grave, he brought a picture of the decorated living room to show him.

We had a Christmas party planned for the next day and the boat parade coming up. Chained's Little Christmas. The tree lighting and Christmas village were already behind us. The season flew by in a blur of sparkling joy and gratitude. Our second Christmas together. In love.