



Milk For The Billionaire's Little (The Lactin Brotherhood #20)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: My billions can buy me anything I want... except love.

Being the CEO of Millerson Enterprises puts me smack dab on the top of every Most Eligible Bachelor list there is. Both men and women flock to be at my side, each and every one of them with dollar signs in their eyes. They don't want the real me, they only want what I can do for their wallet and social status. Even if that's what I want, I can't risk my secret getting out. I could see the headlines now: Billionaire Lactates

When I discover that Littles are using an app to find lactating Daddies to rent for the night, I download it immediately. Maybe I can have some anonymous fun. At least they wouldn't shun me for being part of The Lactin Brotherhood. I'll just find someone, do a scene in a mask, and call it good.

Only when the Little I match with looks up to me all milk-sated and asks to see me again, there's nothing I want more than to scoop him into my arms and bring him home with me. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, after all.

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KENNAN

“I thought you might want to see this, Mr. Millerson.” Seth, my assistant, slid a magazine across my desk. It landed just in front of me with a subtle thud.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and let out a slow breath. “How many of these damn lists are there? And why does everybody care that I’m single?”

It was a stupid question. I knew exactly why they cared.

They cared because I was one of the wealthiest men in the country, and unlike many of my counterparts, I wasn’t married, wasn’t engaged, and hadn’t been paired off through some strategic family merger or wealth arrangement.

That made me a curiosity. A mystery. A target.

And to some, especially the tabloids and those with too much time on their hands, it meant I had to be gay.

I was bi, actually, but that was none of their business.

I’d lost count of how many times people—men, women, even a few couples—had tried to arrange “accidental” meetings in hopes of charming their way into a date, or better, into my life.

Most of them never made it past Seth. He was a fortress, the perfect blend of tact and steel.

He was great at sniffing out an angle and shutting it down before it reached my schedule.

Honestly, he was great at pretty much everything.

Seth had been with me since the beginning, before my first major acquisition, before the first seed round even, and he was one of the few people who actually knew my secret. That had never been part of his job description, but it had happened anyway.

Not because I sat him down one day with a heartfelt confession. I didn't pull him aside and say, "Hey, Seth, just so you know—I lactate." Fuck, no. It had been much more humiliating than that.

I'd been wearing a new brand of chest pads.

Supposed to be ultra-absorbent. Supposed to last all day.

Supposed to be discreet. Spoiler: they weren't.

I'd leaked through my shirt—right before a high-stakes acquisition meeting.

It was a deep navy button-down, custom-fitted, and now it had two very obvious wet spots across the chest. I hadn't even realized it at first until Seth came in to drop off a briefing folder and froze.

Then, without a word, he turned and walked out.

Ten minutes later, he was back with my dry cleaning, fresh undershirt and all.

No commentary. No weird looks. Just handled it.

I changed and made it to the meeting with two minutes to spare.

And from that day on, he made sure the dry cleaning was stocked, the pads were discreetly stored in the office bathroom cabinet, and the press never got a whiff of it.

Not once did he bring it up. Not once did he make me feel like I was anything other than his very competent, very wealthy, very human boss. His wife had multiple children over the years, and I was sure that played a part in his understanding of the mechanics, but still... he went above and beyond.

Honestly, it was good someone else knew. I didn't go to Lactin Brotherhood meetings. Too risky. Too visible. Those gatherings were small, quiet, usually anonymous, but all it would take was one person. One, to recognize me.

One click of a phone.

One photo leaked.

Billionaire Lactates. That'd be the headline. It'd be plastered everywhere before I could even issue a "no comment." And really, any comment at all would only make it worse. It would be a freaking disaster.

So it stayed between me and Seth.

Lord knew I paid him well enough to keep that secret, even if he was a pretty decent guy at heart. I doubted he'd even told his wife. I hoped not. But even if he had, she seemed the type to keep it quiet if for no other reason than I was her husband's boss, and his job gave them a very cushy life.

And she was sweet. She'd sent a thank-you card once after a holiday bonus, one she hand quilled, and on it she wrote that Seth loved working for me and that she

appreciated how I treated him like a human and not a robot.

I nudged the magazine away. “If anyone calls about the list,” I said, waving a hand, “just tell them there’s no comment. They can read it themselves. It wasn’t as if I even had a copy to read ahead of time.”

Seth tilted his head. “To be fair, when they do tell you ahead of time, it’s worse. They asked for photo shoots and to fill out surveys.”

I groaned, dragging a hand down my face. “Right. Fair point. What’s the rest of the day look like?”

He pulled out his tablet and started rattling off the schedule.

Meetings stacked back to back. A working lunch.

Two virtual check-ins with overseas partners.

A brief window around 4:30 where I might be able to breathe, and then a cocktail hour I was scheduled to swing by because I’d said yes, while distracted. Lesson learned.

He also informed me of two charity events that had also extended invites.

“Do I actually need to go to either of them?” I asked.

“Need to? No. But there’s a gala next Friday that’s probably worth considering. Old-money crowd. Discreet people. I’ll forward the details.”

I nodded and stood. “How much time do I have?”

“Three minutes to your first meeting.”

I ducked into the private bathroom attached to my office and changed out the chest pads, just to be safe.

The last thing I needed was another wardrobe malfunction.

I adjusted my shirt, using the mirror to make sure my pads weren’t noticeable.

I looked good. Sharp. Unbothered. No one would guess I was leaking milk beneath a ten-thousand-dollar tailored shirt.

Back at my desk, I grabbed the folder for the first meeting. Seth handed me a bottle of water and a protein bar—my breakfast, apparently—and we walked to the conference room together. The door swung open, and I slipped into business mode.

And for the next five hours, that was where I lived. Contracts, projections, negotiations. A pitch deck here. A vendor concern there. Back-to-back meetings, barely time to breathe between them. But even in the thick of it, the damn magazine cover kept creeping into my mind.

Top 40 under 40.

Bachelor Edition.

Eligible. Untouched. A little bit dangerous.

As if I were dangerous. I mean, I suppose if you meant as a business competitor, maybe. But even that was a stretch. I was hardly what anyone would call ruthless.

I could already hear the questions. They always came in waves, usually when some

article about my dating life, or lack thereof, made it into the news cycle.

Investors would suddenly want to “chat over drinks.” PR would want to manage the narrative.

And some family friend’s daughter, niece, godchild, cousin, would magically be in the city and “hoping to grab a quick lunch.” I had a folder in my inbox just for those.

Eventually, the rumors would start up again too. Gay. Secret relationship. Secret baby. Secret marriage. One of them had said I had a secret vampire husband, which was frankly more entertaining than it was insulting.

But none of it was real.

There were no partners. No secret loves. No fake engagements. And no vampire husbands—though if I ever got around to dating again, someone with fangs might not be the worst idea.

Still, it was exhausting. Not because I was ashamed. Not because I hated being alone.

But because it was never just about me. It was always about what people thought I represented.

A billionaire, single, under 40. There had to be something wrong with me, right?

And heaven forbid it be something as ordinary as being picky.

Or busy. Or just not willing to date someone who saw me as a bank account first and a person second.

By the time my 3:45 meeting wrapped, my shirt was damp again.

Just a little. I excused myself, shot Seth a look, and stepped back into the private bathroom.

Changed again. Thanked the universe that I'd installed a mini fridge in there for emergencies—protein drinks, cold compresses, nipple cream, backup pads.

Corporate executive meets lactating machine. What a time.

When I stepped back out, Seth was waiting by the desk, tablet in hand.

“You’ve got a brief window,” he said. “Fifteen minutes before the next call. Want me to hold your messages so you can breathe?”

I gave him a grateful look. “Please.”

I sat down, finally letting my body sink into the chair.

Rolled my shoulders. Flexed my fingers. The magazine was still there, the headline grinning up at me like a dare.

I picked it up and flipped through the pages until I found my profile.

Center spread, just off the spine. Full-color photo, gray suit, smirking at the camera like I had some secret worth chasing.

It was an old picture, my hair a tad longer.

I looked... good. Polished. Powerful. Alone.

The article said I was “intensely private,” “a shrewd negotiator,” and “rumored to be involved in a long-distance, under-the-radar relationship with someone in finance.”

Which was total fiction. I didn't even like people in finance. For them, everything was about money.

But what could I do? I couldn't exactly issue a statement that said, "Actually, I'm not dating because I'm more focused on building my company, managing my public image, hiding the fact that I lactate, and trying to avoid letting anyone get close enough to hurt me."

Not a great look.

So I let the stories spin. Let the mystery build. Let them believe whatever they wanted, because at least that kept the truth safe.

Seth stepped back in, cleared his throat gently. "Five minutes."

I stood, smoothed my shirt again, and set the magazine face-down on the desk.

And back to work it was.

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JAMES

Today sucked.

No—today triple sucked.

I'd pulled a double shift at work thanks to not one, not two, but three no-call, no-shows. I'd been running around like a chicken with its head cut off, trying to keep everything afloat, and it still felt like the place might topple over.

Running a nursing home wasn't like working at a coffee shop or a retail store.

If you waited too long for your latte, sure, it was annoying.

But if residents here waited too long for their meds?

That could spiral into a real problem—missed doses, unstable vitals, complications they didn't deserve and we couldn't afford.

If someone didn't get to the bathroom on time, it wasn't just uncomfortable, but degrading.

Every delay caused ripples. Every mistake had weight.

We had to meet ratios. Had to follow care plans to the letter.

The state could come in at any time, unannounced, and if they found us understaffed

or out of compliance, that was it.

Citations, fines, or worse. My job wasn't about selling a product or boosting quarterly numbers.

My job was about keeping real, vulnerable people alive, safe, and treated with dignity.

And all of that got a hell of a lot harder when some of your staff bailed all at once.

Part of me feared I'd get a call tomorrow morning saying it was a stomach bug.

That was what it was last time this happened.

We sanitized religiously, but germs still found ways to sneak through.

It wouldn't be unheard of, and as much as I hated people being sick, apathy felt like the worse scenario in this case.

Whichever it was, I was finally home.

The first thing I did, before checking my phone, before taking off my shoes, was to head straight to the bathroom and start running the tub.

I didn't even wait to strip down. I just let the sound of the water fill the room while I moved through my tiny apartment, trying to shift from "in charge of everything" to just... me... soon to be Little me.

I needed Little time. Badly.

"Hey, Rosco." I bent over the habitat in the corner of my bedroom. My hedgehog, all

prickles and cuteness, peeked out from under his fleece tunnel. “Sorry I was gone so long. I hope you had a good day.”

Rosco had belonged to one of our residents. The plan was for them to stay short-term—just a month or two of rehab and then back home. But that didn’t happen. They declined. And once it was clear that they wouldn’t be leaving the nursing home again, we had to find a place for Rosco.

I couldn’t bring myself to send him to a shelter. And he wasn’t allowed to live on-site, no matter how clean or quiet he was. So... I brought him home. Now, he was mine.

And honestly? It was kind of nice.

He made me feel less alone.

“I’m gonna take a tubby,” I told him, “Then I’m gonna play. But I’ll be in the bedroom, so you’ll still hear me, okay?”

I made sure his water was topped off and his food dish full, then padded back into the bathroom. The tub was nearly full now. I tossed in a few of my bath toys, my rubber duckies, a wind-up turtle, a plastic boat with a crooked sail, and then threw my clothes into the hamper.

I climbed in and sank under the warm water with a long sigh.

“That’s what I’m talking about.”

I pushed the toys around, making up little games like I always did.

I tried to get the ducks to balance on top of each other.

It didn't work. It never did, but it always made me laugh, so I considered it winning.

I raced the turtle against the boat and pretended the loser had to sleep in the tub drain.

It was silly and aimless and exactly what I needed.

Eventually, the water started to cool, but that was fine—I was already slipping into Little space by then. My shoulders were soft. My brain, quiet. No schedules, no emergencies, no impossible expectations. Just bubbles and ducks and the comfort of not having to be Big.

I got out, wrapped myself in a big towel, and dried off quickly.

I pulled on my favorite cloth training pants—the ones with little trucks printed all around the waistband.

They were snug and thick, hugging me with just the right pressure.

I never used them, not even back when I had a Daddy, but they helped me feel Little.

The texture, the fit, the soft rustle it made when I moved— perfection.

Next came my knee-high socks, my favorite ones all covered in koala bears, arms outstretched like they were ready for hugs. Absolutely adorable. I smiled just looking at them.

Then I slipped into my pajamas. Soft flannel, threadbare in spots, with yellow stars and pale blue clouds. The pants covered my socks almost entirely, but I didn't mind. I knew the koalas were there. That was what mattered.

I went to the kitchen and pulled out my bottle from the cupboard. Filled it with warm

milk and gave it a good shake. It wasn't human like I preferred, but this would do.

I belonged to a message board for Littles who liked the same thing as me, human milk.

There was something about it that helped me stay Little longer.

But it was so expensive. Always had been.

There were a few folks on the board who sold theirs, and now there was even an app, like a cross between a lactation network and a dating site, designed to connect lactating Daddies and Littles looking for that specific care dynamic.

I'd scrolled through the app a few times. Some of the profiles were sweet. Some were overwhelming. All were expensive. I'd probably go back and look through them again after my next paycheck hit. I'd been working enough overtime lately. Maybe I could afford a little indulgence.

Would it be worth it?

On a day like today?

Definitely.

I carried my bottle into the bedroom, flopped down onto the bed, and grabbed my unicorn stuffy, Marigold, who'd been with me through four moves and two breakups.

She still had a faint pink stain on her left ear from a juice box incident last summer when I thought a group playdate with a mommy might be fun.

It was not. There were far too many Littles for any one caregiver, especially when

four of them had been bratty. Lesson learned.

I pulled Marigold close, cuddled under my weighted blanket covered in boats, and turned on cartoons.

I sucked on my bottle and let the milk warm me from the inside out as the little green cat ran across the screen.

It wasn't fun being Little alone. But there were times, especially when work had been brutal, when it was necessary.

I had Marigold. I had Rosco. I had my cartoons and my socks and my bottle and the safe little corner of my world that I'd made for myself.

And that had to be enough... for now.

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KENNAN

I took one final look in the mirror to make sure I was put together well enough for the gala. My tie was straight, the lapels of my tux jacket sat just right, my hair was neat and presentable, and my chest pads unnoticeable.

It wasn't an event I'd wanted to attend.

Not really. I'd spent the entire week flying between both coasts, buried in back-to-back meetings, barely sleeping.

A week-long nap sounded far more appealing than champagne and small talk.

But the cause was genuinely a good one, children's art education, and you couldn't argue with that.

Plus, skipping would've raised more questions than it was worth.

That didn't stop me from wanting to climb into bed and be a slug. Pull the blackout curtains shut, shut off my phone, and sleep until next quarter's projections had already stabilized. But alas—gala it was.

My driver was already waiting outside when I stepped out. Tonight, we had one stop before heading to the hotel, picking up my date for the evening.

I called her "Mom."

Bringing her had become my go-to strategy.

She loved these things, always had, even when she wasn't in a position where going was always fiscally feasible.

And it was far easier bringing her along than navigating the 20-questions asked trudging through press gauntlets about why I didn't have a date, or worse, if I was "meeting someone there."

I had friends who brought regular "event dates" everywhere.

Not actual romantic partners, just attractive, polished people who essentially functioned as business accessories for each other.

They were great at mingling, smiling in photos, and keeping people from asking too many personal questions.

For some folks, it worked. They even enjoyed it.

But to me, it always felt dishonest.

None of them were really dating. It was just another form of image management. And the worst part? If they did meet someone they actually liked, the public speculation would spiral out of control. Are they cheating? Was the old date real? Is this the real real one?

No, thank you. That circus wasn't for me. Let people wonder. At least my mom wasn't going to betray me to Springfield Weekly.

We pulled up in front of her building, and I got out to go fetch her.

She opened the door before I even knocked, clearly excited.

I'd been doing well for a long time and made sure that resulted in her being well off, too.

But there had been a large chunk of her life when this wasn't even dream worthy. It made me happy I could give her this.

"Well, don't you look dashing," she said, pulling me into a warm hug, careful not to mess up my jacket. She stepped back and gave me a once-over. "Very James Bond. I'm going to be standing next to the most handsome man there."

I smiled. "And I'll be standing next to the most beautiful woman. So we're even."

She was radiant, honestly. Her dress was floor-length navy satin with just enough sparkle that she looked in style and not to the point of being mother-of-the-groom.

Not that she'd turn that role down. She'd paired it with the pearls my father had given her for their 30th wedding anniversary.

She always made sure to bring a piece of him to these events.

The moment she got the invite, she'd been counting down the days.

Unlike me, she loved galas. She and my father used to save up all year to attend the ones for the local animal rescue and the zoo.

Now that I was the one getting the invitations, it only felt right to bring her—especially since my dad passed.

And honestly? It gave me a chance to spend time with her outside of rushed brunches,

between meeting calls, and holidays.

I needed to do better about spending time with her.

I'd been playing the "as soon as this deal" game for too long.

There would always be another deal, but there was only one her.

We arrived at the hotel, the same one that always hosted these events. It was all red carpets and gilded fixtures, valet attendants standing at perfect attention, and just the right level of upscale lighting to make even the most exhausted executive look glamorous.

We walked in together, my mom practically glowing, and I could already hear the murmurs of recognition.

A few camera flashes here and there. Someone asked who designed her dress, and she beamed as she said she'd been introduced to the designer by her son.

That son being me. There was a round of appreciative laughter and more than a few "aww"s.

Inside, the event was a mix of art installations from local schools, cocktail tables, and smooth jazz. It was elegant, tasteful, and, like every other gala I'd ever been too, far too loud.

My mother quickly found a small group of people she recognized from other events.

They were already laughing and gesturing with their wine glasses, gossiping and throwing in the occasional nod of approval.

She blended right in, not a wallflower by any means.

She gave me a quick wave and a smile that said, I'm good, go do your schmoozing.

So I did.

I moved from one cluster to the next, exchanging handshakes, talking strategy, throwing in a well-timed joke or two.

It was all very standard, a blur of foundation directors, marketing leads, tech bros who'd made their fortunes on e-commerce apps, and the occasional minor celebrity looking for a photo op.

Eventually, I got stuck in a conversation that started out innocently enough about education grants, then veered sharply into political territory. The kind of loud, pointed chatter that made my internal PR alarms blare.

"If you'll excuse me," I said with a forced smile, "I'll be right back."

I set my cup down on the nearest high table and headed away to... anywhere. Bathroom, hallway, outside for air. I wasn't even sure where I was going until I pushed open the door to the restroom.

Relief. Dimmer lights. Quieter. And far fewer people.

But not entirely silent. Fuck. I wasn't truly alone. Still better than where I was.

Two men were at the sinks, huddled over a phone and giggling like they were back in high school.

I kept to myself. Did my business. Tried to tune them out. But some things... some

things were hard not to hear.

“Can you believe this?” one of them said, his voice a cross between mockery and disbelief. “This app. You can rent a guy who lactates. Ew. ”

“Wait, what?” the other one asked. “Why’s that gross? If I lactated, I’d be on there. Do you know how much money you could make?”

The first one made a noise of disgust. “No, thanks. Just keep your kinks out of this.”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t even look at them. But their conversation did two very specific things.

First—it affirmed, without a doubt, that I did not want the public to know what my body could do.

And second—it reminded me that I really, really needed to get on that app.

When I finally got home and was finally alone, I loosened my tie and kicked off my shoes, headed straight to my bedroom, and pulled out my laptop. I had one tab open for emails, just in case anything exploded at work, and one for a private browser window.

It didn’t take long to find it.

Sure enough, there it was. The app.

Its interface was professional looking. It wasn’t some sketchy, “is this legit” situation.

The platform connected people—men, women, nonbinary folks who lactated—with people who wanted to connect with them for a variety of reasons.

There were privacy features, ID verification for both parties, even optional contracts for long-term arrangements.

Whatever protections you were looking for, you could opt for...

for a price, of course. Not that money was an issue for me.

It was intriguing. Tempting, even.

Of course, there were no security measures once people met in person, which was the only thing to give me pause. That was something I'd have to handle carefully. But the clientele? They weren't gawking. They weren't mocking. They were looking for exactly what I could offer.

And it wasn't like I had to post a profile saying, "Hi, I'm CEO Mr. Millerson, billionaire, top 40 under 40, surprise lactator."

The site allowed faceless profile pics. And if I met up with anyone, I'd probably use a mask. Like masquerade ball type mask.

I clicked through a few profiles. Some were bold. Others soft. Some looked for play, others for quiet companionship. One man had a photo of just his hand holding a baby bottle with a caption: warm comfort, no questions asked.

I leaned back in my chair, eyes scanning the page.

This had potential.

And after a night of mingling, of small talk, of dodging conversations and smiling through it all, the thought of someone wanting me for something real—even if only part of me—was more appealing than I expected.

Maybe I'd wait until next week. Maybe I'd draft a profile tonight. Maybe I'd keep it tucked in drafts and reread it three times before I sent it live.

But I was doing this.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:19 am

JAMES

It was another hectic day at work, this time because the state had done a pop-in inspection.

That meant I'd spent the entire day giving tours, answering questions, signing forms, reviewing policies, signing more forms, and putting on my best professional smile while silently screaming on the inside. All the actual work I'd planned to get done? Yeah... none of that happened.

And to top it all off, it was Friday Family Bingo Fun Night .

Normally, that part was a highlight. And honestly, it still was, just a highlight that came with a side of stress.

Friday nights meant not only did we have our regular residents' bingo game, but we also had a ton of visitors.

Families came to sit with their loved ones, grandkids helped pass out cards, and everybody, everybody , got really into it.

It was sweet. It was chaotic. It was important.

And it was a lot of work.

Between handing out cards, making sure there were enough markers, corralling the snacks, cleaning up spilled juice, and trying to remember all the bingo puns when I

called numbers, it was a full production.

Some of the calls were easy: “B4 and after!” or “G-54, clean the floor!” But others?

I had to check the little cheat sheet every time.

Still, I wouldn’t have traded it. Seeing the residents light up, laughing with their families, winning little prizes, it mattered.

What didn’t matter, or at least didn’t help, was the surprise semi-emergency in the one bathroom.

A faucet decided to give up on life and fully detach.

Just popped right off in one of my co-worker’s hands.

Maintenance had already gone home, because of course they had, so I was left to handle it.

And by some miracle... plus a YouTube video and an old pair of pliers, I managed to jerry-rig it into working order until morning.

Go me.

By the time I clocked out, I was put-a-fork-in-me done .

I let the night shift supervisor know I was heading out, grabbed my things, and had every intention of going straight home.

And... I sort of did.

If you count a pit stop at the burger joint drive-thru to grab a kids meal with chicken nuggies as “straight.”

Normally, I preferred to make my own nuggets, from a box, but still... I liked them extra crispy—like, almost burnt, baked in the oven until they were golden and hard on the outside. Perfection.

But tonight, I needed fast, warm, easy. And more importantly, the toy this week was a good one: the little green cat from my favorite cartoon show. Or maybe one of the cat’s companions, I wasn’t going to know until I opened it. I crossed my fingers for the cat as I waited in line.

When I got home, I placed the unopened bag on the counter and took a few minutes to care for Rosco, my sweet little hedgehog, who blinked at me from under his fleece blanket like he, too, had just gotten off an eight-hour shift.

I filled his food and water, gave him a quick hello and a treat, then turned my attention to my dinner.

I plated my food onto one of my divided dishes—ketchup in one section, nuggets in another, fries in the last. I didn’t care if I was Big or Little. Divided dishes were non-negotiable when there was a sauce involved. Some things just weren’t meant to touch until it was the exact time.

The unopened toy sat right in front of me. Tempting. But I had rules... Daddy-type rules.

And one of them? I wasn’t allowed to open my toy until I finished all my food.

Even if I didn’t have a Daddy right now, I still held myself to that. It made me feel grounded. Made me feel safe. Made me feel cared for.

I munched slowly, taking out my phone to scroll through emails. Right there at the top was my paycheck deposit notification.

I tapped it open, and holy crap! I stared at the number. The overtime had really added up. Between all the extra shifts, middle-of-the-night emergencies, and covering for no-call no-shows, the paycheck was... way more than I expected.

“I could be responsible with this,” I said aloud to my fry, holding it up like a tiny financial advisor. It nodded back at me.

“I could pay off the rest of my credit card,” I added, picking up a second fry and bouncing it like it was talking.

“Oh, you think I shouldn’t do that?” I asked in a high-pitched voice. “You think I should try to find someone on one of those apps? Maybe get myself some milk?”

The fry wiggled in agreement.

I laughed. “Hmm... yeah, that does sound good.”

Truthfully, I’d been hoping all along that the paycheck would be enough for that. And by some miracle and a ton of work, I did.

It didn’t take much convincing for me to decide the money was going toward milk.

I cleaned up the kitchen, washed my hands, grabbed my phone, and settled onto the couch with a blanket draped around my shoulders like a cape.

I pulled up the lactation connection app, the one I’d bookmarked weeks ago but never actually used.

My fingers hovered over the screen for a second before tapping it open.

There were more profiles than I expected. Each one had a name, real or screen, and a little about their preferences. Some people were clear about wanting to parent or care for a Little. Others kept it clinical. And some just said “Let’s chat” with a winky face emoji.

None of them explicitly said they were Daddies or Mommies, although each profile did list gender or in one case a, “not your business.” You could kind of tell what people were aiming for by how they wrote, the tone of their bios, the images they used. Still, I wasn’t sure. I kept scrolling.

One by one, I checked them out. They were all fine. No red flags, but no sparks either.

And then I saw one.

A cartoon avatar, just a silhouette with a blue-patterned masquerade mask. Simple. Elegant. Not flashy.

I paused.

The mask was what caught me. It wasn’t a selfie. No face. Just the mask. At first, I thought maybe it was some kind of branding. But no, according to the bio, the avatar just represented what they wore during in-person meets.

They’d wear a mask.

Nothing else explained. Just that.

It probably should’ve been a red flag. Why wouldn’t someone want me to see their

face? Why the extra layer of anonymity?

But... it was also kind of hot.

There was something alluring about it.

I stared at the screen for a moment, my thumb hovering over the “message” button.

Then I tapped it.

“Hi,” I typed. “I liked your profile. Your mask is really cool. Are you looking to meet someone?”

I hesitated. Backspaced.

Then rewrote.

“Hi. I liked your profile. Are you currently looking to connect? I’m James. I’m a Little.”

That felt better. Honest. Short. Enough to get the ball rolling without oversharing.

I hit send.

Then I waited.

Every few seconds, I checked the screen, heart thumping, nerves dancing in my stomach like popcorn. I told myself I’d give it an hour. Then a half hour. Then just until my show ended.

But really, I hoped he’d write back right now.

Because after the day I'd had—the week I'd had—I didn't want to be alone. I didn't want to pretend I was fine or strong or adult enough to handle everything without care. I wanted someone to see me.

Maybe even someone who'd bring warm milk and a story to go with it.

Maybe... this masked Daddy was just what I needed.

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KENNAN

As I saw it, there were two ways to do the meet-up.

Option one: spend a ridiculous amount of money to guarantee privacy. That would mean booking a luxury hotel, requesting the penthouse suite, arranging for discreet service, probably even paying for extra security just to make sure no one talked.

Option two: go to a chain motel. Not glamorous, not even especially clean, but likely to fly under the radar. Fewer people looking. Fewer people asking questions. No one expecting a billionaire to check in wearing jeans and a T-shirt at a run-down place off the highway.

Both had their pros and cons. The penthouse offered discretion if you didn't mind the price tag and the unmistakable air of someone important staying there.

But that was the problem. A penthouse suite screamed who I was.

It hinted at wealth and power and privilege. It opened the door for recognition.

The chain motel? Less security, yes, and possibly a little gross, depending on who'd used the room before. But it was anonymous. Forgettable. And if the goal was to keep James, and anyone else, from guessing my real identity, this was the smarter bet.

So I went with the latter, opting for a place that James had picked out.

I hated the feeling that I was exchanging money for milk.

That wasn't what this was supposed to be about.

I didn't need money. I didn't rely on it to get through the day.

I wasn't choosing between gas and groceries, or scraping by to pay rent.

I could, if I wanted to, put in a marble bathtub, fill it with oat milk and fresh lavender flown in from France, and soak in it like a ridiculous wellness ad without feeling the expense.

But something told me that if I didn't list some amount on the app—if I didn't put a number in the "rate" box, it would look like a red flag. Too generous. Too good to be true. And nobody would bite.

So I picked a reasonable, middle-of-the-road number. Not high. Not low. Just enough to make it seem like I was a normal guy with something to offer.

I'd already decided I'd refund James when this was over. Quietly. Maybe anonymously. Maybe not. Who knew—maybe this would even become a regular thing and I'd need to wait until the end. But one thing was for sure, I didn't want the money.

I kept telling myself not to get ahead of myself.

I dressed carefully, not to impress but to disappear. A soft, plain navy T-shirt. A pair of jeans that looked like they came off a clearance rack. Both cost more than the hotel room, of course, but nothing with a logo. Nothing that would make anyone look twice.

The mask I chose was a leftover from a charity event—an elaborate masquerade where understated wasn't even on the menu.

It was a deep, smoky blue with metallic accents and subtle feathering at the temples.

More than a little over-the-top for tonight's purposes, but it was what I had. And honestly? It looked good.

I drove to my first stop but planned to take a rideshare rather than drive one of my own cars to the actual hotel. None of my vehicles were exactly subtle, and I didn't want anything that could be traced or recognized.

I handed my keys to the valet at the luxury hotel that was my cover.

I'd booked a room at the hotel where the gala had been, just to have a legitimate place tied to my name for the night.

After checking in, I left through the side entrance and called the car to the alley, keeping myself as distanced as possible.

I slipped on the mask during the ride and stared at myself in the reflection of the car window. It suited me. It would've looked better with a tux, a flute of champagne in hand, a hot man on my arm. But for tonight?

It worked.

The hotel wasn't a hotel at all. It was a motel and far worse than I expected. The neighborhood, too. It shocked me, given the sign that claimed it was a 3-star hotel. Branding, I guess. A stretch or an out-and-out lie. One of the two.

I climbed out of the car, ignoring the flickering "Vacancy" sign.

A man was already standing there, close to the parking lot, looking around with nervous energy.

He had wavy light brown hair and brilliant green eyes, and in his hand was an old-school metal key on a huge plastic ring, not a card like was standard. The number on the fob was half-faded.

“Are you here for James?” he asked.

I blinked. “You’re not supposed to be paying for this,” I said automatically, walking toward him. “You from the app?”

He looked startled and nodded. “Yeah, I’m James.”

“I don’t understand why you’re here. Or why we’re at this place. And... you’re alone?” My heart was racing. Did not see how dangerous this could be?

I took his hand gently and plucked the key from his other one. I held it up, squinting.

“Is this... eight?” I asked. “Three?”

“Eight,” he said. “I think.”

“Well, let’s find out.”

I led him across the cracked pavement toward the door marked 8 , then slid the key into the lock and turned it. The door opened with a groan. Either it was ours for the night, or the numbers were suggestions and they all worked for every door. I shivered at that thought.

Inside, the room was bland and dated. There were two beds, cheap art on the walls, and a CRT TV.

One lamp flickered before settling, and the other never even pretended to work.

It smelled faintly of disinfectant and something sweet, like maybe someone had spilled soda on the carpet a few tenants ago. Or maybe fresh vapes.

James hovered in the doorway. “I’ve never done this before,” he said quietly.

I could believe that. There was a nervous energy about him, but also a surprising kind of trust.

I turned to face him. “You thought it was a good idea to hang out in a motel like this alone? Outside? In this part of town?” Yes, I was still on that.

His eyes widened. “I—I just... it seemed like the right thing, I didn’t think?—”

“Next time,” I said firmly, “we’re meeting someplace nicer.”

He gasped, a little flustered, and then quickly corrected himself. “I don’t think there can be a next time.”

“Oh?” I raised an eyebrow.

“That was brought to you by the letters O and T—overtime,” he said, chuckling at his own joke.

“You’re being very Daddy-like,” he added after a beat. “Is that... normal?”

There was no accusation in his voice. Just curiosity.

I nodded. “It kind of is. And when you said ‘first time’... did you mean first time using the app , or...?”

He looked down at his shoes. “That... and the first time meeting someone to, um,

drink. I've only ever bought it in jars before."

"No problem," I said gently.

I tugged my shirt off and dropped it onto the foot of the bed. There was no point in hiding. He was here for exactly what I offered. He knew what I could do. There was nothing to be ashamed of.

I sat down on the bed, James standing there unsure.

"However you're most comfortable," I said. "You tell me."

He looked stunned. "I... I don't know."

I moved to the center of the bed, leaned back against the headboard, and held out my hand.

"Why don't you come over here, sweet boy," I said softly. "See what you can do."

He crawled across the bed to me, tentative but eager. James was Little.

As he settled beside me, I gently explained how things worked. How circling the nipple with his tongue first might help with the latch. How gentle, steady pulls worked better than sucking hard. How it helped to switch sides.

Not that he needed the advice.

The moment his tongue touched me, I knew, this boy might not have done it before, but his instincts were sharp. Maybe he didn't know it intellectually, but his body did. His mouth knew. His lips closed around me with a warmth and hunger that stole my breath.

He lay across my lap, head heavy against my chest, mouth sealed to my skin.

I had to will myself not to react too much, not to shiver or arch or give in to the heat pooling low in my belly. This wasn't about that . This was James. This was about milk.

His hands were folded against my side. His eyes were closed.

He drank slowly, and I let him.

Again and again and again.

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JAMES

I was starting to doze off, cheek pressed to the masked Daddy's chest, his arm around my back steady. The even rise and fall of his breathing lulling me to sleep.

It had been so long since I'd had real milk, actual milk from a human and even longer since I'd had it from the source.

But even then, it hadn't been like this and I wasn't sure it even counted.

It had been a try it and see thirty second endeavor from a lactating Daddy who was showing off.

There had been nothing tender or sweet about it. Not with this kind of tenderness.

Still, this wasn't a true close connection. Not really. I didn't know his real name. Heck, I didn't even know the shape of his nose. But there was an intimacy here that I'd never felt before, not even with people I'd dated.

I felt guilty about the room. It smelled like mildew and fake citrus.

The bed was lumpy and creaky, the kind where the mattress slumped toward the center like it was trying to eat any who dared try and get some sleep.

The sheets were thin and scratchy, the blanket absent, and the walls were yellowed from age, or maybe nicotine from back when smoking was allowed.

I had expected him to be in a hurry. I'd assumed he'd gently, or maybe not so gently, nudge me up the second I was done, brush me off, and vanish to get dressed and disappear.

That he'd collect his things, say something vague and professional, and ghost me, or worse, raise his rates in the hopes of getting more money out of me.

But he didn't.

Instead, his hand moved slowly over my hair, fingers soothing and rhythmic, like it was the most natural thing in the world to let me curl up against him and drift off.

And drift I did.

I don't know how long I slept. But when I finally cracked my eyes open, I was still wrapped in his arm. He looked down at me, smiling gently.

"I think somebody needed this," he said softly.

I blinked. "I... I did. Thanks."

I started to push myself up. "I didn't mean to fall asleep. How long were we here?"

"I don't know," he said. "I hope long enough that you feel relaxed."

I bit my bottom lip and nodded. Reluctantly, I slid off the bed, reaching for my phone on the bedside table. One glance at the screen told me this hadn't just been a catnap—I'd been asleep for at least two hours.

Two full hours in a stranger's arms, after drinking from him like it was the most normal thing in the world.

I swallowed hard. “I’m sorry. I’d pay you more, but I... I don’t have it right now. I had to save up for this already.”

Great. Now I sounded like a loser.

“I’ll be right back,” I muttered, bolting for the bathroom before he could respond. I needed a minute to pull myself together... desperately . My emotions had gotten tangled up with my nerves, and the longer I stood there, the more my brain started to spiral.

What if he was annoyed? What if he thought I’d wasted his time? What if he was expecting more money and was just too polite to say anything?

My brain was feeding me the worst possible scenarios, and I knew none of them made sense. If he wanted something from me, he would’ve said something—or at least woken me up. But try telling my anxiety that.

I turned on the sink, meaning to splash some water on my face, but the second I touched the knob, the spigot blasted water like a fire hose.

I yelped, stumbling back, drenched from neck to waist. “Shit!”

Seconds later, the door swung open.

“You okay?” he asked, concerned. “Did you see a bug?”

“No,” I said, laughing nervously. “The faucet’s just broken. And I mean... there are probably bugs too.”

He stepped in, took one look at me, and winced. “You’re soaked.”

“Yeah,” I muttered, wringing out the hem of my shirt.

He reached for one of the motel’s towels, then paused mid-grab like it had personally offended him. He let it go instantly. “You’re not touching that. Who knows what that brown is on it.”

“Is it that bad?” I asked, glancing at it. The brown stain near the edge didn’t exactly reassure me. “Never mind. It is.”

The Daddy gently reached for my shirt, pulling it up and over my head. He was careful. Unrushed. Like it wasn’t weird. Like helping someone dry off was just... a thing you did.

Back in the main room, he handed me his T-shirt. It was the softest thing I’d ever felt. It smelled like laundry and cologne and something just faintly earthy.

“I’ve got a jacket. You use this.”

No way I was turning that down. I slipped it on, tugging it down over my hips. It was a little big and still felt like a hug.

“Thank you,” I said quietly. “I, um... I know this is probably forward, but... could we maybe do this again?”

He hesitated. “I don’t know if that’s the best idea.”

Oh gods. I had sounded like I was asking for a freebie, hadn’t I? Way to ruin a vibe.

“I meant—just, you know, maybe next time I’ve got enough overtime again. I’d pay. I just...”

His voice softened. “How about this?”

I wanted to reach out and take his hand, but I kept mine tucked at my sides. My palms were too warm. My chest too tight. My nerves too shot.

“If you decide you want to, you can reach out to me through the app. I promise I’ll see it.”

“Oh. Yeah. Okay,” I said, not really trusting my voice. It wasn’t a yes, but at least it wasn’t a no.

“I’m guessing you don’t want to stay here for the night,” I offered. “But if you do, I can leave you with the key.”

He smiled. “Thanks. But yeah, I should get going. Early shift tomorrow.”

It took everything I had not to ask him what he did for work. If he was wearing a mask, he didn’t want me to know anything about him. I might not like that, but I was going to respect his boundaries.

“Do you need a lift?” I offered. “I saw you took a ride share here.”

“Yeah, maybe...” He pulled out his phone. “No—I gotta make a phone call first.”

“Oh, okay. Well—thanks. Really.”

Our parting was awkward. Way more awkward than it had any right to be, considering how intimate the night had been.

“I’ll return the key,” he promised.

I nodded. “Just drop it in the box.”

He nodded back.

I left.

Only... I didn't get far.

Once I made it to my car, I sat down in the driver's seat and gripped the wheel. My eyes burned. I blinked fast, telling myself it was just the bad lighting or the mildew smell or leftover nerves.

But it wasn't.

I was already attached. To his voice. His touch. To the way he held me.

This wasn't supposed to be anything. Just a transaction. A soft one, yes. A good one. Sure. But still... a one-time exchange. But the thought of going back to jars, of holding a tepid bottle?

I didn't want that.

I wanted him.

But what was I going to do? Ask him to be my Daddy after two hours and a broken faucet?

I sighed, forehead resting against the steering wheel, trying to breathe.

Just as I reached for the ignition, a car pulled into the lot.

And not just any car.

This one was sleek. Expensive. Black with deep-tinted windows. I didn't know much about cars, but even I could tell, this one cost more than the entire motel was worth.

Whoever was about to check into this place was going to be very disappointed.

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KENNAN

It was so difficult to turn him down.

Hard enough that I didn't say the word that really needed to be said— no . Just no. No explanation. No sugar coating. One simple two-letter word.

I'd told myself this app thing was a good idea. I thought I could go in, scratch an itch, get what I needed, and leave. Easy. Peasy. Done. But as I sat there, watching the sweet boy sleep, lips still slightly parted and cheek resting against my chest, softened by my milk, my mind kept wandering.

Wandering into dangerous territory.

I kept imagining us . Not in that dingy motel, but somewhere better.

Going on a date. Me buying him little gifts—a silly hat that made him giggle or a stuffed animal I knew he'd name.

I imagined him curled up in my bed, the real one, the big one, dozing off on my chest as we watched old cartoons with the volume low.

None of which could happen. None of which should happen.

That wasn't the deal.

It was best to cut him off now. Best to forget the entire foolish notion and move on.

I called my driver, not wanting to go back to the hotel where my car was parked.

He could deal with that in the morning. When I climbed into the back seat, he turned to ask something...

probably just checking in, maybe offering a bottle of water or a comment about traffic, but I cut him off with a look.

“I’m not in the mood to discuss anything.”

He nodded and didn’t say another word. That was one of the perks of hiring well.

I leaned my head back and closed my eyes, replaying the entire evening on an endless loop—his nervous smile, the way his fingers trembled before he touched me, the sweetness in his gaze when he drank, and finally, the peaceful look on his face as he fell asleep, safe and full and tucked in my arms.

When we pulled up to my house, I still had his shirt. I’d never given it back. It had gotten lost somewhere in all the awkwardness that was our good-bye, and if I was being honest with myself, really honest, that was probably intentional on some level.

Once I was inside, I climbed the stairs slowly and went straight to my suite.

I sat on the edge of the bed, pulled the shirt out, and brought it up to my cheek.

There were still faint damp patches where the faucet had sprayed him, a reminder of the moment when I rushed in to help him.

It was ridiculous, but I held onto it a bit longer than I should have.

I missed him . Already.

I didn't even know his last name. If I had it, I'd be able to find out more. Seth, my assistant, was the king of digital trails—he could take a single blurry screenshot and track it to its origin in no time. But would that be fair to James?

Fuck.

Why was this so hard?

Nothing about him screamed gold-digger. He hadn't asked for anything.

He got the hotel room. He paid for my services with overtime, not credit cards.

That wasn't someone lazy trying to hitch himself to a free ride.

That was someone who worked for what he wanted. Someone a lot like me in that regard.

I opened the app and refunded the payment. I hovered over the message box for a long time, trying to figure out what to say.

You needed more than me?

No. That wasn't it. That was insulting at best.

Eventually, I typed, For next time and hit send before I could change my mind.

So much for saying no.

Later that week, we met again. Not in a motel this time, but at a small apartment I kept in the city.

It wasn't much. Just a one-bedroom walk-up with creaky floors and furniture that had seen better decades.

But it had been my first place—my first real home, bought with my own money before the success came pouring in.

I kept it for nostalgia. It grounded me. And maybe, in a way, bringing him here was like showing him a piece of myself, unmasked.

Not literally unmasked, of course. That would come later... if ever.

Just like the first time, he drank deeply before slipping into sleep, full and warm and safe. Only this time, he curled up in my old bed, not a scratchy, questionably clean motel mattress. My bed. My space. My sheets.

When he woke, he didn't mention the refund. Not with words, anyway.

Instead, he gave me a folded-up piece of paper with a drawing on it—us at the sink, his shirt drenched, me in my mask, reaching for a towel.

It was lopsided and messy, clearly not drawn by a professional artist, but it made me smile so big my jaw was probably going to hurt from it.

His little scribbles told me more than a thank-you ever could.

I didn't want him to leave.

A few times, I almost offered to order us food, maybe curl up and watch something together. But I didn't. It was better not to blur things. Right?

"Hey," he had said, blinking up at me, just coming out of his dozy haze. "Is this

really your place?”

I nodded, caught off guard by the question.

“I’m so sorry,” he added quickly.

So much for not being a gold digger.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he blurted out. “I just feel bad. This place is so nice, and I dragged you to that horrible motel.”

I lived my life going with my gut, and the second he said something I could connect to my biggest fear, what did I do? I jumped to the conclusion he was trying to use me. I was an asshole.

“I didn’t mind the motel.” I’d always have fond memories there. Not that it was a place I wanted to go back to anytime soon.

He looked up at me shyly. “Really?”

I nodded. “Really. But maybe next time, we do something a little different.”

I swallowed,

“I was thinking... maybe next time we go on a date.”

The words hung in the air like a dare. I was usually confident... always confident, but saying that made my voice falter. The uncertainty caught me off guard.

He reached up to my jaw, his fingers brushing softly along the edge of my chin. “Let me guess,” he said with a smirk. “A masquerade ball?”

I barked a surprised laugh. “Actually... yeah.”

His eyes widened and then fell. “I don’t have anything fancy to wear.”

“It doesn’t need to be fancy,” I assured him. The event didn’t even exist yet. I could make it anything I wanted it to be. “And I have an extra mask at home I can send you.” Or rather, I was going to buy him one.

“You do?”

“I do,” I confirmed. “I’ll send you the details.”

He didn’t stay much longer. When he left, he gave me a big hug and hesitantly walked away.

I should have left too, but if I was going to keep up the illusion that this place was my main residence, I needed to wait. The dishonesty of it filled me with unease. I was going to need to tell him soon or let him go for real. This wasn’t fair to either of us.

Once I was sure he was gone, I shut the door and pulled out my phone.

“Hey, Boss,” Seth said when he answered. “What’s up?”

“You’re being very informal.” I didn’t mind, but I always razzed him when he was like this.

“And you didn’t call me on the work phone.”

“Fair,” I said, laughing. “Listen... how soon do you think you can set up a masquerade ball?”

There was a long pause. “Excuse me?”

“I need to throw a masquerade ball,” I repeated, trying to sound nonchalant. “Soon.”

“You’re serious?”

“I have a date,” I said, a little smile tugging at my lips. “And I kind of need the event to exist so I can send him the details.”

Another pause.

“I do not even want to know, do I?”

“No, Seth,” I said, grinning now. “You really don’t.”

He sighed. “Fine, Boss. Give me an hour. I’ll get you a venue and a time.”

“You’re the best.”

“Keep your nice words,” he grumbled. “I’m going to be asking for a long vacation after this. Probably at your house in the Hamptons.”

“Consider it done.”

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JAMES

When I was told I had a delivery, I half suspected it was the mask. Kennan seemed like the type to be a little extra and bring it himself instead of waiting until the day of the event. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking. Maybe I just wanted it to be him .

But when I went downstairs to the door, it wasn't.

It was a man in a suit. Very business-like. Fancy, even. He was holding a garment bag in one hand and a paper shopping bag in the other, a weird orange-colored one.

"I take it you're James?" he asked.

I nodded.

"I was asked to bring these to you."

"Thank you," I said automatically, my brain still catching up to what was happening.

Then I hesitated. "Can I ask a question?"

He raised an eyebrow but didn't stop me.

"Are you sure it's me? Should I, like... show you ID or something?" Nothing in a garment bag was cheap. Ever.

"No, I'm sure it's you," he said with a smile. "They're from Mr. ... they're from

Kennan.”

Just hearing his name sent a little thrill through me. We hadn’t used names for long, so it still felt new, like a gift every time he said mine or I said his.

Kennan and I had been chatting back and forth about the event, although not really about the event. More like... using the event as an excuse to talk. And neither of us seemed in a rush to stop doing that.

“Should I sign anything?” I asked.

“No, you’re good. Have a nice night, sir.”

Sir. That made me laugh a little internally. The only time I’d heard someone call me sir was when they were about to tell me I needed to fill out more paperwork. Definitely not from someone this well-dressed. It was weird now that I thought about it—that a delivery guy would be so dressed up.

I shrugged it off and brought the bags back up to my room.

The first thing I did was unzip the garment bag.

Inside was a suit. Or maybe a tux? I didn’t even know the difference.

How horrible was that? I ran my fingers down the lapel.

What sat inside was definitely not a box store special.

This outfit was nice . The garment bag gave nothing away about where it originated, but the suit inside said it was someplace I wouldn’t be welcome. That was for sure.

I pulled out my phone and sent him a message: You rented me a suit??

Less than thirty seconds later, he replied with a voice text: “ No. It’s a gift. It’s for the ball. Try it on. See if it fits. I did my best guessing your size.”

I slipped it on and stood in front of the mirror. I looked like someone else. Someone important. Someone who could walk into a ballroom without worrying about being laughed at or mistaken for catering staff.

Even with my tousled hair and my white socks peeking out underneath the pants—crap . Shoes. I was going to have to go get shoes. At least those could be from the discount store. People didn’t tend to look at your feet, right?

I sent him a picture. It fits perfectly. Thank you.

He responded immediately: You look great. Were the shoes too big or too small—I can send a different size over.

Shoes? He sent shoes, too. I rushed to the orange bag, the one I’d assumed held the mask. It wasn’t a mask at all. It was shoes. Shoes that were exactly my size.

Are you like one of those tailors who can just look at someone and know their size?

We hadn’t discussed his job, but it would’ve made sense.

Nope. Not a tailor. Then another message followed a few seconds later: How about you get ready. I need to as well. I’ll pick you up at 6.

I agreed, fingers hovering over the keyboard a second longer than necessary. Why hadn’t he told me what he did for a living? He definitely didn’t have mafia vibes. There was nothing shady or scary about him. Could he be a doctor? Maybe

something like that—doctors probably owned suits.

I set everything out carefully, laying the pieces on the bed to prevent wrinkles.

After calling ahead to snag a spot, I ran down the street to get my hair trimmed.

I let the stylist shape it a little, nothing too dramatic, but a thousand times better than the current just-rolled-out-of-bed vibe it currently was sporting.

If I was going to be dressed up all fancy, I might as well not look like I'd just crawled out of a pile of laundry.

I was showered, changed, and pacing the room when there was a knock at my door. Someone must have let him in downstairs. Security was hardly secure here.

I opened it—and there he was. Kennan.

No mask. Just his face. His actual face.

He was stunning. The most drop-dead gorgeous man I had ever seen. I recognized him instantly by his smile .

“Come in,” I said, stepping back to make room.

I immediately felt awkward. My shitty little apartment hadn't grown any classier in the last hour. The peeling linoleum, the slightly leaning bookshelf, the crooked light fixture... it all screamed not good enough .

“I just need to say goodbye to Rosco and then we can go.”

“Rosco?”

“Yeah, come and meet him.”

Without even thinking, I reached out and grabbed his hand, tugging him inside. I brought him over to Rosco’s enclosure and launched into the story of how I ended up as the proud papa of a hedgehog.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Rosco,” Kennan said, crouching down to get a better look.

“He thinks so too,” I replied, answering for him with a little smile.

Then Kennan looked at me. Something in his face changed—softened, but serious. So very Daddy.

“You’re not weirded out by who I am?”

His question caught me off guard.

“I don’t think I know who you are,” I said slowly. “Other than what I know, you know? Why, are you a famous singer or something? You’re handsome enough to be a movie star, so maybe that?”

“No,” he said, then shook his head. “I mean—yeah. Kind of famous, but nothing close to a movie star. I’m Kennan Millerson. From Millerson Enterprises.”

My jaw dropped. I knew that name. Everyone knew that name. I couldn’t remember seeing a picture of him, but I’d been all work and no play for a shit long time. I didn’t know a lot of popular culture.

Standing in front of me was not just a man with a good job. He was Kennan Millerson . As in... the CEO of Millerson. He was the one who gave people the good

jobs. The person whose name showed up in Forbes, in billionaires' lists, and all that kind of stuff. He was the antithesis of me.

"Oh," I breathed. "That's why you wore a mask."

He nodded.

"I'm just... me, though. I work at a nursing home. I'm just me."

And just like that, even with my little glow-up, my freshly styled hair, my tailored suit, my fancy shoes, I suddenly didn't feel good enough.

"I know, James," he said gently. "That's why I'm here... for you."

Something in the way he said it broke through the fog in my head. He knew me. Not in the celebrity gossip way. Not in the flash-and-glamour way. Me. The Little who looked to him for his milk.

I stood on my tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

"I'm glad you are."

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KENNAN

James stood on his toes and pressed a kiss to my cheek. A quick brush of lips, light and adorable. It startled me, not because I hadn't wanted it, but because of how much I had .

"I'm glad you are," he whispered.

I nodded, trying to swallow the lump forming in my throat. I couldn't remember the last time someone had looked at me the way he just had, not with recognition, not with ambition, but with warmth. With want.

He fussed with Rosco's food and water while I stood in the center of his tiny apartment with the fancy box still in my hand, unsure what to do with myself.

The place was cluttered in the way of someone who was always on the go but still took care of what mattered.

The hedgehog. The cartoon mug on the counter.

The blanket thrown just so on the couch.

Everything about James screamed real. This wasn't a display piece, the way my home had become. It was his safe space.

I gave him his mask, one that complimented my own, and instead of saying thank you, he threw his arms around me and said, "Just like Daddy's."

It was difficult not to read too much into those three words, especially when I loved hearing them.

But James was quick to say things he felt when he was most comfortable, and this felt like one of those moments.

I refused to do anything that might embarrass him or make him start second-guessing everything he said to me in the future.

Instead, I tucked those three words away like the gift they were.

When he was ready, we walked down together. The car was waiting out front.

His eyes went wide. “I saw this car... that first day at the motel. It’s your car?”

I nodded. “One of them.”

“You don’t do anything halfway, do you?” He chuckled.

“Not usually.” And definitely not with him. There was something about him that tugged at every Daddy instinct I had. I’d be a fool to let him go without giving us a real chance.

His mask was tucked under his arm, and I saw him running his thumb along the edge like he wasn’t sure he deserved it.

I wanted to say something reassuring, but we were already sliding into the back seat, and the driver was pulling into traffic.

I didn’t mind speaking freely around my staff.

I trusted them all completely or they wouldn't be on my payroll.

But it would be ridiculous to expect James to feel the same already.

As we approached our destination, I put my mask on and then helped him with his.

This man was something to treasure. He was a man who didn't know who I was when I'd walked into his home. Who'd let me meet his pet. Who'd kissed my cheek like I was a person, not a name on a list.

This was dangerous. I knew it. I just didn't know how to stop. No. That wasn't it. I refused to stop it.

The ball was held at the City River Hotel—a place known for its velvet staircases, gilded doorframes, and champagne that cost more than most people's rent.

I hated events like this. I always had. The weight of expectation was suffocating.

But tonight, with James at my side, it didn't feel like pressure.

It felt like possibility.

Inside, everything glowed. The lights were low and golden, casting the whole room in an amber haze. Seth was getting far more than a vacation for setting this up. He took a stuffy hotel and somehow made it magical.

James stood just inside the entrance, taking it all in. I reached for his hand and felt his fingers twitch with nerves before relaxing into mine.

“You okay with people seeing us?” he asked.

“More than.” I gave his hand a squeeze. “Are you?”

He nodded but didn’t speak.

“We can leave whenever you want,” I added. “Or fake a call and pretend it’s an emergency.”

“Tempting,” he murmured. “But I’ll be okay with you by my side.”

My heart soared at the trust he was affording me.

I led him onto the floor, not straight to the dance floor, but along the outer edges where conversation was quieter. People nodded in my direction, not completely sure it was me, thanks to my mask. Their eyes were on me and on my hand joined with his. I got more than a few approving nods.

Good. I personally didn’t care about their approval, but this was James’s first time at such an event and I wanted it for him. He deserved a night where he didn’t have to explain who he was or what he wanted. Where he could just be.

We took flutes of champagne, and I steered us toward one of the quieter balconies for a few minutes to breathe. But James leaned in, his shoulder brushing mine.

“You want to dance?” he asked suddenly, eyes flicking toward the floor.

I blinked. “With everyone watching?”

He gave a half-smile. “Isn’t that the point of a masquerade? Not to care who’s watching?”

He had a point.

We returned to the ballroom, and I held out my hand in invitation to dance as we reached the dance floor. He took it without hesitation, just as the music shifted into a slow waltz.

It started simply enough, hands, steps, rhythm. I could feel him figuring it out in real time. He wasn't bad, not at all. I half wondered if they did fun dance nights at the nursing home he ran. I knew they did bingo. All of them did.

He let me lead, but not because he didn't know how—because he wanted to.

Around us, couples swirled. Masks flashed. Dresses twirled. And still, the world shrank to just us.

“Is this your thing?” he asked softly. “Fancy parties and secret dances?”

“It used to be,” I said. “Now I mostly show up because people expect me to.”

“Do you like it?”

“I like this.” My eyes held his. “Dancing with you.”

He flushed, a slow pink blooming across his cheeks. “Smooth.”

“I've had practice.”

“You're not so different from me, you know,” he said, his voice dropping lower as we turned.

I arched a brow. “No?”

“No. You think I'm some sort of innocent, wide-eyed Little, and maybe I am

sometimes, but you, you're just as careful. Just as good at hiding."

"Maybe we're both better at showing up when we're behind masks."

He didn't answer. Just leaned his cheek against mine briefly as the music swelled. I caught a whiff of his shampoo, all minty.

The song ended. Another began, slower this time. I didn't let go of him. He didn't pull away. We didn't talk. Just moved to the music, our bodies close.

Halfway through the second dance, I tilted my head and caught him looking at me. Not just looking, watching. Like he was memorizing the moment.

And when I leaned in, so did he. Our lips met... soft, tentative, and perfect.

His breath caught, and I felt it against my mouth.

"I've been wanting to do that," I murmured.

"Me too," he whispered back.

We finished the song in silence, our bodies still close, foreheads brushing.

When the music ended, James rested his head briefly against my shoulder before stepping back.

"So now what?" he asked.

I smiled. "Now we eat too many tiny desserts and sneak off early."

"And you keep your mask on the whole time?" There was more to that question than

a simple choice of attire. He was wanting to know if I was going to let him in. And I was. But this wasn't the place for that conversation. So instead, I answered it at face value... sort of

“That depends on whether you want to kiss me again without it.”

He flushed again but didn't look away. “You know I do.”

“Then I'll make it worth it.”

We wandered the ballroom for another hour, sipping drinks, laughing quietly at poorly told jokes, and pretending we weren't slowly migrating toward the exit with each encounter.

When we passed by the dessert table, James grabbed a tiny tart and grinned at me like he'd just gotten away with something.

I couldn't wait to see him in full on Little mode.

Outside, the night was cool and soft. He tugged off his mask, eyes bright and bold in the moonlight. “Now you.”

I pulled mine free and let it dangle at my side.

James stared at me like he was still seeing something new, even after seeing me this way earlier.

“You're kind of a sap, you know,” he said.

I chuckled. “You brought out the worst in me.”

“The best,” he corrected. “Definitely the best.”

And just before we climbed into the waiting car, I leaned in and kissed him again. No music. No audience. Just us.

Unmasked. Unhidden.

Real.

A Daddy and his boy. At least, if I had anything to say about it.

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JAMES

The car was quiet. My fault, not Kennan's. I wasn't used to having a stranger so close by who had no option but to hear all my words. And tonight, none of my words were going to be for good company.

I wanted to tell him everything I desired from him tonight. Those words were for Kennan alone.

Kennan sat beside me, his hand resting close enough that our fingers brushed every time the car turned.

I wanted to take it in mine, but again—stranger in the car.

It still blew my mind that he was rich enough that the expense of a driver wasn't one he even felt.

But also, he wasn't snobby about it. Not once did he complain about the motel other than to protect me from the sketchy towel.

My building came into view too soon. I wasn't ready to say good-bye. And getting the courage to invite him up, to risk rejection, was difficult enough. Doing it with an audience? I wasn't sure I'd be able to handle that.

The driver slowed to a smooth stop and turned slightly. "We've arrived, sir."

I hesitated, then looked over at Kennan. He was already watching me.

“Do you want to come up?” I asked quietly before I lost all nerve.

There was a pause, maybe a second where I wondered if I’d misread it all and he was going to turn me down. Instead, he nodded. “I’d like that.”

After giving his driver instructions, we stepped out together, and I led the way inside, punching in the code for the door and glancing over my shoulder at him.

We climbed the stairs to my apartment. When I unlocked the door and pushed it open, I suddenly felt self-conscious about where I lived.

“Come in,” I said softly.

I hung up our jackets and turned back to him, suddenly unsure of what to do with my hands, my body. But he closed the distance before I could spiral, resting his palms on my waist and tipping his forehead to mine.

“I meant it,” he whispered.

“Meant what?”

“When I said I haven’t stopped thinking about kissing you.”

My breath caught. “Then maybe you should do something about it.”

He did.

It only took a second for his mouth to crash into mine, and my hands to find his shirt, tugging him closer.

I tasted the wine we’d shared at the ball, the sweet cream from the desserts.

The low sound he made when my lips parted under mine took all of my nerves away. He wanted me as badly as I wanted him.

Kennan's hands slid up my back, his body guiding me backward toward my bedroom. He broke the kiss.

"Do you want this?" he asked, consent never sounding so fucking hot.

"Yes," I said. "So badly. Please, Daddy."

"That's my sweet boy." He said the exact words I needed to hear.

"Not here. Bedroom." I grabbed his hand and led him the short distance.

He kissed me again, less tentative than before, deepening it with each brush of his lips.

I melted into him, pulling at the hem of his shirt and then attacking the buttons.

There was nothing smooth about my movements.

If anything, I was a fumbling mess, but soon enough his shirt was open. I pushed it over his shoulders.

"I've got this." He gently moved my hands, and for a second it felt like rejection, but then I saw what he was doing.

He had both an undershirt and chest pads he needed to remove.

Next time, I'd ask him to show me how, let me take care of him the way I knew he was going to take care of me.

But for now, I watched and learned... fine, and drooled a little.

Once he was rid of his clothes, I slid my fingers over the smooth planes of his chest, careful to avoid the nipples until he gave me permission, down the muscles of his abdomen, as his hands found my waist and then my belt.

“Your turn.” He pressed a kiss to my cheek and asked, “Can I?”

“Please.”

I kicked off my shoes and let him undress me piece by piece, his hands moving with such care.

I stood there, naked in front of him for the first time.

Normally, I got nervous being so exposed like this, but the way he looked at me left no room to question how much he loved what he saw.

There was no reason to be shy. He wanted me exactly how I was.

Daddy lifted me up and onto the bed and climbed in beside me. I pulled him in for a searing kiss, unable to wait a second longer. I wanted this man, to taste him, feel him, have him inside of me.

His mouth moved from my lips, slowly exploring my body.

“You’re gorgeous,” he whispered, tracing a path across my stomach with his mouth. I reached for him, fingers curling into his hair as he moved back up to kiss me again, and when I hooked my leg around his, he groaned.

Feeling bold, I reached between us, jerking his cock, loving the feel of his girth in my

hand and hoping for more.

“Lube? Condoms?” he asked.

“Drawer,” I whispered. “Bottom one.”

He moved away for a heartbeat, rummaging, and returned with one and lube.

We didn’t speak. We didn’t need to. Everything was slow and careful, his hand between my legs preparing me, his kisses steady as my breath hitched.

He circled my entrance then prepared me one finger at first, then another and another, until I was writing beneath him and begging for more.

He held up the condom, once again affirming that this was what I wanted. He was so Daddy, and I fucking loved it. I snatched the condom from him and rolled it over his length.

Kennan put a pillow under my hips and lined himself up with my needy hole.

When he pushed inside, it wasn’t rushed.

He entered me inch by inch, watching my face the entire time.

And when he was fully seated, I clung to him, head tucked into his shoulder, body trembling around him, and he held me just as tightly.

He moved gently, rocking into me with a rhythm that felt like the song we’d danced to earlier. Was he humming it, too? Would it always hold a special place in his heart like it would mine?

“James,” he breathed.

He thrust into me, increasing speed and force with each moan I made, until my orgasm was so close I begged for release. He wrapped his hand around my length, jerking it as he continued to slam into me. Less than a handful of jerks later, there was no holding back my climax.

I came first, crying out his name, and he followed with a strangled groan, burying his face against my neck. We were a sweaty, sticky, hot mess. It was fucking perfect.

We collapsed together in a tangle of limbs. I wanted to stay right here forever, the weight of him over me giving me a sense of home. But then he shifted, rolling to his side and pulling me with him. Please don't let him be leaving.

He wasn't. Instead, he went to the bathroom, coming out with a couple of wet cloths and towels, cleaning us both up, before climbing back into bed and patting the spot beside him.

“Come here, my sweet boy.”

I nestled into his side, my cheek against his chest. Then his hand moved up and cupped my jaw, thumb stroking the edge of my mouth.

“Still hungry?” he murmured.

I knew what he meant.

“Can I, Daddy? Is that okay?” I wouldn't have dared ask, not wanting him to think that's all I wanted him for. But if it was offered, I wasn't going to refuse.

“More than, my sweet boy. You need to stay hydrated after working so hard to please

Daddy.”

He had called himself Daddy, and it was all I could do not to squee.

I shifted and kissed the curve of his chest before drawing one nipple into my mouth. He gasped softly, tightening his arm around me. “Daddy’s good boy.” His praise was everything.

I suckled lazily, slowly. His skin was salty and warm, his heartbeat thudding gently beneath my cheek. I let my eyes drift shut as his fingers threaded through my hair.

This wasn’t about milk. It wasn’t even about sex anymore. Something had changed, something wonderful.

I felt him kiss the top of my head, and I sighed, my lips still wrapped around him, body curling into his as I drifted to sleep.

KENNAN

I didn't usually cook for anyone. Entertaining wasn't my thing, and when I did it, it tended to be for work. Heck, I didn't usually invite people to this house. It was gorgeous and there was plenty of room, but I needed a place for me to be me.

James wasn't "people." He was the exception I hadn't been expecting.

I'd have already had him over if I didn't want to overwhelm him.

He knew I had money beyond his understanding.

But knowing that and seeing it were two different things.

He'd brought up that stupid motel a few times already as if he had somehow wronged me by the place not being a bazillion stars and even more dollars.

We'd been seeing each other for a little over a month now.

Quiet dinners out or at his place were the norm.

We also had lazy weekend coffee runs, one adorable afternoon at the botanical gardens where he'd pointed out every flower like it was a friend, and a trip to the zoo.

We both worked a great deal but took advantage of the time we did have.

I'd learned his preferences, his habits.

And I'd learned about what he wanted and needed from his Little space.

He'd told me all about his journey with flushed cheeks and soft words, and a whole lot of nervous giggles.

He wasn't the first person who called me Daddy, but he was the first person who meant it in this way.

I'd read up on it, listened to his every word, and was going to do the best I could to fill that role for him.

He assured me I was already naturally doing so, but that wasn't good enough for me... for James. He deserved everything.

Rosco had been my inner excuse for not bringing him home.

But really it had been fear, fear that he wouldn't like my world, that I wasn't a good enough Daddy for him, that he would wake up and see that my life was always going to be in the limelight.

Once that realization hit, I did what anyone with more money than they should have would do—I set up a hedgehog habitat in my suite and got him a fancy carrier.

It might've been a little over the top. Good thing James was far more amused than anything else when I sent him the pictures.

Tonight was simple, the two of us, a quiet kitchen, and a "Little" dinner I'd researched like I was prepping for a business acquisition.

Dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets, mac and cheese made from a box, a side of peas arranged into a tiny smiling face, and a glass of apple juice. I was saving the milk for

later.

I set the table with colorful divided plates, and laid out the utensils decorated with puppies from a popular cartoon and a folded blue cloth napkin with stars stitched along the edge.

Next to the plate, I placed the new stuffie I'd picked out: a soft, brown hedgehog with bright button eyes and a tiny fabric bowtie.

It wasn't Rosco, of course. But it was Rosco-adjacent. And maybe James would like having a cuddle version of his little guy.

The doorbell rang, exactly on time.

I opened it and there he was, pet carrier in hand, looking a tiny bit nervous and a whole lot stunning. He had a tote bag slung over one shoulder.

"Hey," he said sweetly. "I think Rosco would like to not be moving anymore."

"Of course, sweet boy." I reached for the carrier. "Come in. I'll show you where it is."

Having a purpose was good. If I stopped to give a tour, I had a feeling this place would feel every bit the square footage it contained. We'd get to that, once he was more comfortable with the setting. At least that was my plan.

We got Rosco settled in.

I kissed James's cheek. "Would you like to change into your Little clothes before dinner?"

He nodded shyly. “Is that okay?”

“It’s more than okay. I set up the guest room with your things. Come on, I’ll show you.”

I didn’t love the idea of the guest room, but I’d read that it was good to have a separate place for your Little for them to be alone if they wanted. I’d ask him after tonight if he liked it that way or not. This was a learning curve for me.

He followed me, his hand brushing against mine before slipping into it completely, fingers twining. When we reached the guest room, he gasped.

I’d laid everything out on the bed—a few new Little clothes I’d picked out just for him. A soft onesie in pastel blue with tiny stars. Matching knee socks. And a hoodie shaped like a dinosaur, with fabric spikes running down the back.

“You got me presents?”

I cupped his cheek. “Of course I did. I saw them and thought of you. I wanted you to feel special tonight.”

“You didn’t have to...”

“I wanted to.” I kissed his forehead. “Go ahead and get changed. I’ll wait downstairs.”

There would come a time where I would want to help him get dressed, but we’d discussed it, and easing into things felt like our best choice for now.

By the time he padded into the kitchen, he looked like every bit the darling Little I’d hoped to see tonight. He wore the blue star onesie and socks, his hair slightly tousled.

The stuffie tucked under his arm made my heart feel too big for my chest.

“You look adorable,” I told him.

James blushed and peeked up at me. “Thank you, Daddy.”

I pulled out his chair, and he climbed in, carefully settling in with his legs swinging just above the floor.

“You made dinner?”

“I did.” I set the plate down in front of him and handed him a sippy cup filled with juice. “I hope it’s okay.”

“Nuggies! And happy peas!”

I chuckled. “And mac and cheese. I even remembered to put it in its own section, away from the ketchup.”

“You’re the best, Daddy.”

We ate together. He nibbled while making dinosaur sounds, kicking his feet. I let myself watch him, soaking in every bit of the delight he gave off.

After dinner, I led him to the least formal living room. I’d moved the coffee table out of the way and laid out a thick blanket and pillows on the floor, with another soft blanket draped over the back of the couch in case he got cold.

James sat on the floor with his stuffie, who he named Junior, and I sat behind him, gently guiding him into my lap. He fit there perfectly, leaning back against my chest.

“Would you like some milk, Jimmy?” I asked softly, testing out a Little name for him. He said he didn’t have one but that he never really thought about one either. Now he would get to see if he liked it.

He nodded. “Yes, please.”

I unbuttoned my shirt slowly, and once it was, I helped him turn so he was lying across my lap, cradled securely in my arms. He looked up at me, wide-eyed. I stroked his hair back.

“I’ve got you,” I said, and he nodded again, then leaned in and latched onto my nipple, first circling it and then bringing it into his mouth for the first long pull.

The way his body relaxed against mine flooded me with emotions. The first time he’d drank from me, it had been fabulous. But this time, it was on a whole other level. I couldn’t even pinpoint what was different about it, but I wanted to hold onto these emotions with both hands.

I felt the rush of milk respond, and his soft hum of satisfaction. It was everything.

I leaned my head back and started to tell him a story about a hedgehog prince who got lost in a library and had to find his way home by following a trail of glitter stars. I made sure my voice was soft, rhythmic, soothing.

As I spoke, I felt his body sink further into me, the tension draining from his shoulders, the little sighs between swallows. He looked up at me once, milk-drunk and sleepy, and I smoothed my hand over his cheek.

“You’re safe,” I whispered. “I’ve got you. Just rest.”

His eyes fluttered shut again, his suckling slowing. He was full now, and sleepy, and

warm.

When he finally slipped into sleep, I held him there, brushing my fingers along his hairline, the rhythm of his breath against my chest slow and steady.

And for the first time in a long time, the mansion didn't feel too big.

It felt just right.

KENNAN

“Are you sure you don’t want me to handle any of this, sir?” Seth had offered for the fifth time this week. He’d been watching me, frazzled, as I tried to get everything organized for James’s birthday.

I wanted it to be special—beyond special—but also, I wanted it to be done by me. I was his Daddy and throwing money wasn’t giving him what he needed.

“I have it under control, Seth,” I said.

I might have been lying. I wasn’t quite sure.

James wasn’t impressed by money, so simply buying him a nice watch, a new car, or anything like that wasn’t going to make him happy—and that was the goal, right? To make him happy.

Instead, I made a list of everything that he enjoyed, everything we enjoyed together in the six months we’d been a couple, and any idea that I could come up with. I’d narrowed it down, but not enough.

So far the only task that was done was redecorating a guest room to become a playroom for us.

I had it matching his favorite pajamas, and it was wonderful.

Even so, I wasn’t sure how that would go over.

We hadn't really discussed a quote "nursery" for him.

But moving the coffee table every time we decided to play in the living room or changing the comforter on the bed when he wanted to be in Little space wasn't really practical.

So that part was done, but in the back of my mind, it kept nagging at me that the playroom was for both of us. We both enjoyed those kinds of times together. It wasn't for him. I needed to do better.

"Sir, I assure you I don't mind helping," Seth tried again.

"No is a complete answer, Seth." He meant well, but the man was driving me bonkers.

"I'm getting coffee." He started to turn on his heel.

"Wait, you're not offering me coffee?" I was attempting to lighten the mood.

"Sir, with all due respect. You have lost your mind."

"Nope. I lost my heart... although it's not really lost, it's over at the nursing home."

Seth was good and done with me. I frustrated him to no end. I'd been working less, finding my priorities where they belonged. That was good and something Seth had been pushing me to do for a long time, but it was an adjustment period for both of us.

"Fine. I'll get you coffee."

He did, and I went back to my planning.

A week later, it was birthday day, and I planned to celebrate with him all day.

I'd slept over at his place, and when I woke in the morning, I snuck out to his favorite bakery, getting him the muffins he loved and his two favorite coffees, because you shouldn't have to choose on your birthday, and then after I helped him get ready, I drove him to work. Not my driver. Me.

I'd been to the nursing home quite a few times now, making Friday family bingo a regular part of my calendar, and I was greeted by multiple residents as we headed to his office. Normally, I'd have left him at the door with a hug, but I wanted him to see the delivery I had waiting for him.

"You're ridiculous." His words didn't match his expression as he took in the balloons and flowers I'd arranged to have delivered before normal hours, with the help of one of his coworkers and a local florist who I did a lot of business with at work.

"Ridiculously in love," I said, hugging him and kissing the top of his head. "Happy birthday, my sweet boy. I will pick you up later."

Instead of going to work, I went home. I had a cake to bake.

There were a thousand bakeries I could order from—both near and far. Heck, I could hire the famous cake baker from the Food Channel. Easy peasy. But I wanted to do this for him.

I'd watched YouTube videos aplenty, ordered the special cake pan, and piping tools. I was doing this. The cake was supposed to look like his favorite green cat. After I piped on the green icing, it was cat-esque at best. And there was more frosting on the plate than on parts of the cat.

Cake decorating was not my gift.

I poured sprinkles along the plate where the frosting was in an attempt to make it look like it was intentional and moved on to my next task: streamers.

I didn't even know you could still buy them, but he told me about a birthday he had when he was young and how much fun he had with the streamers, tearing them down and turning them into some sort of doll reminiscent of the corn husker doll.

I went to his new room, the one he'd yet to see, and put up so many streamers. There was no way he wasn't going to be able to build an army of those little dolls if he wanted to.

The room was ready to go: a shaggy star-shaped rug, an entire constellation on the ceiling when you turned the lights off, squishy bean bag chairs big enough for both of us, some toys, a couch. Nobody walking in would call it a nursery, but it was definitely youthful and definitely a playroom.

I was excited to see his face.

On the rug sat his Little gifts—a stuffed animal I had made just for him, a book I had illustrated of the story I told him about the hedgehog prince lost in the library, and some socks with the same green cat as I'd attempted to put on the cake.

The only thing left was dinner. And that was easy—macaroni and cheese from a box, with dinosaurs and baby trees, AKA broccoli, his newest green vegetable of choice.

Everything was ready to be heated up, giving me just enough time to shower and pick him up.

He came out with a handful of cards, most from residents, beaming.

We went to his apartment first, hopefully for one of the last times, and gathered

Rosco before heading to my place.

We stopped off at the kitchen first, so I could get it cooking. He recognized that cat from my failed cake attempt right away, throwing his arms around me and thanking me a thousand times.

“You made me a cake!” He kissed my cheek with a loud smack. “A cake!”

“It’s your birthday, of course there is cake.”

“But you made me a cake .”

“I did. And now I’m going to make you dinner. Did you want chicken and mac and cheese, or did you want shrimp scampi?”

I did have the supplies for that, one of the easier dishes I knew how to make, but to no surprise, he picked the chicken nuggets.

I got the water on the stove to boil and put the chicken in the oven.

“Can you help me?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Would you look in the cupboard where the divided dishes are and pull a couple out?” That was where I had hidden his main present. Or at least, I hoped it would be his main present. It still depended on if he wanted to accept it or not.

“You’re a tricker, Daddy.” He took out the Happy Birthday bag. “I’m opening it now. I don’t care if I have cake yet or not.”

“There’s no rule here about cake first.”

“Good, because that’s a silly rule.”

There was a story there, but that was for another time. I was too excited to watch him open his present.

He pulled out the box and lifted the lid. Inside were two things: a key and a ring.

“This doesn’t look like the key to your house,” he said, holding it up.

“It’s a symbolic key, one that says, I want to live with you but that we can decide where our wholeness together is.”

“I don’t like it when we don’t sleep together.” His eyes were still on the key, his face not giving much away.

“I don’t either.”

He squinted, looking at the key more carefully. “I think that we need to change the key to one from here. And then we can decide later.”

“Sounds good to me.” I waited for him to address the ring, and he didn’t, instead playing with the key.

“Is there anything else in there?” Maybe he didn’t see it. I was hoping for that. Ignoring it because I was asking too soon would sting.

“Oh, there’s more?” He reached inside, pushed back the cotton batting, and held up the ring. “What is this, Daddy?”

“What do you think it is?” I took it from him and knelt down in front of him. “I was trying to be clever, and I almost thought you were just turning me down.”

He shook his head.

“James, I want to walk this life with you. I want to go to sleep each night with you in my arms and wake up each morning to you by my side. Will you marry me?”

He covered my hands with his. “If we do this, no one where I work is going to care. They all loved you at bingo. But people at yours might.”

As much as I loved him looking out for me, I hated that he had to worry about that kind of thing, but he probably was right to. I wasn’t hiding my relationship with him. Heck, it had been in the gossip rags more times than I wanted to think about. But the people who mattered, they didn’t care.

My mother was the one who helped me pick out the ring, telling me to put a ring on it already.

I was surrounded by support. “I don’t care what any of them think or say or do.

What I care about is spending these times with you.

So, James, if it was just you and me, what would you say? Do you want to be mine?”

“Oh, silly Daddy. I’m already yours. And yes—I’d love to marry you.”

He held out his hand, and I slid the ring on. And before I could right myself, he was peppering my face with kisses, telling me, “Love me, Daddy.”

“I do and always will.”

He turned the stove and oven off. “I think we have something better to do before dinner,” he said, nipping at my bottom lip.

“Better than chicken nuggets?”

“So much better.”

And up the stairs we went, clothes flying off the second we reached my suite.

JAMES

It was hard to believe it had been one year since we got married. Daddy had always been the one to plan all of the celebrations—my birthday, my promotion, even our wedding. But today... today I was taking the reins.

He'd been out of town for work most of the week, and it gave me the perfect opportunity to get everything set up.

I'd ordered a cake from the same bakery we used for our wedding, and a meal from the same caterers too.

I even bought a new set of dishes that matched the ones we had on our reception tables.

I was setting everything up to mirror that day—our day.

It might not have been a flashy wedding by billionaire standards, but it had fit us perfectly, and I wanted to recreate a piece of our wedding.

It had been a small wedding, but it wasn't tiny by most people's standards.

But by the expectations the papers all had for my husband, given his status, it had been minuscule.

Fewer than a hundred people, including us.

No press, no board members. No extended cousins or “my grandfather’s lawyer’s friend’s daughter.

” Just our people. Friends and family. The people who mattered most.

It couldn’t have been more perfect.

We even wore the masks from our first real date during our first dance as husbands.

People thought it was sweet and romantic, and it was.

But it was also a reminder of who we were...

of the fact that it wasn’t the world’s version of us that mattered.

Not the titles. Not the expectations. I was a manager at a small nursing home, and he was a billionaire CEO.

But those were roles. Costumes in their own way.

The real us? That was what counted. That was what stood under the twinkle lights on our wedding night.

If I’d known the first time I’d worn my mask that it had real gemstones on my face, ones set there by some designer I couldn’t even pronounce... I probably would’ve panicked all night, worrying I’d break it. But I didn’t know. I just felt like a prince.

Willow licked my ankle—her newest habit.

“Hey, Willow. Did you need to go out?” I asked, looking down at her wagging tail, going a thousand miles a minute.

Just like Rosco had come into my life, Willow had too via work.

One of the new residents couldn't find anyone to care for her, and the intake coordinator knew exactly who to go to.

She didn't even ask me. She went straight to Kennan.

She knew which of us would cave fastest, and she was right.

Kennan and Willow were best buds from day one.

I barely got a hello from Daddy when he came home anymore. Nope. He was too busy rolling around on the floor with her, she demanded it.

It was sweet.

I slapped my thigh, and she followed me out to the back door, and I let her out to explore the yard. The sky was that perfect kind of blue, the clouds soft and puffy and lazily drifting. I stared up at them, finding shapes... like I used to as a kid. A bunny. A car. A train.

When she was done, we trotted back inside together, and I double-checked everything one last time before heading to the shower. I wanted to be done and ready when Kennan got back.

I stood under the hot water, rinsing out my hair, when I heard a familiar voice cut right through the sound of the spray.

"I canceled my morning meeting," Kennan said casually.

I smiled. "Let me guess. You missed Willow?"

He chuckled, walking the rest of the way into the bathroom, his shirt already halfway off. “There room in there for me?”

“I suppose I could make room.”

The thing was huge. The shower, I mean. We could probably fit a dozen people in here and still have space. Showerheads above and from all sides. It was totally ridiculous. I adored it.

Daddy finished taking off his clothes and stepped inside, warm water cascading over his skin.

“Happy anniversary, my love,” he murmured, pulling me close.

“Happy anniversary,” I echoed, and kissed him gently.

I helped him wash his hair, then his body. It was slow and sweet, not rushed. Just the comfort of being together. Being home. Gods, I missed him.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes,” I said, shutting off the water. “Thanks for coming home, really.”

He dried his hair with a towel and looked at me like I’d lost my mind. “How could I not be here? This is the anniversary of the happiest day of my life.”

Even though I knew we had a whole fancy dinner planned, when he suggested we climb into bed to take a quick nap, I agreed. I needed to snuggle up under the covers, just as badly as he seemed to.

“You must be tired,” I said, brushing my fingers over his arm.

“I’m...” He yawned. “That’s all I’m gonna say.”

“Me too,” I laughed.

“Then maybe you should have some milk before you fall asleep.”

I wasn’t gonna say no to an offer like that, that was for sure. I kissed his jaw and shifted, resting across his chest.

“I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you, my sweet boy. Now be good and have some milkies and take a little nap.”

I didn’t argue. His arm wrapped around me, solid and warm, while I latched on. I closed my eyes, nursing slowly, not because I was ravenous, but because I needed this connection... needed my Daddy.

He told me a story while I suckled, about a lion and a squirrel who built a home in the middle of the woods where no one else could find them.

And the squirrel, he said, liked shiny things and couldn’t stop bringing home treasures.

The lion didn’t care. The lion just liked having someone to come home to.

I smiled, milk in my mouth, his voice humming in my ear.

After a while, I dozed off.

When I woke again, he was smiling down at me.

“You know, I heard someone has something very special planned for our evening.”

I yawned. “You heard, huh?”

“Seth might’ve told me.”

“Seth,” I groaned. “Why would he do that?”

“Because,” Kennan said, tapping my nose, “he didn’t want me to ruin your plans by making plans of my own.”

“What kind of plans were you thinking of?” When Seth assured me he wasn’t making any because he was going to be away, I’d assumed that had been the order of things.

“Oh, just a trip. Back to our honeymoon spot.” His smirk made it necessary for me to kiss him. So I did.

“We leave next week,” Kennan said.

“We have work.” Stupid adulting.

“Your leave request has already been accepted.”

“How can it be accepted? I’m the boss.” I’d have seen it for sure.

He smirked. “Are you? You think you’re the boss?”

“Hello,” I mumbled into his chest, pretending to be asleep again, knowing full well I had my intake coordinator to thank for making this happen, but not quite ready to admit she was the real person behind the curtain, despite my title.

Later that evening, after we got dressed in the exact outfit we wore to our wedding, I brought him down to the dining room. He stopped in the doorway, stunned. I’d matched everything, down to the napkin folds.

“James...”

“I wanted to remember it all.”

He stepped forward, pulled me close, and we danced to the same song from our first dance, right in the middle of the room, this time with no masks.

There were no photographers. No speeches.

Just us. He dipped me at the end, something he only dared to do at home, since I once told him I was afraid of being dropped in public, and then kissed me until my knees nearly gave out.

The food was delicious. The cake was perfect. Willow barked in approval when I shared the tiniest corner of frosting with her.

We curled up on the couch later with Willow tucked into beside us. Kennan had me in his lap.

“I can’t believe it’s been a year,” I whispered.

“I can,” he murmured back. “I’ve loved every second.”

“Even when I cried because I couldn’t find my other green cat sock?” That hadn’t been my best day.

“Especially then.” He kissed the top of my head. “You came to me instead of sulking. You didn’t even hesitate.”

It was true, I didn’t. I needed my Daddy. And if that meant calling him at work, that was what I was going to do. If it was a time he couldn’t be reached, he’d have waited to get back to me. That was the deal we had made, and so far it was working well.

“Even when I flooded the bathroom trying to fix the sink?”

He laughed. “You didn’t flood it. Just... moisturized it very aggressively.”

“I want a hundred more years like this,” I said softly, eyes closing.

“I want forever,” he replied, stroking my hair. “And you already promised that to me. No take-backsies allowed.”

Worked for me.