



# Lane's Lost Kitten

**Author:** *Della Cain*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Sometimes you need to lose something to find the one thing you didn't know was missing.

Moving to a new city, into a new apartment building, fresh off the heels of a shitty breakup is a whole lotta change at once. I'm officially not a fan. At least my landlord is hot...hot and straight. That's probably for the best. I don't exactly have my life together.

When my kitten goes missing, I'm at a loss. I've always been so careful not to leave my door open and have no idea how she got out. All I know is that she is out there in the big world all alone, and it's somehow my fault.

So what do I do? Sob loud enough for my landlord to hear. He offers to help me find Cat-terine, and when we do, he gives me a hug—a hug that doesn't feel very straight. Now what?

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# Page 1

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Moving sucked.

There were no two ways about it. It full-on sucked. You could sugarcoat it as an exciting new adventure or a new beginning or moving up, but at the end of the day, there was nothing fun about packing up everything you own. And, if that was the entirety of it, it might be worth it. It wasn't though.

After all my boxes were ready, I got to load them into a vehicle in the most unfun version of Tetris ever. And as an added bonus? The rental trailer was not only too small to hold everything, it was a pain to navigate for the hours and hours of driving needed to arrive at our destination only to unpack it again. All of that? It was only the first half of the task at hand.

Somehow, I convinced myself that this was a grand idea, for the best, that I'd be happy that I did it. And maybe all of that was true, but after getting everything into the trailer and driving for hours, I was too beat to be optimistic.

It was true that the opportunities here were better than in my old town. That, I couldn't deny. My new job was a couple of steps up from the one I'd just left. I'd been there for five years and had been all but told I'd hit my ceiling. Staying there, I'd never have reached my entry level at this company.

And honestly, I needed some distance from my ex. After we broke up, we continued to share our apartment, saying it would only be until we had better jobs and could afford places of our own. And maybe that would've been fine if either of us were on track for a promotion, which we weren't. In hindsight, it was probably the dumbest idea I'd ever had. We were exes for a reason and, while we could still be friends in a

distant sort of way, there was no distance when you shared a bathroom. None.

We had been barely scraping by. Our choice hadn't been based on either of us trying to remain close to each other in the hopes we'd get back together. Our breakup was shitty, but not because he was a dick or anything. We just weren't compatible. It would've been better if he was an asshat...easier anyway.

It had taken a long-ass time for me to figure out that he was never going to accept me for who I was and what I needed. But once I did, there was no turning back. Maybe that was why I thought living with him would be bearable, would be fine. That was me being a fool.

It wasn't fine, and I couldn't handle it, but that ended up being the kick in the ass that got me actively looking for jobs and eventually out of the apartment, ready for a brand-new start.

This was my brand-new start, not ours. It was freeing and terrifying wrapped up in a ball. I didn't know anybody in a city. Heck, I knew nothing about it. I hadn't even visited. Everything from my interviews to my lease signing had been virtual.

So much relief flooded through me when I pulled into my new neighborhood. It was clean, the buildings kept up well, and easy to get to.

I left my car parked in the loading zone and went to my apartment 1A, where my landlord was going to be waiting with my key. All the paperwork had been finalized and done online, and actually, it had been quite easy, which was great after the horror stories I'd heard about. When I first started to research places to live here, there were videos warning of price gouging and bait-and-switch and fees equaling over \$10k just to walk in the door.

None of that had been true here. The building was owner occupied, which was huge.

Slumlords didn't live where they scammed people in subpar living conditions. They lived in the mansions those people paid for. And the rent? So reasonable I initially thought the listing had an error.

The building wasn't something you'd see on the cover of a fancy magazine, but it was nice enough. Best of all, it was ready and waiting for me.

I'd raised my hand to knock when the door opened. The man standing there with a bag of garbage in his hand, nearly took my breath away. That was the absolute last thing I needed. He was supposed to be a grumpy old guy, not some hotty. Those were the rules. Fine, I made up the rules, but still... I shouldn't be looking at my landlord as a lollipop to be licked. I shouldn't be looking at him at all, really. But there I was, doing exactly that.

"New guy?"

I nodded.

"Let me dump this, and I'll grab your keys and show you to your apartment."

And because I was me, I watched him walk down the hall.

A few minutes later, he was back to escort me. Nice for a small place at the price point I was paying anyway. Best of all, there were no surprises. Everything was exactly like the pictures I'd been shown.

"Do you need some help bringing your things in?"

"No, I got it," I said. Not really, but what was I gonna do? Say, Oh yeah, you're my servant. Please help me move. Then you can evict me at the end of the month, which was completely not fair. He didn't give off those kinds of vibes at all. But I was in a

frazzled state, and when I was like that, I tended to jump to conclusions like that.

“How about I help you anyway?”

The way he said it hinted at him being a daddy, but I’d learned my lesson about projecting daddyness on someone just because they were nice, and I wanted to see it. I wasn’t going down that road again, especially not with my landlord, of all people.

Maybe he was a daddy, but what did that matter? I wasn’t looking for one, and I definitely wasn’t looking for one here—where I lived. What was it they said about not shitting where you eat? Yeah, that was me. I was not going there. Didn’t matter that he had an ass that belonged on underwear billboards, or eyes that sparkled in the sun as we walked outside, or a little cleft on his chin I longed to nibble.

Nope.

Wasn’t going there.

“Okay,” I conceded. I was fairly confident this man could ask me to do anything, and I would. Those eyes paired with that cleft...they were dangerous.

Half an hour later, we had the majority of the unloading done. It went surprisingly well. He ordered pizza, telling me it was the moving-in special. I didn’t ask him if he bought pizza for all his tenants because I didn’t want to know. In this moment, I wanted to pretend that I was special. Basically, I was a glutton for punishment.

We ate, and then we brought the last of my stuff in. There was still a ton to do with all the unpacking. But at least everything big was in the place. I had a bed set up that only needed to be made and a couch in the living room. Everything else was good enough for the day. I didn’t start my new job for a week. I had time to unpack.

“If you need anything else, let me know.”

“Well, there’s one thing I’ve been thinking about for a while. I’d never lived alone. Fully alone anyway. I’d had a roommate or a daddy or an ex. Not even in college.

“Sure, what’s up?” Why was I babbling.

“I was hoping I could add a pet to my lease, like we discussed. How much more is that a month?”

“Like I said before, I don’t do that. I’ve always enjoyed having animals around. I asked the people who had dogs if they would bark at people as they walked down the halls past their apartment doors. That got obnoxiously loud quickly.”

I imagined it would.

“Other than that, you’re pretty good to go. My ex has a cat. She named her Winnifred, a silly name for a cat, but she is cute and cuddly.”

Should I have been shocked he was straight? No. But I was. Or maybe disappointed was a better description. In either case, it was for the best. I shouldn’t be having inappropriate thoughts about my landlord.

I thanked him and then grabbed my keys. I went to return the U-Haul. It was a struggle not to go straight out and pick up a cat right then and there. I’d already made the decision to avoid the adorableness of a kitten and adopt a full-grown cat. I wanted to give a home to a fur baby that might be overlooked.

After catching a whiff of myself after all the sweaty work, I hopped in the shower and made a plan: I’d set up the apartment and unpack everything. Once I was done, I could go and see if the cat distribution system was working in my favor.

And, three days later, I did. I walked into the shelter to look around just to see what they had. And Cat-terine made a beeline over to me when I walked into the cat social room. It was love at first sight. She was coming home with me. So much for my not-getting-a-kitten plan.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:57 am*

Coffee...the beverage of the gods.

Especially after a night like the one I just spent trying to figure out why the wired smoke alarm in one of my units kept sounding in obvious lack of any sort of trigger. And that had been after helping the new tenant move in. It wasn't something I normally did, but he looked like he could use the help. And no, it had nothing to do with the way he filled in his jeans. Nope. Nothing at all.

I thought the tenants in the surrounding units were going to have me tarred and feathered, and I couldn't really blame them. Although I had gained a number of skills as the building super since inheriting this business from Gramps, I guess smoke alarm rebellion was not one of them.

Most electrical problems, really. I had managed to stop the wail by dismantling the device itself, and the sucker fought me, but I was concerned that there was an electrical problem behind it. A fact confirmed when the new smoke alarm instantly screeched in protest. Much as I hated leaving any unit down one detector, there was nothing for it but to wait until morning and call the professionals.

Picking up my phone in my free hand, I checked the time. Still a half hour before the professionals would be in their office. Enough time for two cups of coffee. And to plan my day. All my friends told me how lucky I was that Gramps entrusted me with the building that meant so much to him. And absolutely I was, but that somehow did not make it any less work. In fact, after a few months, I gave up my day job because I was spending everything I earned there and more, paying other people to do jobs around the place. Tasks I thought I would be able to do myself.



And what a learning process I dived into at that point. I'd become quite the painter and floor layer and could pound in a loose nail and do so many other things, but it had taken time. Each month, I hired out a little less than the one before. Unfortunately, as I answered calls from various tenants and visited their units, I learned that most of them were in severe need of updating. Not necessarily while existing tenants lived there. No, they seemed comfortable and preferred I not inconvenience them with major renovations. But as apartments opened, I would remodel each before renting it to the next customer.

When I got the call the night before to come and help out, I was so deeply asleep after a day of installing new wood flooring that I hadn't even heard the shrieking alarm. Only the vibrating phone hopping around on my nightstand inches from my face had dragged me from slumber. Not that I minded because my dreams had consisted of more deep-brown boards, many of which were floating above my head instead of snapping into place in the living room of the empty unit.

I reached for my tablet and brought up the spreadsheet for the rehab of that unit to see what I had left to do. The couple who moved out a few months before had not been hard on it, but they had lived there for almost thirty years and according to Gramps had almost never asked for any kind of updates, in fact preferred not to be bothered by workmen of any kind.

I made a mental note to be sure and include in future leases a requirement to allow such maintenance at the landlord's discretion to avoid the amount of work I was having to put into each one that opened before I could rent them again. It seemed most of Gramps' tenants were incredibly long-term, and he'd managed to keep their rents low partly by doing only necessary repairs. These folks were one by one retiring either to somewhere warmer or to live with their adult children or to senior communities. I was grateful they were not all doing it at the same time. So far, I'd been able to get each place done before the next landed in my lap.

I had checked off most of my to-do list for this one, and was very proud of how it was turning out. A couple who had moved into a remodeled one-bedroom a few months before were very excited to have a nursery ready in time for their unplanned-but-super-welcomed baby. They could have it in a couple of weeks, and I already had a tenant lined up for their old place. They'd kept it very clean and I wouldn't even have to paint.

Unlike their new home that still needed the floor finished, new faucets installed, and a few other things. Their baby would have a modern and neat home. They'd even picked out the paint for the nursery. When I made the offer, I held my breath, hoping they wouldn't want anything too wild like baby pink or blue, but they'd selected a soft green that I thought nearly anyone would enjoy.

My phone chimed, and I looked down to see a text from my ex. Just making sure you're eating and taking care of yourself. Typical Meri.

I've been living on beans and crackers.

Yeah, right. I'm having Rob drop off a care package for you when he goes into town in a few days.

Meri and I had been a couple, but after a while, it became clear to both of us that not only were we much better friends than we had ever been lovers, but we didn't share goals or aspirations. Meri had always harbored a desire to be a country girl and live on a homestead where she could create a self-sufficient lifestyle. She liked to bake bread and grow tomatoes on the balcony of our old apartment. She even got hold of some wool to spin into yarn one time. Me? I bought bread at the store, wanted my yarn pre-spun into clothing and blankets, and the closest I wanted to get to growing fruits and vegetables was buying them from the farmer's market.

She'd met Rob on some homesteader's dating app, shortly after we decided to give

up on being a couple. Together, they'd bought some acreage and built their home and everything else to follow their shared dream. I missed her, sometimes, because she was so busy, but I never actually did have to go to the farmer's market because Meri and Rob supplied me with so much out of concern for my welfare.

When we were together, she'd always been annoyed by my efforts to take care of her. Seemed we were both natural caregivers. Rob loved that she laid out his clothes for special occasions and watched his diet to make sure he didn't eat more butter than bread.

First time they brought me a basket of beautiful lettuce, a bug hopped out of it, and they nearly fell over laughing at my shock. They truly were two peas in a homesteading pod. And they were both my friends now, which was great but also reminded me that I had not found my pod-mate yet.

Still there? she texted.

Yeah, sorry. Just figuring out what I need to do on a unit.

Funny, I had no idea you had all those skills when we were together.

No. Neither did I.

We chatted back and forth a bit more, and then I had to message the electrician and said goodbye to Meri. She was probably off to feed the chickens or something. She really loved those chickens.

I poured my second cup of coffee. She'd always been a tea girl. I should have known we were incompatible.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:57 am*

Bringing Cat-terine home was the best thing ever. She was adorable beyond words and, for some reason, she picked me. Funny how I thought I was going to go to the shelter and find myself a cat only to have none of the say when it came down to it.

Before I even looked, I'd picked up the cat necessities, everything from a fancy cat litter pan that cleaned itself, to a water dish that was a tiny waterfall, to feathers on a little pole. But everything I'd purchased was cat, not kitten, specific, and a second trip was going to be needed.

"Sweet girl, this is your new home." I brought her into the room where the cat litter was. The nice people at the shelter had given me instructions like letting her see it, showing her where her food was, etc. I followed their directions and sat back to let her be alone and explore. The day was huge for her. She'd gone from the shelter, into a cardboard box, for a car ride, and now was in a brand-new place. It was probably going to be a while before she settled in.

They also said one of the big things to do was to keep her in a single room for two to five days so she could get used to everything. Given how small my apartment was, I figured it would be fine to let her roam. If it looked like it was overwhelming her, though, I'd figure something else out.

I sat down on the couch and turned on the television in the background. In my mind, the TV was a signal that I was "busy" and not staring at her. Did cats ever worry about that? Probably not, but also maybe? I wasn't willing to risk it. I wanted to give her a perfect life.

"I want you to be happy here," I murmured as the movie played softly. I hadn't even

paid attention to which one it was. One of the Batmans. That was all I knew.

I kept my eye on her and spent my time scrolling on my phone, looking for all the things that I'd most likely never need as a kitten owner nor would she want. I planned to get them all anyway. Among other things, I found a little cardboard house they said was perfect for kittens learning how to scratch—the theory being that it was far better for them to scratch cardboard than my couch. I had a hard time thinking of her as being destructive. Kittens were adorable balls of fluff, but they didn't stay that way for long.

From there, I grabbed a bunch of toys and a new collar small enough for her. I even contemplated getting a bell for that but ultimately decided it might be going a little too far. Besides, I didn't need to hear her coming in. The final thing that went in the cart was a little felt mushroom that had a tiny bed inside for her. According to the review, it was 50/50 whether the cats loved the little house or preferred the box it came in. In both cases, the cats loved it, and that worked for me.

When I set my phone down, she was at my feet, looking up. “Did you want to come sit with me?”

She opened her mouth and let out this little almost meow.

“You're just too adorable. I cannot even.” I picked her up and set her on my chest. She curled up on my shoulder, lay down, and the two of us watched a movie together.

We spent the rest of my week of adjustment bonding. Aside from that, I rearranged things in the apartment to work better, did some exploring of the neighborhood, and contemplated getting one of those kitten backpacks so that she could come with me everywhere. I wasn't sure she'd like it, but it would be fun. It was currently living on my wish list while I decided.

I scoped out the grocery store, the pizza place where I had my first dinner here, as well as an all-you-can-eat, all-day-long-breakfast-serving diner. It wasn't like where I came from, but I could see myself getting used to it here.

My first day of work was spent in HR, going over paperwork, watching training videos, and learning all the things I shouldn't do because they might get the company sued and or me fired. I still didn't have a feel for how much I was going to like or not like the job, but at least all the Is were dotted and Ts were crossed and all of my initial trainings were behind me.

The next day, I was going to get my desk and meet the others in my area. That was when the real discovery would begin.

I grabbed a chicken sandwich and a salad on the way home, not wanting to bother cooking. And when I got inside, the first thing I did was place the bag on the counter and look for the cat.

Normally, I found her in one of two places—staring at me basically right at the door or sitting on a towel in front of my dresser. Out of all the way-too-fancy things I bought her—that towel was her favorite, and, technically, it wasn't for her. But it had a cat on it, so close enough, I supposed.

The first time she discovered it, I'd dropped it on my way to putting things away, and she had claimed it as her own, and I didn't have the heart to take it away from her. But today, she wasn't in either place.

I called her name while I looked behind furniture and the refrigerator, in the drawers, in the closet. I looked everywhere and I couldn't find her. She'd somehow gotten out. Maybe the city needed to inspect the place, and she followed them when they left. No. That didn't make sense. My landlord would've told me it was happening.

And for now, it didn't matter how she got out. She had, and I needed to find her.

"Fuck." I grabbed my keys and ran out, calling for her, running the halls, going through the staircases, over and over, around, and back again. I searched everywhere and when I was done, I searched again, With no success. I went back into the apartment on the impossible chance that she came back.

She hadn't, but that didn't stop me from looking again. This time, I even I looked places I knew she couldn't be, including the medicine cabinet, which was a whole inch deep.

"I need to plan." I took in a few deep breaths. Running around like a chicken with no head wasn't finding her. I could do this. I had to do this.

Once again, I went back out only this time before I managed to accomplish anything, I collapsed on the floor and started to cry. Not a few tears down the cheek kind of crying, either. I full-on ugly cried with both tears and snot. I had her for one week and already put her in danger. And the worst part? I didn't even understand how.

"Why? Why did I let her do that?" I sniffled and buried my face in her hands.

"Are you okay?" a familiar voice asked. And when I looked up, it was my landlord—landlord McHottie. Sure, he was straight, but that didn't make him any less sexy.

I looked up at him, and he squatted down until we were eye to eye.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"Cat-terine, she's gone."

I instantly saw the terror on his face. He probably thought I meant “gone” the way one does when their elderly relative passes away.

“She’s... I can’t find her,” I explained. “I can’t find her anywhere.”

“I’ll help you find her,” he offered. I pushed myself up and threw my arms around him, hugging him close. It was the only thing I could think to do.

And then he hugged me back, hugged me close to him. And I felt safe. He was going to help me find my cat. I just knew it.

Why did he have to be straight?



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:57 am*

Hugging a tenant was certainly not in the How To Be a Landlord manual, if there was any such thing. But he'd been so bereft, how could I not? When I rented the unit to Lane, he'd been very worried about having a pet. And now that he had her, Cat-terine was family to him. He'd found nearly a half dozen apartments in his price range that either had a no-pet policy or charged such a large additional monthly fee—and hefty extra deposit as well. He'd confided that he didn't know if he'd ever find a new home where he could have a fur baby.

It didn't help that the reason he'd moved was a new job, making him coming into this place without any knowledge of the various neighborhoods and which landlords to watch out for. Rent control was not a thing in our area, and some people took advantage of that fact. I told him that Gramps often said he'd had to clean up a lot of messes made by people and by very well-cared-for animals. He had not charged anything extra to those with a pet or two, and neither did I.

I hadn't seen much of him since he moved in, nothing more than a wave or hello in the hallway, but once or twice I had passed him with Cat-terine in a backpack with a clear panel so she could see out. Adorable—both of them!

“It's going to be okay.” I patted his back gently, knowing I should step away but not wanting to. Not while his shoulders were still shaking with suppressed sobs. “We'll find her. I promise. She can't have gone far.”

He tipped his face up to me, eyes glossy. “I've looked everywhere. She must have gotten out of the building and probably someone picked her up. Or maybe she got hurt.”

“No.” I brushed a single tear that fought its way free to trail down his cheek. “She’s here somewhere. So the door was never left open, correct?”

“Y-yes.” He nodded. “But she must have found a way because I looked everywhere.”

“Windows?”

“Open, some of them. But the screens are still in place.”

“Good.” I stepped back and fished in my pocket for the old-fashioned handkerchief I carried with me. A Gramp’s thing. “It’s clean.” I held it up to his nose. “Blow.”

He did, with a honk, then moved farther away, covering his face with a hand. “I can’t believe I did that. Is that a real hankie? Like in the movies?”

“That’s what they’re for.” I shrugged. “My gramps said that gentlemen carry them and they are good for the environment. He hated piling the landfills with disposable everything. Also, if you have a cold, a soft cotton hankie is way easier on your nose.”

“You would make a great salesman for handkerchiefs.” His smile was wobbly but there. “Do you really think we’ll find Cat-terine?”

“I do.” Turning him in the direction of his unit, I gave him a small push. “We will begin at your place and expand our search if needed.”

He didn’t reply, but neither did he disagree, leading the way down the hallway. “I can’t think of anywhere I didn’t look.”

“Then we’ll have to retrace your steps. After all, Cat-terine is a moving creature. For all we know, she was following you the whole time.” I waited while he opened his door and then followed him in. “Show me where she would normally be at this time

of day?”

“When I get home, she is always waiting for me right here inside the door or on her favorite towel. Nowhere else.” He pointed to a spot on the floor. “But today she wasn’t there.” He walked into the living room. “So I thought maybe she was sleeping in her basket by the couch or over here by the chair.” He led me from place to place, explaining how she liked to be at each one various times of the day. “But I checked all her spots. And now you’ve seen them all, too.” He held his hands up in the air. “No Cat-terine. We need to go look outside.” He turned toward the door to the hallway.

“Wait a minute.” I had an idea.

Lane faced me again, his cheeks still marked by a tear or two, but he was ready to launch out the door. “Aren’t you coming with me?”

“No. I think we need to look here again, but this time without going for just the places you expect to find her. For example, did you check the bathroom? Behind the shower curtain in the tub maybe?”

“No!” He darted off down the hall but soon returned. “She wasn’t there.”

“It’s just a start. Let’s each take a room and we’ll search all the unlikely places instead of the likely ones.”

“Like closets and under the sink...I didn’t look there!” He pivoted, but I reached out and took his arm.

“Wait. How about you take the bathroom and bedroom and I’ll take the kitchen and living room? Just so we have our assignments.”

His eyes held a light of hope that I prayed I wasn't wrong to put there. "Yes, sir!" He saluted, and I shook my head, lips quirking as he returned to the bathroom. "She's definitely not here. Bedroom next."

I looked under the sofa and behind the low bookshelf, anywhere I could think of while the sounds of drawers thumping closed and items landing on the floor emerged from the bedroom. When I'd exhausted the living room, I stepped into the kitchen. It was not much bigger than a kitchenette but did have a small table and chairs at one end. I opened every cabinet and even the oven, although I couldn't imagine how she'd have gotten in any of them. Each was firmly closed. Standing by the stove, I was just about ready to agree Cat-terine had escaped when I heard it. A squeak or...

"Elio, I hunted everywhere and—"

I shushed him and shook my head.

He stopped and looked around "Did—" This time, he stopped on his own, placing a finger to his lips. How even in distress did he manage to be so cute? And why was I noticing? We had, until I gave him an unprofessional hug, a perfect landlord/tenant relationship.

Another squeak and a rattle. Where was it coming from? Very close... I dropped to my hands and knees and tried to get another angle on the situation. A soft thud, and I found myself shoulder to shoulder, on all fours next to Lane. We crawled around the small space, brushing against one another while we tried to find the source of the squeak and rattle.

Mew.

"Cat-terine." Lane turned in an awkward circle. "I hear her."

As did I, and now I had identified the location where the sound came from. “Stop.”

“But she...”

“Is behind the stove.” I could see the tip of a tail flicking in cat annoyance through the narrow gap between the stove and the cabinetry. “Any idea how she got there?”

“None.” He sounded as mystified as I felt. “How will we get her out? She’s scared.”

I didn’t ask how he knew that, and I hoped he was wrong. But in any case, we had to get her out. And that wasn’t too hard. Moving the stove forward a few inches gave Cat-terine enough room to leap up onto the counter. But she was filthy!

“Oh no! Catch her.” Lane raced after his greasy cat while I surveyed the area behind the stove that my between-tenants cleaning service had apparently felt no need to do anything about. Ever. Ugh.

Making a mental note to get them back out here to finish the job and to be more proactive in checking behind them, I followed Lane into the living room just in time to see him nab his pet. Now they both needed a bath.

Cat-terine enjoyed her bath about as much as any cat would—not that I had a lot of experience in cat washing. But with her owner in charge and me assisting, we finally had her fluffy and clean again. We were laughing so hard it was lucky we didn’t fall in the tub along with her. Then we decided I would order us some food while Lane cleaned up and I kept an eye on Miss Cat-terine so she didn’t disappear again.

When we were finally sitting on the couch with our giant burritos, sharing an order of chips and guac, it felt so comfortable to have everything running smoothly again. Lane smelled fresh and clean from his shower, Cat-terine snoozed in her mushroom bed, and I knew I needed to leave as soon as we finished eating.

But I didn't. We just talked about nothing in particular, side by side on his sofa, until Lane fell asleep, his head on my shoulder... There was nothing in that landlord manual about this, but I was pretty sure it was inappropriate to want every evening to be like this.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:57 am*

“Now, little one, I have to go to work.” I was holding Cat-terine so she was nose to nose with me, my voice the opposite of firm. How could it be with her sweet eyes looking directly into my heart like this. “What that means is you’re going to stay out of trouble, you’re going to be a goody kitty, and you’re not going to hide and scare me half to death again. Is that understood?”

She rubbed her nose against mine. Was she under the impression she could get by just on her cuteness? She totally could, but she didn’t need any affirmation of that. I couldn’t see anybody not bowing to her every whim.

Last night had been terrifying. Coming home and finding her gone... I didn’t want to have to deal with that ever again. Of course, she had still been here, but I had no way of knowing that. I had all these visions of her being hurt, lost, afraid and it was too much. Of course, I handled it just like a grown-up responsible adult would—I broke down sobbing. I’m not even sure what I would have done had Elio not shown up.

I really needed someone in that moment, and there he was. He just jumped into action. I hadn’t pegged him as the daddy type, but there he was being all sweet and daddy. I enjoyed it, almost too much. Even as it was happening, the whole situation perplexed me. One minute, he was there, jumping in, giving me a handkerchief, making sure that I was okay, that my cat was okay. The next minute, we were acting like longtime friends, eating burritos and watching TV. It felt so comfortable and safe being around him. I woke up this morning still kicking myself for falling asleep against him. It had been nice being around someone I could be that relaxed with, for sure. Only the cost was too high.

When I woke up, things changed...he had changed. Not changed like Dr. Jekyll and

Mr. Hyde kind of way, but there was like this wall between us. And I couldn't help but think I had crossed a boundary he didn't like, and that's why he slapped that wall in place.

He decided that he was going to make sure that I didn't do it again. And that was fair. He was my landlord, not my friend. Just because I was lonely, and he'd felt bad for me, and wanted to help, that didn't mean our roles in each other's lives had changed.

I needed to stop thinking about last night, his ass, and the way I felt snuggled against him.

After a quick cuddle with Cat-terine, I went to work for my first "real day." I was excited to see how things went, but not as excited as I was for tonight. When I woke up this morning, I found an email from Chained, the local club. I'd been invited to go on a tour and not just any one but a little tour.

The little was the exciting part. I'd been a member of a club before, and it was fine. Good even, depending on the night. But one that actually cared about its age play members? That hadn't been my experience, and I was thrilled to see what Chained had to offer and if they lived up to their fabulous reputation.

My last club hadn't been overly welcoming to people who had interests like mine. They were the only game in town, though, so I put up with it. They'd have accepted me more if I wanted to be tied up in beautiful knots for all to see or to be whipped in a demonstration or even if I walked around led by a leash. Those were the members they prioritized. And, in a way, I got it. Those were their largest interest groups.

It sucked, but each club had its own culture. And that one didn't align with what I was looking for. I'd considered driving a few hours from home to check out a club called Collared but, at the end of the day, I'd been too lazy to venture outside my town.



I was excited to learn about Chained when I was researching the area and doubly excited when I discovered it was a sister club to Collared. I put in an interest form before I even moved. The price was high, and it wasn't the best way to stay on budget, but also—if I was going to find other littles to play with and/or a mommy or daddy to spend an afternoon or evening with, it was my best option.

After reading the email, I replied right away to let them know that I'd be there without a second's thought. Of course I was going to go.

Work was better than expected. I feared I'd be frazzled and overwhelmed. I felt neither. So far, I liked my job, which was good since I'd moved all the way here for it.

My desk was in an area with natural lighting, and the people who had their desks around mine were very pleasant. The lunch area was roomy and designed to be relaxing, not rushed. And best of all? It wasn't one of those offices that wanted you to all be "just like family." In my experience, there was nothing more toxic than an environment whose goal was to make your job fill every facet of your life. No, thank you. The day flew by. Another good sign.

When I got home, I went into my closet and grabbed my plastic tote—the one where I kept my little clothes until I could come up with a better solution. I was currently considering getting a little dresser to fit in the large space. I hadn't had time to look into it yet, but I was thinking about looking this weekend.

My last closet had been too small for any furniture or coats or shoes. It was tiny. One thing that was especially nice about this apartment was that there was lots of storage space carved out. I planned to use it well.

I dug out little clothes and laid a few options on my bed. My go-to outfit was a pair of footie pajamas that were getting really worn in the knees. I loved them, and it

showed. Then I considered that the tour was as much about them assessing my compatibility as a member as it was me checking the place out. Wearing clothing that might indicate I had money issues was probably not the best idea.

Instead, I decided to wear a pink onesie with my favorite thick underwear and some rather short shorts. The combination wasn't my favorite, but I looked adorable, especially when I paired it with some knee-high socks. Best of all, I was able to slip my street clothes over it, and there would be no awkward first-night dressing room moments. The fact that they had little orientations implied it wouldn't be like my last club, but only time would tell.

It was time to embrace being little and alone. I'd never done that before, always going to a club with a daddy I wanted a big relationship with, too, someone who I thought had the potential to be both a daddy and a boyfriend. But I wasn't doing that anymore. I wasn't sad about it, either. Letting go of the expectation of "needing" to have someone in my life to fill both areas had done wonders for me.

I was done tying my relationships to what my little desired. I needed someone who accepted me for myself, and that was just the way it was. They didn't need to take an active part in it for me to be happy. As long as they liked me just as I was, that was good enough for me.

When I walked into Chained, I was greeted by smiling faces and instantly knew I'd found the right place. One of the little room workers led me on a tour. That blew my mind. They had people who manned the little rooms so that the littles could just be little and not worry about...well, anything.

The tour was fantastic and included showing me some of the nicest changing rooms I'd ever seen, even on the internet. I could rent one out for the evening if I was ever interested—a sort of private retreat. They showed me a list of events open to both members and nonmembers who had filled out the proper paperwork, and they

encouraged me to attend some of them to check everything out and get a feel for the place. Not once in our time together did I feel the high-pressure join-now push I'd experienced at my last club.

But the best part of the tour? When they showed me the little room. I'd never felt as welcome and accepted in these types of spaces as I did when I walked inside then crawled over to the story hour and got lost in the wonder of what became my new club before the night was over.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:57 am*

I couldn't keep from thinking about Lane. They said people have a type, and most of those I'd dated were the polar opposite of the sweet young man who had fallen asleep on my shoulder. Male or female, they were all more like Meri, independent, strong minded, and resentful when I became too "helpful." Could I help it if I liked making sure those I cared for were safe, warm, and had everything they needed?

Maybe, but did I want to?

And had I been making one wrong choice after another? Honestly, I was overthinking one evening when Lane had been distraught because he thought his beloved pet was missing and had needed someone to lend a hand. Anyone would have been fine, and he'd probably put our time sitting together on his couch out of his mind by the next morning. He'd fallen asleep because he'd been emotionally wrung out, but that didn't mean anything more. My shoulder had just been handy.

Then, leaving the hardware store with yet another five-gallon bucket of paint, I walked past the pet store and stepped inside. Walked right to the cat toys section as if there were arrows painted on the floor. What could it hurt to pick up a little something for the troublemaker who looked so adorable and innocent curled up in her bed after putting both of us through it while trying to get stove grease out of her coat.

I zeroed in on a stuffed bird that could spin all around while buttons were pressed on a remote control. How fun was that? I mean—I'd like it if I were a cat. Or so I told myself while carrying it to the front of the store, paying for the item, and heading for home, excited about giving it to Lane. Maybe he'd let me see Cat-terine play with it? She'd captivated me almost as much as her owner.

I almost second-guessed myself when I heard Lane getting home from work. Waiting all afternoon just to give a little toy to a cat... He passed my door on the way to his, and I forced myself to let him get inside and settle before I knocked.

When I did, Lane opened the door in pajamas. At first, I wasn't sure what was unusual about that, then I noticed that they had attached feet. I hadn't even realized they made those in grown-up sizes, but I could see the practicality. I never knew where my slippers were. Not that I'd ever look half as good as he did in them. Not good. Adorable.

"Hi," he said, looking surprised. "I-I didn't expect you tonight."

"Is this a bad time?" My gaze focused on something else about the pajamas—clipped on was a paci holder with a pacifier swinging from it. "I can come back another time."

"No, it's okay."

"I interrupted something. Really. I just brought a little something for Cat-terine." And I supposed there was no real reason I had to stick around after handing it to him. Yet my hand gripping the Pet Party sack stayed at my side. This was why you didn't get involved with tenants. They had their own lives and shouldn't have to explain themselves to their landlord so long as whatever they were into didn't harm the property and they paid their rent on time. The last thing I'd ever want to do was make him feel uncomfortable now or anytime we found ourselves passing in the hallway. He deserved better than that.

Also, I was intrigued. He looked very cute in his jammies, cuddly, too.

But he didn't likely want to hear that from me. Maybe he had someone over...

“I can come back another time.” Still holding onto the bag, like it was my ticket to visit him and handing it over would give me no more excuse. “Enjoy your evening.”

“You brought something for my cat?” I guess he’d just picked up on that.

“Yes.” Was that wrong?

“You didn’t come to fix the sink?”

No wonder he looked confused. “I didn’t know you had a sink problem. What’s wrong?”

“It’s clogged, but I guess my message didn’t get to you. That’s why I thought you’d be here during regular business hours.” All my tenants knew they could contact me anytime for emergencies, but things like a clogged sink would wait until office times. “I probably should have sent the message in the morning.” His gaze cast down to the floor. “Sorry.”

“No, you don’t have to be sorry. And since I’m here, why don’t I give you the toy for Cat-terine and then go get my tools and take care of business as well.”

“Oh no, I can’t, I mean you don’t have to.” He scribed a circle on the floor with his toe. “I don’t want to bother you.”

I thrust the bag into his hands. “Wait to open it until I come back, okay? I’d like to see if Cat-terine likes it.” Without waiting for an answer, I headed to my place to grab the plumbing tools. I had a storage area down by the parking area, but some things got used so often, they ended up in my entryway semi permanently.

When I returned, he let me in, careful to close the door after me. His pet may not have escaped for real, but he wasn’t taking any chances she might be thinking of it. I

didn't blame him. I saw her expression when we found her behind the stove—where I still couldn't imagine how she got into—and she looked very pleased to have one over on him. I had no doubt she loved Lane, but she also liked her little tricks. Darting out the door might be next on her playlist.

“Come in,” he said. “Cat-terine is waiting to play.”

“We can't keep Cat-terine waiting, but I need to work on your sink. Do you think she can be patient for a bit?”

“No.” He glanced over his shoulder and back at me. “She is not good at that.”

“Then maybe we should give her a few minutes before I get on the job.”

“Really? You have time?”

“For Cat-terine?” And you. “Nothing but.”

A few minutes stretched out to a half hour while Lane knelt on the floor, sending the spinning toy all over the place, chased by the adorable fur ball until finally Cat-terine curled up on her towel and fell asleep.

Then we watched her for a while because what was cuter than a kitten unless it was Lane lying on his belly on the rug, kicking his feet and smiling at her. I was feeling things I had no business feeling, and so I stood up and picked up my tools.

Without saying anything, I headed for the kitchen and opened the cabinet under the sink. If there was anything to distract a man from a sexy tenant in footie pajamas, it was the gunk I would find in the trap.

The glamour of my life was never ending. I placed an empty bucket underneath and

got out my wrench. Fifteen minutes, and I'd be home and watching the news instead of watching Lane watching Cat-terine. It would be better that way.



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:57 am*

I wasn't sure what compelled me to open the door. I knew better than to even acknowledge a door knock when I was in my little clothes. I'd barely put them on, sure I had the night to myself, when the knock came. Who does repair visits that late in the day? Apparently, my hottie of a landlord.

And maybe that's why I opened it, on some unconscious level. I'd already messed things up with him. There was no harm in letting him see me this way. In hindsight, it was probably nothing but my curiosity about his reaction. A not-so-small part of me wanted him to instantly recognize what he was seeing and be happy about it.

My pajamas didn't shout little. Not the clothing itself anyway. The attached paci and holder? That, on the other hand, was pretty much shouting what I was. Despite that, I opened the door. I didn't have to, either. It would've been so easy for me just to message him back and say, "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm indisposed. Give me ten minutes."

I hadn't thought of that at the time. I saw him through the peephole and just opened the door wide. I honestly figured he was here for the sink, and then I felt bad when he came back with his tools to actually fix the sink after he'd only stopped by to give my fur baby a toy.

There weren't very many people I would've allowed to see me like that, not even in the pajamas. Some things were meant to be private. It didn't surprise me at all that not once did he look at me like I was a freak or gross or even a weirdo. He noticed my paci; of that, I was sure. I could pinpoint the second his eyes caught it. What shocked me wasn't that he was polite about it. I'd have been shocked had he not been. What did surprise me was how it didn't seem to faze him—at all.

He was such a nice guy. There was no denying that. Heck, he was there to bring my cat a present. Who did that? Who randomly picked up a surprise gift for another person's pet? Elio. That's who.

Best of all? That weird wall I felt between us the night before—gone. I wasn't sure if I'd been imagining it in the first place or if being willing to show this side of myself to him had it falling away. Honestly, I didn't care which. I was thrilled to have things feeling more natural.

Ha! Imagine needing a paci to make tension disappear. Life sure was good at being confusing.

I stayed with him as he worked on the sink. I told myself it was in case he needed me to answer any questions, but that was only partially true. I wouldn't have stayed to be there for a QA. I was there just as much to be near him as anything else.

"Can I ask you something?" he asked while fixing the sink, his voice muffled by being in the cabinet.

It took me a few seconds for the question to process. I'd been actively trying not to stare at his delicious ass clad in very lucky denim. In this position, it was right there, begging me to, but Elio deserved more respect than that. Also, I didn't need him to turn around and see a growing erection which would 100 percent have been the result of that.

"Yeah, go ahead." I wasn't sure what I was expecting him to ask, but I sort of assumed it was something about the sink. I assumed wrong. "Is there something really gross in there that I did?"

"No, nothing like that—nothing about the sink, and this mess wasn't your fault. This looks like maybe I should have taken care of this before you moved in. I should've

paid more attention.” As if he could’ve seen this coming. And if he could, it wasn’t like there weren’t a thousand small things that could go wrong with each rental unit on a given day. He needed to cut himself some slack.

“No worries.” And then I remembered there was a question, one he let me lead him from quickly, which had me doubly curious. “What did want to ask me?”

I might not have asked if I’d remembered what I was currently wearing.

“Your outfit. I feel like there’s more to the story than just pajamas.” It was so refreshing to have him ask like that. I wasn’t looking forward to the pretending neither of us noticed game I’d been sure was in my future.

“What gave me away?” I chuckled. “Was it the pacifier dangling from it?”

My words must’ve surprised him. He went to sit up and bumped his head on the cabinet or possibly the pipe. It was hard to see from my angle. Instead of pushing back and coming out from under the sink, he went back to work. It was better this way—probably. The conversation was already treading in the realm of uncomfortable. No sense jumping into that territory with both feet.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I know better,” he said. This time, he pulled his head out from under the sink before sitting on his knees.

I waited for the discomfort to set in. But it didn’t.

“So yeah, I did notice that. Is it a sensory thing?”

I’d assumed he’d go straight to age play, and that told me something new about Elio.

He was probably as vanilla as they come. That wasn't a bad thing or a good thing. In and of itself, it was neutral. Still fascinating.

"Yes. No. Both. I mean, I guess in a way it is." And suddenly I was stammering, but not because I wasn't wanting to talk about it. I did. I just didn't know where to start. From what I could tell, he knew nothing about being little, and I wanted his introduction to be a decent one. I opted to dive right in. "Have you ever heard of age play?"

"No, I don't think so."

It was no shock to me.

He tucked back under the sink and worked on the issue again.

"Maybe you could tell me about it." That was unexpected. And so I did. I told him how I got into age play, the first time I realized that I was little, the things I enjoyed including footie pajamas, and pacifiers and squishy pillows and macaroni and cheese with little shapes. Especially the ones that were unicorns. I told him it all, and it fell from my lips with ease. I loved how he would ask clarifying questions along the way. Not once for even a nanosecond did I feel judged.

"Your sink's all done. I think," he said, though it didn't sound too reassuring.

He stood up and turned on the water, and, sure enough, it went straight down. "Yep, it's all done."

"Thanks for coming by. You really didn't have to do it tonight." I was so glad that he did.

"I was happy to. It was nice learning more about you. Plus, I got to see Cat-terine.

She really is adorable.”

“Yeah, she is. Can I get you something to eat or drink?” I shouldn’t be trying to foster a friendship. He was in charge of my housing, after all. But it was so nice to have someone to talk to about all of me, and not just the bits that were outward facing.

“I’d love that, but I really need to get cleaned up. You don’t want to know what I found under the sink.”

He was right about that. I did not want to know.

“Thank you for the cat toy,” I said in a little kittycat voice and punctuated it with a meow, and he laughed.

“With cute thank-yous like that, it might happen more often—fair warning.” This time, she reacted for real and purred.

He grabbed his tools and walked to the door. “That stuff you shared with me? Thank you for trusting me.”

“Thank you for wanting to know.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:57 am*

I carried my tools downstairs to the closet where I stored them. One of the better features of it was a sink where I'd be able to wash them up and leave them to dry. I'd had this installed after getting tired of covering my sink with grease and gunk from my projects about the place.

I also found tasks like this great for clearing my mind. Over the time I'd owned the building, I'd spent a lot of this mind-clearing time, but it was never more needed than tonight. Previously, I'd be sorting out tasks that needed doing or maybe trying not to be too sad about Gramps. I'd been closer to him than my parents even, at least once I grew up, and I still found myself reaching for my phone to tell him something funny or frustrating that happened to me. That impulse was there even though my brain knew I lived and worked in the building he left me, meaning, he was gone.

But he'd been such a great person to have around while I was on my own for the first time, loving nothing more than for me to stop by and update him on all the happenings in my life—and maybe embellishing them just a bit for his enjoyment. He'd been very fond of Meri but never said a negative word when we split up. “You young people have to do what you like, but I hope you don't think I'm going to stop caring about Meri because you're no longer a couple.” I never thought that, and when he passed, this woman, who I never saw cry in all our time together, sobbed.

Gramps had that effect on people.

The pipe wrench was the only thing really dirty. While I twisted the pipe free and cleared it of obstruction, Lane had felt it necessary to explain the pajamas and paci to me. He had spoken quietly and without any apology for what might sound odd to many. If it had been anyone else, I might have been among them, but somehow, I

couldn't find anything about this man less than intriguing.

And I was honored that he'd chosen to explain it to me. I left the storage room and locked the door behind me then went to my unit. It was getting late, and tomorrow would be another busy day.

I turned on the television, planning to watch a cop drama or two before turning in, but my mind would not let go of everything Lane had told me while I lay on my back with my head and shoulders under the sink. It had been very difficult to do my job and act like nothing he said rattled me, when of course it did. I could see him out of the corner of my eye, and he looked every bit as adorable, but his explanation touched on things I'd never considered. Or really knew anything about. I went for my tablet and sat back down, more interested in real life than what made-up police with equipment almost no department would ever have might be up to tonight.

I searched the term "daddy" and found a whole lot of different things. Some, the obvious, parents, others, the older gray foxes that had been in fashion for a while, and then I found what I was looking for.

Daddies and littles occupied their own section of the internet. Also, mommies, but that wasn't really something I needed to know about. Littles identified as various ages from baby on up, and most were only in that space part of the time. Their daddies took care of them, gave them "tubbies," a popular term for baths, cooked them meals, played with them, tucked them in, and in cases of the youngest, even changed their diapers.

I read for hours, pausing only to refill my decaf, going deeper and deeper, reading personal accounts and fiction, a couple of scientific studies that went over my head, and even found various pages on social media sites that were geared to those who were daddies and littles. Some were in relationships both in and out of that world, and others just met up to "play."

It was a lot, and I was processing slowly.

I went into the kitchen for one last coffee and noticed the trash was nearly full. An overflowing trash can being one of my pet peeves, I pulled the bag and tied the plastic handles before heading to the dumpster out back. As happened all too often, someone had gone through in search of recyclables, despite the fact there was a container for them right next to it. And of course the collectors were not particularly careful with their digging, so I spent another five minutes or so picking up the garbage then went for my broom and swept up around it all, muttering under my breath. Gramps used to be a whole lot grumpier about it, and I'd thought he was overreacting, pointing out that the people were probably very poor and needed what they could get from recycling some cans and bottles and things. But after cleaning up after them day after day, I understood a lot better why he growled when he had to deal with it.

But then I stood back and admired how clean the garbage area looked and felt better. The building was a big responsibility but my tenants counted on me to keep it nice for them. People like Lane. I'd actually stopped thinking about him for a few minutes, but it seemed everything pointed right back at him.

I replaced the broom and dustpan in their places and headed for my unit, wondering just how rude it would be to stop in for a quick minute. Decided it would be very rude and that I had better chill. He had been very friendly and gracious, willing to explain his clothing and a little bit about himself when he didn't need to do that.

I didn't know much about what it meant to be a daddy, but the more I thought about it, the more I could see myself lining up with some of the characteristics. At least when it came to caregiving. That was what had gotten me into trouble with Meri and the others I dated. They did not want someone to take care of them. But I couldn't help myself.



Still. A daddy? I couldn't see it.

Inside my unit, I started for the sofa, just wanting to sit down and close my eyes for a moment, but I spotted a piece of folded paper on the floor near the door. A flier? We technically did not allow salespeople in the building, but they did manage to get in from time to time. Feeling grumpy coming back up, I scooped it up and unfolded it and then melted a little inside.

I found a picture of a bunny wearing pajamas and sporting a paci just like Lane's and a note:

Thank you so much for fixing my sink and for listening to me and for everything.

I was done processing for the moment and ready to get to know this man. Big or little, he'd managed to touch my heart in a way nobody else had. I wasn't sure if I could be everything he wanted or needed, but at the very least I could ask him out. See if he was interested.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:57 am*

It was date night, the night I'd been waiting for what felt like a gazillion years.

I'd been caught off guard when I walked past Elio one morning on my way to work. I said hello, just like I normally would, and he stopped me, asking if I had a minute. Of course I did. Even if I'd been running late, I'd have given him that.

"I've been meaning to catch up with you. I wanted to thank you for the picture."

It had been a spontaneous decision, drawing him a bunny and writing him a thank-you note. I'd been coloring when the idea hit me. I looked down and loved my little bunny in jams, and the first thing I thought was to share it with him. What better way than with a thank-you note.

"You can't thank people for a thank-you," I said, "otherwise we'll be having thank-yous forever."

It was a concept I struggled with as a six-year-old who loved to get mail. I wanted to respond to every single letter I got, including thank-yous from my grandparents for gifts, visits, etc.

"But it wasn't just a note, was it? You drew that for me?"

It was hardly what I'd call a masterpiece, but I had put in my best effort.

"You're welcome. I thought it was cute, and I wanted you to have it." Objectively, it was adorable.

He smiled sweetly, and I wanted to lean in and kiss those lips. It wasn't the first time, nor did I think it would be the last, that I felt such an urge. He was too darn kissable for his—make that, my own good.

“So anyway, I was wondering—and just to put it out there, you're under no obligation to say yes because I'm your landlord—but I was thinking maybe I could take you out to dinner on Friday.”

“You mean like a date?” I asked.

“Not like a date—a date,” he clarified.

“I thought you were... I...” Instantly I regretted starting the sentences. Obviously, if he was asking me out, he wasn't straight. Why would I mention my own conclusion jumping? “Please forget I said that—bi people exist. I should know, being one,” I added. I leaned very heavily toward male companions, but I'd had a few long-term relationships with women in the past.

“Yeah, we do.” He chuckled. “So, is that a yes or no?”

“Oh...oh! Sorry I was... Yes.”

He looked at me, confusion on his face.

“That was a yes. That was definitely a yes. I would absolutely love to go on a date with you. So my answer is yes.” Because nothing said keeping your cool as much as saying yes multiple times to one dinner invitation.

“I'm going to take that as a yes. Do you want to firm up plans now for times and places or just wing it on Friday?”

“I get out of work at four thirty, so any time after six should work. But maybe you could surprise me with where we go. I don’t really know anything around here yet, so whatever I picked would be pretty iffy.” It was one thing to try a random taco place because of an online review, but a date? I kind of wanted to be extra sure the place wasn’t going to be gross. He would be able to accomplish that much better than I could.

“That sounds great. How about I pick you up at six thirty?” Before I could answer, he added, “You know, no need to rush—or seven if you prefer.”

I didn’t. I preferred six...or right now. I was already excited about going but opted to play it calm, cool, collected-ish. “I don’t want to wait till seven.” Tried and failed. Not calm and cool in the tiniest of bits. But it earned another smile, and that made it worth it.

“Six thirty would be great.” He promised to get in touch with me ahead of time to finalize our plans, and I went off to work.

The rest of the week was dragging, dragging, dragging. Did I mention it dragged?

But the day was finally here. I was going on a date with Elio, my sexy landlord. He hadn’t told me the name of the restaurant he’d picked out for us, citing it was a surprise. He did let me know casual dress was fine, which was good. I didn’t really want to wear work clothes to a date. It would feel more like a work meeting than a date. And when I gave my closet a good look, it became very evident that I didn’t have any nice clothes that weren’t for work.

I opted to wear a button-up just in case the place was a little on the fancy side, and paired it with my favorite jeans. I contemplated some khakis to be a little more put together, but that felt like it was pushing the work vibe more than a date one. I wasn’t sure where this was going to go between us, but I was really sure I didn’t want it

headed toward the this feels less like a date and more like business vibe territory.

I wanted tonight to be 100 percent date-like. Whatever that meant.

Elio picked me up exactly at six thirty. I opened the door with a smile, a little better dressed this time.

“You look handsome,” he said, and held up a little bag with a cat pawprint on it.

“Is that for me?” I teased.

“Nope, it’s for my favorite girl.” He walked past me to Cat-terine, who was meowing for his attention. He pulled out a little ball with a bell in it and rolled it across the room. She barreled after it and started batting it around. He handed me the rest of the bag. “This is filled with them. The man at the store said that they will get lost a lot and then, once you have forgotten all about them, they’ll be found in the middle of the night by your sweet kitty who will decide it’s suddenly time to play. Basically, they’ll only be found when you don’t want them to be. You’re welcome.”

I could very much see that being the case. I put them under the sink, bag and all, not wanting her to get them all out and lost while we were gone. Elio went down to his car.

“Where are we going?” I asked when we arrived at the car.

“I couldn’t decide. And then I watched one of those cooking travel shows where they go across the United States finding hidden gems. Have you ever seen any of those?”

“I haven’t, but it sounds fun. Is one of those hidden gems here?”

“Yeah, not too far from here. We probably could walk, but there’s the potential for

rain, so I figured it was better if we drove. No one wants to walk a mile in the rain, especially not with a full belly.” He was right about that.

We drove the short distance and when they said “hole in the wall,” they meant it. You could easily drive past this place without even realizing it was there.

“What do they feature?” I asked as we walked up to the door.

“You’ll see. I looked up the menu and they have it all highlighted ‘as seen on TV.’”

We walked inside and I instantly loved the place.

Upon reading the menu, I discovered they were best known for deep-frying random things like cheesecake and Oreos, and even a sandwich—not like a grilled cheese sandwich, no. They took the sandwich and dipped it in batter before they deep-fried it.

I did a hard pass on that one and instead got the actual grilled cheese. We sat in the corner booth and ate our fill of junk food. I splurged and had a milkshake to wash it all down, although they called it a malt. As much as people tried to tell me the difference between a malt and a shake, I never tasted the difference. But in any case, it was delicious.

And the company? Fantastic.

We talked about how he came to own the apartment building and why it meant so much to him. It put a lot more things in perspective—the way he handled so much of the maintenance on his own, the way he seemed to really care about his tenants, and the way he just came over to fix things that were broken, even though it was well past normal working hours for that kind of a task.

In the same way he learned a lot about me that night in the kitchen, I learned a lot about him right there in the diner. I wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not. I found myself really falling for him, and really liking him. And because it was me, I just blurted out, "I really like you, Elio." I grabbed his hand as we were walking to the car. "This okay?"

"It's more than okay." He squeezed it back. "And, for the record, I really like you, too."

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:57 am*

I hadn't had an evening like this in, well, in forever. Lane was the antithesis of everyone I'd ever dated or been involved with, proving my theory that I'd just been going for the wrong type. I couldn't even imagine how or why that would have happened, and after our lovely time together, I actually didn't care.

However many frogs I had to kiss to get to this moment, everything in me said they were worth the warts. Ick. At least I could turn my back on the past with no regrets. Meri had said more than once that I was a great guy who just didn't know what or who he really wanted. She was going to love my admitting that she'd been right.

Of course, the same could be said for her since until she met Rob, she'd been with me and I was just as wrong for her. But the sense of joy and wonder I felt just sitting in the car next to Lane...I didn't have any words.

I walked him to his door and waited while he unlocked it. All evening, while we talked and laughed, the heat between us had been building, and I wanted nothing more than to take him to my place and make love to him all night. But the last thing this very sweet man would want was me leaping on him like a wild thing. I'd have to make patience my watchword and wait until he was ready for me to make a move. If he ever was.

"Elio?" Lane stood in his open doorway, one hand on the knob, a look of doubt in his beautiful blue eyes. "Would you like to come in?"

"Yes." The word was out before I could even consider whether it was smart. Or what he was inviting me in for. "I'd love to." For any reason.



“Okay.” He smiled, and the doubt disappeared. “I think I have some wine.”

“Wine sounds good.” I followed him into the kitchen where he pulled a bottle of white from the refrigerator. He turned to face me, and I couldn’t help myself. I just wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him in for the kiss I’d been planning to give him at the door. Only, instead of a good-night version, this was something else entirely. His lips parted under mine, a moan emerging as our tongues tangled.

Hips locked together, my erection was no secret. But then neither was his. Still, just because we were hard for one another was no reason to assume he wanted me to take him to bed, but when we parted to breathe, I cupped his chin, stroking the barely scruffed skin. “Lane, I think you know where this is going. But it doesn’t have to unless you want it.”

He breathed through parted, swollen lips, eyes heavy-lidded. “I want you.”

“I can’t promise to be a daddy for you. I barely understand what I might need to do that or if I could.” Studying his sexy face, I wished I could promise him anything and deliver, but despite my bad picking in the past, I’d never been deliberately dishonest.

“I don’t need you to be what you’re not. But I do need you to be okay that I’m little.”

I kissed him on the nose. “More than okay. But is it all right if I find you adorable like this, too?”

He linked his arms behind my neck and leaned in for another kiss, one I was happy to give. And this time, we didn’t stop to breathe until we found ourselves in his bedroom with our shirts halfway off. I kicked the door closed because Cat-terine did not need to see what we were up to. She’d dragged her towel into the living room from where Lane said it was usually by his dresser, and sacked out, sound asleep.

“You smell so good,” I told him, nuzzling the base of his throat. “I need to see if you taste even better.”

His groan had me dropping to my knees. He braced himself on my shoulders as I opened his zipper and pushed his pants and undershorts to his knees. I’d expected him to be large from our little bump and grind in the kitchen, and my expectations were more than met. Opening my mouth, I took him inside, gliding my tongue around the head, saltiness hitting my palate. The clean scent of soap from the shower he must have taken before our date filled my nose, along with a hint of muskiness that made me wild. I took him deeper then withdrew until he whimpered and grabbed my head, making no secret of wanting me to suck him off.

Luckily, I liked the idea, too.

The room was dim, just enough light filtering through the window from a streetlight outside for me to be able to see what I was doing and who I was doing it to. Head bobbing, I brought him into my throat and then out so only the head remained in my mouth. Using teeth, lips, and tongue, I sucked and nibbled, and licked. He wobbled but kept those hands braced, and I liked the edge having to stay standing would be giving him. Dipping my hand, I palmed his balls and gently squeezed.

“Ohhhh,” he moaned a second before his hot cum spurted into my mouth. I closed my lips tight, not wanting to let any of it escape, and drank him down while he swayed on his feet. When the very last drop disappeared down my throat, I eased back and released him from my mouth then stood, slowly. “That was—”

“Yes, it was.” I didn’t have a word for it, either. “Let’s get you the rest of the way undressed, now. I want to be skin to skin with you.”

He nodded.

“Hold on to me and step one foot at a time out of your pants, okay?”

“Okay, D-Elio.”

I wondered for a moment if he was saying what I thought he was, but it didn't really matter at this moment, and once I had him out of his clothes, I turned my attention to mine and moved a lot faster. Skin to skin would be amazing, was amazing, but I had to make one exception for now at least. Fishing in my pants pocket, I found a condom. “Lube?”

“Nightstand,” he said, sitting on the side of the bed. “How do you want me?”

I turned from where I was opening the drawer. “I want to see those beautiful eyes.”

“On my back, then.” He grinned and flopped backward, his butt right at the edge of the mattress. “I want to see your eyes, too.”

I tore the condom packet with my teeth and pulled it out then rolled it over my throbbing cock. It was supposedly lubed, and it probably would have been okay, but I always felt like a little extra slick made things better for everyone, especially at the start. Squeezing some in my palm, I coated the condom before turning my attention to prepping him. A dab on my fingers, and I was rubbing the slippery stuff around his needy hole. He whimpered and rocked his hips upward.

“No more waiting,” he huffed. “Please, Elio, I need you.”

Fingering his ass, I winked at him. “I want you to be ready for me, Lane. No rushing.”

“I'm ready!” This time when he rocked, two fingers slipped inside. He was slippery and hot and tight and ready, and I did not argue.

Lifting his knees toward his chest, I fitted the head of my cock to his hole and gave a thrust. Easing back, I drove into him again, a little deeper this time, and then again and again, faster and faster. He surrounded me with his heat, and sooner than I would have liked, my balls tightened to my body. I gritted my jaw, not wanting to come yet, wanting to make it last for both of us, but he chose that moment to tighten his muscles, and my cum poured into the condom, leaving me wrung out and panting over him.

Exhausted. Happy. And worried. Could I be enough for him? I got up to get a washcloth to clean up the adorable sleepy man still lying on the bed and, while I was at it, brought Cat-terine and her towel back to the bedroom where we could all be together. She'd been away from her person long enough. "You're a good kitty, aren't you, Cat-terine?" I petted her silky head. "Such a sweet girl."

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:57 am*

Waking up surrounded by the warmth of being the little spoon and my furry baby sleeping right next to me was officially my favorite way to start the day. I felt so cherished by both the human and the feline that I would have stayed like that all day if I didn't have to get up to pee.

Carefully, I lifted his arm and slid out of bed then padded into the bathroom to take care of things, including brushing my teeth. I didn't need to scare him away with bad breath. Cat-terine had enough of that for both of us.

When I came out, Elio was sitting up, using one of those feathers on a stick to play with the cat, who was adorably engaged in her hunt. It was a joy to watch, even if it wasn't the same as climbing right back into bed and into his arms to recapture some sleep.

I crossed over and sat on the bed beside him, kissing his cheek. "Morning. Did you sleep well?"

"Actually, I did. Once we got to sleep"—he winked—"that is. You?"

"Oh, very much so. I like sleeping with you," I replied.

He kissed my cheek. "I'll be right back." Elio handed me the stick with the feather and took his own turn in the bathroom. When he returned, he took the stick back from me. "I want her to know I'm the cool one."

"I'm confident she's well aware," I whisper shouted, as he continued to play with the cat for a few more minutes. "What do you have on your plate today? Can I make you

breakfast?”

“I would love breakfast.” He set the stick down, giving me his undivided attention. “Today’s plans include fixing the front banister, adding new outlet covers in the laundry room, replacing lightbulbs in the staircase, and, for added excitement, replacing the windowsill in the vacant apartment. It’s got a big crack.”

“Oh, you do have a full day,” I said, getting up and throwing on some sweats. No one wants a naked cook. “Do you need any help?”

“I can handle it,” he replied, his tone playful. “Though, I wouldn’t mind having an assistant, or a boss, if you know how to do the windowsill.”

“I’m more than happy to do your bidding.” I loved the idea of working side by side with Elio. Although, if he had mentioned any other activity for the day, I’d have been thrilled to do those as well. I wanted to spend time with him. Full. Stop.

“I’ve never done the windowsill before. I’m going straight by whatever the YouTube videos suggest,” he teased.

“I’m the perfect assistant. I can pull up YouTube videos like a boss.”

“Deal.”

That settled, I went to work on getting breakfast ready as Elio made the coffee and set the table. I whipped us up some French toast and bacon. It was an easy meal but one I rarely took the time to make during the week. Who needs a dirty pan and plate when you can have toast on a paper napkin?

He loved my French toast and, when breakfast was over, Elio went back to his place to clean up and get dressed while I did the same here. It wasn’t hard to say goodbye

to him, knowing that I'd be at his place shortly. Had he been going to a day job or on an overnight family trip, I'd have been clingy, asking him to stay.

I really didn't know a lot about handyman stuff, but I figured I'd be able to follow directions well enough to hand him the right tools when he asked for them and keep him company.

Forty-five minutes later, I knocked on his door, and he called for me to come in. When I did, he was in the bedroom, the door shut.

"Did you want me to come back later?"

"No," he called back, "I left the door unlocked for you. I wanted you to be able to just come in. Help yourself to anything. There's some coffee brewing in the kitchen."

"My coffee wasn't good enough, I see," I sassed. He drank it all though. Fair to say, my French toast was a hit.

"Oh, it was plenty good enough. There just wasn't enough of it. Today is going to be a many-cups-of-coffee day." I went into the kitchen to pour myself a mug and one for him. I'd watched how he fixed his when he was at my place, and it felt nice to be able to do this for him.

Partway through pouring it, I stopped, realizing that if I had been pushing for him to be "Daddy," if I was still focused on needing to have both parts of my relationships met by the same person, I'd have been upset that I was making this coffee.

It was ridiculous on so many levels. I was embarrassed for me. In this scenario, it just made sense that I was the one preparing the coffees. Since I was the one out here, I was the one needing to pour. Maybe this just-dating thing wouldn't work.

I went to grab the creamer from the fridge and noticed my drawing was on there. I just stopped and stared. He hadn't just said thank-you because he was being polite. He liked it, valued it enough to put it on his fridge. And maybe that was the little side of me who loved to see things on the fridge—important things, pictures, and photographs, and such—that it just hit me in a good way.

“You okay?” He came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me. I leaned back into him.

“You saved it,” I said, as if he didn't already know.

“Of course I did. You made it for me.”

I turned in his arms. “You don't think it's weird that it was a little kid-like though?”

He kissed my forehead. “It was little-kid-like, and I loved it.”

I slammed my lips to his, wanting to show him how much all of that meant, without having to formulate the words. There was no way I wouldn't get too emotional if I thought about it any longer, and maybe it was okay if I did, but we had things to accomplish, including replacing a windowsill, which I had sort of thought was connected to the entire window. So, it was going to be an adventure that was for real.

Being his assistant turned out to be the funnest way to spend a Saturday. Who would have thought it? We fixed little things here, a big thing there, chatted about my work, my old work, the city, the place we went to eat. Chattering on about anything and everything.

It felt so natural, like we'd been friends and lovers for years instead of barely knowing each other. For real, Elio was dangerous. It was official. Because I could so easily fall in love with him without even realizing it. Heck, I wasn't so sure I hadn't



already started my descent.

When we were done for the day, I went to the mailbox on my way back to my apartment. Inside was a card from Chained. I couldn't wait to open it up and tore open the envelope. Inside was a glittery cati-corn invitation to a craft day for littles at Chained.

I squeed, although the way Elio came running, I had a feeling it didn't sound as much like a squee as it did me yelping in pain.

"Are you okay?"

"Sorry. Yeah, I'm just excited. Look what I got." I handed him the invitation. "I told you about Chained, right?"

He nodded.

"This is a craft day they are having next month, and I'm invited." Which was a clever marketing promo more than anything, but I'd take it.

"It looks like a lot of fun." He held it out for me. "Cat-terine is cuter."

Accurate.

"You can come with me if you want, but zero hurt feelings if you don't. And if you do decide to go, that isn't a commitment to always want to go." Not in a million years did I want him to feel any pressure.

"I think I want to go."

"Think on it." I kissed the cleft on his chin. Gods, that thing was a work of art. "I

don't have to RSVP for a week.”

At week's end, he was still holding firm that he wanted to go with me.

I didn't want to get my hopes up, but, also, I couldn't wait.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:57 am*

When I agreed to go to Chained, I did it with the intent of having an open mind, but I had no idea what to expect. Once again, the internet was my friend. I could learn anything there from how to fix a windowsill to what kinds of activities I might find at a place like Chained. To my chagrin, there was not a lot about this club that I could locate, but there were a whole lot of clubs that invited people who had particular “kinks” to come.

I didn’t think of Lane as kinky. To me, that had a whole other feel rather than what I saw in him that night in his footie pajamas. No matter how he dressed or what we were doing, he just seemed like himself. Fun, silly, serious, adorable...those characteristics were present in him all the time. But would it be different at Chained?

Frankly, some of the pictures I saw were a little scary for me—a guy who I learned from a podcast would be called “vanilla” among those in the know. My favorite ice cream flavor...what did that say about me? But also, I wondered what kind of reception I’d get at the club. Would I be an embarrassment to Lane?

The craft day was being held in the afternoon. I didn’t know why I expected the club to be open only at night.

“It mostly is,” Lane said when I asked as we approached the building that housed the club. “Or at least most places are, but sometimes they have special events. I am new to Chained, but I understand they often have fundraisers for all kinds of charities as well. But it’s nice to have an afternoon party, especially for the littles and their caregivers. In my experience, not many places will do something like that.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Others often take precedence to us. Chained even has a special room just for us. I imagine that’s where we’ll have our craft day.”

I opened the door and held it for Lane to precede me inside.

“Welcome!” A woman wearing a frilly pink dress sat behind the desk in the foyer. “Are you here for the craft day?” She giggled. “You must be because nobody else is coming in until after nine. I’m Kerry. Names please?”

“Hi, Kerry.” Lane stepped forward, his backpack straps over one shoulder. “I’m Lane. I received an invitation and this is Elio, my guest. We called in his information, too.”

She scanned a ledger on the desk in front of her. Although she was dressed and spoke like a little girl, she had a real efficiency about her that reminded me of a certain iconic cartoon girl. “I see you here.” Lifting her head, she gave a nod. “Daddy says my reading is getting very good. Please leave your phones here, and do you need help finding the changing rooms?”

“My phone?” I clutched the device in my jacket pocket, ready to protest.

“It’s policy,” Lane murmured. “People’s privacy is very important, and all phones are cameras. I can find the changing room, Kerry. I had a tour.”

“Oh, I see.” Not that I was that hooked on my phone in general, but I was pretty used to having it on me. “Let me silence the ringers so it doesn’t bother anyone.”

“Your daddy is very nice,” she said to Lane.

“Oh, he’s not...I mean...” Lane seemed at a loss, so I stepped in.

“Thank you, Kerry. You seem very nice, too. I bet your daddy is proud of you.” He’d handled it just right, and we left her smiling. Along a hallway, we passed many doors. “These are the private changing rooms. They are all booked tonight, but there is a room where everyone who wants to change clothes and did not get a private room can do that. It’s right here.” The door opened as he spoke, and a man emerged accompanied by another holding his hand. The second man wore tiny shorts and a tight shirt that was, from what I’d seen online and what Lane had explained, to be an adult-sized onesie. Knee socks and light-up sneakers completed the look.

“You okay?” Lane asked after they passed us with a cheerful greeting.

“Yes. I think so. Just something I haven’t seen before. But they were friendly.”

Lane set his backpack on a bench and took off the hoodie he’d worn over a very tightly fitted T-shirt with a cat on the front that looked a lot like Cat-terine. He also had brought shorts and changed into them, along with socks and sneakers. I noticed most of the other littles were being dressed by their daddies.

“I should have helped you,” I murmured while stuffing the hoodie in the backpack. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine. Don’t worry.” He selected a locker and opened it. “We can leave our things here.”

I placed the backpack and Lane’s street shoes inside, and Lane closed the locker and handed me the key. “Ready?”

He grinned. “I’m so ready. I love crafts.”

“What kinds of crafts will there be?” I was curious. “Coloring like the cute bunny you drew for me?”

“Oh, there’s sure to be coloring,” he said. “And probably lots of glitter.”

“Glitter?”

He laughter rang out and a couple of other littles turned toward him. “Glitter?” one asked. “My daddy doesn’t like me to play with glitter.”

“Sometimes it gets in our hair,” Lane confided then held out a hand. “I want to play now.”

His voice had changed timbre as he spoke, and I thought I was getting to see his little come out or whatever they might call it. “You’ll have to show me the way,” I said, squeezing his fingers. “I’m kind of excited.”

“I’m very excited.” He looked around. “Let’s go. I hope that boy’s daddy isn’t in charge. He’d probably hide all the glitter.”

“Lane?”

“Yes?”

“If there is glitter, try to keep it out of your hair?”

He shrugged. “I try.”

We walked through several areas on our way to the little room, but they were dimly lit, so I didn’t get a really good look. Enough to know I was seeing some of the pieces of dungeon furniture I’d viewed online, but with no people around and just the actual equipment, it looked less menacing.

Not to say that I wasn’t glad that we walked right past it. I was all for consenting

adults doing their own thing, but I didn't think I'd like to flog or be flogged. And I was concerned about what we might find in the little room, but when we got there, it was filled with daddies and mommies and other caregivers and littles dressed like the ones we'd seen in the changing room. They were gathered around a number of tables doing...crafts. Coloring and painting and folding paper and putting together models, all sorts of things.

Lane gave a little bounce. I'm going to make goldfishes, okay?"

"All right." I let go of his hand, and Lane darted off to a table where lots of sparkly metallic paper was in use. By the end of the day, I'd learned a lot but a couple of things in particular. One, littles were all about snack time, and two, the glitter situation was worse than I'd feared and it did get in people's hair. Also, I had more skill at crafts than I'd thought.

On the way home, after he'd gone to each station and done the activities, some with me helping, listened to a lady named "Miss Lily" tell us about some upcoming events that got everyone all excited, and then finished up with a big fat oatmeal chocolate chip cookie, he could barely keep his eyes open. "Did you have fun, Lane?"

He yawned and leaned his head back. "Most fun ever. Thank you for coming with me."

I reached over and ruffled his hair. "It's okay, Lane. I had a good time, too."

His eyes snapped open. "Really?"

"Absolutely. It was fun to watch you having such a nice time."

He fell asleep on the drive while I processed the day. I was doing a lot of processing lately. I hadn't been shocked by anything I'd seen. Rather, I'd had fun, too, just being

there and watching the interactions.

Surprising but true.



## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:57 am*

Things with Elio had been going great. We'd been together for a while now, and every day I spent with him, I liked him more. We'd even gone to Chained a few times for some of their private events. It was a huge step for Elio.

The day I handed him the first invitation to look at, I wanted to show him why I'd been screaming. The worry on his face had me jumping in and trying to alleviate it quickly, and giving him that paper had been the fastest way to do so. No part of me had thought it through. Had I, I'd have held off, not wanting to inadvertently push anything Chained on him.

When I showed him, the initial reaction I saw was the curiosity in his eyes. I tried not to read too much into it. We hadn't talked about him being a daddy or possibly being a daddy for me even though daddy conversations had arisen. It was natural that they would, since he was learning about me.

Chained wasn't anything that had been put on the table as even a consideration for us as a couple, and there I was offering for him to come and not just any time; no, I picked a special event. And to my surprise, he wanted to come without asking any more questions about the event. Even when I gave him a chance to change his mind without feeling like he was being a dick, he didn't take it.

We had so much fun that day and a few others since then. I had a little snow globe we made together on the shelf. It had been a blast to create, but better than that, it was a daily reminder that we'd gone there together and that he hadn't stood there watching like many of the newer daddies often did. Nope. He dove right in, and we made a craft together.

My favorite event, out of the handful we'd gone to, had been story time. It wasn't in the little room, making it a tad more low-key. There had been a lot of brand new to the scene littles there exploring the club. Seeing the wonder of it all through their eyes was fascinating, but I didn't pay attention for long, instead allowing myself to fall into little space and enjoy the time with Elio and other littles.

We were in the main room, and a local artist slash author, who also happened to be a mommy, came and read her book. It had nothing to do with being little, and that made it better, allowing me to immerse myself in the tale. It was an alphabet book about bugs, and I loved it. All the illustrations had started as oil paintings, and they blew me away. I wasn't a huge fan of insects, but the book had kind of made me want to be.

Best of all, I sat there thinking how much I liked it that Daddy's here. That was when it hit me—it was too late to be keeping a “daddy distance” with Elio. That line had been crossed; that ship had sailed; that time had passed. I already thought about him as Daddy.

And I needed it to cut it out. He was my boyfriend. I loved our relationship. He did, too. It was nice being with someone willing to express their feelings instead of filtering them. I tried to do the same for him.

The question sat there staring at me. Did I need Elio to be my daddy, or was this enough? Going to Chained with me was huge. I loved that he did that for me. But if he said, “You know what? That's just not my thing,” I could say with confidence that I'd have been okay with that.

Elio was fundamentally different than my ex on every level. And not just my ex, anyone else I'd met in I couldn't even tell you how long. Elio saw my little side as part of me. And even if he didn't fully understand it, and even if he didn't want to fully be an active part of that time with me, he saw that as the me he cared about. And

he respected it and cherished it in a way I'd never experienced before. It was huge for me, that realization that I could have Elio and I could have my little side, even if if he didn't want a more active role in that side of me.

"You be good." I went to get Cat-terine off my lap so I could go to Elio's place for a movie. I wasn't sure which one Elio had picked out, but he seemed legit excited about it, and I was as always over-the-top giddy to be spending time with him, so it worked.

He'd invited me over for a lazy Sunday morning, a rainy one at that. I couldn't wait. Cat-terine, on the other hand, was not thrilled to have me leave. The tiny little ball of fur was keeping me from getting up. Sure, I could have ripped her from my lap, but it might hurt both of us and it would for sure piss her off.

That gave me an idea. I picked up my phone and called him up. He answered on the first ring.

"Everything okay?"

"Well, yes, and no. I have a little one here who doesn't want me to leave. How would you feel about having her over, too? Maybe I can make a makeshift litter box, so you don't have to worry about that."

"I think it's a great idea," he said without skipping a beat, "and you don't need to. I have some disposables in the storage closet."

"Disposables?" Was that even a thing? Must be if he had them in the closet.

"Yeah, they make disposable cat litter pans. One of the tenants left them a long time ago. I sort of forgot about them, and then you got your fancy litter box. Cat-terine is a bit spoiled. She wouldn't have used them. So I didn't think to give them to you. But

now it'd be a good time. I'm going to run and get those, and you can make your way over."

When I arrived at their apartment with Cat-terine in my arms, he was just coming back from the storage closet. Perfect timing. And sure enough, he had a package of disposable cat pans. Who knew they were a thing?

But it was more than that. The place was decorated for our movie date.

"Let me set up this litter, and I'll show you what I've done for our day in."

"Okay," I said, on autopilot, my eyes still taking in the room.

"What do you think, Cat-terine?" There was a huge stuffy shaped like pancakes on the couch, a cartoon on the television, and an elephant-shaped gift bag on the coffee table, begging me to just take a look. I somehow managed not to and I was quite proud of myself. That thing was itching to be opened.

When he came back, he asked, "Did you look at your present?"

I could've been looking that whole entire time. Ugh.

"No, I wasn't sure it was my turn or if it was another of many gifts chosen to spoil a certain cat." He did treat her like gold, one of his best qualities if anyone were to ask me.

"Yeah, I guess I do, do that." He took Cat-terine from me and rubbed noses with her. "But how can I not? You're the kind of cute no one can resist."

I grabbed the bag and sat on the couch, tossing the tissue paper. When I reached inside the bag, there was a pair of footie jams and a crochet hook, complete with paci

attached to it, similar to the one I wore the first time Elio saw anything little about me.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“I thought we could have a daddy little day...you and me together. We could watch The Princess Bride and you can wear your new cuddly pajamas and use your paci. After the movie, we could have lunch. I got that macaroni and cheese you like, and I even found the cutest dishes that have small squares in them to separate your food—divided dishes, I think they are called.”

A little day. Elio was offering me a little day. No, that wasn’t true, it was a daddy/little day. Elio referred to himself as a daddy. That was huge.

“Yeah, I don’t know if they’re the kind you like. They have these little panda bears on them. I thought they were cute.” He set the kitten down.

“Pandas?”

He nodded.

“I love pandas.” I nearly tackled Elio to the ground. “You’re amazing.”

“I think that’s your title.” He kissed the top of my head.

I held him closer. “Want to help me get dressed?”

He stepped back slightly. “Yeah.” His enthusiasm was overflowing. Not having been daddy to a little before, it wasn’t a surprise that he didn’t have the normal gear. It was a pair of pajamas that I loved, but was missing things like thick underwear or even a diaper. I ended up wearing my boxers underneath.

But really, none of that mattered. He took this time to do this for me. All of this was for me.

We snuggled up on the couch together. I sucked down my paci, my head in his lap, watching one of my all-time favorite movies, and when it was over, we had lunch together. The divided dish was far cuter than I'd imagined it would be, and I was imagining cuteness.

"Was this okay?" he asked, pointing to the macaroni and cheese.

"This was so much more than okay, Daddy."

It was the first time I had said that word aloud in relation to him, and I meant it with every fiber of my being.

"Is that okay?" I asked.

"More than," he said.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:57 am*

I had positively held my breath when I made Lane dinner after we watched The Princess Bride that day, hoping I was doing things right. That the shaped mac'n'cheese I picked out was good for the dishes. I wasn't an expert daddy, by any means, but I was looking forward to learning and grateful for the patience a certain little demonstrated with me nearly all the time. More than I'd have been able to manage, for sure.

Being a caretaker either came naturally or it did not, I believed, and looking back at my other relationships where I'd tried to extend that and been rejected pretty firmly, I wondered how it had taken me so long to get to this point. Could I have had stronger relationships if I'd been with other littles instead of the really independent-anything-but littles I'd chosen? Or was it just a matter of finding myself with one in particular, the right little for me. The one who brought my caregiving instincts to the forefront and made me a true daddy.

I'd probably never know, but what mattered was that I'd met someone who made me wake up every morning looking forward to seeing what the day would bring. I still went about my jobs in the building and all the other things that made up my life, but once Lane was home from work, the real day began. We were eating dinner together quite often now, spending our evenings and weekends together, and some of that time he was big, others little. Life was so much more interesting and joyous with Lane in it.

And with that in mind, I came to the conclusion that our relationship required something a little formal at this point. A special occasion to celebrate and, hopefully, cement the daddy/little side of our relationship. I picked a Friday night when we could stay up late if we chose and not have to worry about getting up early. Or at

least Lane wouldn't. My schedule was more flexible than his since I didn't have to go to an office.

On the weekends, he often helped me with my work, and on a couple of occasions, he'd been flagged down by other tenants to help them out with a problem. They just saw us together so much, they assumed it was his job, too, I guessed. I told him he could just send them to me, but he got a kick out of the new skills he was picking up, he insisted.

I spent a whole week planning how I would do it, shopping and watching YouTube videos for recipe ideas before Friday finally arrived. I decided not to use the little dishes or anything like that because it really was up to Lane when that happened, and he hadn't mentioned wanting to be little this weekend so far. And I didn't think it was necessary for him to be when I popped the question.

I had in mind a dinner that was not little, but that had elements of little, and in the end decided to serve a favorite of mine—although not one I'd ever prepared before. So I spent Tuesday down the rabbit hole on YouTube watching one influencer after another make spaghetti carbonara. Wednesday, I learned the art of New York cheesecake, and I figured I could manage a salad and garlic bread on my own. I set the table and bought flowers. I even lit a couple of candles because they said special occasion to me. And then I set the small box with the gift I'd bought him by his place. And waited.

And got a text: I'm running a little late. Be there soon.

Soon was a couple of hours late, and my pasta was a little congealed, the salad maybe shouldn't have been dressed until he got there, but when he walked in and saw the table all set with flowers and candles, he gave me the most satisfying squee. "What did you do? It's not my birthday, is it?" He thought for a second. "No, it's not."



“You really did have a long day, didn’t you.” I gave him a big hug and kiss. “Want a glass of wine?” Ever since that first night he stayed over and we never got around to drinking the wine, I kept a bottle in my fridge. Neither one of us was a big drinker, but a glass with dinner was a relaxing pleasure.

“Yes, please.” He sank into his seat at the table. “Nothing bad at work. It was just busy and I’m wiped out, so if I fall asleep with my face in the soup, try to understand?”

“Good news. We’re not having soup.” I tousled his hair, something I enjoyed doing. “So we don’t have to worry about you scorching those cute cheeks.”

“What are we having? Can we eat fast and go to bed?”

I went into the kitchen and came back with bowls of salad and the big enameled cast-iron pot I’d cooked the pasta in. “If you’re trying to seduce me, I promise you’ll succeed.”

I gave him a few minutes to sip wine and enjoy his only slightly wilted salad before bringing in the garlic bread and serving the pasta. “I also made a cheesecake,” I told him. “So save room.”

“Okay.” He set his fork down. “Not that you don’t always cook great, but this”—his wave took in the room—“has special all over it.”

“Open your present.”

He blinked. “I didn’t see it.” Reaching for the box, he gave me a tired smile. “I really am sorry to be so low energy after you’ve gone to so much trouble.”

“Don’t apologize for having a heavy work day. If I’d realized, I’d have saved all this

for tomorrow, so maybe I should apologize.”

“Look at us being all polite and stuff.” He was working the ribbon on the small box. “Coming home to you is the best part of the whole day.” With the ribbon undone, he finished unwrapping and opened the little brown box. “What is...ohhh, Daddy!” He pulled out the paci inside. “It’s engraved with our initials. All three of us, even Catherine.” Hopping up from his seat, he came around the table and climbed into my lap. “That’s the sweetest gift. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome, but you’re right about this being a special occasion, at least I hope it will be.”

Resting his cheek on my shoulder, he traced circles on my shirt with a fingertip. “What kind of occasion? We haven’t been together for a year, so it’s not our anniversary.”

“I want to ask you something.” We already were being daddy and little, so was it necessary to do this? I stroked a lock of hair back from his forehead and knew that it was. “If you’re not too tired.”

“No, I’m good. What’s going on?” His voice was soft, tired. My timing sucked. “Please, Daddy?”

“When can I ever say no to you?” I drew in a deep breath. “Lane, would you officially be my little?”

He sat up straight on my lap, eyes wide and every trace of tired gone from his face. “You are proposing that I be your little? Forever?”

“For as long as you want to be.”

“And you’ll be my daddy. Forever.” His lower lip trembled.

“For as long as you want me to be.”

“Then I now pronounce us Daddy and little.” Lane pressed that trembling lip to mine and kissed me. “I didn’t really think about it before, but it’s so wonderful that you did. This is why you’re the daddy. You take care of me and give me what I need. And I need to have you be my daddy.”

“I love you, Lane.”

“And I love you, Daddy.”

“Want cheesecake?”

He bobbed his head, riding the line between big and little. “I want a big piece.”

“Okay, then.” I stood up, bringing him with me, and set him on his feet. “Finish your dinner and then you can have the biggest piece of the cheesecake with a big dollop of blueberry compote that I also made.”

“Gee, Daddy, you’ve got chef skills.” He returned to his seat and picked up his fork. “And after dessert, maybe we can seal this deal in the bedroom.” He met and held my gaze. “I mean with sex.”

I laughed so hard I blew wine out of my nose. One of Lane’s gifts was knowing when things were getting too serious and needed to lighten up a little. “I think that’s the best idea I’ve heard all day.”

“No, Daddy, it’s a good one, but the best idea is that you’re my daddy forever.”

“And you’re my little for just as long.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:57 am*

Weeks had passed since Elio asked me to be my little. A lot had changed since then, but also a lot stayed the same. All of it for the better.

Elio was a daddy—my daddy. He stepped into those shoes seamlessly. I loved it. He loved it. It was working out for us both, and wasn't that the sign of a good relationship?

I'd had more time to be little since he officially became mine. I loved that. But what I loved more was how I could let my little side shine through doing our normal everyday activities, especially when it came to my paci. It was no longer relegated to the times I was in full little gear. I even used it at bedtime more often than not. And best of all, Elio embraced it fully, understanding it was what I needed.

One thing that surprised me after we became "official" was the sense of security that came along with it. It probably sounded boring to have comfort in a relationship. People often thought they wanted excitement, a thrill as it were. And maybe some did, but not me.

He wanted me exactly the way I was, and I wanted him exactly the way he was.

The one thing I'd been so worried about—Elio being my landlord— not once had that been an issue of any kind whatsoever. I continued to pay my rent as per my lease, he continued to fix shit around my place as it broke, and we began to switch back and forth from my apartment to his. We had no rhyme or reason for our schedule. When we were at one place and getting sleepy, that became home base for the night. Sometimes it would be weeks at one place, and other times we switched more often.

It was nice in that we each had our own space, even if we practically lived together. One day, I wanted to get rid of the practically and just live together. But with everything so new, I wasn't in a rush for that. Had he been across town, that would be a different conversation. But for now, we didn't even need to go outside to get to each other's place. This worked just fine.

My phone buzzed in my pocket and, when I saw it was Elio, I immediately answered.

"Some guy's here with a package for you," Elio said. "Did you want me to bring it right up to you?"

I tapped on my phone, wanting to see what package it was to discover it was my back order here far sooner than they had thought it would be.

"I know what this is!" And I couldn't wait. "Can you tell them yes so they bring it here?" It was my dresser. Well, it would be—it was the pieces for my dresser.

A minute later, there was a knock on the door. When I answered it, I signed for the box. They set it on the living room floor. It had two-man warnings all over it. I'd been told it was heavy, and it was labeled heavy. Still, I kind of pooh-poohed the idea of it actually being heavy. I assumed the warning was akin to the labels on the soap-filled cleaning pads telling you the lemon one wasn't edible. I was wrong. Good thing I didn't need to hold it all at once and could slide out each individual piece as I needed it.

"Knock knock." Daddy rapped on the doorframe.

"Do you want to know what it is?"

"I don't know, want to know it's a dresser, or it will be a dresser," he teased. Stinker.

“We’ll see how many times I have to take it apart and put it back together before it’s right.” I always managed to get them done, but it was trial and error for sure.

“And that is officially where you have me,” Daddy said.

The two of us spent the next hour and a half putting the dresser together. The instructions were remarkably easy, and the cuts were precise, making the execution just as low stress. That didn’t make the project stressless. On the contrary, Catherine saw to that.

A certain little fur baby, who shall remain unnamed to protect the not-so innocent, decided the bowls of screws and dowels were her playthings, and we spent just as much time finding a screw that was batted across the floor as we did assembling the thing. Could we have figured out a way to prevent her from getting to them? Absolutely. Did we like seeing her sad face when we tried to take things away from her? Categorically, no.

“This is much nicer than I thought it would be based on how many pieces there were.” I ran my finger over the top.

“I think so, too.” He opened and closed each drawer, making sure they slid on the tracks easily.

“Can you help me get it into my closet?”

“Why the closet? Don’t you want access to it?”

“It’s for my little clothes. I always kept those hidden away.” And now that I thought about that, it was silly. This wasn’t my office where people walked past my desk a bazillion times a day. This was my own home. There was no reason I couldn’t leave it out.

“We can put it in the far-right corner of your bedroom. There’s room there.”

I hugged Elio. “Thank you. I needed someone to say that to me.”

We moved the dresser and unpacked all my little clothes into it. Daddy had bought me some and, when I paired them with the ones from my tote, my dresser was mostly full.

“I didn’t realize how many things I had,” I noted.

“And you also have things at my place,” he reminded me. I didn’t have a ton over there—a couple of outfits was all. At least as far as clothing went. I did have toys, coloring books and crayons, and my panda dishes though. We had it set up where I could wake up and choose to be little in either place without the need to go back and forth. It was working out for us.

“Speaking of my place, did you want to come over and play today? We could try the new play dough set I got you.”

I had to admit the offer was tempting.

“I so want to play,” I said, really meaning it. “And I love play dough, but I had a different kind of play in mind.”

“Oh, really? I could be persuaded. What are you thinking?”

I grabbed his hand. “Let’s throw the garbage away and go get pancakes, eating them until we burst.”

He broke into laughter.



“Things are not boring with you.” He cupped my cheek. “They’re not even close to boring. Heck, they might not be on the same continent. Even when we are ‘boring’ by most standards, though, and when we just stay in, that’s not boring, either.”

“Daddy, is this a long-winded way of saying no pancakes?” I stuck my bottom lip out in a faux pout.

“Of course not. We can eat pancakes until tomorrow if you want.”

“Good because we are going to need our energy.” He nibbled on my bottom lip while I grabbed his ass. “Lots and lots of energy.”

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:57 am*

It was a logical thing to do, moving in together. The real question was why it took us so long. We had been spending every night together in one place or the other for months, bringing Cat-terine with us each night, and while it wasn't a big hassle, it was a little inconvenient. We'd end up at one house while the fixings for that night's dinner were at the other, or the shirt Lane wanted for work was in my closet and we were at his place. Things like that. But none of those were reason to move in together. Not really.

The best reason was we'd grown together into a couple of people who loved each other but also liked one another and never willingly were apart. The people at the club joked we were chained at the hip, and I didn't hate the idea. It was time, and there was no question which unit we would live in. Gramps' old space, my current one, had three bedrooms. The owner's unit was more like a house than an apartment, right at the front of the building with a big front window Cat-terine loved for its patch of afternoon sunlight. She even had her own towel there.

We woke up on the morning of moving day very early because Lane's place was already rented out, and the new tenant would be moving in very soon. We wouldn't have much to do because he had kept it nice, but we did need to get his things out soon enough for the new cleaning service to do their thing. He protested that he'd do it himself, but I had these ladies for a reason. Unlike the last service, they had eagle eyes and left everything immaculate. They were in and out in a few hours in most cases, too.

"Good morning, love." I rolled over ready to wake Lane in a fun way, but all I found was Cat-terine curled up beside me. "Where is Lane?" I stroked her furry head. "Is he in the bathroom?"

“I’m packing up the kitchen.” He hustled into the bedroom with an empty box. “Since you mentioned the bathroom, want to be in charge of that?”

“We haven’t even had coffee yet.” I sat up, but I wasn’t really awake. “Don’t you want to come back to bed for a few minutes? Maybe we can...”

“Not right now, we can’t, Mr. Landlord. If we’re going to have this place emptied in time for Maria and Jolene to clean at three. The new tenants will be here tomorrow. We have no time to waste.” We’d actually planned to get more done earlier in the week, but between some plumbing problems that came up for me and an extra busy week at work for Lane, we hadn’t been able to. “Come on! I have the coffee brewing. Bathroom packing, please.”

I was awake enough now to be excited about what this day meant. From now on, we’d have the same exact address, down to the unit number. We’d have all our things in one place and would live together for real. Officially. I bounced out of bed and grabbed the box, planted a kiss on Lane’s cheek, and raced into the bathroom to take care of business and pack the things that lived in there.

When he moved in, when I helped him unload, it hadn’t seemed like nearly so much stuff, but it had all been neatly packed in boxes intended to be carted a long distance. Now, we figured we’d pack a few boxes, unpack, and come back for more.

That was a better idea on paper than in reality. We were starting to pile things in my place, our new place, because time was bearing down on us. Lane was starting to get a wild look in his eye and Cat-terine, well, she didn’t have a clue what was going on except that she didn’t like it and was sitting in a corner glowering at us. By noon, I knew I had to step in and make some decisions. My little and our pet needed me.

First things first. I picked up the phone and called the cleaners. “Hi, Maria. I know we said three o’clock, but can you possibly change and come very early tomorrow

morning? Like six o'clock?"

She laughed. "Six? Really?"

"It's a lot to ask, I know. But I'll make it worth your while."

"Sounds like someone had some planning issues." Maria and her partner in crime were incredibly organized and would never have anything like this happen. "Can I make another suggestion?"

"All right..." If they couldn't come tomorrow morning, we'd be in deep trouble because we were not going to get done today at the rate we were going. Not with any level of sanity. "What did you have in mind?"

"We can come now and help. Clean behind you as you go, even pack and move things. We're very good at that."

"Are you kidding?" I covered the phone. "Lane, do you have any objections to the ladies helping with moving?"

"Objections?" He picked up Cat-terine and spun around. "No objections."

I uncovered the phone. "Maria? If you're serious, we'll give you time and a half for the whole thing."

"See you in a half hour." She hung up, and Lane and I danced in a circle.

"They will probably just send us out because we're in the way," he exulted. "Where shall we go?"

They did not send us away, but they did take the project to a whole new and

organized level where we were done with moving things out of the apartment by the original three o'clock time, and they could move forward with the cleaning. They were incredible, and the old service had done us a favor by being incompetent.

Once Maria and Jolene were in Lane's old place with their cleaning products and vacuum and brooms, Lane and I sank onto the sofa. Not only had they helped us pack and carry, they'd supervised us unpacking, and we were sitting in a neat and tidy space that I suspected they'd actually done some cleaning in as well.

My eyes were closing when Lane rested his head on my shoulder. "Good job, Daddy."

"What?" I turned to face him. "I nearly had us going under for the third time." Not very Daddy in my books.

"You recognized a situation and took steps to resolve it. You saw that I was starting to panic and Cat-terine was freaking out and you brought in help. Look around. There's no way we could have made this work without that help, not in our tight schedule. And now, we are moved in and settled and the only thing left to do is..."

We beamed at one another. "Back to bed?" I suggested.

"That sounds good."

"Maybe a tubby?"

He visibly relaxed. "Yes, please, Daddy."

"Okay, you go get your basket of toys for the tubby and bring it in while I start the water running. Want bubbles?"

“I love you this much, Daddy.” His arms could not spread wider when he spread them to show me how much.

With Cat-terine once again in her pool of sunlight, all was right with the world, and I went in to run a bath for a certain little who needed to relax and play with toys. It was as settling for me as it was for him, and when he came in with the basket, I showed him where we would keep them on a shelf for convenience. “Now, let Daddy undress you and you can play for a few minutes before it will be time to suds you up and get you ready for bed. A certain good boy has had a long day.”

I took off his clothes and helped him to step into the tub. He sank into the bubbles and rested his head against the back. “I’m tired.” His voice was just a little sigh.

I put a couple of boats in the tub and soaped up a washcloth. “Wash up time.”

He never even protested that he wanted to play. And after I got him all scrubbed up and cleaned, I rubbed shampoo into his hair, worked up a lather, and rinsed it away. Then I went into the bedroom and came back with a set of footie pajamas. “Time to get out, Lane. Daddy is going to tuck you in bed and read you a story.”

“I can’t help it! I’m so excited.”

Tonight was the first time we’re going to Chained, just us. Tonight wasn’t connected to some sort of event fostering daddy/little dynamics, and I couldn’t wait to throw my backpack on and race there. I wasn’t patient. Good thing Daddy was here. He had enough patience for both of us.

I handed it to my pack to him for inspection. He wasn’t one to micromanage my life, but I’d asked him to make sure I was ready for tonight. It would take a lot for me to move past missing something important, and I didn’t trust myself not to. Not when I was this filled with anticipation.

“Do you have everything you need?” he asked.

I shrugged.

“We’ll make sure,” Daddy assured me in the exact way I needed him to.

“Thank you, Daddy.”

He opened my bag, took everything out, and laid it on my bed. He made sure I had my favorite jams, worn and well-loved. He double checked that Bunny Love, the stuffed rabbit was there. It looked exactly like the one that I drew for him that first night, right down to the outfit. He found someone on the internet who handmade stuffies using pictures you sent them, and it was absolutely perfect. One by one, everything from my socks to my spare paci were spread out for inventory.

“It looks like you have everything.” He kissed my cheek and then folded up my backpack and brought it to the closet.

“Daddy, are we still going?” I’d be heartbroken if he said we weren’t, but also I’d understand and not make a fuss. This was as big a deal for him as it was for me, just a different kind.

“Of course we are.” He turned around and held up a backpack embossed with Catherine’s face. “I think this would suit you better, though.”

I couldn’t help the giggles that erupted into laughter.

“You like it?”

“I love it. How did you do it?” I snatched it from his arms and hugged it close. It looked like she did that very first day.

“I took the picture off the shelter website. It was under their alumni portfolio.” What a clever daddy.

I shoved all my things inside, sucked it up, and put it on, and stood proudly.

“See, Cat-terine? You don’t have to miss anything. You’re going with us.”

I wrapped my arms around Daddy for a squeeze, and he walked me out to the car. The drive was short, and we were there fairly early as far as the evening went. But for a special day, you didn’t want to be mushed in a crowd. Early was best.

“I booked us that room that you like so much.” He was so full of surprises tonight.

“The one with the ducks?” I asked.



“The one with the ducks.”

I could barely contain my excitement, I was practically bouncing my way there. It was a challenge to even get through check-in. I wanted to get there so badly that and as soon as the door opened, I ran straight to it, leaving Daddy in the dust.

This time it was Daddy who was giggling as he caught up to me and opened the door. It was just as wonderful as I remembered. Ducks everywhere. On the changing table sat rubber duckies. A mural with ducks covered the wall. There was even a duck-shaped basket filled with personal items a caregiver might need.

I wasn't even a huge lover of all things duck, but there was something magical about this room. Daddy said it was probably the glitter they used with the paint. And he could well be right. I did like glitter. Too much.

“Let's get dressed, so we can enjoy our night, okay?”

I nodded, put my bag down, and took off my shoes. I liked it when Daddy got me ready, but for some reason, I didn't like him near my shoes. I was always worried that I had stepped in something or they were gross. It was 100 percent a me problem.

He didn't waste time helping me get my clothes off. Today wasn't about the naked part. We'd save that for another time.

“You're ready for your clothes now.” He kissed my cheek. He started with my thick underwear and then helped me put on my duckie socks. I hadn't even packed them. He must've put them in my backpack as a surprise.

Finally, it was time for my jams. One foot at a time, he had me step into them. The first time he found out I wore socks in my footie jams, he gave me a questioning look. I explained that the insides were prickly. Instead of judging me, he felt around

the elastic and agreed with me. No one had ever even pretended to look at my issue and see if it was real. They always assumed it was me being...I didn't even know what.

Daddy promised to find some that didn't have that kind of thread, and he did. They were wonderful and the only pair I didn't need socks for.

But tonight was a big deal, and I wanted to wear the first little outfit he saw me in. They were distressed and old. He didn't care. He understood it wasn't a commentary on him and how he took care of me. It was 100 percent about comfort and memories—our memories.

He took me by the hand, and we walked straight to the little room. Our plan was to order dinner after we played and maybe meet some new people. They had adorable little food and combination platters that combined them with big food for caregivers and littles to share. I loved that there were plenty of options. I was going to enjoy them, but first, it was playtime.

We'd been in a little room before, but it had always been an organized activity. Today was the first time we were there just for free play, and it was a bit overwhelming.

We were greeted as we walked in by Miss Lily. She had a way of making the room feel homey.

“Welcome back. We have some fun things today. We have bubbles going in that corner, car races over there, and, of course, there's all of the blocks.”

“I like bubbles.” I leaned in to Daddy.

“If you get bored with bubbles, today's craft is finger painting, and, of course, we'll

have stories on the half hour. If you need anything let me know.”

“Snack?” I asked, like it was a complete sentence.

“Oh, how could I forget. We always have snacks. Tonight it’s orange juice pouches and animal crackers. For our healthy little boys and girls, we have trees,” which was code for broccoli.

“Sounds perfect,” I replied, fully prepared to skip the green stuff.

“Bubbles?” Daddy asked.

“Bubbles!” It had been years since I played with my bubbles. Not only did she have all the colors, but also a bubble gun.

Tons of little bubbles that sparkled as they hit the light floated in the air. I crawled around, popping them until I was out of breath and ready to move on. Quite a few littles joined, and I met three new people.

That had been my goal for the night: to make friends. I was pretty proud of myself for reaching out and, when it was time to eat, I took my three new friends with us, and we had a snack together. Daddy talked with their daddies and the one mommy. We were having a blast.

But as the next story time came, my energy depleted and I snuggled beside Daddy and listened to the Miss Lily read to us. Soon I was yawning. It wasn’t even that late, and I wasn’t tired, not really. But between the excitement of play and the relaxing nature of story after having a full belly of juice and broccoli —they had ranch —and animal crackers had me done. At least for a while..

“Did you want to take a break?” He kissed the top of my head. “We can go out into

the main area and relax on the couches.”

It sounded heavenly.

“Yes, Daddy.”

We left the little room, and Daddy looked around until he found a group of littles and daddies who had some space left in their seating area. “

“Hi, we’re new. We’re hoping we could join you. I’m Elio and this is my boy, Lane.”

“Well hello,” a man holding a crochet project stood up. “I’m Bridger. This is my boy, Hudson, and these are our friends. We’d love to have you join us.”

He introduced us to each of them, and we sat down. I played with the littles, and Daddy talked to the other daddies. It was the perfect ending to our first “real” night at Chained.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:57 am*

“How does everything look?” I stepped back from the “tablescape” we’d created together. This was the first time we would be hosting a play party in our home. Since becoming regulars at Chained, we’d been invited to a number of other member’s homes. Some of those were for barbecues or various other types of parties, but more often than not they were play dates for a few or a bunch of littles and their mommies and daddies.

It was entirely different from club events where they had so many activities planned and a staff to vacuum up all the glitter and mop up all the paint. Our friends would generally set a theme and keep things a little less messy. But fun. Just so much fun.

We had a lot to live up to.

“It’s perfect.” Lane reached for a bunny-shaped cracker from the bowl in the center of the table then pulled his hand back.

“You can eat one.” I grabbed a bunch. “Let me see your hand.”

He extended it, palm up, and I poured the cheesy crunchy things into it. “My friends will like these. They won’t even know they are good for them.” Unlike most of the shaped treats we’d found, these were actually a little more on the healthy side.

I ate one myself. “Nope, they taste just the same as the other ones you like.” For our bunny party, Lane had wanted to be true to the theme in every way. We had a veggie platter with a big bowl of ranch dip surrounded by carrots, celery, sugar snap peas, and radishes as well as cherry tomatoes. All the vegetable pictured in the version of Peter Rabbit we would be reading during story time. We also had bunny shaped mac

and cheese, almond butter and jam sandwiches cut out with a bunny face cutter, bunny butt carrot muffins with the most adorable tails and a bunny cake to finish. More things too. The table, covered with an orange cloth, groaned under its burden.

“It’s going to be a fun party, isn’t it?” His words were confident, but the line between his eyebrows told a different story, so I took his hand and led him to the big chair. Our guests would be arriving any minute, and Lane looked completely adorable in his bunny jams. He was already panning a Cat-terine themed party for later in the year, but this one was about the drawing he’d made me, which had graduated from the fridge to framed status on the living room wall, and the bunny I’d had made for him to match it. Bridger and a couple of other daddies had suggested we keep the number of littles invited to six or fewer, and the play to a couple of activities and a story or animated feature. Thus Peter Rabbit’s Garden where the named bunny stops being a scofflaw in favor of growing his own veggies.

“It is going to be amazing. It’s very nice of you to share your nursery playroom with the others as well.” We’d just finished it. It was set up with a toddler bed instead of the crib many wanted, and a dresser filled with clothes. Also a toy box that had almost no room left. Not every little wanted to open their private space that way, but my generous boy loved to share, and we’d be doing a building activity and guessing game in there. “Have I told you how proud you make me?”

“Yes.” He came over and flung his arms around me. “And it’s only fair since I have the bestest daddy of all.”

“And I have the best boy.” In the whole world.