



Novo (Rent-A-Daddy #2)

Author: *Victoria Sue*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Matty needed a husband. Novo needed revenge. Neither expected to catch real feelings.

Novo Jeremiah Sousa might not have a one-percenter badge on his cut, but he knows how to work the system—especially when it's dirty. For five long years, he's hunted the man who destroyed his family, watching from the shadows as billionaire Harold Coombes lived a gilded life built on betrayal and blood. But Novo's patience pays off the day he discovers a vulnerability: Coombes's pampered, pretty-boy godson, Matthew.

Matty's no stranger to wealth, but his world is crumbling fast. He doesn't even care about the money anymore, he just wants to stop his merciless uncle getting his cruel hands on it. But the only thing standing between Matty and financial ruin is a bizarre clause in his parents' will: marry by twenty-eight, stay married for two years... or lose everything. With his twenty-eighth birthday looming, Matty is desperate enough to sign a contract with a complete stranger.

But not just any stranger.

A Daddy.

Because if Matty's going to do this, he's doing it his way—finally giving in to the aching, hidden need he's never dared to name out loud.

Two million dollars. Two years. One arranged marriage between a former spoiled rich kid aching to be protected and a battle-hardened enforcer with a score to settle.

What could possibly go wrong?

Only everything...

Especially when Novo starts to care.

Especially when Matty starts to trust.

And especially when the man who destroyed Novo's family finds out what they're up to—

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Chapter one

Novo

I suppose it was as good a day as any to get married.

I'd spoken to Ricky and Calvin from the agency a couple of times and assured them I'd be here.

I'd never spoken to Matthew, or Matty as Calvin called him.

I didn't want to. Let them think it was a business arrangement so Matthew could get his trust fund, and I could get the cool two million I'd been promised.

One million for each of the two years I had to stick this out.

We even had a lawyered-up contract. Not that I cared about the spoiled little rich kid or even my two mill. Thanks to my Portuguese great-grandfather I had enough cash as a cushion, and I'd worked for my club ever since I left active service.

"You sure about this?"

I glanced back at Cruise, my uncle's road captain and my best friend.

My uncle Jono was the president of the Diamond Kings MC, and I had joined as a prospect fifteen years ago, much to my dad's consternation.

Mom and Dad had never been in the life, but Dad and my uncle had never fallen out about it.

“No option,” I said. And there wasn’t. We’d tried everything to take out old man Coombes but like most with more money than morals, he’d gotten away with everything.

And they said bikers were dirty.

Then three months ago, Digger had found the emails between the boy and the dating agency, or Rent-a-Daddy , as it was called.

And the revenge plan was back on.

“Two years is a long time.”

“Not really.” It had been five since I buried my dad and four since Mom had followed him. Officially it was a stroke, but I knew better. She’d died of a broken heart.

The door to the small waiting room burst open in the Denver County Courthouse and Ricky bustled in followed by Calvin brandishing flowers to fix on my jacket.

“Oh my God,” Ricky squeaked. “Matty’s won the lottery.

” I sighed internally because I’d followed Ricky’s exact instructions and had to dress in a fucking kilt.

Why, I had no idea, as I didn’t have so much as a dram of Scottish blood in me, but this was my last chance to get the scumbag who had as good as murdered my mom and dad, so if I’d needed to wear a fucking tutu I would have.

Cruise and I thanked them, then followed them out. I saw Matthew before he noticed me and took in the way he was nervously twisting his hands, which surprised me. I had quite a few friends in the lifestyle and had reached out to the club in Charlotte, and apparently Matthew was a mean little shit.

Didn't look that way right now, though. If anything, he seemed terrified, which didn't fit with what I'd been told about him at all.

He was handsome enough, if you liked the pretty boy type.

Small and slender with brown hair and highlights that probably cost more than my first bike.

His face was carefully blank, but his eyes were darting around like a cornered animal's.

When he spotted me, they widened even more. Guess the kilt made an impression after all. Or maybe it was the tattoos. Or the beard. Or the fact that I was about a foot taller than him and twice as wide. I watched his throat work as he swallowed hard.

"Matthew," Calvin said, "this is Novo. Your... um... fiancé."

Matthew gave a tight nod but didn't speak. Up close, I could see the tension in his shoulders, the way his knuckles were white from gripping his own hands. Not at all what I expected from the spoiled brat I'd heard about. I watched the lump travel his throat as he swallowed.

"Hello," I said, keeping my voice neutral. No point in making this worse than it needed to be.

"Hi," he whispered, then cleared his throat. "Thank you for... doing this."

I raised an eyebrow. Gratitude wasn't what I'd expected either, considering this was a very well-paying gig. "Let's just get it done, Matthew."

His eyes widened slightly. "I— Novo ," he said, his voice barely above a whisper, before clearing his throat and standing straighter. "I prefer Matty."

"Matty, then." According to what I knew, he should be calling me Sir, and I would be calling him Boy.

An awkward silence fell between us. I could feel Cruise's eyes boring into my back, probably wondering if I was going to bolt. For a split second, I considered it. This was a lot of commitment for revenge, even if Harold Edward Coombes deserved everything coming to him and more.

"Your kilt looks nice," Matty finally said, his voice still quiet but with a hint of something else—maybe amusement? "Ricky insisted, didn't he?"

I nodded, surprised he'd picked up on that. "Yeah. Said it was non-negotiable."

"Are we all ready?" a man said, opening the door to the judge's chambers. I stood back to let Matty go in first, but caught the flash of panic on his face so as naturally as breathing, my hand fell to the small of his back to guide him through.

I wasn't expecting the small, shy smile that curved his lips as he nodded his thanks and stepped through the doorway.

The courtroom was small, almost cramped, with wood paneling that had seen better days and fluorescent lighting that made everyone look sickly.

Not exactly a romantic wedding venue, but then again, this wasn't a real wedding.

The judge was a middle-aged woman with kind eyes and reading glasses perched on the end of her nose.

She smiled at us as we arranged ourselves—Matty and me in front, Ricky, Calvin, and Cruise behind us like the world's most mismatched wedding party.

I knew Ricky and Calvin had brought muscle with them as well, because their husbands—Daddies, whatever—were insanely protective.

Not that I had a problem with that. I was just surprised pretty-boy didn't.

"Marriage is a sacred bond," the judge began, launching into the standard spiel about commitment and partnership.

I tuned her out, my eyes fixed on a point just above her head.

Two years. Two years of playing house with this stranger, all so I could finally get the info I needed to make Harold Edward Coombes pay for what he'd done.

My dad's face flashed in my mind—how he'd looked that last day, defeated and broken, the light gone from his eyes after Coombes had systematically destroyed everything he'd built.

"Mr. Sousa?" The judge's voice pulled me back to the present. "Your vows?"

I blinked, momentarily thrown. Vows? Nobody had mentioned vows. I glanced at Matty, who looked equally startled.

"We, uh, we didn't prepare anything specific," I said, trying to sound apologetic.

The ceremony was mercifully brief after that.

Calvin and Ricky stood as our witnesses, beaming like this was a real love match instead of what it actually was—a business transaction with a side of revenge.

Matty's hands trembled as we exchanged the simple bands I'd picked up at a jewelry store yesterday.

His skin was cool to the touch, and I couldn't help noticing how small his hand looked in mine.

When the judge pronounced us married, there was an awkward moment where Matty glanced up at me, uncertainty written across his face.

I gave him a brief nod and leaned down to press a quick, impersonal kiss to his lips.

It lasted half a second, but I felt him freeze completely at the contact.

We stepped away from each other quickly, both of us pretending that awkward moment hadn't happened.

The judge smiled at us, oblivious to the tension.

"Congratulations, Mr. and Mr. Sousa-Coombes."

Matty's head jerked up at that, his eyes wide. We hadn't discussed names. Hell, we hadn't discussed much of anything beyond the basic terms of our arrangement. I should have asked more questions, I guessed, but the result was more important than how I got there.

"We're keeping our own names," I said smoothly. "For professional reasons."

The judge nodded, unfazed. "Of course. Well, congratulations regardless."

Cruise clapped me on the shoulder as we exited the judge's chambers. "Well, that's done," he said, his voice low enough that only I could hear. "You good?"

I nodded, watching as Ricky enveloped Matty in a hug that seemed to swallow him even if he was probably half an inch taller than Ricky. Calvin stood beside them, practically bouncing with excitement.

"So," Ricky said, pulling away from Matty but keeping his hands on his shoulders. "Celebration dinner? I made reservations at Marcello's." He turned to Matty. "Daddy and Daddy Saul will be joining us."

Matty glanced at me, uncertainty written across his features. "I, um, I don't know if—"

"We'll be there," I said, surprising myself. Cruise gave me a look, but I ignored him. This whole charade needed to be convincing, and ducking out of a wedding dinner would raise eyebrows.

Besides, Matty looked so relieved at my answer that I almost felt... something. Not sympathy exactly, but maybe a twinge of curiosity about this kid who was nothing like I was expecting.

"Fantastic." Ricky clapped his hands together. "Six o'clock. Don't be late."

Cruise gave me a significant look. "I'll catch you two later, then."

Congrats and all that." He nodded at Matty, who returned the gesture with a tentative smile, but then Ricky distracted Matty, and I stepped away with Cruise.

My uncle would want to know if I'd gone through with it.

If the first step of our plan was in motion.

"Tell him it's done. I'm officially married to Harold Coombes' godson. "

"You sure you can pull this off?" Cruise asked, his voice dropping even lower. "Like I said, two years is a long time to play house."

I nearly ground my jaw. "Two years is nothing compared to what that bastard took from my family."

Cruise gave me a long look. "Just... be careful, brother. Don't lose yourself in this."

I clapped him on the shoulder. "Not a chance."

Once Ricky and Calvin had bustled off, chattering excitedly about centerpieces and champagne, Matty and I were left standing awkwardly in the courthouse corridor. Alone together for the first time as... husbands. Jesus.

"So..." Matty fidgeted with the new ring on his finger. "What now? Um, home?"

Good fucking question. I hadn't thought this far ahead. The plan had been simple: get married, wait for Matty to get his trust fund, use my position as his husband to destroy his godfather. I hadn't considered the practical details of actually living as a married couple.

"Ricky said you have your own place." Because there was no way I was living with Coombes, and my house was exactly that. Mine.

He nodded.

"Okay then." I'd brought the truck. Even I wasn't dumb enough to ride my bike in

this fucking kilt. Or not drunk enough, whatever.

He followed me to my F250 and hesitated. Realizing the problem, I simply opened the door and grabbed his waist, practically throwing him onto the seat. "Shit, sorry," I said, immediately contrite. I wasn't a bully. "I expected you to weigh a little more."

And then I had another unsettling thought.

In my head I'd expected someone into kink, maybe submissive play if I was lucky enough to get back into that, and who needed a lot of spoiling and looking after.

At least, that's what I'd understood from what I'd seen Bolt, the Daddy I knew, do at the clubhouse.

I expected a boy who was very high-maintenance.

A spoiled brat looking for a spanking, but what if he wanted a Daddy/caregiver rather than a Daddy/Dom?

That was completely different. I tried to look at him unobtrusively.

He had skin-tight pants on, so he definitely wasn't rocking a diaper.

But I should already know this. And a tinge of shame crept in.

I'd been so focused on finally getting my revenge that I hadn't thought about the practicalities.

Matty's eyes widened, but then his lips quirked up in a slight smile. "It's okay. I'm used to people overestimating my size."

I nodded, shutting the door and walking around to the driver's side. The cab fell silent as I started the engine and pulled out of the courthouse parking lot.

"Where to?" I asked, realizing I didn't even know where Matty lived.

"Bayridge Apartments, off Thornton Parkway," he said, his voice soft. "Building C, but you can just drop me at the entrance if you want."

I frowned, glancing at him. "Drop you? We're supposed to be living together, remember? That was part of the deal."

Matty bit his lip, looking down at his hands. "Right. Sorry. I just... I didn't know if you'd want to stay tonight or if you needed to get your things first or..."

Jesus, this kid was nothing like I'd expected. Where was the entitled brat I'd heard about? The one who threw tantrums when he didn't get his way? This Matty seemed almost... afraid. Of me? Of the situation? I couldn't tell.

Unless he was the best actor I'd ever seen.

Yeah, that was probably it.

"I've got a go-bag in the truck," I said, keeping my eyes on the road. "We're supposed to live together, so I can get the rest tomorrow." Ricky had told me Matty didn't have his own car, but I assumed with the cash he had access to he rode around in chauffeur driven limos or whatever.

"Okay." His voice was barely audible over the engine.

The silence stretched between us. I couldn't help stealing glances at my new husband. He sat rigidly in the passenger seat, hands folded in his lap, staring straight ahead.

Something wasn't adding up.

Bayridge Apartments turned out to be a mid-range complex—not the luxury high-rise I'd been expecting. The buildings were well-maintained but nothing special. I pulled into a visitor spot near Building C and killed the engine.

I hopped out, grabbing the duffel from behind the seat. When I came around to the passenger side, Matty was already out of the truck, fidgeting with his keys. I frowned. “Matty, you should wait for me to help you down. You could have hurt yourself.”

His lips parted but no sound came out at all, and for a moment he looked completely stunned. But that was what he was paying for, right? A Daddy?

We rode the elevator to the third floor in silence. The hallway was clean but bland, beige flooring and off-white walls. Matty stopped at Apartment 307, unlocking the door with slightly trembling hands.

"It's not much," he said as he pushed the door open.

I stepped inside, taking in the modest apartment. The living room was small but tidy, furnished with a comfortable-looking, if slightly worn, sofa and a coffee table stacked with books. A tiny kitchen opened off to the right, and a hallway presumably led to the bedrooms and bathroom.

It was nice. Homey. But nothing like what I'd expected from Harold Coombes' godson. Just what the fuck was actually going on?

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Chapter two

Matty

I cringed when Novo looked around the apartment, but it was all I could afford on the measly allowance I got from my godfather.

He wanted me to move in with him, but I would rather die, so this was it.

Part of the marriage contract meant paying for Novo's living expenses as well, so he'd just have to suck it up.

I'd already gotten a fold-up camping bed for myself I could stow behind the sofa.

I didn't want to explain how hard I had to work for this place—the long hours at the coffee shop, the careful budgeting, the constant fear that Harold would find a legal way to cut me off completely. I'd been so stupid for so many years.

Money had never been an issue. Then two years ago I'd gotten a call from the bank to say my account was overdrawn, followed by both my credit cards being stopped.

My godfather demanded I return immediately, and when I did, he told me he was sick of paying for my wasteful lifestyle.

It was a shock. I knew he didn't care about me, and it was my money. But since he stopped everything but the minimum allowance he had to pay me, we'd been in a standoff.

I even went to see my lawyer, only to find out I never knew the terms of my mom and dad's will, as I'd never bothered to update my mailing address. Although to be honest, I never really knew my mom and dad either.

And I didn't know what to think of the bombshell my lawyer dropped on me.

Looking at Novo now, taking in his massive frame, his intense eyes, the way he filled my small apartment with his presence—I wasn't so sure of this anymore.

When Ricky had first told me about Rent-A-Daddy, it had seemed like the perfect solution.

Find someone willing to play the part of my husband for two years, get my trust fund, and finally be free of Harold's control.

Because the first time I'd tried it on my own it had been a disaster.

I just hadn't expected someone like Novo.

"Um, the bathroom's down the hall," I said, gesturing awkwardly. "And there's only one bedroom, but I have a bed in here—"

"We'll figure it out," Novo said, his voice gruff as he set his duffel bag down. "You hungry?"

The question caught me off guard. "A little," I admitted. I hadn't eaten since yesterday's breakfast, as nerves were making me nauseous.

Novo nodded, as if making a decision. "We've got that dinner later, but that's not for hours. You got anything here, or should we order something?" Novo's intense blue eyes studied me for a moment, and I felt myself shrinking under his gaze.

“I have some leftovers,” I said, wrinkling my nose at the thought.

"Show me what you've got," he said finally, following me to the kitchen.

"Sorry," I mumbled. "I usually shop on Wednesdays." Which was a lie. I couldn't shop because I hadn't gotten my check from the coffee shop until this morning.

"Don't apologize," Novo said, his voice softer than before. "We'll order something. What do you like?"

I looked at him, trying to decide what he'd like. "Pizza?"

"Works for me," Novo said, surprising me with his easy agreement. "What toppings?"

I hesitated, wondering how to navigate this first test of our weird arrangement. "I'm good with whatever you want."

"Pepperoni?" he asked, pulling out his phone. "Any place you recommend?"

"Mario's is good," I offered, trying not to stare at the way his massive hands dwarfed his phone.

"They deliver pretty quickly." And they were cheap.

I reached into my back pocket and pulled out my debit card.

Novo stared at it like it was a bomb, then took it from my hands.

Food was part of living expenses, so I had to pay.

While Novo ordered, I tried not to spiral. This whole situation was surreal. I was

married—actually married—to this mountain of a man I'd never met before today. A man who was nothing like I'd expected.

When Ricky had described him, he'd mentioned Novo was big, bearded, and part of a motorcycle club. I'd nearly balked at that—but he'd provided a ton of references, including some military.

Daddy Chris and Daddy Saul were both happy with those, so I'd gone ahead.

And as we were fast approaching the start of the two-year deadline, he was really my last chance.

I'd understood Ricky needed to find someone who was the total opposite of either Carrington or James. What Ricky failed to mention was how intense his presence would be, how his blue eyes seemed to see straight through me, or how surprisingly gentle his deep voice could sound.

"Twenty minutes," Novo said, pocketing his phone. "So, should we talk about how this is going to work?"

My stomach clenched. "Um, yeah. I guess we should."

He gestured to the sofa. "Might as well be comfortable."

I perched on the edge of the cushion while Novo settled himself at the other end, his large frame making my IKEA furniture look like dollhouse pieces.

I looked over at him as silence settled, then lowered my eyes quickly.

I knew most Doms required that. If he was a Dom?

Ricky hadn't actually said, but he knew I wanted a Daddy

“Ricky told me I was your third try,” he said. My head shot up in surprise. I hadn’t expected Ricky to share that. “Want to tell me about the other two?”

I felt my pulse pick up. “Carrington was...well he gave in. My godfather offered him an immediate \$500,000 instead of waiting for the two years. He took it,” I added in a whisper.

Novo didn’t react except to narrow his eyes. “Do you have proof?”

“Only what Carrington told me,” I whispered. “He said it had been fun, but his creditors didn’t like waiting for two years, and he hated living here. He kept wanting to go to my godfather’s.”

“And I understand if you don’t get married the money reverts to your godfather?”

I nodded. “Not that he doesn’t have enough of his own,” I added miserably.

“And the second?”

I felt my chest tighten at the mention of James.

My breathing suddenly became shallow and rapid.

"James was—he—" I tried to take a breath, but my chest grew tighter.

"He wanted—" I couldn't get the words out as memories flooded back.

James's cruel smile, his hands on my throat, the things he'd said he would do once we were married.

The room started to blur around the edges.

"Matty?" Novo's voice sounded far away. "Matty, you need to breathe."

I couldn't. My lungs were refusing to cooperate, my heart hammering so hard I thought it might burst. I pressed a hand to my chest, fingers curling into my shirt as I gasped for air that wouldn't come.

"Shit." Novo moved with surprising speed for such a large man. In one fluid motion, he was beside me, then lifting me as if I weighed nothing. The room spun as he settled back on the couch and placed me sideways across his lap, my back against one of his massive arms, my legs draped over his thigh.

"Easy," he murmured, his deep voice rumbling through his chest against my side. One large hand spread across my back, warm and steady. "I need you to try to match my breathing, okay?"

I tried to focus on the steady rise and fall of his chest against my side. My vision was swimming, tears blurring everything as I struggled to draw breath.

"That's it," Novo encouraged, his voice surprisingly gentle. "In through your nose, hold it, then out through your mouth. With me now."

His hand moved in slow circles on my back, the pressure firm but not threatening. Gradually, the vice around my chest began to loosen. The roaring in my ears subsided enough that I could hear Novo counting softly, "In, one, two, three, four... hold... out, two, three, four..."

I don't know how long we sat like that, me curled on his lap like a child while he guided me through breathing exercises.

Eventually, the panic receded, leaving me exhausted and mortified.

I became acutely aware of my position—cradled against the chest of a man I'd just met, a virtual stranger who was now my husband.

"There you go," he said, his voice gentler than I would have thought possible from such an intimidating man. "Just keep breathing with me."

Minutes passed as we sat like that, my body cradled against his much larger frame. The panic receded slowly, leaving me limp with exhaustion and embarrassment. I knew I should move, get off his lap, but I couldn't seem to make my limbs cooperate. "I'm sorry,"

I risked looking up at him, expecting to see disgust or impatience. Instead, his gaze held nothing but concern. It was so unexpected that I had to look away. "Don't apologize," Novo said firmly. "You want to tell me what triggered it?"

I shuddered. "James... he wasn't what he seemed.

" I swallowed hard. "When we were alone, after the contract was signed but before the wedding, he told me what he really wanted.

He said..." My voice faltered. "We went to his club, and he said I was going to enjoy it, but he tied me up with a gag, and, and," I took a huge breath in, and Novo just hushed me.

I closed my eyes and tried not to think about the pain, the humiliation.

"James who?" Novo murmured.

"Degrassi," I whispered without thought.

Novo's expression darkened, but his hand continued its gentle motion on my back. "Degrassi," he repeated, his voice low and controlled in a way that made me shiver. "Thank you for telling me."

Before he could ask more questions, the doorbell rang. I flinched at the sound.

"That'll be the pizza," Novo said, carefully helping me off his lap. "Stay here, I'll get it."

I watched as he moved to the door, his movements fluid despite his size. My body felt hollow, wrung out from the panic attack. I hadn't meant to tell him about James. I hadn't told anyone the full story, not even Ricky.

Novo returned with the pizza box, setting it on the coffee table. The smell that normally would have made my mouth water now made my stomach churn. He opened the box and handed me a slice on a napkin, taking one for himself.

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I took a small bite to be polite, but my throat immediately tightened. The food sat in my mouth, impossible to swallow. With trembling hands, I set the slice back down, then forced the bite down my suddenly dry throat.

Novo noticed immediately. "Not hungry after all?"

I shook my head, embarrassed. "Sorry. I thought I was, but..."

"No need to apologize." He set his own slice down and studied me. "When's the last time you ate something?"

"Yesterday morning," I admitted. "I was too nervous."

Novo frowned. "You need something in your stomach. You got eggs?"

"I think so."

Without another word, Novo stood and moved to the kitchen. I heard him opening cabinets and the refrigerator, the sounds oddly domestic. Not too long after, he returned with a plate of scrambled eggs and buttered toast.

"Try this," he said, handing me the plate. "Protein and carbs. Easy on the stomach."

I took a tentative bite. The eggs were perfectly cooked, lightly seasoned, and somehow exactly what I needed. "Thank you," I whispered, surprised by the gesture.

Novo nodded, watching me eat with a satisfaction that seemed almost... protective.

"I'm going to call Ricky and cancel dinner."

"No," I protested, suddenly anxious. "We can't. They've been planning it, and Daddy Saul is coming, and—"

"Matty," Novo interrupted gently but firmly. " You need rest, not a social event. Ricky will understand."

"But—"

"No buts, boy. You need a warm bath and an early night. We can reschedule dinner for another time."

I was too startled at being called “boy” to protest any further, and the thought of warm water and the chance to wash away the day's tension was tempting. "I don't want to disappoint them," I said weakly. But suddenly, I didn't want to disappoint him either.

Novo studied me for a moment, his actions gentle for such an imposing man. "You're not disappointing anyone. You've had a hell of a day—we both have. There's nothing wrong with taking care of yourself."

The kindness in his voice made my throat tight. "Okay," I whispered, taking another bite of toast.

Novo took the pizza in the kitchen to nuke a couple of slices, pulled out his phone, and started texting. I focused on finishing my eggs, surprised by how much better I felt with some food in my system.

When Novo returned, he looked satisfied. "All set. Ricky sends his love and says to rest up. We've rescheduled for Saturday."

"Thank you," I said, setting my empty plate on the coffee table. "For... everything."

Novo nodded, then gestured toward the hallway. "Why don't you show me where the bathroom is? I'll run you a bath."

I blinked in surprise. "You don't have to—"

"I know I don't have to," he interrupted, his voice firm but not unkind. "But I'm going to. That's part of this arrangement, isn't it? Taking care of you?"

I felt my cheeks warm. "I... yes. I guess it is." Carrington had pretended, but he'd failed miserably.

I led him down the short hallway to the bathroom, suddenly self-conscious about how small and ordinary it was. The tub wasn't anything special—just a standard shower/bath combo with a plastic curtain. Novo seemed to fill the tiny space, making it feel even smaller.

"Towels?" he asked, turning on the tap and testing the water temperature with his hand.

"Under the sink," I said, watching in amazement as this intimidating biker carefully prepared a bath for me. He found the towels and set one on the closed toilet lid, then rummaged under the sink again.

"Bubble bath?" he asked, holding up the bottle I'd splurged on last month—one small luxury I allowed myself.

I flushed. I could practically feel the heat scorch my skin. "Yes, please."

He poured a generous amount under the running water, filling the bathroom with the

scent of lavender and vanilla. Steam began to rise, fogging the small mirror above the sink.

"Do you need help?" Novo asked, his expression carefully neutral.

"No," I said quickly, my face burning. "I can manage."

"Alright." He straightened up, towering in the small space. "Take your time. I'll be in the living room if you need anything."

Once he'd closed the door behind him, I let out a long, shaky breath.

This wasn't at all what I'd expected. Novo was nothing like Carrington with his selfish calculations, or James with his hidden cruelty.

He was gruff and intimidating, yes, but also.

.. gentle. And for a moment, a tiny moment, I let myself pretend this was real.

Novo

I grabbed the keys and let myself out of the apartment. I needed to call Cruise. He answered right away.

"Hey, I was just getting ready for that fancy shindig I really don't want to come to."

"It's canceled," I said shortly, and then told him how Matty had behaved.

"Yeah," Cruise said, "but if he's the manipulative little fucker you were told about, he's probably a real good actor playing for sympathy."

Which could be true. “Find out what you can on his financials. Ask Digger to turn up what he can. Plus, I want everything on a James Degrassi. I don’t have anything else, but there’s probably a contract he broke somewhere with Rent-a-Daddy.

” Digger, one of my MC brothers, could access anything with a computer.

“Will do. How’s the love nest? You in a fancy hotel suite downtown somewhere?”

“Nope,” and I told Cruise about the apartment. “I get if he’s a brat, but why is he here? Something else is going on.”

“Gonna be a tight squeeze,” Cruise commented.

I sighed. It would be like living at the clubhouse before I’d built my own place. “Get me the info, then we’ll see what’s what.” I let myself back in. Until I knew any different, I was going to be careful but uphold my side of the contract.

Which meant I had a boy to look after. And I was going to start with setting his pajamas out. Then we’d see where we went from there.

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Chapter three

Matty

The water turned tepid before I could bring myself to get out of the bath.

My skin was wrinkly, but I'd needed that time to process everything.

Today I'd married a complete stranger—a hulking, bearded biker who was nothing like I'd expected.

Who'd held me through a panic attack without judgment.

Who'd made me eggs when I couldn't eat pizza.

I wrapped the towel around my waist and realized I hadn't brought clean clothes with me. Taking a deep breath, I cracked the bathroom door open.

"Novo?" I called softly.

"Yeah?" His deep voice came from the living room.

"I, um, I need to get to my bedroom."

"Go ahead," he answered, and I heard the television volume lower slightly.

I dashed across the hall to my bedroom, clutching the towel tightly.

Once inside, I closed the door and leaned against it, heart pounding.

On my bed lay a neatly folded t-shirt and a pair of soft sleep pants I didn't even remember owning.

Next to them sat a small stuffed dog—the one Ricky had given me last Christmas that I usually forced myself to keep in my dresser drawer.

Which meant Novo had gone through my things.

A wave of shame washed over me, followed by a surge of anger.

Who did he think he was, rummaging through my personal belongings?

Contract or no contract, we'd just met. There were boundaries. I stared at the dog like it was going to develop teeth and bite me. I'd nearly taken him to a charity shop at first, but Ricky had been nice to me.

They'd even invited me to Christmas dinner, but I'd lied and said I was with other friends.

Which was stupid because I didn't have any other friends.

No other friends.

I sat on the bed and clutched the dog to me, like I had more nights than I cared to admit.

Boarding school had been dog eat dog—no joke. Survival of the fittest, and the biggest lesson I had learned was how to be a bully. I might not have been able to use my fists, but I'd soon found out words were often more effective weapons.

I kept my head down in college, then decided to take my cash and travel.

Because obviously getting a job wasn't for the likes of me.

I pressed my lips together as my throat got tight.

I'd followed so-called friends to Atlanta, then got bored and visited a BDSM club.

It had been like falling down a rabbit hole, except the Dom I'd fallen for hadn't wanted me in the end because I was too much of a brat.

Apparently, I wouldn't know what submission was if it hit me in the face.

So, what did I do?

Look for a smaller club. But not to learn my lesson, no I was far too good for that. I wanted to be a big fish in a small pond, as an older Daddy Dom once said to me.

And look how that had turned out?

I'd watched as all the subs got their Doms, and none of them had ever been interested in me. I'd treated Rowan abominably because I wanted his Dom, and even after all that he'd been nice to me.

I dressed quickly, the soft fabric comforting against my clean skin. I held Patches in my hands, debating whether to put him back in the drawer. Would Novo think it was stupid? Childish?

I wiped my face, surprised to feel it wet. Novo had been in here, laying out clothes for me like... like a real Daddy would. And he'd found Patches, so he must have intended for me to use him.

It had been Ricky's idea to advertise for a Daddy Dom and not just a Dom. Said I needed looking after.

Taking a deep breath, I opened my bedroom door and padded into the living room, Patches clutched against my chest.

Novo was sitting on the sofa, scrolling through his phone. He looked up when I entered, his eyes taking in the pajamas, my damp hair, and Patches in my arms. Something softened in his expression.

"Better?" he asked.

I nodded, hovering uncertainly. "Thank you for the clothes."

"You're welcome. You feeling up to eating a little more? I saved you some pizza."

"Maybe a small piece," I said, surprised to find I actually was hungry again.

He patted the cushion next to him. "Sit. I'll heat it up."

I perched on the sofa, setting Patches beside me as Novo went to the kitchen. When he returned with a plate and glass of water, his eyes fell on the stuffed dog.

"Friend of yours?" he asked, nodding toward Patches as he handed me the plate.

I felt my cheeks warm. "Ricky gave him to me. His name is Patches." I flushed. Why did I say that? I didn't even name him. Ricky did.

Novo settled back on the sofa, keeping a respectful distance. "Nice to meet you, Patches," he said seriously, and I nearly choked on my bite of pizza.

"He's not mine," I rushed out. "Ricky gave him to me," I repeated.

Novo's expression didn't change, but something in his eyes shifted. "Well, he's here now. And he looks like he's been loved."

I glanced down at Patches with his slightly matted, worn ear. "I... make sure he's out if Ricky comes around," I lied, then immediately regretted it. What did it matter what I did with a stupid stuffed dog? I certainly wasn't about to admit he'd spent any time in my bed.

"Nothing wrong with that," Novo said, his voice matter-of-fact. "I've got a buddy in the club who's a combat vet. Sleeps with a stuffed bear his daughter gave him."

I blinked, trying to imagine an intimidating biker like Novo cuddling a teddy bear. The mental image almost made me smile.

"What?" Novo asked, catching my expression.

"Nothing," I said quickly, taking another bite of pizza to avoid answering.

Novo watched me eat for a moment, then cleared his throat. "So, sleeping arrangements. Like you said, there's only one bedroom."

My stomach clenched. "I have a folding bed," I said, nodding toward the closet. "I was going to set it up out here."

"No," Novo said firmly. "You'll take the bed. I'll sleep on the couch."

"But—"

"This isn't up for debate, Matty." His tone was gentle but left no room for argument.

"You've had a rough day, and you need proper rest."

I stared at him, trying to understand what his angle was. Carrington had insisted on sharing the bed from day one, claiming it was part of maintaining our cover. And James... I shuddered slightly at the memory.

"I'm too big for your bed anyway," Novo added with a slight shrug. "My feet would hang off the end."

That was probably true. My queen-sized bed would be cramped for someone of his size. Still, I felt guilty. "The couch isn't very comfortable, and not much longer."

"I've slept in worse places," he said simply. "Finish your pizza, then we should both get some sleep. Tomorrow's going to be busy."

"Busy?"

"Yeah. I need to get some of my things. We need to sort out how this living situation is going to work, and..." He paused, studying me. "We should probably talk more about expectations. For both of us."

I nodded, my appetite suddenly diminished again. I set the half-eaten slice down. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why did you agree to this?" I gestured vaguely between us. "To marry me, I mean. Ricky said you weren't even registered with the agency."

Something flickered across Novo's face, too quick for me to identify. "Money," he said after a brief pause. "Two million is a lot of cash."

"Oh." I felt my face heat. What a stupid question. Of course, it was the money. "Why else would someone marry a stranger?" I added, trying to keep the hurt out of my voice.

Novo was quiet for a moment, his blue eyes studying me. "Why did you pick me? After what happened with the others, you must have been scared."

I picked Patches up and clutched him to me, finding comfort in his soft fur.

"Ricky and Calvin vouched for you. And..

." I hesitated, not wanting to admit how desperate I'd become.

"I'm running out of time. The trust fund terms state I have to be married for two years before my thirtieth birthday.

That's less than twenty-six months away now. "

"And if you don't make it?"

"Everything goes to Harold," I whispered. "My parents' entire estate."

Novo's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. "How much are we talking about?"

I shrugged. "I'm not entirely sure. The lawyers said it's several million plus properties. My parents were well-off." I picked at a loose thread on Patches' ear. "Not that I care about the money itself. I just don't want him to have it."

"You said he's your godfather?"

"He's actually a cousin of my dad's, hence the same last name. He was my father's

business partner. When my parents died, he became my guardian. When I was a child I called him Uncle Harold." My voice turned bitter. "Not that he ever acted like family."

Novo nodded slowly, processing this. "And he controls your current finances?"

"He gives me an 'allowance'—barely enough to cover this apartment and food." I pulled my knees up to my chest, hugging them. "He froze all my accounts two years ago. Said I was being irresponsible with my money."

"Were you?" Novo asked, his voice neutral.

I flinched. "I... I don't know. Maybe? I traveled a lot, spent without thinking." I buried my face against my knees. "I never had to worry about money before."

When I looked up, Novo was watching me with an unreadable expression. "And now you're trying to get your inheritance back with this marriage."

"Yes." I swallowed hard. "I know it sounds... calculated. But I don't have any other choice."

Novo was quiet for a long moment. "We should get some sleep," he finally said, standing up. "We can talk more tomorrow."

I nodded, suddenly exhausted. The emotional toll of the day had drained me completely. "There are extra blankets in the hall closet," I said, getting to my feet. "And pillows."

"I'll find them," Novo assured me. "Go to bed, Matty."

I hesitated, clutching Patches to my chest. "Thank you," I said softly. "For today."

For... being kind."

Something flickered in Novo's blue eyes. "Get some rest, boy."

The "boy" sent a strange warmth through me, and I hurried back to my bedroom before he could say anything else. Once inside, I closed the door and slid under the covers, Patches still clutched in my arms.

What was I doing? I'd married a complete stranger—a massive, tattooed biker who could probably snap me in half without breaking a sweat. And yet... the way he'd held me during my panic attack, the gentleness in his hands as he ran my bath, the way he'd called me "boy" in that deep, rumbling voice.

I buried my face in Patches' fur. I couldn't afford to get confused about what this was.

Novo had been clear—he was here for the money.

This was a business arrangement, nothing more.

The fact that he was being kind didn't mean anything.

He was probably just making sure I didn't back out of our deal.

Novo

I scrubbed a hand over my face and stared up at the ceiling. It was true I had slept on much worse than a couch. There'd been plenty of nights I'd been lucky to get any sort of rest on the cold, hard ground, especially with the sound of gunfire keeping everyone very much awake.

But that wasn't what was keeping me awake right now.

I could easily insist we move to a bigger place by the terms of the contract.

I could take the bed. I'd expected to spend my time plotting revenge from a luxury hotel or penthouse with what I knew of Matthew Coombes, but the Matty I'd met and married yesterday had thrown me.

The spoiled brat I'd been told about and the frightened young man sleeping in the bedroom didn't match.

The modest apartment, the panic attack at the mention of this James Degrassi, the way he clutched that stuffed dog like a lifeline—none of it fit the profile I'd been given.

And Harold Coombes? The more I learned about that bastard, the more I wanted to destroy him.

Not just for what he'd done to my family anymore.

The way Matty talked about him, the fear in his eyes when he mentioned his godfather—it painted a picture of control and manipulation that went beyond mere financial abuse.

My phone buzzed with an incoming text. Cruise.

Digger's digging. Initial financials look interesting. Coombes has been bleeding the trust dry for years. Legal but sketchy. Will have more tomorrow. Degrassi has a reputation in certain circles. Not good.

I frowned at the screen. If Coombes had been draining the trust, that might explain why he was so desperate to prevent Matty from getting married. It wasn't just about control—it was about money.

And if Degrassi had a bad reputation... I thought of Matty's panic attack, the way he'd trembled at just the mention of the man's name.

I texted him back. Keep digging. Need everything on both.

I set my phone down and listened. The apartment was quiet. I wondered if Matty was actually sleeping or if he was lying awake like me, clutching that stuffed dog and trying to make sense of his new reality.

I hadn't expected to feel protective of him. That wasn't part of the plan. I was supposed to marry him, help him get his trust fund, and use my position as his husband to gather dirt on Coombes. My feelings weren't supposed to enter into it at all.

But the way he'd looked at me when I'd helped him through that panic attack—like he couldn't believe someone would actually care enough to help him—had stirred something in me I hadn't felt in a long time.

I was going to have to be careful. Matthew Coombes was a means to an end. Nothing more, nothing less.

There was no way I could afford to catch feelings for him.

Chapter four

Matty

I woke to the sound of Novo moving around in the living room. For a few disorienting seconds, I forgot everything that had happened yesterday—the courthouse, the wedding, the panic attack. Then reality came crashing back, and I clutched Patches tighter against my chest.

I was married. To a giant biker I barely knew.

Glancing at my phone, I saw it was 7:15 AM. I had a shift at the café starting at 8:30. Helena had college kids that did the early morning rush. I hadn't even thought about work yesterday, too consumed with the wedding. But I couldn't afford to miss a shift—not with my rent due next week.

Taking a deep breath, I slipped out of bed and padded to the bathroom. After a quick shower, I dressed in my work clothes—black pants and a dark green polo with the café logo embroidered on the chest. When I finally emerged from the bedroom, I found Novo in the kitchen frying eggs.

He turned when he heard me, his blue eyes taking in my outfit. "Morning," he said, his deep voice still rough with sleep. "Made breakfast."

"Thanks, but I have to get to work," I said, hovering in the doorway. "My shift starts at eight thirty."

Novo frowned, spatula in hand. "Work? You didn't mention that yesterday."

"At The Lazy Bean," I explained, fidgeting with my shirt hem. "I work there five days a week."

"Why?" The bluntness of his question caught me off guard.

"Because I need money?" I replied, confused. "The 'allowance' Harold gives me barely covers rent."

Something flickered across Novo's face—surprise, maybe, or disbelief. "You work at a café," he repeated slowly. "For minimum wage."

"Plus tips," I added, feeling defensive. "Look, I know it's not glamorous, but—"

"No, that's not—" Novo shook his head. "I just didn't expect... never mind. You need a ride?"

"I usually take the bus," I said, grabbing my wallet from the counter. "It's not far."

"I'll drive you," Novo said, shoving the eggs onto a plate with buttered toast and turning off the stove. "Eat that while I get dressed."

"You don't have to—"

"I'm not letting my boy take the bus when I have a perfectly good truck," he interrupted, his tone leaving no room for argument. "Besides, I need to head to the clubhouse, anyway."

The word "boy" sent a strange flutter through my stomach. "Clubhouse?"

"Diamond Kings," Novo explained, gesturing to the leather cut hanging over one of the kitchen chairs. I hadn't noticed the name last night in all the chaos. "My MC. Need to check in, get some of my things."

"Oh." I shifted uncomfortably. "Will they... I mean, do they know about...?"

"About us?" Novo raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah," I whispered. "I didn't know if they'd... approve."

Novo's expression softened slightly. "My uncle knows. He's the president. A few others. Don't worry about it."

I nodded, taking a bite of toast to avoid saying anything else. The eggs were perfect again—just like last night. I hadn't expected Novo to cook for me.

I ate quickly while Novo disappeared to change. When he returned, he was wearing worn jeans and a black t-shirt that stretched across his broad chest, the Diamond Kings cut over it. The transformation was striking—he looked every inch the intimidating biker now.

"Ready?" he asked, grabbing his keys.

I nodded, swallowing the last bite of toast. "Thanks for breakfast."

"Don't mention it."

The ride to The Lazy Bean was quiet. I kept stealing glances at Novo's profile as he drove, still trying to reconcile this man with the husband I'd imagined when Ricky first proposed this arrangement. When we pulled up outside the café, I hesitated.

"What time do you finish?" Novo asked.

"Three-thirty," I replied, hand on the door handle. "But really, I can take the bus home. You don't have to—"

"I'll pick you up," he said firmly. "Text me if anything changes."

I blinked. "I don't have your number."

Novo looked surprised, then pulled out his phone. We exchanged numbers quickly, and I felt a strange flutter in my chest as I saved his contact information.

"Three-thirty," he repeated.

"Okay," I agreed, then impulsively added, "Thank you."

Novo nodded, his blue eyes studying me. "Have a good day at work, Matty."

"I slid out of Novo's truck, feeling weirdly flustered by his attention.

The Lazy Bean was already busy with the morning rush, and as soon as I pushed through the door, I spotted Helena, who I hated working with behind the counter, her lips pursed in disapproval.

"You're late," she snapped, though a quick glance at the clock showed I was actually five minutes early. "Kevin had to leave early as he has an exam."

"Sorry," I mumbled automatically, knowing arguing just made her meaner, heading to the back room to stash my things.

"Who was that?" Helena followed me, arms crossed. "The guy in the truck?"

I hesitated, not sure how much to share. "A friend."

"Friend?" Her eyebrows shot up. "Since when do you have friends who look like that? Is he in a gang or something?"

"It's a motorcycle club," I corrected before I could stop myself. "And he's... he's my husband."

Helena's mouth dropped open. "Your what?"

I felt heat creep up my neck. "We got married yesterday."

"You got married?" Her voice rose sharply. "To a biker? Are you insane?"

"It's not—it's complicated," I fumbled, tying my apron with shaking fingers.

"I'll bet it is." Helena's eyes narrowed. "Well, your personal drama better not interfere with your work," she snapped. "Jenna called in sick, so you're covering the front and making drinks. And don't mess up the orders like last time."

I bit back a retort. Helena had been gunning for me since she started as the assistant manager four months ago. The owner, Marco, was a really kind man who'd given me the job when I was desperate. Helena had been trying to get her niece hired for days, and I was the obvious obstacle.

The morning dragged by in a blur of espresso shots and pastries. Helena hovered constantly, criticizing everything from how I wiped down the counter to how I greeted customers. By lunchtime, my nerves were frayed.

"You forgot the cinnamon on that latte," Helena said loudly as I handed a drink to a customer.

"I didn't order cinnamon," the woman said, looking confused.

Helena's smile was tight. "Our specialty lattes always come with cinnamon unless otherwise specified. Matty should know that by now."

I forced a smile. "I'm so sorry. Would you like me to add some?"

The customer shook her head and moved away, leaving me to face Helena's glare.

"This is exactly what I'm talking about," she hissed. "You're careless."

"The customer didn't want cinnamon," I protested, picking up my own drink.

"That's not the point." Helena leaned closer. "So tell me about this sudden marriage. Is it for a green card or something?"

My coffee cup froze halfway to my mouth. "What? No."

"Then why would someone like you marry someone like him?" She gestured vaguely in the direction Novo had driven off. "He looks dangerous."

I remembered how Novo had looked after me yesterday, held me through the panic attack. "He's not," I said, my voice sharper than I intended. "And it's none of your business."

Her eyes widened, then narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"I said it's none of your business," I repeated, heart hammering in my chest. I'd never stood up to Helena before.

"Watch your tone," she snapped. "I'm your boss."

"You're the assistant manager," I corrected. "And my marriage has nothing to do with my job."

Helena's face flushed an ugly red. "Maybe I should call Marco and tell him how you're speaking to me."

"Go ahead." The words came out braver than I felt. "He knows I'm a good worker."

For the next hour, Helena made sure I got the most difficult customers and complicated orders. During the lunch rush, she assigned me to handle both the register and drink-making while she disappeared into the back "to do inventory."

By two o'clock, I was frazzled and exhausted.

I didn't have time for a break, just guzzled black coffee, which we were allowed.

My hands were shaking from stress and too much caffeine on an empty stomach.

When the door chimed, I looked up automatically, hoping it wasn't another rush of customers, and my heart dropped somewhere into my boots.

Mrs. Kazinsky was a friend of Helena's and the most demanding and nit-picking customer I'd ever met.

I was sure she only visited to make my life hell.

I looked up to see Mrs. Kazinsky approaching the counter, her designer purse clutched in her manicured hand. Her face was already set in that pinched expression that meant trouble.

"Matthew," she said coldly. "I'll have a large skim latte, extra hot, with exactly one

and a quarter pumps of vanilla. Not too much foam, but not too little either."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, forcing a polite smile as I rang up her order. "Anything else today?"

"A heated blueberry scone. Make sure it's warm all the way through this time." She slid her credit card across the counter with two fingers, as if touching the surface might contaminate her.

I processed her payment and turned to make her drink, feeling her eyes boring into my back as I worked. My hands were shaking so badly I had to concentrate on each movement.

"I heard you got married," Mrs. Kazinsky said, her voice dripping with disdain. "Helena tells me he's some kind of criminal."

I nearly dropped the milk pitcher. "He's not a criminal," I said quietly, focusing on steaming the milk to the exact temperature she preferred. "He's in a motorcycle club."

"Same thing, isn't it?" She sniffed. "I always knew you'd end up with someone... unsuitable. Birds of a feather, after all. Where did you meet?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but my personal life is just that." When I turned to hand it to her, she reached across the counter and grabbed my wrist.

"Didn't your mother ever teach you respect," she hissed.

Her sudden grip startled me, and the hot latte tipped, pouring over the counter and her purse. She shrieked, leaping back.

"You did that on purpose," she screamed. "Look what you've done. My Hermès scarf.

My phone."

"I'm so sorry," I gasped, grabbing napkins and rushing around the counter. "You grabbed my wrist, I didn't—"

"He assaulted me," Mrs. Kazinsky announced to the now-silent café. "This employee deliberately threw coffee at me."

Helena materialized from the back room as if summoned by the commotion. "What happened?" she demanded, then saw Mrs. Kazinsky's stained scarf. "Oh my god, Elaine. Are you alright?"

"No, I am not alright," Mrs. Kazinsky seethed. "Your employee attacked me with scalding coffee. He could have burned me. I'm going to sue this establishment for every penny."

"It was an accident," I protested, still clutching the napkins. "She grabbed my arm while I was holding the cup—"

"How dare you blame the customer?" Helena's eyes flashed with fury. "That's it. You're fired, effective immediately. Give me your apron."

My stomach dropped to my feet. "But Helena, it was an accident—"

"Now," she snapped, hand outstretched. "And don't expect a reference."

With trembling fingers, I untied my apron and handed it over. The entire café was watching, some customers looking uncomfortable, others openly curious. Mrs. Kazinsky was still making dramatic noises about her ruined belongings.

"I'll be speaking to Marco about this," I said, my voice barely audible, even knowing

I wouldn't. Marco was a sweetheart and looking after his wife Isabella full time. He didn't need my troubles.

Helena's smile was cold. "Go ahead. Who do you think he'll believe? Me or the irresponsible boy who just assaulted our best customer?"

I grabbed my bag from the back room, trying desperately to hold back tears until I was outside. The moment I pushed through the door into the afternoon sunlight, my vision blurred. I stumbled to a nearby bench and collapsed onto it, my hands shaking so badly I could barely pull out my phone.

It was only 2:15. Novo wouldn't be expecting to pick me up for another hour and fifteen minutes. I stared at his name in my contacts, finger hovering over the text button. What would I even say? 'Hi, new husband I barely know, I just got fired because I'm a complete disaster?'

Taking a deep breath, I started typing.

Hi. I'm done early. Something happened. Don't rush though.

I hit send and immediately regretted it.

God, I sounded pathetic. He was probably busy with his club stuff anyway.

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand, trying to pull myself together.

I could walk home. It wasn't that far, and the fresh air might help clear my head.

I sent him another text saying I would walk and see him at home.

I stood up, shoving my phone back in my pocket, when a sound made me look up. An

engine revved loudly—too loudly—and I turned to see a black sedan accelerating directly toward me, jumping the curb where I stood.

Time seemed to slow. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe, couldn't even scream as the car barreled toward me. This was it. I was going to die on a sidewalk outside the coffee shop that had just fired me.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:09 am

Chapter five

Novo

I was already heading back to the café when I got Matty's text. It had been a frustrating few hours. I'd spoken to Digger, Cruise, and my uncle about club business and the current problems surrounding the businesses we ran.

We needed to discuss our four prospects and decide who we were going to give a cut to. As far as I was concerned Risk and Tik Tac were solid, but the other two weren't up to much.

Daisy, my uncle's wife, was having problems with some of the sweetbutts who thought they had the same rights as old-ladies, but that was nothing new and I was all up in my head about Matty, more than I cared about what Cindy had done to get in Tex's pants.

Besides, I was eager to avoid Sophie, who had marked me as her ticket in.

I'd deliberately left early so I could grab a coffee and wait for Matty. See what he was like at work. I didn't know why I felt so protective already. It wasn't part of the plan. This was about revenge, not about actually being a husband.

I'd just parked across the street when I saw him stand from the bench he was sitting on. His shoulders were hunched, his face tense, and even from this distance, I could tell he'd been crying. My body tensed instinctively. Something had happened.

Then I saw the black sedan and how it sped up. It jumped the curb, engine roaring, heading straight for Matty, who stood frozen like a deer in headlights. I was out of my truck in an instant, boots hitting the pavement at a run.

"MATTY," I roared, sprinting toward him.

At the last possible second, I tackled him, wrapping my body around his smaller frame as we hit the ground and rolled.

The car missed us by inches, its side mirror clipping my shoulder with enough force to send pain shooting down my arm.

The sedan screeched away, tires smoking as it veered back onto the road and sped off.

"Are you okay?" I demanded, my hands moving over Matty's body, checking for injuries. His eyes were wide with shock, his breath coming in quick, shallow gasps.

"Matty, talk to me."

"I-I'm okay," he stammered, though his whole body was trembling.

I helped him sit up, keeping one arm around his shoulders. People were gathering now, voices raised in alarm. Someone was calling the police.

"Did you see the license plate?" a bystander asked.

I shook my head, my focus still on Matty. "Black sedan, tinted windows. That's all I caught." I turned back to my husband. "Can you stand?"

He nodded, but when I helped him to his feet, his knees buckled. Without hesitation, I scooped him up in my arms, cradling him against my chest. He was so light—too

light, really. Had he always been this thin? I'd noticed yesterday he barely weighed anything but had given it no thought afterwards.

"My truck's across the street," I said, nodding toward it. "We're going home."

"But the cops—" someone started.

"We'll make a statement later," I cut them off. I needed to get Matty somewhere safe, needed to process what had just happened. That car hadn't been an accident. It had deliberately targeted him.

The realization hit me like a freight train. Someone had just tried to kill my new husband.

Matty didn't protest as I carried him to the truck.

He remained silent as I set him gently in the passenger seat and buckled him in.

His face was ashen, his hands still trembling in his lap.

I rounded to the driver's side, my mind racing.

This had Coombes written all over it. The bastard must have found out about our marriage.

"What happened at work?" I asked as I pulled away from the curb, wanting to distract him.

"I got fired," Matty whispered, his voice breaking. "Mrs. Kazinsky—she grabbed my wrist, and I spilled coffee on her. Helena said I did it on purpose."

I glanced over at him, noting the way he curled in on himself, like he was expecting to be hit. My hand tightened on the steering wheel. "Who's Helena?"

"The assistant manager," he murmured. "She's been trying to get me fired for months. Wants her niece to have my job."

The pieces clicked together in my mind. "And this Mrs. Kazinsky?"

"Helena's friend. Comes in just to make my life miserable." He wiped at his eyes with trembling hands. "I'm sorry. This is stupid. It's just a job."

"It's not stupid," I said firmly. "And someone just tried to run you down. That's not a coincidence."

Matty went even paler. "But why? I don't know anyone," but then Matty's eyes widened. "You think... you think that was because of the wedding?"

I nodded grimly. "Your godfather must have found out."

"Oh God," Matty whispered, wrapping his arms around himself. "He tried to kill me. He actually tried to kill me."

I reached across the console to squeeze his knee. "He failed. And he's not getting another chance."

Instead of driving back to Matty's apartment, I took a different turn.

We needed somewhere safe, somewhere Coombes couldn't find us easily.

The clubhouse was secure, not ideal for Matty in his current state, but it would keep him safe.

You could take him home , a little voice needled me, which was true.

I had my own place in the compound, but I firmly shut that thought down.

"Where are we going?" Matty asked, noticing the unfamiliar route.

"Clubhouse," I answered. "It's secure. You'll be safe there until we figure out what to do next."

His eyes widened. "Your motorcycle club? But—"

"It's a building with good security and brothers I trust with my life. No one will hurt you there."

Matty fell silent, staring out the window.

I could see the thoughts racing behind his eyes, the fear and uncertainty.

After a few minutes, he spoke again, his voice small.

"I understand if you want a divorce, annulment, whatever.

" I blinked in shock, but he added," It's not like you signed up for this. "

I shrugged, trying to dial it back a little. "You're not getting out of paying me that easily," but as soon as I saw the tears, I knew I'd said the wrong thing.

"He really tried to kill me," he repeated, as if still trying to process it. "My own godfather. What if you get hurt? It's one thing for him to aim for me, but not an innocent guy as well."

I clamped my lips shut because guilt stabbed me like a knife. I was anything but innocent. I'd gone into this for revenge. I was ex-army and had a whole club behind me. Matty had to be a hundred pounds soaking wet, and he didn't seem to have any close friends.

"Maybe there's more going on than you realized," I said, keeping my voice neutral. I couldn't let on how much I already knew about Coombes. Not yet.

"But why not just... I don't know, contest the marriage or something? Why try to kill me?"

I considered this. "Maybe he's desperate. Or maybe he knows something we don't."

Matty hugged himself tighter. "I never thought he'd go this far. He's always been controlling, even cruel sometimes, but this..."

I reached over and squeezed his knee again, surprised by how natural the gesture felt. "We'll figure it out. Right now, we need to keep you safe."

The clubhouse came into view—a large, converted warehouse with the Diamond Kings logo emblazoned across the front, behind a high wired fence.

Several motorcycles were parked outside, along with a few trucks and cars.

I got waved through by the prospect on the gate, pulled into my usual spot, and cut the engine.

"Stay close to me," I instructed as we got out. "Some of the guys can be... abrasive at first, but they're family. No one will disrespect you."

Matty nodded, moving to stand beside me. I placed a protective hand on his lower

back as we approached the entrance. I could feel the tension in his body, the slight tremor that still hadn't subsided from the shock.

The door swung open before we reached it, revealing Cruise's tall frame. His eyes widened slightly at the sight of Matty.

"Wasn't expecting company," he said, his gaze flicking to me with a silent question.

"Someone tried to run him down outside his work," I said bluntly. "Need a secure place until we figure things out."

Cruise's expression hardened immediately. "Shit. Come in."

The main room of the clubhouse was thankfully quiet—just a few brothers playing pool and Tex behind the bar. All eyes turned to us as we entered, conversation dying as they took in Matty's small form beside me.

"This is Matty," I announced. "My husband. He's under club protection."

The words hung in the air for a moment before Tex broke the silence. "Well, damn, Bear. When we heard you got hitched, I thought Cruise was fucking with us." He grinned, stepping forward, then hesitating when he clocked Matty shrinking back into me.

Tex raised his hands in a placating gesture. "No offense intended, little man. We're just surprised to see Bear with—" he caught my warning glare and quickly changed tack, "—with anyone, really. He's not usually the bringing-home-type."

I felt Matty press closer to my side, his body practically vibrating with tension. "Is there somewhere private we can talk?" I asked Cruise, keeping my voice low.

Cruise nodded. "Office is empty. Jono's out till later."

"Thanks," I murmured, then guided Matty through the main room, keeping my body between him and the curious stares of my brothers. I could feel their questions burning in the air, but everyone knew better than to push right now.

The club's office was small but comfortable—a desk, a worn leather couch against one wall, and a mini-fridge in the corner. I closed the door behind us, shutting out the low murmur of voices that had resumed once we passed.

"Sit," I said gently, guiding Matty to the couch. "You want water? Something stronger?"

Matty shook his head, then changed his mind. "Water, please."

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I grabbed a bottle from the mini-fridge and handed it to him, noticing how his hands still trembled slightly as he unscrewed the cap. I settled beside him, careful not to crowd him but close enough that he could feel my presence.

"You're safe here," I said, watching as he took small sips of water. "No one gets in without us knowing."

"I'm sorry," Matty whispered, staring at the bottle in his hands. "I never thought—I didn't think he'd actually try to—" His voice broke.

"This isn't your fault," I said firmly. "None of it."

Matty looked up at me, his brown eyes swimming with tears. "But it is. I dragged you into this. You're just trying to help me get my trust fund, earn some money, and now someone's trying to kill me. They could have hurt you, too."

I nearly winced at the irony. If he only knew my real reason for marrying him... But seeing him now, so vulnerable and genuinely afraid, I felt a pang of guilt I hadn't expected.

"I'm not that easy to hurt," I assured him. "And neither are you, apparently. Quick reflexes back there."

He gave a broken laugh that was more of a sob. "I didn't move at all. I just froze. If you hadn't been there..." He trailed off, the implications hanging heavy in the air.

I reached out and squeezed his shoulder. "But I was. And I will be."

The door opened, and Cruise stuck his head in. "Jono just called. He's on his way back. Wants to talk to both of you."

I nodded. "Thanks."

Cruise hesitated, his eyes taking in our closeness, but then he grinned and sent me a knowing look.

"Who's Jono," Matty asked, "and why did they call you Bear?"

"Jono's my uncle," I explained, ignoring the Bear question for now. "President of the club. And he'll want to know what's going on."

Matty nodded, still clutching the water bottle like a lifeline. "Will he be... okay with me being here?"

"Yes," I said firmly. "You're my husband. That means something here."

His eyes widened slightly, a flash of something—gratitude, maybe?—crossing his face before he looked down again. "What do we do now?" he asked quietly. "About... everything?"

I considered this. We needed a plan, and fast. "First, we need to make sure you're safe. Then we figure out exactly what your godfather is up to."

"He's going to keep trying, isn't he?" Matty's voice was barely audible. "If he was willing to try once..."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," I growled, surprising myself with the ferocity in my voice.

The protective instinct surging through me wasn't just about my revenge plan anymore.

The thought of someone trying to hurt Matty—this frightened, vulnerable young man who'd already been through so much—filled me with a rage I hadn't expected.

The door swung open, and I looked up to see my uncle stride in. Jono was shorter than me but built solid, his salt-and-pepper beard neatly trimmed, the president patch on his cut worn with pride.

"Bear," he nodded to me, then turned his attention to Matty. His expression softened slightly. "You must be Matty. Welcome to the family."

I felt Matty tense beside me, clearly uncertain how to respond to such a warm greeting.

"Thank you," he managed, his voice small but polite.

Jono settled into the chair behind the desk, his sharp eyes taking in Matty's disheveled appearance and my protective posture beside him. "Cruise filled me in on what happened. You're sure it was deliberate?"

"No doubt," I said grimly. "Car jumped the curb, accelerated straight for him. Driver knew exactly what they were doing."

Jono nodded slowly. "And you think it's the godfather?"

"Who else?" I countered. "He stands to lose millions if our marriage sticks. Plus, he's a controlling bastard who's been keeping Matty on a financial leash for years."

Matty flinched slightly at my blunt assessment, but didn't contradict me.

"You file a police report?" Jono asked.

I shook my head. "Not yet. Wanted to get him somewhere safe first."

Jono considered this, then nodded. "Smart. We need to be careful how we play this." He turned to Matty. "Your godfather—he has connections in law enforcement?"

Matty nodded. "He golfs with the police chief," he said, swallowing hard. "And the district attorney. They play poker every Thursday. He knows judges, too."

"That complicates things," Jono said, leaning back in his chair. "Filing a police report might not do much good if he's got that kind of pull."

"So what do we do?" Matty asked, his voice small but steadier than before.

Jono and I exchanged a look. "We keep you safe," I said firmly. "And we gather evidence. If your godfather is willing to try murder, he's desperate. Desperate people make mistakes."

"You can stay here tonight," Jono offered. "We've got a couple of rooms upstairs. Tomorrow we'll figure out somewhere more permanent."

Matty looked at me, uncertainty in his eyes. "What about my apartment? My things?"

"I'll send a couple of prospects to pack up what you need," I assured him. "It's not safe for you to go back there right now."

"Okay," he whispered, then added, "Thank you. Both of you."

Jono's expression softened further. "You're family now, kid. Diamond Kings take care of their own."

I felt Matty's surprise at those words, the slight stiffening of his shoulders before he relaxed again. I wondered how long it had been since anyone had treated him like family.

"I should call Ricky," Matty said suddenly. "He'll be worried when he hears about what happened at the café."

"Good idea," I agreed, standing up. "I'll show you where you can make the call in private."

Jono nodded, understanding my unspoken request for a moment alone with him. "You're gonna use your room?"

I knew what Jono was asking, but just gave him a "yes." Namely why wasn't I taking him to my house out the back? It was as secure as the rest of the club.

I led Matty out of the office and down a quiet hallway to the room I slept in when I stayed at the club rather than at my place. Once the door was closed behind us, I turned to face him.

"You okay?" I asked, studying his face. The color had returned somewhat, but he still looked shaken.

"I don't know," he admitted. "It doesn't feel real. Any of it."

I reached out and squeezed his shoulder gently. "Make your call. Take your time. I need to talk to my uncle about a few things, then I'll come back for you."

Matty nodded, pulling out his phone. As I turned to leave, his voice stopped me.

"Novo?" I looked back to find his eyes fixed on mine, something vulnerable and

grateful in their depths. "Thank you. For saving my life."

A strange warmth spread through my chest. "You'd do the same for me," I said, though I wasn't sure why I believed that about someone I barely knew.

The look of determination that crossed his face surprised me. "Yes," he said firmly. "I would."

I closed the door behind me, troubled by the sincerity in Matty's voice, and went to see if I was about to get a chewing-out from my uncle.

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Chapter six

Matty

I sat on the edge of Novo's bed, clutching my phone so tightly my knuckles turned white, and wishing it was Patches.

My conversation with Ricky had been brief but emotional—he'd been horrified to hear about the car and what happened at the café.

He'd begged me to come and stay with them, but I'd declined.

I didn't want to put anyone else in danger.

The room was sparse but neat—a queen-sized bed with dark blue sheets, a dresser, and a small desk in the corner.

A small bathroom through another door, which seemed to have a decent-sized shower.

A couple of framed photos sat on the nightstand, but I didn't know who the older couple was in either of them.

A younger Novo standing with them in the second photo was very obvious, and so was his pride in his dress uniform.

This was Novo's space, and I felt like an intruder despite his invitation to wait here.

Someone had tried to kill me today. The reality of it kept hitting me in waves, leaving me breathless and shaking. If Novo hadn't been there...

I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to stop the trembling. I'd never felt so alone, so vulnerable. Even when all the Doms had rejected me, Harold had frozen my accounts, Carrington had abandoned me, and after what James had done—none of it compared to knowing someone wanted me dead.

The door burst open without warning, and I jumped to my feet, heart pounding. But it wasn't Novo.

A woman stood in the doorway, wearing nothing but a tiny tank top and panties. She was tall and curvy, with long blonde hair and dark eyes that widened when she saw me.

"Who the fuck are you?" she demanded, her gaze sweeping over me dismissively.

"I—I'm Matty," I stammered, backing up until my legs hit the bed. "Novo's... husband."

She let out a harsh laugh, stepping fully into the room and closing the door behind her. "Husband? That's cute. Bear doesn't swing that way, sweetie."

I swallowed hard, confusion washing over me. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." She sauntered closer, her eyes cold despite her smile. "Bear and I have been hooking up for years. Whatever game he's playing with you, it's just that—a game."

My stomach dropped. Doing anything that undermined the believability of the contract invalidated it. It didn't specify fidelity, as that was unreasonable when I had

no intention of being sexually active with my husband, but I doubted if this woman had even heard of the word discreet.

She must have taken my silence as disbelief. She raised an eyebrow, gesturing to the room. "Why do you think I walked in like this? We have an arrangement. Every Friday, after the club meeting." She smirked. "Well, every night, really. He likes it when I don't wear much. Says it saves time."

I tried to keep my expression neutral, but something must have shown on my face because her smile widened.

"Aww, did he tell you he was gay?" She laughed again, the sound like glass breaking. "Bear is many things, but gay isn't one of them. Trust me, I know exactly what he likes." She ran her hands down her body suggestively.

"Well, he's not here," I said, not knowing what else to say. I barely knew Novo. The first time we met was in the courthouse.

The woman laughed again. "Oh, sweetie, he'll be here. He always comes back to me. Whatever this little marriage charade is, it's just business. Men like Bear don't settle down with skinny little boys like you."

I felt sick, my hands trembling. What if she was telling the truth? I barely knew Novo. Our marriage was a contract, a business arrangement. But something about the cruel gleam in this woman's eyes made me doubt her story.

"I think you should leave," I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

"Or what?" She stepped closer, invading my personal space. "You'll cry? Run away? Face it, you don't belong here. This is a real MC, not some gay fantasy club."

Before I could respond, the door swung open again. This time, a woman in her forties with auburn hair and fierce green eyes stood in the doorway. She took in the scene with one sweeping glance, her expression hardening when she saw the blonde's state of undress.

"Sophie," she said, her voice like ice. "What the hell are you doing in here?"

Sophie's demeanor changed instantly. "Daisy, I was just—"

"Half-naked in a member's room? Again?" Daisy stepped fully into the room, crossing her arms. "After you were specifically told to stay the hell away from Bear's space?"

"I didn't know he'd gotten himself a pet," Sophie sneered, gesturing toward me.

Daisy's eyes flashed dangerously. "That 'pet' is Bear's husband and therefore family. Which is more than I can say for you." She pointed to the door. "Get dressed and get out. If I see you anywhere near this room or Matty again, you'll be finding a new club to open your legs in."

Sophie's face flushed with anger, but she didn't argue. She shot me one last venomous look before storming out, slamming the door behind her.

Daisy turned to me with a sigh. "I'm sorry about that. Sophie's been warned repeatedly about boundaries." She offered her hand. "I'm Daisy, Jono's old lady. You must be Matty."

I shook her hand, still rattled by the encounter. "Yes. Thank you for..." I winced.

Daisy waved it off. "Don't let Sophie get to you. She's been trying to get her hooks into Bear for years. He's never given her the time of day."

Relief washed through me, though I wasn't sure why it mattered. Our marriage wasn't real, after all. "Oh," was all I managed to say.

"Come on," Daisy said, gesturing toward the door. "The men will be talking business for a while. Why don't you come downstairs and meet the other old ladies?"

"Old ladies?" I asked, confused.

Daisy laughed. "Club wives. Or partners, technically. Jono, or Prez as he's referred to, and I have been together for twenty years."

"I don't want to be any trouble," I said, still shaken from Sophie's confrontation.

"Honey, you're no trouble at all." Daisy's warm smile made me feel instantly more at ease. "Besides, I've been dying to meet you. Bear's never brought anyone around before."

I followed her downstairs, hyperaware of the curious glances from club members as we passed. The main room was busier now, with more bikers playing pool and drinking at the bar. Daisy led me to a corner where three women sat chatting around a table.

"Ladies," Daisy announced, "this is Matty, Bear's man."

The women looked up with varying expressions of surprise and interest.

"This is Ellie," Daisy said, introducing a petite woman with short dark hair. "She's Tex's old lady. And that's Maria, she's with Digger." Maria, a curvy woman, smiled warmly. "And this is Kat, Cruise's fiancée."

Kat, a tall woman with vibrant red hair, grinned at me. "So you're the one who finally

tamed the Bear, huh? Damn, we were starting to think it would never happen."

"Bear?" I asked, finally voicing my earlier question as Daisy guided me into a chair.

The women exchanged amused glances. "It's Novo's road name," Ellie explained. "Because he's big and growly, but secretly a teddy bear."

I couldn't help the small smile that tugged at my lips. The image of Novo as a teddy bear was surprisingly fitting after how gentle he'd been with me.

"Drinks." Maria declared, waving toward the bar. "We need to welcome our newest family member properly."

Before I could protest, Tex appeared with a tray of shot glasses filled with amber liquid. "Ladies," he said with a wink, "and Matty. First round's on the house."

"Oh, I don't really—" I started, but Kat pushed a shot glass into my hand.

"Club tradition," she said firmly. "New family members drink with us."

I hesitated, then took the shot glass. It had been a long time since I'd had alcohol—I simply couldn't afford it on my meager café salary. The bourbon burned going down, but the warmth that spread through my chest was welcome after the day I'd had.

"Another." Daisy called, and before I knew it, another shot was in my hand.

By the third shot, I was feeling pleasantly fuzzy around the edges, the tension from earlier melting away.

I vaguely thought again that I'd only eaten breakfast, then pushed the thought away.

The women were asking me questions about how Novo and I met, and I found myself giving the sanitized version Ricky had helped me craft—we met through mutual friends, hit it off, and decided to get married quickly because we knew it was right.

I tried to keep my voice steady as I spoke, but the alcohol on top of the day I'd had, made everything feel slightly unreal.

"So romantic," Maria sighed, giving me another glass with something pink this time. "And look at you—you're so cute. No wonder Bear couldn't resist making you his cub."

I felt my cheeks flush with embarrassment and alcohol. Cub made me sound like a child. "I'm nothing special," I mumbled, taking another sip. The sweet drink was dangerously easy to swallow.

"Nonsense," Daisy said firmly. "Bear doesn't do anything without a reason. If he married you, you must be pretty damn special."

The warmth in her voice made my throat tight. I wasn't used to this kind of acceptance, this immediate inclusion. These women barely knew me, yet they were treating me like I belonged.

"So what do you do, Matty?" Ellie asked, leaning forward with interest.

"I worked at a café," I said, emphasizing the past tense. "Got fired today."

"What?" Kat's eyebrows shot up. "Why?"

The story spilled out of me—Mrs. Kazinsky, the spilled coffee, Helena's vindictive firing. The words tumbled out faster with each drink, my inhibitions lowering as the alcohol took effect.

"That bitch," Ellie spat, slamming her glass down. "Someone should go throw coffee on her."

"I'll do it," Kat volunteered, her eyes gleaming mischievously. "I've got excellent aim."

I giggled at the image, the sound surprising me. I couldn't remember the last time I'd laughed like that—genuinely, without fear or constraint.

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"And then that car..." I continued, my voice dropping. "If Novo hadn't been there..."

Daisy's hand covered mine, warm and reassuring. "But he was there. That's what matters."

"To Bear." Maria raised her glass. "For saving our newest family member."

"To Bear," the others echoed, and I found myself joining the toast, warmth spreading through my chest that had nothing to do with the alcohol.

"One more round," Kat declared, waving to the bartender.

"I don't think I should," I protested weakly, already feeling the room tilt pleasantly around me. "I'm not much of a drinker."

"Nonsense," Maria laughed, pushing another pink concoction toward me. "We're celebrating."

I took the drink, unable to resist their infectious enthusiasm. The sweet liquid went down easily, and I found myself relaxing further into my chair, a pleasant buzz humming through my veins.

"So," Ellie leaned forward conspiratorially, "how is he?"

"How is who?" I asked, blinking slowly.

"Bear," she clarified with a wicked grin. "In bed."

My face flushed hot. "Oh. I mean, well—"

"Leave him alone, El," Daisy chided, though her eyes twinkled with amusement. "They just got married yesterday."

"So?" Ellie shrugged. "When Tex and I got together, we didn't leave the bedroom for three days."

"TMI, lady," Kat groaned, covering her ears dramatically.

I giggled again, the sound bubbling up from somewhere deep inside me. The room spun slightly as I turned my head, and I realized suddenly just how drunk I was.

"I should probably slow down," I mumbled, setting my glass down carefully.

"Probably," a deep voice agreed from behind me. "And you need some food."

I turned—too quickly, the room spinning—to see Novo standing there, arms crossed over his broad chest, an amused expression on his face.

"Novo," I said, my voice coming out louder than intended. "We were just talking about you."

His eyebrow arched. "Were you now?"

"All good things," Daisy assured him with a wink.

"They've been interrogating me," I said, trying to stand and nearly toppling over. Novo moved quickly, his hand steadying my elbow. The warmth of his touch seemed to radiate up my arm.

"I can see that," he replied, his voice tinged with amusement. "Having fun?"

"So much fun," I nodded emphatically, which was a mistake as the room tilted alarmingly. "Your friends are nice. Except Sophie. She's not nice at all."

Novo's expression darkened. "Sophie?"

"Don't worry," Daisy interjected smoothly. "I handled it. She won't be bothering Matty again."

Novo's jaw tightened, but he nodded his thanks to Daisy. "I think it's time to get you upstairs," he said to me, his hand still firm on my elbow.

"But we're celebrating," I protested, gesturing wildly toward the drinks. "I'm part of the family now. They said so."

Something softened in Novo's expression. "Yes, you are. But I think you've celebrated enough for one night."

The women laughed, and Kat raised her glass. "Don't worry, Bear. We'll celebrate with him plenty more times."

"Looking forward to it," I said earnestly, then hiccupped.

Novo sighed, but I could see the corner of his mouth twitching. "Come on, lightweight. Time for food and bed."

Before I could respond, he bent down and scooped me up into his arms. The sudden movement made my head spin, and I instinctively wrapped my arms around his neck to steady myself.

"I can walk," I protested weakly, even as I leaned my head against his shoulder.

"Sure you can," he agreed, his chest rumbling against my side as he spoke. "But this is faster."

The women's laughter and wolf-whistles followed us as Novo carried me through the main room. I buried my face against his neck, suddenly embarrassed by the attention. He smelled good—like leather and soap and something distinctly all man.

"Did you bring Patches?" I mumbled against his skin. "He doesn't like being on his own."

"On his way," Novo assured me, and I sighed.

"They're right, you are like a big teddy bear."

"Uh huh," Novo replied, his voice gentler than I expected.

We reached his room, and he managed to open the door without putting me down. Once inside, he set me carefully on the edge of the bed. The room swayed slightly, and I gripped the edge of the mattress to steady myself.

"Water," Novo said, pressing a cold bottle into my hands. "Drink all of it."

I obeyed, grateful for the cool liquid sliding down my throat. When I finished, Novo took the empty bottle and handed me another.

"All of it," he repeated firmly.

"Bossy," I muttered, but took the second bottle.

As I drank, I watched him move around the room, setting out what looked like sweatpants and a t-shirt on the bed beside me.

I heard a knock at the door and Bear opened it to see a young man standing with a tray of food.

They smelled like burgers, but I was full of water.

"Thanks, Risk."

"Sophie said you weren't gay," I blurted out suddenly when the door closed, then clapped a hand over my mouth. "Sorry, I didn't mean to—"

Novo went still, his back to me. "What exactly did Sophie say?"

I swallowed hard, wishing I'd kept my mouth shut. The alcohol had loosened my tongue too much. "She said you two hook up. That you're not... that this is just an arrangement for you." I gestured vaguely between us. "Which it is, I know that. And you just have to be a Daddy not do anything else."

Novo turned slowly, his expression unreadable. "Sophie's been trying to get into my bed for years. I've never been interested."

"Oh." Relief washed through me, though I wasn't sure why it mattered. Our marriage was a contract, nothing more. "That's good. I mean the contract doesn't specify fidelity, but it does require discretion, and she seemed... not discreet."

"Sophie is many things. Discreet isn't one of them." Novo sat beside me on the bed, the mattress dipping under his weight. "For the record, I'm bisexual. But even if I wasn't, I wouldn't be interested in Sophie."

"It doesn't matter," I whispered, my voice cracking.

"I know what this is. What we are." The room swam before my eyes, and suddenly the emotions I'd been holding back all day—the terror of nearly being killed, the humiliation of being fired, the confusion of Sophie's claims, the unexpected kindness of the club women—crashed over me like a tidal wave.

A sob tore from my throat, followed by another, and then I was crying uncontrollably, my whole body shaking with the force of it. I pressed my hands to my face, mortified but unable to stop.

"Matty..." Novo's voice sounded alarmed, but distant through the roaring in my ears.

"I'm sorry," I gasped between sobs. "I'm so sorry. I don't—I don't know why I'm—" But the words dissolved into more tears.

"Hey, hey," Novo's voice gentled as his large hand came to rest on my back. "It's okay. You've had one hell of a day."

"Someone tried to kill me," I choked out, the reality of it hitting me all over again. "My own godfather wants me dead. I lost my job. I have no home. I dragged you into this mess. And I'm so drunk and I never get drunk because I can't afford it and—"

"Breathe," Novo instructed, his hand making slow, steady circles on my back. "Just breathe for me."

I tried, but the sobs kept coming, months—years—of fear and loneliness pouring out of me in an unstoppable flood. "I'm so tired," I admitted, the words barely intelligible through my tears. "I'm so tired of nobody ever liking me."

Without warning, Novo's arms encircled me, pulling me against his chest. One large

hand cradled the back of my head while the other continued its soothing motion on my back. "I've got you," he murmured, his deep voice rumbling through his chest against my ear. "You're safe now."

Something about those simple words, about the solid warmth of him, broke me completely. I clung to him, sobbing into his shirt, all pretense of dignity abandoned. I couldn't remember the last time someone had held me like this—like I mattered, like my pain was worth comforting.

"That's it," Novo encouraged softly. "Let it out. I've got you."

I don't know how long we sat like that, me crying in his arms while he held me steady. Eventually, the sobs subsided into hiccups and shaky breaths. Exhaustion swept over me like a heavy blanket, my eyelids suddenly too heavy to keep open.

"Sorry," I mumbled against his now-damp shirt. "Ruined your shirt."

"It'll dry," Novo said simply. He tried getting me to take a small bite of the burger but I turned my face away.

Then he was lifting me and taking me to the bathroom, and I was too out of it to even register how he did everything for me, wiped me, washed my hands, brushed my teeth.

Then we were back in bed and he pulled me close so I could use his shoulder for a pillow.

"Just like a proper Daddy," I murmured and promptly fell fast asleep.

Chapter seven

Novo

I woke to find Matty curled against my side, his head tucked under my chin, one arm flung across my chest. His breath came in soft, even puffs against my neck, his body warm and pliant with sleep.

I hadn't meant to fall asleep holding him like this, but somewhere in the night, we'd shifted together.

Carefully, I tried to extricate myself without waking him, but as soon as I moved, he made a small, disgruntled noise and pressed closer. I froze, not wanting to disturb him. The kid needed rest after yesterday's fuck-up.

In sleep, he looked younger, more vulnerable.

The worry lines that had creased his forehead yesterday were smoothed away, his long lashes casting shadows on his cheeks.

I found myself studying his face, noticing details I'd missed before—the slight upturn of his nose, the small freckle near his right ear, the way his lips parted slightly as he breathed.

As I shifted again, the sleeve of his borrowed t-shirt rode up, and I sucked in a sharp breath. Dark bruises circled his upper arm—bruises that matched my fingers where I'd grabbed him yesterday, pulling him away from the car. I hadn't realized I'd

gripped him so hard.

"Mmm," Matty murmured, his eyes fluttering open. He blinked slowly, confusion evident as he took in our position. "Novo?"

"Morning," I said quietly, watching as awareness dawned in his eyes.

He jerked upright, then immediately clutched his head with a groan. "Oh God," he moaned, squeezing his eyes shut. "Why does everything hurt?"

"That would be the shots you did with the old ladies," I said, sitting up beside him. "How bad is it?"

"My head is trying to escape my body," he whispered, still clutching his temples. "And someone wallpapered my tongue."

Despite myself, I chuckled. "Hangover 101. Let me get you some more water and painkillers."

Matty just groaned again, falling back against the pillows and pulling the covers over his head. "Just let me die in peace."

I slipped out of bed and grabbed a bottle of water and some ibuprofen from my bag. When I returned to the bed, Matty was still hidden under the blankets, only a tuft of brown hair visible.

"Come on," I said, tugging gently at the covers. "Medicine time."

"Nooo," came the muffled protest. "Everything hurts. The light hurts. Your voice hurts."

"My voice hurts?" I repeated, raising an eyebrow even though he couldn't see it.

"It's too deep," Matty complained from beneath the blanket. "It's vibrating my brain."

I bit back another laugh. "If you take these pills and drink this water, you'll feel better."

"But you made me drink water last night," Matty muttered, but slowly emerged from his cocoon, blinking painfully at the dim light filtering through the blinds. His hair stuck up in all directions, and his eyes were puffy and bloodshot. He accepted the pills and water with trembling hands.

"Small sips," I advised, watching as he swallowed the painkillers. He clearly wasn't joking when he said he didn't drink. I'd made him hydrate last night but he still looked miserable this morning. And this barely eating nonsense was going to stop.

He grimaced after each swallow, but dutifully drank half the bottle before handing it back. "I'm never drinking again," he declared solemnly.

"Everyone says that during their first hangover," I said, sitting on the edge of the bed. "You'll feel better after a shower and some food."

The mention of food made Matty turn slightly green. "No food. Ever again."

"Toast," I insisted. "And maybe some eggs if you're feeling adventurous."

Matty just groaned, pulling the covers back over his head. "Five more minutes," came his muffled voice, sounding younger than I'd heard before.

Something about his tone, the childish plea in it, tugged at something inside me.

This was what Ricky had meant when he'd said Matty needed a Daddy, not just a Dom.

The realization settled over me with unexpected clarity.

I'd skirted on the edge of the scene for years once I'd been discharged.

Jono and Daisy attended the local kink club regularly, and while I enjoyed the times I'd been, being a good Dom took years of dedication and between the club and overseeing the two local bars including one strip joint we owned, I never had the time.

"Five minutes," I agreed, my voice gentler than intended. "Then shower. I'll find you something clean to wear."

A mumbled "Thank you" emerged from the blanket nest, and I found myself smiling despite the seriousness of our situation. Hungover Matty was... almost cute.

When I returned with fresh clothes borrowed from Cruise—who was smaller than me and closer to Matty's size—I found Matty sitting on the edge of the bed, looking miserable. He'd pushed the covers back and was staring at his arm with a confused expression.

Guilt twisted in my gut. "That was me," I admitted. "When I pulled you away from the car. I didn't realize I'd grabbed you so hard."

Matty blinked up at me, his expression unreadable. "You saved my life," he said simply.

"Doesn't mean I needed to hurt you in the process," I countered, setting the clothes beside him. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Matty said, his voice suddenly stronger. "I'd rather have bruises than be dead."

I couldn't argue with that logic. "Shower's through there," I said, nodding toward the small bathroom attached to the room. "Towels are under the sink. Use whatever you need."

Matty nodded, then winced at the movement. "Thanks," he mumbled, gathering the clothes and shuffling toward the bathroom.

I heard the water start, and only then did I let out a long breath.

The protective instinct I'd felt yesterday hadn't diminished, and should I be letting him go in the shower alone?

What if he slipped or got dizzy? Decision made, I went back into the bathroom and sighed.

Matty was sitting down in the shower, the jets pounding on his bent head.

I tugged off my shirt and shucked down my jeans.

This was what I'd signed up for, I told myself. I stepped into the shower stall and knelt beside him. "Hey, little one," I murmured softly, letting the warm water seep through my boxers.

"Let me help you." Gently, I guided him to his feet, one reassuring hand holding him steady. Matty kept his head down, his neediness clear as the water cascaded over him. I reached for the shampoo and squeezed a bit into my palm.

"Tilt your head back just a little, sweetheart," I instructed, my voice gentle yet firm.

To my delight, he complied without hesitation, his head tilting obediently back. I worked the shampoo into his hair, my fingers massaging his scalp while he let out a tiny, contented sigh.

“That feels good,” he murmured, his eyes still closed in trusting surrender.

I rinsed his hair carefully, shielding his eyes with one hand before reaching for the soap and washcloth.

As I worked up a light lather, I hesitated for a moment, mindful not to overstep—but I was here as his Daddy, here to care for every Little part of him.

I tenderly washed his back, avoiding the bruises, then his arms and chest. His skin felt delicate and soft under my hands. I quietly skipped over his midsection and legs and placed the cloth in his trembling hands.

“You finish up, little one,” I said softly. “D—I’ll be right here if you need me.”

Crap, I’d nearly called myself Daddy then. It was one thing thinking it in my head, but another giving it a name.

Maybe I should talk to Bolt? Bolt was one of our original brothers, but I’d seen him with his old lady and she called him Daddy and spent most of her time on his lap.

He also was strict when it came to eating, drinking and what she did or didn’t do.

I couldn’t say I’d ever seen her behave particularly childishly, but then I’d never really looked.

I knew Daisy was very protective of her.

He accepted the cloth with shaky hands and finished washing himself while I hovered nearby, ready to catch him if he wavered. When he was done, I turned off the water and wrapped a towel around his small shoulders.

“Better now?” I asked, gently helping him stand.

“A little,” he admitted, clutching the towel as if it were a lifeline. “My head still feels like it’s going to spin out of control.”

“Food will help, sweetheart,” I assured him, guiding him out of the shower. “Go get dressed, and I’ll get us some breakfast.”

I stepped out to give him a moment of privacy while I quickly changed my wet boxers. When Matty emerged from the bathroom, he looked a bit better—his damp hair combed neatly, and he was dressed in Cruise’s borrowed t-shirt and sweatpants that hung a little too large on his fragile frame.

“Thanks,” he said quietly, avoiding my gaze. “For...helping me.”

“That’s what I’m here for, baby,” I replied, the sincerity in my voice catching me by surprise. “Do you think you can handle going downstairs for food, or would you prefer that I bring something up to you?”

Matty paused, then squared his small shoulders. “Downstairs,” he decided softly. “I should probably say sorry to the ladies for last night.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, boy,” I insisted gently. “They really enjoyed spending time with you. And if anything, they should apologize for getting you drunk,” I added.

A faint blush colored his cheeks. “I’m not usually such a big drinker,” he murmured.

“I know,” I said, placing a hand on his lower back and guiding him toward the door.
“Just take it slow, sweetheart—you’re doing just fine.”

The clubhouse kitchen area was busier than I expected at this hour. Daisy stood at the stove flipping pancakes while Ellie sat at the table nursing a cup of coffee. Tex and Cruise were there too, talking quietly in the corner.

"Well, look who's alive," Cruise called out when he spotted us. His eyes flickered with amusement as he took in Matty's disheveled appearance.

"Barely," Matty mumbled, wincing at Cruise's volume.

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Daisy turned from the stove, spatula in hand. "How's the head, sweetie?"

"It's still attached," Matty replied, carefully lowering himself onto a chair. "Though I'm not sure that's a good thing right now."

Daisy laughed softly. "Hangover special coming right up. Greasy bacon, pancakes, and my secret remedy."

"I'm not sure I can—" Matty started, but Daisy waved the spatula dismissively.

"Trust me, honey. I've been fixing Diamond Kings hangovers for twenty years. My remedy hasn't failed yet."

I sat beside Matty, close enough that our shoulders brushed. He leaned into me slightly, as if drawing strength from my presence. The gesture was subtle but unmistakable, and I felt that strange protective instinct flare again.

"Sleep okay?" Cruise asked, his eyes moving between us with barely concealed curiosity.

"Fine," I answered shortly, not wanting to discuss our sleeping arrangements in front of everyone.

Daisy set a steaming mug in front of Matty. "Drink this first. All of it."

Matty eyed the murky liquid suspiciously. "What is it?"

"Better not to ask," Ellie advised with a grin. "But it works."

With a grimace, Matty lifted the mug to his lips and took a cautious sip. His face contorted in disgust, but he continued drinking under Daisy's watchful eye.

"Good boy," Daisy praised when he finished, taking the empty mug and replacing it with a glass of water. "Now hydrate while I finish cooking."

The phrase "good boy" made Matty's cheeks flush, but he obediently sipped the water. I found myself watching him, noting how his hands had steadied somewhat, how the tension in his shoulders had eased.

"So," Cruise said, sliding into the chair across from us. "Jono's calling church at noon."

I nodded, understanding what he wasn't saying. We needed to figure out how to protect Matty and deal with Coombes. "I'll be there."

Matty looked at me in confusion. "You're going to church?"

I smiled. "A meeting of our main members. In biker circles it's referred to as "church."

"In the meantime," Cruise continued, "We've got something for you to look at." He glanced at Matty, then back to me. I pressed a kiss on Matty's head.

"Be right back." I shot a look at Daisy, and she nodded. Then I followed Cruise into the office. Digger was already in there.

Digger's laptop was open, displaying a series of documents and photographs. He nodded in greeting, his usually jovial expression serious.

"What've you got?" I asked, closing the door behind me.

"Financial records," Digger said, turning the laptop so I could see better. "And they're not pretty."

I leaned over his shoulder, scanning the spreadsheets and bank statements. "Talk to me."

"Harold Coombes has been systematically draining Matty's trust fund for the last three years after he made some particularly bad investments and needed Matty's to shore his own up," Digger explained, pointing to various transactions.

"Technically legal, because he's the trustee, but ethically?

Sketchy as hell. He's been moving money into dummy corporations, all kinds of shit.
"

"How much?" I asked, my jaw tightening.

"Based on what I can piece together, he's siphoned off at least four million in the past three years," Digger said grimly. "And that's just what I can track."

Cruise let out a low whistle. "No wonder he's desperate to keep Matty from getting married."

"There's more," Digger continued, clicking on another document. "Remember that James Degrassi guy Matty mentioned? I found him."

A photograph appeared on the screen—a handsome man in his forties with cold eyes and an arrogant smile. My stomach turned as I remembered Matty's panic attack at the mere mention of his name.

"He's got a reputation in certain circles," Digger said carefully. "And not a good one. Been banned from three BDSM clubs in Atlanta for crossing lines. There are rumors about him—nothing that's stuck legally, but enough smoke to suggest a serious fire."

"Coombes hired him, didn't he?" I said, the pieces falling into place. "To marry Matty, and then what? Control him? Abuse him?"

Digger nodded grimly. "Found emails between them. Coombes promised Degrassi a cut of the trust if he married Matty and kept him 'in line.' Whatever that means."

"Jesus Christ," Cruise muttered.

My hands clenched into fists, rage building in my chest. "And Carrington? The first guy?"

"Similar deal, just less sinister," Digger confirmed.

"Matty found this guy himself but Coombes offered him quick cash to back out, and he took it, and after that Coombes decided he couldn't risk it and got in with Degrassi.

But with Degrassi..." He hesitated. "The arrangement seems darker.

There's language in their emails about 'teaching Matty his place' and 'breaking bad habits. '"

The implications made my blood run cold. No wonder Matty had panicked at the mention of James. What had that bastard done to him?

"There's one more thing," Digger said, pulling up another document.

"The trust fund stipulations. If Matty doesn't fulfill the marriage requirement,

everything goes to Coombes.

But here's the kicker—if Matty dies before the three-month mark after the wedding, Coombes still gets everything.

As his husband, if you hadn't signed a contract it'd be all going to you, so you just got a target put on you as well. "

I stared at the screen, a chill running down my spine. "So he has a financial motive to make sure Matty doesn't make it to the end of three months, never mind two years."

"Bingo," Digger said grimly. "If Matty dies, Coombes gets everything without having to wait."

"That car wasn't just trying to scare him," Cruise said, his voice hard. "They were trying to kill him."

My mind raced, piecing together everything we'd learned.

Coombes had been systematically stealing from Matty's trust for years.

He'd tried to control Matty through getting rid of Carrington, then through the more sinister Degrassi.

And when those plans failed, he'd decided murder was the simplest solution.

"What were his parents thinking?" I asked incredulously.

"Evelyn and Richard Coombes were childhood sweethearts. Richard Coombes was a computer software genius, but didn't have a lick of business sense, which is where Harold enters the picture."

"How did they die?" A cold feeling ran down my spine.

"Private helicopter crash. The pilot, who had a previously unblemished record, according to the tox screen was apparently so drunk it was a wonder he could get the bird off the ground.

Thing was, Matty was supposed to be with them, but at the last minute he came down with chicken pox so they left him at home. He was three."

"Does Matty know any of this?" I asked, my voice tight with controlled rage.

Digger shook his head. "Not the extent of it, I'd bet. He knows Coombes controls his finances, but I doubt he realizes how much has been stolen or the Degrassi involvement."

I straightened, my decision made. "Keep digging. I want everything you can find on Coombes—business dealings, personal life, the works. And see if you can track down that black sedan from yesterday."

"Already on it," Digger assured me. "Tex has some contacts at the department of transportation. We're pulling camera footage from the area."

"And we've no way of telling if the helicopter crash might not have been an accident, so nothing in front of Matty," I said. There was no point in adding to his worries.

I nodded my thanks and headed back to the kitchen, my mind churning with what I'd learned.

The rage I felt toward Coombes had intensified, but now it was worse.

This wasn't just about my parents anymore.

It was about Matty—the vulnerable young man who'd been manipulated, controlled, and now had been targeted for murder by someone who was supposed to protect him.

Guilt hit me. Wasn't I doing something similar? Using him? But I didn't want to hurt him, never that. When I returned to the kitchen, I found Matty nibbling tentatively on a piece of toast, looking slightly better than before. Daisy was hovering nearby, a satisfied expression on her face.

"There you are," she said when she spotted me. "I was just telling Matty about the time you and Cruise decided to rebuild that Harley in the living room."

Matty looked up at me, a hint of a smile on his pale face. "She said you got engine oil all over her new carpet."

"She's never let me forget it," I said, settling back into my chair beside him. "Feeling any better?"

He nodded cautiously. "Daisy's witch's brew actually helped.

My head doesn't feel like it's going to explode anymore.

"Most people would have been fine with the water I'd given him last night, but I was clearly going to have to be more careful with Matty, and definitely make sure he didn't skip any meals.

"Told you," Daisy said smugly, sliding a plate of pancakes in front of me. "Eat up, both of you. You'll need your strength."

I caught the subtle warning in her words—she knew. Just then, the prospects arrived with what looked like Matty's stuff.

"Bear?" Tik Tac yelled. "You want it in here or at your place?"

Shit. I didn't dare glance at Matty. This wasn't how I wanted him to find out I had a house.

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Chapter eight

Matty

"Your place?" I echoed, looking between Novo and the prospect who'd spoken. "You have a place? Like, not at the clubhouse?"

Novo shot the prospect a glare that could have melted steel before turning to me with a carefully neutral expression. "Yeah. I have a house on the club property. Behind the main building."

"Oh." I set down my toast, suddenly not hungry anymore. "Why didn't you mention it before?"

The question hung in the air, heavy with implications. Why had he insisted on staying at my cramped apartment when he had his own house? Why had we slept in this small room at the clubhouse when there was another option?

"It didn't come up," Novo said, his voice tight. "And your apartment was closer to your work."

"Right." I nodded slowly, not believing him for a second. But it was none of my business. I was supposed to be paying for all our expenses.

Daisy cleared her throat. "I'll just... check on those prospects." She hurried out, leaving Novo and me in uncomfortable silence.

I stared at my plate, trying to process this new information. It shouldn't bother me—our marriage was a business arrangement, after all. But something about Novo deliberately keeping his house a secret stung in a way I wasn't prepared for.

"Matty—" Novo began, but I cut him off.

"It's fine," I said, forcing a smile that felt brittle on my face. "It makes sense. You barely know me. Why would you want me in your personal space?"

Novo's expression darkened. "That's not—"

"Really, it's fine," I insisted, standing up too quickly. The room swayed, and I gripped the edge of the table for support. "I should go check on my things. Make sure they got everything important."

I fled the kitchen before Novo could respond, following the sound of voices to the main room where the prospects were unloading boxes. My head throbbed with each step, Daisy's remedy only partially effective against the combination of hangover and emotional whiplash.

The prospects—two guys whose names I didn't know—had stacked several boxes and a duffel bag near the door. I spotted Patches sitting on top of one, and relief flooded through me at the sight of the stuffed dog.

"You must be Matty," one of the young men said straightening up when he saw me. "We got everything we could find. Clothes, toiletries, some books."

"Thank you," I said quietly, picking up Patches and hugging him to my chest. "I appreciate it."

"No problem," the other prospect, a skinny blond man, replied. "Bear's orders."

"Name's Tik Tac," the first one said seeming friendly.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. Bear. Novo. My husband who had a house he hadn't told me about. Although why I was so upset I had no idea. He didn't owe me anything.

And he saved your life.

I felt the heat creep into my cheeks.

"Where should we put all this?" Tik Tac asked, gesturing to the boxes.

Before I could answer, Novo was behind me, his large hand settling on my lower back.

"Take them to my place," he said, his deep voice leaving no room for argument. "Put them in the spare bedroom."

"No, it's okay," I said. "I'm sure you have a garage or storage space. No point unpacking anything as I'm going to go back to my place soon anyway."

Novo's expression darkened instantly, his jaw clenching as he stepped closer to me. "You're not going back to your apartment."

"I'll be fine," I insisted, hugging Patches tighter. "I can't impose on you forever."

"Impose?" Novo's voice dropped dangerously low. "Someone tried to kill you yesterday. This isn't about imposing."

The prospects exchanged uncomfortable glances before Novo jerked his head toward the door. "Out. Now."

They hurried away, leaving us alone with my meager possessions. Novo took a deep breath, visibly trying to control his temper.

"You're not going back there," he said, each word measured and deliberate. "It's not safe."

"I can take care of myself," I argued, even as a voice in my head screamed about how ridiculous that statement was given recent events.

"Like you did yesterday?" Novo countered, his blue eyes blazing. "If I hadn't been there—"

"I know," I snapped, suddenly angry. "I know I'm pathetic and helpless and a complete disaster. You don't have to remind me."

Novo's expression shifted, surprise replacing anger. "That's not what I meant."

"Isn't it?" I challenged, tears threatening. "Poor little Matty who can't even cross the street without nearly getting killed. Who gets fired from a minimum wage job. Who has to pay someone to marry him because no one would want him otherwise."

"Matty—"

"Just... just tell me where I'm staying, then," I said, deflating suddenly. "Since I apparently don't get a say in the matter."

Novo studied me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then he sighed, running a hand over his beard. "You're staying with me. At my house. Where I can keep you safe."

"Fine," I whispered, exhaustion washing over me. The hangover, the emotional

rollercoaster, the constant fear—it was all too much.

"It's not about not wanting you in my space," Novo said quietly. "I just... I like my privacy. It's nothing personal."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. It shouldn't hurt—his explanation made perfect sense. But the knowledge that he'd deliberately kept his real home from me stung in ways I couldn't articulate.

"Come on," Novo said, his voice gentler now. "I'll show you where you'll be staying."

He picked up two of the boxes while I clutched Patches and my duffel bag.

We exited through a back door of the clubhouse and followed a gravel path that wound behind the main building.

About fifty yards back stood a group of seven cabins.

Novo led me to the one on the right, partially hidden by trees.

"It's not much," Novo said as we approached. "But it's home."

He balanced the boxes on his hip to unlock the door, then shouldered it open. I followed him inside and stopped in my tracks. The cabin was nothing like I'd expected. Instead of alpha-male hunting lodge, it was... beautiful.

Rich wooden walls gave the space a warm, amber glow.

A stone fireplace dominated one wall of the open living area, flanked by built-in bookshelves filled with actual books.

A large leather couch faced the fireplace, worn in places but clearly well-loved, with a handwoven throw draped across its back.

The coffee table looked handmade, solid, and sturdy like everything else.

The kitchen was visible through an archway—all dark wood cabinets and granite countertops, with copper pots hanging from a rack above a professional-grade stove. Everything was immaculate, organized with military precision.

"You live here?" I asked, unable to hide my surprise.

Novo set the boxes down, watching my reaction closely. "For the last five years. Built most of it myself."

"It's beautiful," I admitted, taking in the details. Masculine, yes, but thoughtfully designed and surprisingly cozy. Nothing like the stark bachelor pad I'd imagined.

And exactly something I would want for myself. Before I got shipped off to boarding school, my godfather's place looked like it should have been in Versailles. And I'd hated it. Then it had been all about expensive ultra-modern apartments with absolutely no soul.

"Thanks," Novo said, something like pride flickering in his eyes. "Spare bedroom's this way."

He led me down a short hallway to a door on the right. The bedroom was smaller than the main space but just as comfy—a queen-sized bed with a navy quilt, a dresser, and a small desk by the window that overlooked a small deck and garden.

"Bathroom's across the hall," Novo explained. "Kitchen's stocked. Make yourself at home."

I set Patches on the bed, feeling suddenly awkward. "Thank you. I'll try not to... get in your way."

Novo frowned. "This isn't about you being in my way, Matty. It's about keeping you safe."

"Right," I nodded, not meeting his eyes. "The contract."

Novo made a sound that might have been frustration. "Look, I need to get back to the clubhouse. Meeting starts soon. Will you be okay here for a couple of hours?"

"I'm not a child," I said reflexively, then winced at how petulant it sounded.

"Never said you were," Novo replied evenly. "There's food in the fridge if you get hungry. TV remote's on the coffee table. Wi-Fi password is on the fridge."

I nodded again, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Go. I'll be fine."

Novo hesitated, looking like he wanted to say something else, then simply nodded. "I'll be back soon, but I'll send Tik Tac with the other boxes. I'll lock the door when I go out. Don't open it for anyone but me or him."

After he left, I flopped back on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

The quiet of the cabin settled around me, broken only by the distant sounds of activity from the clubhouse.

I hadn't expected Novo to have a place like this—so personal, so.

.. homey. Had he been embarrassed by it?

Or was it simply that he hadn't wanted me in his personal space?

I sat up and grabbed Patches, hugging him to my chest. "Just us again, buddy," I whispered.

The weight of everything that had happened in the past two days crashed over me like a wave. I was married to a stranger who was only with me for money. Someone—likely my own godfather—had tried to kill me. I'd lost my job. And now I was hiding out in a biker compound because my life was in danger.

A hysterical laugh bubbled up in my throat. How had this become my reality?

I decided to unpack, needing something to do with my restless energy.

My possessions looked pathetically sparse spread out on the bed—a handful of clothes, three pairs of designer shoes from my old life, some toiletries, a few books, and Patches.

The prospects had grabbed my laptop and phone charger, at least.

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As I arranged my meager belongings in the dresser drawers, I noticed how empty they remained.

This room, beautiful as it was, highlighted just how little I actually owned.

Three years ago, I'd had closets full of designer clothes, shelves of books, collections of things I'd acquired during my travels.

All of which I'd sold. Now everything I owned fit in a few small boxes.

My phone buzzed with an incoming text. Ricky.

How are you holding up, sweetie? Any news?

I sat on the edge of the bed, considering how to respond.

I'm at Novo's place now. It's nice. Safe.

Good. Has he been taking care of you?

I thought about Novo helping me through my panic attack, carrying me when I was drunk, washing my hair this morning when I was too hungover to stand properly.

Yeah, he has.

Are you alone right now? Want me to come visit?

The thought of seeing a friendly face was tempting, but I remembered Novo's warning about not opening the door.

Maybe tomorrow? Things are still a bit chaotic.

Of course, honey. Just let me know when. Daddy Chris and I are worried about you.

I set the phone down, throat tight. Ricky had been nothing but kind to me since we'd met at The Escape Club a year ago.

He'd taken me under his wing, introduced me to his friends, tried to help me find a compatible Daddy.

I hadn't always been grateful for his help—had sometimes been downright rude, if I was honest with myself.

Yet he was still here, still caring. They'd even waived their fee until I got my inheritance, which clearly wasn't guaranteed.

With nothing else to do, I decided to explore the cabin a bit more. The bathroom was surprisingly luxurious—a large shower with multiple heads, a deep soaking tub, and high-end fixtures. Novo's toiletries were neatly arranged on a shelf—simple, masculine products without fancy packaging.

The living room revealed more about Novo than I'd expected.

The bookshelves were filled with an eclectic mix—military history, classic literature, motorcycle repair manuals, and surprisingly, several books on psychology and caregiving.

One shelf held framed photographs—Novo with other club members, an older couple

who must be his parents, and one of a much younger Novo in military uniform.

I moved to the kitchen, admiring the professional setup. The refrigerator was indeed well-stocked—fresh vegetables, quality meats, dairy products. No processed junk food in sight. The pantry was equally impressive—organized by category, with everything in clear containers, neatly labeled.

This wasn't the home of the careless biker I'd imagined. This was the home of someone meticulous, thoughtful, someone who valued quality and took pride in his surroundings.

I caught my reflection in the kitchen window and hardly recognized myself. Pale, with dark circles under my eyes, wearing borrowed clothes that hung on my frame. I looked as lost as I felt.

A knock at the door startled me. I froze, remembering Novo's warning not to open it for anyone but him.

"Matty?" Tik Tac's voice called through the door. "It's me. I've got the rest of your stuff."

Still hesitant, I peered through the peephole. Tik Tac stood there alone, arms laden with boxes. He looked harmless enough. I unlatched the door and opened it just enough to see him properly.

"Thanks," I said, reaching for the top box.

As I did, the door was suddenly shoved open with enough force to send me stumbling backward. Tik Tac was pushed aside, and a man I'd never seen before stood in the doorway, his eyes cold and calculating.

"Hello, Matthew," he said, his voice sending ice through my veins. "Your godfather sends his regards."

I backed away, terror shooting through me. "How—"

"Money talks," the man said simply, stepping inside and closing the door behind him. I glimpsed Tik Tac on the ground outside, unmoving. "And bikers aren't as loyal as they pretend to be."

My back hit the kitchen counter. My hand fumbled behind me, searching for something—anything—I could use as a weapon.

"Harold sent you to kill me?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady as my fingers closed around a knife handle.

The man shrugged. "Nothing personal, kid. Just business." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a gun with a silencer attached.

Terror froze me for a split second, but then instinct took over.

I yanked the knife forward and threw it with all my strength.

Years of knife-throwing at summer camp—sent there so he didn't have to deal with me on summer vacations from school—paid off.

The blade caught him in the shoulder, not fatally, but enough to make him howl and drop the gun.

I lunged for the weapon, but he recovered faster than I expected. His boot came down on my hand, grinding my fingers into the hardwood floor. I screamed in pain as he yanked the knife from his shoulder, blood seeping through his jacket.

"You little shit," he snarled, raising the blade.

The door burst open with a thunderous crash. Novo filled the doorway, his expression murderous. Behind him stood Cruise and several other club members, all armed.

Time seemed to slow. The intruder spun, knife still raised. Novo moved with shocking speed for such a large man, crossing the room in what seemed like a single stride. His fist connected with the man's jaw with a sickening crack, sending him sprawling across the floor.

The knife clattered away as Novo descended on him, delivering blow after devastating blow. Blood sprayed across the pristine wooden floor.

"Novo," Cruise shouted. "We need him alive."

It took both Cruise and Tex to pull Novo off the now-unconscious intruder. Novo's knuckles were split and bloody, his chest heaving with each breath. When he turned to me, his eyes were wild with rage and fear.

"Matty," he growled, dropping to his knees beside me. "Are you hurt?"

I couldn't speak, couldn't breathe. The adrenaline that had kept me moving was draining away, leaving me shaking uncontrollably. Novo gathered me into his arms, cradling me against his chest as if I were something infinitely precious.

"I've got you," he murmured against my hair. "I've got you, little one."

I clutched at his shirt, burying my face against his neck as sobs tore through me. The thought that I'd nearly died—again—was too much. That someone had betrayed the club, betrayed Novo, to get to me.

"Tik Tac?" I managed to gasp between sobs.

"Alive," Novo assured me, his large hand stroking my back. "Knocked out, but he'll be okay."

Cruise knelt beside the unconscious intruder, checking his pockets. "No ID," he reported grimly.

"Take him to the garage," Novo ordered, his voice hard as steel even as his touch remained gentle on my back. "I want answers."

Cruise and Tex dragged the man out, while other club members secured the area. Novo didn't move, just held me as I trembled in his arms.

I couldn't do this. I couldn't do this anymore and for the first time I wondered if it would have been better if the man had succeeded.

Chapter nine

Novo

I wouldn't let go of Matty, not until the club had secured the perimeter and Jono confirmed we had patrols in place around the entire compound. My heart was still hammering in my chest, rage and fear battling for dominance. I'd nearly lost him. Again.

When I finally carried him to the couch, he was still trembling, his eyes wide and unfocused. I recognized the signs of shock immediately.

"Matty," I said gently, kneeling in front of him. "Look at me, little one."

He didn't respond, just stared straight ahead, his breathing shallow and rapid.

"Matty," I tried again, taking his cold hands in mine. "You're safe now. I've got you."

Slowly, his eyes focused on mine, but what I saw there made my chest ache. The fear was expected, but there was something else—a profound emptiness, as if something fundamental had shut down inside him.

"He's never going to stop," Matty whispered, his voice small and hollow. "He's going to keep trying until I'm dead."

"That's not going to happen," I said firmly, squeezing his hands. "I won't let it happen."

Matty just shook his head, pulling his hands away and wrapping his arms around himself. "He got in here."

And the prospect on the gate that must have let him in would be lucky to still be walking after I was done with him. If Digger hadn't been watching the cameras, it would have been too late.

I wanted to argue, to reassure him, but the broken look in his eyes stopped me. Instead, I sat beside him and pulled him against my side, relieved when he didn't resist.

"We're going to figure this out," I promised. "My club has resources, too. And we're a hell of a lot more motivated than some hired gun."

Matty didn't respond, just stared vacantly at the blood splatter on my floor. I needed to clean that up, but I couldn't bring myself to leave him, even for a moment.

Daisy arrived a few minutes later with fresh clothes and a medical kit. She took one look at Matty and her expression softened with understanding.

"Hey, sweetie," she said gently, kneeling where I had been. "Let's get you into something clean, okay?"

Matty looked at her blankly, then down at his own clothes. There was blood on them—the intruder's, not his—but he seemed only vaguely aware of it.

"Okay," he whispered, his voice childlike and distant.

Daisy glanced at me, concern evident in her eyes. "I'll help him change. Why don't you clean up a bit too?"

I nodded, reluctantly moving away from Matty. In the kitchen, I scrubbed the blood from my hands and changed my shirt. When I was done, Matty was dressed in clean sweats, his hair combed neatly by Daisy's motherly hands. But his eyes remained vacant, and he clutched Patches to him like a lifeline.

"I'm going to make him some tea," Daisy told me quietly. "Maybe call the doc. He's in shock."

I nodded, watching as Matty rocked slightly, his fingers stroking Patches' worn fur in a repetitive motion. Daisy squeezed my arm before heading to the kitchen, and I sat beside Matty again, careful not to crowd him.

"You're safe now," I said softly. "I promise."

"It wouldn't hurt to get the doc here for him."

Doc Jennings was retired, and because we'd saved his teenage granddaughter from a lowlife that was intent on crossing state lines with her, he came out to extract bullets or to sew up knife wounds whenever we needed him.

Matty looked up at me, his eyes wide and childlike. "Is Tik Tac okay?" he asked in a small voice.

"He will be," I assured him. "Concussion, but nothing permanent."

"The bad man hurt him," Matty whispered, hugging Patches tighter. "Because of me."

My chest tightened at his words and the childish cadence of his speech. This wasn't even the nervous young man I'd married two days ago. This was something else entirely—a protective regression, his mind retreating to cope with the trauma.

"Not because of you," I said firmly. "Because of your godfather. None of this is your fault, little one."

His eyes welled with tears. "I'm scared, Daddy."

My heart jumped at the name. Without hesitation, I gathered him into my arms, cradling him against my chest. "I know you are, baby. But I've got you now."

Daisy returned with a steaming mug of tea, her expression softening as she took in our position. "Here, sweetie," she said, setting the mug on the coffee table. "It's chamomile with honey. It'll help you feel better."

"Can you call the doc for me?" I asked Daisy without taking my eyes off him. Matty stared at the mug as if he didn't know what to do with it.

"It's okay," I encouraged. "Daisy makes the best tea."

With trembling hands, he reached for the mug, but nearly dropped it. I steadied his grip, helping him bring it to his lips. He took a small sip, then another, his body gradually relaxing against mine.

"Thank you," he whispered to Daisy, his voice still small and childlike.

"You're welcome, honey," she replied with a gentle smile. She caught my eye over Matty's head and mouthed, "Talk later," before quietly excusing herself.

For the next hour, I just held Matty as he sipped his tea and clutched Patches. He didn't speak much, and when he did, it was in that same childlike voice—simple questions, basic observations. He seemed to have retreated into himself, finding safety in a more innocent mindset.

I'd seen this before—not exactly the same, but similar reactions in soldiers after particularly traumatic combat experiences, the mind protecting itself the only way it knew how. But this was different. This wasn't just shock or PTSD—this was a regression to a headspace where he felt safe.

Daisy came back with the doc just as Matty was nodding off, his head on my shoulder, both of us stretched out on the sofa. Doc Jennings was a grizzled older man with kind eyes and a gentle touch. He approached quietly, assessing the situation with a practiced gaze.

"Let's not wake him if we can help it," he whispered, kneeling beside us. "Sleep's the best medicine right now."

I nodded, careful not to disturb Matty's head on my shoulder. "He's been through hell the last two days. Two attempts on his life."

Doc frowned, taking Matty's wrist to check his pulse and then his blood pressure. "Blood pressure's low, but not dangerously so. Pulse is a bit rapid." He opened his medical bag and pulled out a stethoscope, listening to Matty's breathing. "Lungs are clear. That's good."

"He's not... himself, but he displays Little tendencies normally when he relaxes," I said quietly, not sure how to explain what I was seeing.

Doc's eyes met mine with understanding. "It's a coping mechanism, particularly in individuals who've experienced severe trauma. The mind retreats to a safer, simpler state." He studied Matty's sleeping face. "Has he done this before?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "We've only been married a few days." The words felt strange on my tongue—both true and not true at the same time.

Doc nodded thoughtfully. "I'll leave you some mild sedatives if he gets agitated. Otherwise, just keep him calm, warm, and secure. Let him stay in this headspace as long as he needs to. Forcing him out could do more harm than good."

"I don't know anything about taking care of someone like this," I confessed, feeling suddenly out of my depth.

The doc met my gaze and smiled. "Yeah, you do, Bear.

Just follow his lead," Doc advised, packing up his bag.

"He'll let you know what he needs. Be patient, be consistent, and above all, be gentle.

" He put a small bottle of pills on the night stand.

"Only if absolutely necessary. Call me if you're concerned or if anything changes. "

After Doc left, I carefully adjusted our position so I could stretch out better, tugging a throw over us. He stirred briefly, mumbling something unintelligible before settling back into sleep, Patches still clutched to his chest.

I stared at the ceiling, my mind racing.

This wasn't what I'd signed up for. My plan had been simple—marry Matty, help him secure his trust fund, use my position to gather dirt on Coombes, and finally get justice for my parents.

I hadn't planned on someone trying to kill him.

I hadn't planned on feeling this fierce protectiveness.

And I certainly hadn't planned on him calling me "Daddy. "

Well, no, that wasn't true. I expected mild play at being a Daddy. Just another word for being protected. Something light. Much to my shame, I hadn't given it any thought. I was playing a role. A means to an end. How hard could it be?

I needed to get my head out of my ass and take looking after Matty seriously, starting with how that fucker ever managed to get in the compound. I hoped Jono had answers.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Carefully extracting it without disturbing Matty, I checked the message from Cruise.

Our guest is ready to talk whenever you are. Prez's handling it for now.

I typed a quick reply.

Stay with him. I can't leave Matty right now.

Understood. Bad news though. Tik Tac was jumped from behind at the door, and the remote alarms didn't sound. Looks like we've got a breach somewhere else. No one let him in the front gate

I stared at the message, a cold fury building in my chest. Not only had someone tried to kill Matty, but they'd infiltrated the club's security to do it. This wasn't just about Coombes anymore—this was personal. Someone had violated my home, my safe space.

I texted furiously. Find the leak. Now.

On it. Digger's checking cameras. I'll keep you updated.

I set the phone down and looked at Matty's sleeping face. In sleep, he looked younger, more vulnerable. The defensive mask he usually wore was gone, leaving only the soft curves of his features. Something protective and tender unfurled in my chest—something I hadn't felt in a very long time.

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My thumb gently traced his cheekbone, and he leaned into the touch with a small sigh. Patches was tucked securely under his chin, one worn ear caught between Matty's lips. The sight made my throat tighten with an emotion I couldn't name.

We stayed like that for hours, Matty sleeping fitfully while I kept watch.

At one point I took him to the bathroom, but he'd barely been aware of it.

Occasionally he'd whimper or twitch, caught in some nightmare, and I'd stroke his hair or murmur reassurances until he settled again.

It was nearly dark when he finally stirred, his eyes fluttering open slowly.

For a moment, he just stared at me, confusion evident in his gaze. Then awareness returned—but not completely. His eyes remained wide and childlike, his expression open in a way I hadn't seen before.

"Daddy?" he whispered, his voice small and uncertain.

I swallowed hard, making a split-second decision. "I'm here, little one."

Relief washed over his face. "Bad dream," he mumbled, pressing closer to me.

"It's okay now," I assured him, stroking his hair. "You're safe."

He nodded against my chest, his fingers clutching my shirt. "Hungry," he said simply.

"Let's get you something to eat, then," I replied, carefully shifting to sit up. "What would you like?"

He shrugged, looking suddenly shy. "Dunno."

I considered our options. "How about some mac and cheese? I make a pretty good one."

His eyes lit up, and he nodded eagerly. "With the little shapes?"

I didn't have any pasta shapes, but the earnestness in his expression made my heart clench. "I'll see what I have, okay?"

He nodded again, reluctantly releasing his grip on my shirt so I could stand. "Patches comes too," he insisted, holding up the stuffed dog.

"Of course," I agreed, helping him to his feet. He swayed slightly, and I steadied him with a hand on his lower back. I guided him to the kitchen, settling him at the island counter while I assessed what I had in the pantry.

"No shapes," I admitted, pulling out a box of regular elbow macaroni. "But I have the good cheese."

Matty nodded solemnly, setting Patches on the counter beside him. "Patches says that's okay."

I smiled despite myself, the simple acceptance warming something in my chest. As I started boiling water and gathering ingredients, my phone buzzed again. Jono.

"I need to take this," I told Matty. "Will you be okay for a minute?"

He nodded, though his eyes widened slightly with anxiety. "Don't go far?"

"Just right over there," I assured him, pointing to the living room doorway where I'd still be in his sight. "You can see me the whole time."

I stepped just far enough away that he wouldn't hear the conversation, but remained visible as promised.

"What've you got?" I asked without preamble.

"Our guest has been quite informative," Jono said, his voice grim. "Not a very professional hit man, hired through an online chat room with IP addresses pinging all over the place. Never met whomever hired him, just told to use the godfather moniker, which could be played as a bad mafia skit."

"So we can't tie it back to him," I growled, keeping my voice low.

"Not directly, no. But there's more. The breach wasn't at the gate. Someone disabled a section of the security cameras for exactly seven minutes—just long enough for him to get over the fence near the east side."

My blood ran cold. "That's an inside job."

"Looks that way," Jono confirmed. "Daisy and I are coming over. We need to talk, and she thinks Matty might need... a woman's touch right now."

I glanced back at Matty, who was carefully arranging and rearranging the salt and pepper shakers, his movements deliberate and childlike. "Yeah, that might be good. Twenty minutes?"

"We'll be there."

I hung up and returned to the kitchen, finding Matty talking softly to Patches about the different spices on the counter. He looked up when I approached, his expression brightening.

"Is the mac and cheese ready soon?" he asked hopefully.

"Just getting started," I replied, returning to the stove. "Daisy and Jono are coming over to visit. Is that okay?"

He considered this, his face scrunching in concentration. "Daisy's nice," he decided finally. "She makes good tea."

"She does," I agreed, dropping the pasta into the boiling water. "And she'd like to see you."

Matty nodded, then returned to his conversation with Patches, explaining in careful detail why the pepper grinder was better than the salt shaker because "it makes the little bits all by itself."

By the time Jono and Daisy arrived, I had managed to serve Matty a bowl of mac and cheese that he was happily eating, making little appreciative sounds with each bite. When the knock came at the door, I checked through the peephole before unlocking it, hyper-vigilant after the day's events.

"Hey," Daisy said softly as they entered, her eyes immediately finding Matty at the counter. Her expression softened with understanding as she took in his childlike posture and the stuffed dog propped beside his bowl.

Jono's face was grim, his eyes sweeping the room, automatically checking for threats before settling on me with a silent question. I gave him a slight nod—we'd talk, but not in front of Matty.

"Hello, sweetie," Daisy approached Matty with a warm smile. "That looks delicious."

Matty looked up, suddenly shy. "Daddy made it," he said, his voice small but proud. "With the good cheese."

I saw Jono's eyebrows rise at the "Daddy," but he kept his expression neutral.

"Lucky you," Daisy replied without missing a beat. "Is that your friend?" She nodded toward Patches.

Matty nodded solemnly. "This is Patches. He's keeping me safe."

"Well, it's very nice to meet you, Patches," Daisy said, treating the introduction with perfect seriousness. "Would you and Matty like to watch a movie while Daddy and Uncle Jono talk about boring grown-up stuff?"

Matty looked at me, seeking permission or reassurance. Something in my chest tightened at the trust in his eyes.

"That sounds like a good idea," I said gently. "What would you like to watch?"

He bit his lip, thinking. "Something... happy? With animals maybe?"

"I think we can find something like that," Daisy assured him, offering her hand. "Shall we go look?"

After a moment's hesitation, Matty took her hand, bringing Patches along with his other arm. I watched as Daisy led him to the living room, her manner gentle but matter-of-fact, treating him with the perfect balance of care and dignity.

Once they were settled on the couch, Daisy expertly navigating streaming options,

Jono jerked his head toward the back door.

I grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge and we stepped outside onto the small deck, closing the door behind us but positioning ourselves where I could still see Matty through the glass door.

"How's he doing?" Jono asked, his voice low.

"Physically, he's okay. Mentally..." I shook my head. "Doc says it's a coping mechanism."

Jono nodded slowly. "The 'Daddy' thing—is that new?"

"Yes and no," I replied, keeping my eyes on the window where I could see Matty curled up next to Daisy, engrossed in what looked like a Disney film. "It was in the contract. Specifically for someone who could act like a Daddy."

"But you're talking Daddy Dom, right?" Jono clarified.

I nodded. "I was expecting someone who wanted a bit of play, a caretaker. He's been around a few clubs, so he already had this mindset."

"Okay," Jono said. "I'm gonna ask you this once."

I eyed my prez warily.

"If this is real in his head, what's going to happen when the job is finished? I know he had a bad few days, but if he needs more on a permanent basis, what will you do then? Just drop him and his millions off at the nearest BDSM munch?"

I stiffened, balking at the very thought. "I don't know," I admitted, "but fuck you for

thinking I would."

Jono slapped me on the back. "Look, Daisy's a little in love with him already. Got all up in my face mama-bear like and demanded to know what was going on. I know the other old ladies feel the same." He paused. "Have you spoken to Bolt?"

I shook my head. "I had the idea but haven't had the chance."

He nodded. "He's coming to the barbecue this weekend. I trust him. With your okay, I'd like to give him a heads up. He might be able to come earlier."

"Yeah, sounds good." I needed all the help I could get.

"Any last questions before we take care of our guest permanently?"

I shook my head, and we both went back inside.

Daisy stayed for another hour, but then got up and kissed Matty on the cheek, saying she had to head home.

Matty threw his arms around her before I showed her to the door.

Brick was waiting to escort her back, and informed me there would be someone on the door all night.

As soon as I locked the door, I heard a notification from my cell phone. It was Daisy.

He needs stuff. Go on Little Legs.

There was a link. I gazed at the online kink store while Matty watched the rest of the film, head on my lap, I added a dozen items to my cart and paid premium shipping so

it would all be here in the morning.

Had I gone overboard? Yes.

Did I care? No.

Chapter ten

Matty

"Mmm?" Daddy rumbled, his eyes fluttering open. "What's wrong, little one?"

I squirmed again, feeling my cheeks heat up. "I gotta go potty," I whispered, embarrassed but too desperate to care.

Without hesitation, Daddy sat up, keeping me steady with his strong hands. "Let's get you to the bathroom then," he said, his voice still rough with sleep.

He stood, lifting me with him like I weighed nothing at all. I wrapped my arms around his neck, feeling safe in his embrace as he carried me across the hall. Once in the bathroom, he set me down gently.

"Can you manage on your own?" he asked, his blue eyes searching mine.

I bit my lip. It was a large bathroom.

"Want me to stay in here?" he asked gently.

I nodded vigorously, propped Patches up by the sink so he could supervise, and went to pee. When I'd finished, I went to the sink, and without even asking, Daddy carefully washed and dried my hands.

"All better?" he asked.

"All better," I confirmed, slipping my hand into his much larger one without thinking.

Daddy led me to the kitchen, where he lifted me onto one of the counter stools. "How about some breakfast? Pancakes sound good?"

My eyes widened with delight. "With blueberries?"

"If that's what you want," he said with a gentle smile, already pulling ingredients from the cupboards.

I watched in fascination as he mixed the batter, his large hands somehow delicate as they worked. Patches sat beside me on the counter, and I made sure he could see everything, too.

"Patches wants chocolate chips in his," I informed Daddy seriously.

Daddy's lips twitched. "Does he now? Well, we can't disappoint Patches."

As he cooked, I swung my legs back and forth, humming softly. The scary things from yesterday felt far away, like they'd happened to someone else. Here in Daddy's kitchen with pancakes cooking, nothing bad could touch me.

A knock at the door made me freeze, my humming cutting off abruptly. Daddy tensed too, his hand automatically reaching for something at his waist before he caught himself.

"It's okay," he said, his voice deliberately calm. "Stay right here while I check who it is."

I nodded, clutching Patches tighter as Daddy went to peer through the peephole. His shoulders relaxed immediately.

"It's just a delivery," he called to me, opening the door to accept several large packages from someone who wore the same jacket I'd seen Daddy wear. I perked up, curious. "What is it, Daddy?"

"Packages," Daddy answered, carrying several large boxes inside. "Special delivery for you, little one."

My eyes widened. "For me?" Nobody ever sent me packages anymore. Harold had stopped even acknowledging my birthday years ago.

"Yep," Daddy confirmed, setting the boxes on the coffee table. "Want to see what's inside after breakfast?"

I nodded eagerly, suddenly more interested in the mysterious packages than the pancakes. "Can we open them now?"

Daddy chuckled, returning to the stove. "Patience, sweetheart. Pancakes first, then presents."

"Presents," I whispered, hugging Patches tightly. "Did you hear that? We got presents."

Daddy flipped the last pancake onto a stack and brought two plates to the counter. Mine had blueberries arranged in a smiley face, while his were plain. A small separate plate held two mini pancakes with chocolate chips.

"For Patches," Daddy explained when I looked at the tiny pancakes.

My heart swelled with happiness. Daddy remembered Patches needed breakfast too. I carefully set the small plate in front of my stuffed friend, making sure he could "see" his special breakfast.

"Thank you, Daddy," I said, pouring syrup liberally over my pancakes.

"You're welcome, baby boy," he replied, watching me with a soft expression I couldn't quite read.

I devoured my breakfast, suddenly ravenous. Daddy ate more slowly, his eyes rarely leaving my face. When I finished, and helped Patches eat his, I bounced impatiently on my stool.

"Presents now?" I asked hopefully.

"Little boys need to wash their sticky hands and brush their teeth," Daddy scolded and led me to the bathroom, but then, when I was sure I was going to die from waiting what had to be a hundred years, he finally led me to the sofa.

I scurried to the coffee table, Patches tucked under my arm. The boxes were wrapped in plain brown paper, but I didn't care. Presents were presents.

"Which one first?" Daddy asked, sitting beside me on the couch.

I pointed to the largest box. "That one."

Daddy helped me tear away the paper, then used a pocketknife to cut through the tape. I gasped as he opened the flaps to reveal the colorful contents inside.

"Oh," I whispered, pulling out a soft fleece blanket with dinosaurs printed all over it. "It's so soft."

"There's more," Daddy encouraged, reaching into the box.

Together, we unpacked a set of dinosaur-themed pajamas, a night-light shaped like a

stegosaurus, and several picture books about—you guessed it—dinosaurs.

"Do you like dinosaurs?" Daddy asked, watching my delighted expression.

"I love them," I confirmed, hugging the blanket to my chest. "T-Rex is my favorite. He's the king."

Daddy smiled. "Well, let's see what else we have."

The second box contained art supplies—crayons, colored pencils, markers, and a stack of coloring books. There was even a set of washable paints with thick brushes, and plenty of painting paper.

"You can draw pictures for the fridge," Daddy suggested, helping me arrange the supplies on the coffee table.

"Can I color now?" I asked eagerly.

"In a little bit. Let's see what else we have first."

The third box made me squeal with delight. Inside was a teddy bear almost as big as Patches, but newer and fluffier. It wore a little leather vest that almost matched Daddy's.

"He can be Patches' friend," I said, introducing the stuffed animals to each other with great ceremony. "His name is... Bear. Like you."

Daddy chuckled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "That's a good name."

The final box contained clothes—soft sweatpants, t-shirts with cartoon characters, fuzzy socks, and even underwear with superheroes on them. Everything looked

comfortable and colorful, nothing like the plain, practical clothes I usually wore.

"These are all for me?" I asked in wonder, running my fingers over the soft fabrics.

"All for you, little one," Daddy confirmed, his voice gentle. "Do you like them?"

"I love them." I launched myself at him, wrapping my arms around his neck in a fierce hug. "Thank you, Daddy. Thank you, thank you."

His strong arms encircled me, holding me securely against his broad chest. "You're welcome, baby boy."

For a moment, we just stayed like that, me clinging to him while he held me safe and warm. I felt tears prick my eyes, though I wasn't sure why. Nobody had given me presents in so long. Nobody had cared enough to notice what I might like.

"Can I wear the dinosaur pajamas?" I asked when I finally pulled back.

"It's not bedtime yet," Daddy pointed out. "But how about these?" He held up a pair of soft gray sweatpants and a t-shirt with a cartoon T-Rex.

I nodded eagerly and reached for them, but Daddy was already standing up.

"Let's get you changed," he said, leading me toward the bedroom.

I followed happily, clutching my new clothes. In the bedroom, Daddy helped me change, his movements efficient but gentle. The new clothes felt wonderful against my skin—soft and cozy, like being wrapped in a hug.

"There," Daddy said when I was dressed. "How does that feel?"

"Good," I replied, doing a little twirl. "Really good."

"I'm glad, little one." He ruffled my hair affectionately. "Now, how about we try out those art supplies? You can color while I make some calls."

I nodded eagerly and raced back to the living room, settling on the floor with my new coloring books and crayons. Daddy spread my dinosaur blanket out for me to sit on, and I arranged Patches and Bear as my audience.

"I'm going to make the best picture ever," I told them seriously. "For Daddy."

Daddy settled on the couch with his phone, keeping one eye on me as I flipped through the coloring books, finally selecting a page with a T-Rex that needed to be colored in. I chose the brightest green crayon for his body and a fierce red for his teeth.

As I colored, I hummed to myself, feeling peaceful and safe. The bad things that had happened yesterday seemed far away, like a scary movie I'd watched rather than something real. Here on my dinosaur blanket with my stuffies and my new clothes, nothing could hurt me. Daddy would protect me.

I was so absorbed in my coloring that I barely noticed Daddy's phone conversations, catching only snippets as he spoke in a low, serious voice.

"...secure the perimeter... double the patrols... need to know who..."

When I finished my T-Rex masterpiece, I held it up proudly. "Daddy, look."

Daddy immediately ended his call and gave me his full attention. "Wow, that's amazing, little one. Is that a T-Rex?"

I nodded enthusiastically. "He's the king of the dinosaurs. And he's super strong, just like you."

Something soft flickered across Daddy's face. "Is that so?"

"Uh-huh. And he protects all the little dinosaurs from the mean ones," I explained, crawling over to show him my picture up close. "Can we put it on the fridge?"

"Absolutely," Daddy agreed, taking the picture with careful hands. "This deserves a place of honor."

I beamed as he walked to the kitchen and secured my artwork to the refrigerator with magnets. Seeing my picture displayed made my chest feel warm and fluttery.

"What else would you like to do today?" Daddy asked, returning to the living room.

I thought about it, tapping my crayon against my chin. "Can we watch more movies? With popcorn?"

"I think that can be arranged," Daddy said with a smile. "How about you pick out another coloring page while I make the popcorn?"

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I nodded eagerly and returned to my blanket, carefully selecting another dinosaur to color. This time I chose a stegosaurus, deciding to make him purple because that was a royal color and stegosauruses were very important dinosaurs.

The smell of popcorn soon filled the cabin, making my tummy rumble despite the pancakes we'd had earlier. When Daddy returned with a big bowl of buttery popcorn, I clapped my hands in delight.

"Movie time," I said, scrambling onto the couch with Patches and Bear.

Daddy settled beside me, placing the bowl of popcorn between us. I immediately snuggled closer to his side, making sure Patches and Bear had good views of the TV too.

"What would you like to watch, little one?" Daddy asked, navigating through streaming options.

"Dinosaurs," I replied without hesitation. "Or maybe... superheroes?"

"How about both?" Daddy suggested. "We could start with that dinosaur movie where they make a park, but only the parts that aren't too scary. Then maybe something with superheroes after?"

"Yes," I said, shoving a handful of popcorn into my mouth. "That's perfect."

Daddy found the movie and started it, but made sure to skip the scary parts where people got eaten. I appreciated that—I didn't want nightmares. Instead, I focused on

the amazing dinosaurs, gasping in wonder each time a new one appeared on screen.

"That one." I pointed excitedly. "That's a brachiosaurus. They have really long necks so they can eat leaves from the tallest trees."

"Is that so?" Daddy asked, seeming genuinely interested in my dinosaur knowledge.

"Uh-huh. And they're gentle giants. They don't eat people or other dinosaurs. Just plants."

"Like you," Daddy observed with a smile. "You're gentle too."

I beamed at the comparison, snuggling closer to his side. His arm wrapped around me, making me feel safe and protected. Halfway through the movie, I started to feel sleepy, my eyelids growing heavy despite my best efforts to stay awake.

"Tired, little one?" Daddy asked softly, noticing my struggle.

"No," I protested weakly, even as I yawned widely. "Wanna see the dinosaurs."

"They'll be here when you wake up," he promised. "How about a little nap?"

I wanted to argue, but my body betrayed me with another yawn. "Will you stay with me?"

"Of course," Daddy assured me, shifting so I could lay my head in his lap. "I'll be right here."

I settled down, Patches and Bear tucked securely against my chest, my dinosaur blanket draped over me. Daddy's large hand stroked my hair in a soothing rhythm, and I felt myself drifting off, safe and content.

When I woke up, the living room was bathed in afternoon sunlight. I was still on the couch, but now fully stretched out with my head on a pillow. Daddy wasn't beside me anymore, but I could hear his deep voice coming from the kitchen.

For a moment, I felt a flicker of my adult self trying to surface—a voice in the back of my mind that whispered about danger and responsibilities and the strangeness of this situation. But I pushed it away. Being Little was so much better.

Here, I was safe. Here, I didn't have to worry about bad men with guns or Harold trying to hurt me. Here, I had Daddy to protect me and new stuffies and dinosaur blankets.

I sat up slowly, rubbing my eyes and looking around for Patches and Bear. They had fallen to the floor during my nap, and I quickly scooped them up, checking to make sure they were okay.

"Did you have a good nap?" Daddy's voice came from the doorway. He was holding a glass of juice and a small plate with apple slices arranged in a fan shape.

"Uh-huh," I nodded, making room for him on the couch. "Patches and Bear fell, but they're okay."

"I'm glad to hear it," Daddy said, sitting beside me and offering the snack. "I thought you might be thirsty when you woke up."

"Thank you," I said, taking a sip of the juice. It was apple, my favorite, and not too cold. Perfect. I munched on an apple slice, suddenly realizing how hungry I was. "Did you nap too?"

"No, little one. I had some work to do while you were sleeping." His expression was serious for a moment before softening again. "But I checked on you every few

minutes."

"To make sure I was safe?" I asked, the memory of danger flickering at the edges of my consciousness before floating away again.

"That's right," Daddy confirmed, his large hand gentle as it smoothed my ruffled hair. "I'll always keep you safe."

I believed him completely, the absolute certainty warming me from the inside. I finished my apple slices, then looked up at him hopefully.

"Can we finish the movie now?"

Daddy grinned. "Absolutely."

The next day was quiet. Daddy spent a lot of time talking to different people but made sure I was busy and safe. After lunch and a nap I asked if we could watch the dinosaur movie again.

"Daisy called while you were sleeping. She'd like to come visit and bring her special friend with her."

My eyes widened. "A special friend? Who is it?"

Daddy chuckled. "Her name's Annabel and she's even got a teddy to bring to meet Bear and Patches."

I nodded eagerly. "I like Daisy. She's nice."

"She likes you too, little one." Daddy hesitated, then asked, "How are you feeling after your nap?"

I thought about it, wiggling my toes under my dinosaur blanket. "Happy," I decided. "And safe."

Something complicated passed over Daddy's face—relief mixed with something else I couldn't name. He reached out and brushed his thumb across my cheek in a gesture so tender it made my chest ache.

"They should be here soon," Daddy said, checking his phone. "Why don't we clean up a bit and get ready for our visitors?"

I bounced excitedly, gathering my coloring supplies and arranging them neatly on the coffee table. "Do you think Daisy's friend will want to color with me?"

"I bet she would," Daddy replied, helping me fold my dinosaur blanket. "And maybe you can show her your new dinosaur pajamas too." Daddy had bought three more pairs for me.

I nodded enthusiastically, carefully positioning Patches and Bear on the couch so they'd be ready to greet our guests. The prospect of meeting someone new—especially someone who might be like me—sent a thrill of excitement through me.

When the knock came at the door, I practically vibrated with anticipation.

Daddy checked the peephole before opening it, revealing Daisy standing with a tall, tattooed man who looked nearly as imposing as Daddy.

Beside him stood a petite woman with long blonde hair pulled into pigtails, clutching a teddy bear wearing a pink tutu.

"Hello, sweetie." Daisy greeted me warmly. "This is Bolt and Annabel. They've been

so excited to meet you."

I shyly stepped closer to Daddy, suddenly feeling a bit overwhelmed. The woman—Annabel—smiled brightly at me, then held up her teddy bear.

"This is Princess," she said, her voice soft and musical. "She's been super excited to meet your stuffies."

My shyness melted away at the mention of Patches and Bear. "My stuffies are over here," I explained, taking her hand without thinking and pulling her toward the couch. "This is Patches, he's been with me for a long time. And this is Bear—he's new, but he's already Patches' best friend."

Annabel followed me eagerly, sitting cross-legged on the floor as I introduced our stuffed animals with great ceremony. She treated each introduction with perfect seriousness, making Princess bow to Patches and Bear.

"Princess is very pleased to meet such distinguished gentlemen," Annabel said, her eyes twinkling. "She doesn't have many boyfriends."

"They can all be friends," I declared, arranging the three stuffies in a circle. "Patches likes everyone, and Bear is learning."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Daddy and Bolt disappearing into the kitchen with Daisy, but I was too engrossed in playing with Annabel to worry about them. She was showing me how Princess could do a special twirl in her tutu.

"Do you want to color?" I asked, gesturing to my new supplies. "Daddy got me dinosaur books."

"I love dinosaurs," Annabel said, already reaching for the coloring books. "Which

one's your favorite?"

Chapter eleven

Novo

I shook hands with Bolt and we both watched for a moment until Daisy shooed us both away, then I made coffee and took him out to the backyard where I had a small deck.

I set two mugs of coffee on the table and took a seat across from Bolt.

He was a big man, almost as tall as me, with tattoos covering his forearms. His eyes, though, were kind and observant as they flickered between me and the window where we could see Matty and Annabel coloring.

"Thanks for coming," I said, my voice low. "I'm... out of my depth here."

Bolt nodded, taking a sip of his coffee. "Jono filled me in on the basics. Sounds like you've had a hell of a week."

"That's putting it mildly," I replied, running a hand through my hair. "I wasn't expecting... this." I gestured vaguely toward the window.

"The regression?" Bolt asked directly. "Or the fact that you feel something for him?"

I nearly choked on my coffee. "I didn't say—"

"You didn't have to," Bolt said with a knowing smile. "I've been where you are."

When I first met Annabel, I thought I was just going to be her Dom. The Little stuff caught me completely off guard."

I studied him carefully. Bolt had been with the club for years, respected by everyone. I'd seen him with Annabel at club gatherings but had never paid much attention to their dynamic.

"How does it work?" I asked bluntly. "One minute he's an adult, the next he's... not."

Bolt leaned back in his chair. "Age regression isn't the same for everyone.

For some, it's strictly role play—they're always aware they're adults pretending.

For others, like Annabel and I'm guessing Matty, it's a headspace they slip into.

They're not pretending to be childlike; in that moment, they are experiencing the world as a child would. "

"But why?" I asked, glancing through the window where Matty was showing Annabel how to color a triceratops. "Why would an adult want to be a child again?"

"Lots of reasons," Bolt replied thoughtfully.

"For some, it's about reclaiming a childhood they never got to have.

For others, it's about escaping adult responsibilities for a while.

And for many, especially those who've experienced trauma, it's about feeling safe and cared for in a way they might not have been as actual children. "

That struck a chord. From what I knew of Matty's childhood, there hadn't been much

warmth or security.

"The trust fund stipulations mentioned the Daddy thing," I admitted. "But I thought it would just be... I don't know, me being protective, making decisions. Not this."

"Being a Daddy Dom isn't just about dominance and protection," Bolt explained. "It's about nurturing, guidance, consistency. For someone in a Little headspace, you're their safe harbor in a scary world."

I thought about how helpless Matty had looked when I'd found him at the café, how terrified he'd been during both attacks, how he'd clung to me afterward. Had he retreated to this Little headspace because it was the only place he felt safe?

"How do I know what he needs?" I asked, feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility. "I don't want to screw this up."

Bolt smiled sympathetically. "You follow his lead. Watch for cues. When he's in his Little space, he'll tell you what he needs—sometimes directly, sometimes through behavior. The key is consistency and boundaries."

"Boundaries?" I echoed.

"Little or not, they still need structure," Bolt explained.

"Rules help them feel secure. Annabel thrives on knowing exactly what's expected of her—regular mealtimes, a consistent bedtime, clear rules about behavior." He chuckled. "And she tests me. She can be a brat, but that's usually when for some reason she feels insecure, and wants to know I'll always be her safe space."

I thought about how naturally I'd fallen into some of those patterns already—helping Matty wash his hands, making sure he ate proper meals, watching over his safety.

"Does he... stay like this?" I asked hesitantly. "Or does he switch back?"

"Most Littles fluctuate," Bolt said. "Annabel can be completely adult when she needs to be—she has a job, pays bills, functions in the world.

But when she's home with me, or when she's stressed or overwhelmed, she slips into her Little space.

It's my job to recognize which headspace she's in and respond accordingly. "

I nodded, processing this. "And when they're... Little... is it sexual?"

Bolt shrugged. "Sorry, but that differs with every person. It isn't with us. When we have sex, she's firmly in her adult headspace, but a few Littles at the club we go to enjoy 'Daddy's special touches.'"

I groaned. Why did it have to be so complicated?

Bolt grinned, unashamedly enjoying my discomfort. "Are you worried the club won't accept Matty when he's in his Little space?"

I thought about that. I hadn't really considered it.

They accepted Annabel, but we didn't have any same-sex couples at the moment who were members.

"I think Daisy would chop their nuts off if they looked at him funny." Bolt took a healthy swallow of his coffee.

"What about when they first come out of it?

" I asked. "Matty's retreated after a serious trauma.

What happens when he starts to come back? Do I need to get him therapy?"

Bolt's expression turned serious. "That can be complicated.

Sometimes there's embarrassment or shame.

They might not remember everything they did or said while in their Little space, or they might remember but feel uncomfortable about it.

" He leaned forward. "I one hundred percent agree that Matty might need to talk through his trauma, just don't make the mistake of treating his Little space as something he needs to be cured of.

It's just another aspect of the lifestyle people enjoy.

It doesn't have to be associated with trauma.

There doesn't have to be any other reason than it's their thing. I'll text you a couple of names of therapists familiar with the lifestyle." I relaxed a little.

"The most important thing," Bolt continued, "is that you don't make him feel ashamed. Don't tease or belittle. Validate that this is a normal coping mechanism and that you accept all versions of him."

I nodded, understanding the gravity of the responsibility I'd taken on. "I never expected any of this when I married him," I admitted.

Bolt studied me for a moment.

"No one ever does," he said with a knowing smile. "It's a journey. When I discovered her Little side, everything changed."

"For the better?" I asked, genuinely curious.

Bolt's expression softened as he glanced toward the window where we could see Annabel showing Matty how Princess could do a special dance.

"Absolutely. It's opened up parts of myself I didn't know existed—patience, tenderness, a kind of love that's both protective and nurturing.

" He paused. "I love all sides of her, and I have no idea how I got to be so fucking lucky. "

I followed his gaze, watching as Matty laughed at something Annabel said, his face lighting up with genuine joy. Something twisted in my chest—a feeling I couldn't quite name.

"What if..." I began, then stopped, unsure how to voice my concern.

"What if he doesn't want this when he comes back to himself?" Bolt finished for me.

I nodded, the question that had been gnawing at me finally in the open.

"That's a risk," Bolt admitted. "But in my experience, the Little side is always there, even if it's deeply buried. If Matty has truly slipped into this headspace naturally, it's because it's part of who he is."

"And if it's just a trauma response?"

"Then you support him however he needs when he comes back," Bolt said simply.

"Either way, what he needs right now is consistency and safety. The rest will sort itself out."

I ran a hand over my beard, processing everything Bolt had shared. The responsibility felt enormous, but strangely, not unwelcome.

"I'd like to invite you both to our Little group," Bolt said after a moment. "It meets twice a month. Annabel and three other Littles get together to play while the caregivers chat. It might help both of you to connect with others who understand."

"I'll think about it," I replied, not committing but not dismissing the idea either. Even the thought of Matty being anywhere outside of the compound made me nervous at the moment. I doubted if Coombes was going to give up anytime soon.

Bolt nodded, respecting my hesitation. "For what it's worth," he added, "I'm pretty sure you have good instincts."

Before I could respond, the sliding door opened and Daisy stepped out onto the deck.

"You boys about done with your chat?" she asked with a knowing smile. "Annabel and Matty want to show you their masterpieces."

We followed her inside to find Matty and Annabel sitting cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by completed coloring pages. They looked up with identical expressions of pride.

"Daddy, look," Matty called, holding up a vibrantly colored stegosaurus. "I made him purple because that's a royal color and he's very important."

"It's beautiful, little one," I said, genuinely impressed by how neatly he'd stayed within the lines. "And you chose the perfect color."

Matty beamed, his entire face lighting up with my praise. "Annabel helped me with the spikes. She knows a special trick to make them look extra pointy."

Annabel nodded solemnly, holding up her own creation—a T-Rex in brilliant shades of green and blue. "Princess wanted it to be sparkly," she explained, pointing to the glitter pens Daisy must have brought with them.

Bolt crossed the room and knelt beside Annabel, examining her artwork with exaggerated seriousness. "This might be your best dinosaur yet, Pumpkin," he declared, ruffling her pigtails affectionately.

I found myself mirroring his actions, crouching beside Matty and looking through his other completed page. "You've been busy, little one."

"We're making a dinosaur book," Matty informed me, carefully gathering his pages. "Annabel says we can staple them together and make a cover and everything."

"That sounds like a great project," I agreed, feeling a strange warmth spread through my chest at his enthusiasm.

"Can Annabel come play again?" Matty asked, looking between me and Bolt with hopeful eyes. "She's really good at colors and her Princess is very nice to Patches and Bear."

"Of course she can," I said, meeting Bolt's gaze over their heads. "As long as it's okay with Bolt."

"Absolutely," Bolt agreed. "Princess needs more friends."

"Yay," Matty and Annabel exclaimed in unison, giving each other a high-five that made both Bolt and me smile.

Daisy watched the scene with a knowing look. "I've made some sandwiches," she announced. "Who's hungry?"

"Me," Matty and Annabel chorused, scrambling to their feet.

As they followed Daisy to the kitchen, Bolt clapped me on the shoulder. "See? You're doing fine," he murmured. "Just follow your instincts."

I watched as Matty carefully showed Annabel where to wash her hands, explaining the dinosaur soap dispenser I'd ordered with the same excitement as if he'd created it himself.

The sight stirred something protective inside me—something I hadn't expected to feel when I'd agreed to this marriage of convenience.

What had started as a means to an end—a way to get close to Coombes and avenge my parents—had somehow been complicated by this vulnerable young man who now trusted me completely. Who called me Daddy and looked at me like I hung the moon.

And the most unsettling part? I was starting to like it.

Chapter twelve

Novo

Much as I hated it, two days later, I was forced to go out.

Matty seemed content to stay in his Little space as much as possible, but he was showing glimpses of being an adult.

He'd asked me about a job, and I'd simply told him not to worry.

I knew we were going to have to discuss what had happened at some point, but I wasn't rushing him.

I had to go to one of the bars since the manager was sick and I needed to see how Ashley, his assistant, was doing. And yes, Jono or Cruise could have gone, but they had their own businesses to run, on top of the heightened security for the compound.

I'd delivered an excited Matty to the clubhouse, as apparently he was going to do some baking with Maria. All the guys knew not to let him out of their sight and as mama-bear Daisy was there, none of them would dare.

Tik Tac immediately caught my nod and drew nearer to them, and I nodded my acknowledgement. I was glad to see he looked okay. He was one of the newer prospects, but a stand-up guy. Never objected to anything he was asked to do.

I was relieved Sophie hadn't been back to the club in the last couple of days.

I got in my truck and headed to the edge of town where The Last Keg was located.

We ran two bars. One was more upscale and catered to the younger crowd; this one was more for the locals and next to a huge rest stop popular with big rig drivers.

We served food, again nothing fancy, but filling.

Next door, Glitter Bomb was our strip club.

It was early, though, so the girls had only been in bed maybe two hours and as I called them yesterday and they were fine, I wasn't going to go in.

I walked in and greeted Andy, who was bent stocking shelves just as Ashley came out of the back office. She grinned. "Hi Bear."

"Everything good? Problems?"

She shrugged. "Masterton's thought they were gonna short me on the delivery yesterday, but I soon set them straight."

I chuckled. Ashley was a hundred and twenty pounds, if that, but she took no prisoners, and besides, all she had to do if she needed was pick up the phone and she'd have the place full of Diamond Kings.

I also knew Jimmy Masterton was very well aware of that and if it was a driver, he would take care of it.

Ben, our regular manager, had been sick with an ulcer, but he was about ready to retire as well. Ashley would be a great replacement.

She narrowed her eyes. "Didn't expect to see you. Thought you were all loved up on

your honeymoon."

I rolled my eyes even though a kernel of warmth unfurled in my gut. "You're all a bunch of gossiping old ladies." She snorted.

"Don't let Daisy hear you say that."

Which was true.

"Want a drink, boss? We got a new bourbon in," Andy offered.

What I wanted was to get out of here and home to Matty but it wouldn't kill me to sit for five minutes.

I nodded. "Small one." He poured for me and I picked the glass up, inhaling the smokiness and something a little spicier.

"I'll have one of those," came the voice behind me and it took everything in me not to react.

I kept my face neutral as I turned to see Harold Coombes standing behind me, dressed in a tailored suit that likely cost more than most people made in a month. He looked exactly like the photos I'd seen—silver-haired, distinguished, with the cold eyes of a predator.

"Mr. Coombes," I said evenly, not extending my hand.

If he was surprised I knew who he was, he didn't show it. He simply smiled, the expression not reaching his eyes, and slid onto the barstool next to mine.

"Mr. Sousa," he replied, accepting the bourbon Andy poured. "I thought it was time

we met face to face."

I took a deliberate sip of my drink, letting the silence stretch uncomfortably. Ashley had slipped into the back, likely calling Jono. Good girl.

"I was rather distressed to hear of the wedding and to not receive an invitation," Coombes said, swirling his bourbon. "Of course, we both know that this is simply a financial arrangement."

"I don't owe you explanations," I replied, my voice deceptively calm despite the rage bubbling beneath the surface. This was the man who'd tried to have Matty killed. Twice. The man who'd been stealing from him for years. The man who'd set him up with Degrassi.

And the man who'd ruined my parents' lives.

Not that he would ever find the connection. I started going by my mother's maiden name before even enlisting as a tribute to Gran, and I knew Digger had buried my old records and made the name change official when we'd hatched the revenge plan.

Coombes chuckled, the sound like ice cracking. "I admire directness. So let me be direct as well." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a checkbook. "Name your price."

I raised an eyebrow. "My price?"

"To walk away from Matthew," he clarified, uncapping an expensive fountain pen. "This marriage is obviously a sham. I'm willing to make it worth your while to end it."

I took another sip of bourbon, letting him stew. "And why would you think that?"

"Please," Coombes scoffed. "A biker marrying a boy like Matthew? It's transparent. He's using you to get his trust fund, and you're using him for..." he waved his hand dismissively, "whatever it is you want. Money, I assume."

"You seem to think you know a lot about me," I observed coldly.

His eyes narrowed fractionally. "Matthew has always been... impulsive. Emotional. He needs guidance."

"And that's what you're providing? Guidance?" I asked dryly.

Coombes blustered. "He has shown time and time again he is financially irresponsible. He refuses to meet with his deceased parents' financial advisor, or even consult one of his own. I have plenty of money, as I'm sure you are aware. I just don't want Matthew to drink or snort his fortune away."

I thought of what a lightweight Matty was with alcohol. I wanted to rearrange Coombes's supercilious face but landing myself in jail wouldn't help Matty.

He had to know both attempts had been unsuccessful, but it wouldn't surprise me if he assumed that as a biker I was treating it as business as usual.

Although... Was this my chance? If I pretended to be tempted this might be my way in. I leaned back, pretending to consider his words. "And if any of that were true, what makes you think I would walk away?"

"Look, I'm a businessman," Coombes pressed, sensing an opening. "I understand transactions. Matthew found someone willing to marry him to fulfill the trust conditions. I'm simply offering a better deal."

I gave him a long, measured look. "What exactly are you proposing?"

Coombes smiled thinly, clearly believing he'd hooked me. "Five hundred thousand dollars. Cash. Tax-free. You divorce Matthew, sign an NDA about the arrangement, and walk away."

"Five hundred thousand," I repeated, as if considering. "That's a lot of money."

"More than you'd make in several years, I imagine," he said with barely disguised condescension. "And considerably less hassle than staying married to a troubled young man for two years."

I took another sip of bourbon, letting the liquid burn down my throat while I imagined all the ways I'd like to make this man suffer. "Troubled how?"

Coombes waved his hand dismissively. "Matthew has always been.

.. difficult. Emotional problems. Substance issues.

He's been in and out of therapy since he was a child.

" He leaned closer, lowering his voice. "Between us, he's not entirely stable.

Has these childish episodes. It's embarrassing, really. "

My fingers tightened around my glass. The casual way he spoke about Matty made my blood boil. "Sounds like you don't think much of your godson."

"I've done my best with him," Coombes sighed, the picture of put-upon nobility. "His parents, God rest their souls, left me with quite the burden. But I've always looked out for his best interests."

"By ruining his chance of a relationship a second time?"

Coombes's expression flickered—surprise, then rapid recalculation. "I don't know what nonsense Matthew has been filling your head with, but I assure you, I've only ever wanted what's best for him."

"Including someone trying to run him down?" Based on what we found out from the hired gun, Digger had made it look like he'd taken the money and run, so as Matty was still very much alive, Coombes would think he'd been double-crossed.

Coombes set down his glass with deliberate care. "I see Matthew has been telling tales. Unfortunate, but not surprising. He's always had a flair for the dramatic. I was once dragged all the way to his school because he'd threatened suicide. It was simple attention-seeking."

How I didn't put a bullet in that lying mouth I had no idea. Suicide? My poor, sweet baby.

I reined myself in, aware that if I alienated Coombes, I would blow any chance of getting the information I needed.

"If you're so concerned about him, why was he living in a hovel and working for minimum wage?"

"The apartment was nice and well cared for, but if I made it sound like I thought the place a dump it made it sound like I was open to a better arrangement."

Coombes sniffed, clearly agreeing with me. "Matthew chose that lifestyle. I offered him a perfectly comfortable apartment in one of my buildings, but he refused. Pride, I suppose. He's always been stubborn that way."

"He's stuck at it though," I observed, watching Coombes's reaction carefully.

He frowned, tapping his manicured fingernails against the bar. "Yes, well, desperation makes people do foolish things. Which brings us back to my offer." He opened his checkbook. "Five hundred thousand. Clean break. Everyone wins."

I pretended to consider, taking another slow sip of bourbon. "That's... tempting," I admitted, watching hope flicker in his cold eyes. "But I'm not sure it's enough."

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"Seven hundred and fifty thousand," he countered immediately, confirming my suspicion that his first offer had been deliberately low. "But that's my final offer."

I stroked my beard thoughtfully. "It's not just about the money. Marriage has its... benefits."

Coombes's lip curled slightly. "I find that hard to believe, given Matthew's... proclivities."

"You'd be surprised," I said with a deliberate smirk, enjoying the flash of disgust on his face. "But I'm a reasonable man, and even though I enjoy a hot, willing body, I have to admit your offer would pay for many more. Let me think about it."

"Don't think too long," Coombes warned, sliding a business card across the bar. "My offer has an expiration date."

"How long?" I asked, pocketing the card.

"One week," he replied firmly. "After that, things might become... complicated."

The threat was thinly veiled, but I kept my expression neutral. "I'll be in touch."

Coombes nodded, satisfied he'd made progress. He finished his bourbon in one swift motion and, standing, threw a fifty down next to his empty glass. "A pleasure meeting you, Mr. Sousa. I look forward to our future business relationship."

As he walked away, Ashley emerged from the back, her expression worried. "Boss?"

"Call Jono if you haven't already," I said quietly.

"Tell him Coombes just left. I want someone tailing him, but discreetly." Although if he was going back to his estate, tailing him would be impossible.

She nodded, already pulling out her phone.

I downed the rest of my bourbon, the rage I'd been suppressing during the conversation threatening to boil over.

The casual way Coombes had dismissed Matty, the disdain in his voice when he'd mentioned his "childish episodes"—it took everything in me not to follow him into the parking lot and beat him senseless.

But I needed to be smarter than that. I had him thinking I might be bought. That could be useful. And hopefully give us a week's breathing room.

Then I had another thought. How exactly did Matty's godfather know about his Little side?

And the suicide attempt. Fuck, I was going to cover Matty in bubble wrap.

I stood, leaving cash on the bar. "I'm heading back. Have Ben call me when he's feeling better."

"Will do, boss," Ashley replied. "And congrats on the marriage. We're all real happy for you."

I nodded my thanks and left, my mind racing.

Coombes had revealed more than he realized.

His casual dismissal of Matty's "childish episodes" confirmed he knew about Matty's Little side and saw it as something shameful.

Something to be hidden away...my hands tightened on the steering wheel as I drove back to the club.

By the time I pulled into the compound, I'd regained some control over my anger. The prospects at the gate were doubled, and I noticed additional security measures had been implemented since the breach. Good. I wasn't taking any more chances with Matty's safety.

As I parked and headed toward the clubhouse, I could hear laughter coming from the kitchen.

I followed the sound, pausing in the doorway to take in the scene.

Matty stood at the counter, flour dusting his nose and cheeks, carefully decorating what looked like chocolate cupcakes.

Maria was beside him, guiding his hand as he piped frosting into wobbly swirls.

Three of the old ladies sat at the table, chatting and sampling the finished products.

Matty was the first to notice me, his face lighting up with pure joy. "Daddy, look what I made." He held up a cupcake with lopsided frosting and multicolored sprinkles.

"That looks amazing, little one," I said, crossing the room to examine his creation more closely. "Did you save one for me?"

"I saved you three," Matty declared, pointing to a small plate set aside. "The

chocolate ones are the best."

"He's a natural," Maria said, wiping her hands on her apron. "Been helping all morning."

I ruffled Matty's hair, noting how relaxed he seemed. "Having fun?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "Maria showed me how to crack eggs without getting shells in the batter. And Ellie let me use the mixer all by myself."

"Very impressive," I said, accepting the cupcake he thrust into my hands. I took a bite, making an exaggerated sound of appreciation that made him giggle. "Delicious."

Daisy appeared from the pantry, her arms full of baking supplies. "Oh good, you're back. We were just about to start on cookies." She gave me a meaningful look. "Jono's in the office. Wants a word when you get a chance."

I nodded, understanding her subtle message. "I'll go see him after I finish this masterpiece," I said, taking another bite of cupcake.

Matty beamed at the praise, then turned back to his frosting with renewed concentration. I watched him for a moment, the contrast between this happy, flour-dusted young man and Coombes's dismissive description making my chest ache with anger.

"I'll be right back, little one," I promised, touching his shoulder gently. "You keep helping Maria. I know you'll make the best cookies."

Matty nodded seriously. "I'm gonna make dinosaur ones if Maria has the right cutters."

"I'm sure she'll find something," I assured him before making my way to Jono's office.

I found my president behind his desk, papers spread out before him, his expression grim. He looked up when I entered, gesturing for me to close the door.

"You met with Coombes," he said. Not a question.

"He found me at The Last Keg," I confirmed, dropping into the chair across from him. "Offered me seven hundred and fifty thousand to divorce Matty and walk away."

Jono's eyebrows shot up. "That's a lot of cash."

"He's desperate," I said, leaning forward. "I played along, told him I'd consider it. Gave us a week's breathing room."

"Smart," Jono nodded. "Digger's been digging deeper into his finances. It's worse than we thought."

"How bad?"

Jono pushed a folder across the desk. "He's been systematically draining not just Matty's trust, but several other accounts connected to the Coombes estate. We're talking at least twelve million over the past five years."

I let out a low whistle, flipping through the documents. "Embezzlement on top of attempted murder."

"And that's not all," Jono continued, his voice hardening. "We found a connection between Coombes and Degrassi that goes back years. They were involved in some

real estate deals together—deals that look suspiciously like money laundering fronts."

"So Coombes wasn't just setting Matty up with an abuser," I growled. "He was bringing Degrassi into the family business."

"Looks that way," Jono agreed. "If Matty had married Degrassi, they would have had complete control over the trust fund and could have drained it legally."

I closed the folder, disgust churning in my gut. "Did you get eyes on Coombes after he left the bar?"

"Tex is tailing him. So far he's just headed back to his estate.

" Jono leaned back in his chair. "What's your play here, Novo?

You stringing Coombes along to get evidence on him?

" he huffed. "I'm sure you've noticed we haven't had any cops wanting any sort of statement about the accident with the car. "

I grunted. "That, and keeping him from making another move on Matty while we build our case." I hesitated, then added, "There's something else. When we talked, he mentioned Matty's 'childish episodes.' He knew about his Little side and talked about it like it was something shameful."

Jono's face darkened. "Bastard."

"Yeah," I agreed, the memory reigniting my anger. "The way he talked about Matty... like he was a burden, a problem, but what I want to know is how did he know?"

"How is Matty doing?" Jono asked, his voice softening slightly, obviously not having

an answer to my question.

"Better than you'd expect," I admitted. "The Little space seems to be protecting him from the full impact of what's happened. He's happy baking cupcakes with the old ladies, coloring dinosaurs, playing with his stuffies." I ran a hand over my beard. "Bolt says it's a coping mechanism."

"And when he comes out of it?"

I shook my head. "That's what worries me. When reality hits him again..." I trailed off, unable to finish the thought.

"You care about him," Jono observed, not a question.

I didn't answer immediately. Two weeks ago, Matty had been nothing more than a means to an end—my ticket to bringing down Harold Coombes. Now...

"Yeah," I finally admitted. "I do."

Jono nodded, unsurprised. "I could tell. The whole club can."

I shifted uncomfortably. "It complicates things."

"Life's complicated," Jono replied with a shrug. "Doesn't mean it's not worth it."

We both heard the crash, and rushed out.

The sound of shattering glass and raised voices propelled me through the door with Jono on my heels.

In the kitchen, Matty stood frozen, surrounded by broken cookies and shards of a

ceramic plate, his eyes wide with distress.

Across from him, Spade—a newer patch member—was laughing.

"...such a jumpy little thing," Spade was saying, clearly amused. "Didn't mean to scare the baby."

Maria was already kneeling to clean up the mess, her face tight with disapproval. Daisy stood with her hands on her hips, glaring at Spade.

"You know better than to come up behind someone like that," she snapped

Matty's lower lip trembled as he stared at the ruined cookies. "I'm s-sorry," he whispered. "They're ruined."

Anger surged through me at the sight of his distress. Before I could think, I was across the room, stepping between Matty and Spade.

"What the hell happened?" I demanded, my voice dangerously low.

Spade's smirk faltered. "Just having a little fun, Bear. Came in for a beer and the kid jumped a mile when I said 'boo.' Not my fault he's skittish as a—"

My hand shot out, grabbing him by the front of his cut. "That 'kid' is my husband," I growled, pulling him close enough to see the fury in my eyes. "And he's not here for your entertainment."

"Whoa, easy," Spade protested, raising his hands. "It was just a joke."

"Did you see anyone laughing?" I snarled, tightening my grip.

"Novo," Jono's voice came from behind me, a quiet warning.

I ignored him, focusing on Spade's increasingly nervous expression. "You will apologize to my husband. Now. And then you'll clean up every bit of this mess."

Spade swallowed hard, finally seeming to understand the gravity of his error. "Sorry, Bear. Didn't mean any disrespect."

"Not to me," I snapped. "To Matty."

I released him with a small shove, stepping back so he could face Matty, who was now half-hidden behind Daisy, eyes wide and frightened.

Spade cleared his throat awkwardly. "I'm sorry, Matty. Shouldn't have scared you like that. It was... it was wrong of me."

Matty nodded slightly but didn't speak, his eyes darting between Spade and me.

"Now clean it up," I ordered, my tone leaving no room for argument. "Every crumb."

As Spade knelt to begin gathering the broken pieces, I moved to Matty's side, my voice immediately softening. "Are you okay, little one?" I reached out, gently wiping a smudge of flour from his cheek.

Matty nodded hesitantly, but his eyes still glistened with unshed tears. "I made special dinosaur cookies for you," he whispered. "Now they're all broken."

"We can make more," I assured him, stroking his hair. "Accidents happen."

"But I wanted them to be perfect," he insisted, his voice quavering. "For you."

Something in my chest constricted at his words. I cupped his face gently between my palms, making him look at me. "You don't need to be perfect, Matty. Not for me. Not for anyone."

His eyes searched mine, uncertainty clear in their depths. Then as he stared at me, he licked his lips, and I all but groaned. My cock pushed against the zipper constraining it.

Before I could respond verbally, he surged forward, capturing my lips with his in a kiss that was anything but childlike.

His hands gripped my shoulders, pulling me closer as his mouth moved against mine with surprising intensity.

After a moment of shock, I responded, one hand sliding to the small of his back while the other cradled the nape of his neck.

The kitchen around us fell silent as the kiss deepened. Matty pressed himself against me, his body warm and solid, nothing like the behavior of moments before. When we finally broke apart, both breathing heavily, his eyes were clear and determined, though a flush had spread across his cheeks.

"How about you take me home, Daddy?" he said breathlessly.

Chapter thirteen

Matty

Seeing Daddy defend me like no one ever had in my life did something to me. I was aware of everything that had happened, but instead of being scared, I was suddenly brave. And I wanted Daddy—Novo—with a desperation that astonished me.

When we stepped inside the cabin, Daddy locked the door behind us and turned to face me, his expression guarded.

"Matty," he began carefully, "we should talk about—"

I silenced him with another kiss, pressing my body against his solid warmth.

For a moment he remained still, then with a groan that vibrated through my chest, his arms wrapped around me, lifting me easily.

I wrapped my legs around his waist as he carried me to the bedroom, his mouth never leaving mine.

He set me down beside the bed, breaking the kiss to search my face. "Are you sure about this?" he asked, his voice rough with restraint. "You've been through a lot."

"I've never been more sure of anything," I said, my fingers working at the buttons of his flannel shirt. "I want this. I'm not... I don't know how to explain it. I feel safe with you. Protected. But I also want..."

"What do you want, Matty?" Daddy asked, his thumbs tracing circles on my wrists.

"I want to feel something good," I whispered. "I'm tired of being afraid. Please, Daddy . Make me feel something else."

Something in his expression softened, and he released my hands to cup my face. "If we do this, we do it my way," he said, his voice gentle but firm. "Slow. Careful. And if at any point you want to stop, you tell me."

I nodded, leaning into his touch. "I trust you."

His eyes darkened at my words, and he leaned down to kiss me again, this time with deliberate slowness. His beard tickled my skin as his mouth moved from my lips to my jaw, then down my neck. I shivered, my hands fisting in his shirt.

"Too many clothes," I murmured, tugging at the fabric.

Daddy chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest. "Patience, little one."

The term of endearment sent a confusing mix of comfort and arousal through me. I wasn't in my Little space now, but the words still warmed me, making me feel cherished, and I still wanted to call him Daddy.

He helped me remove my flour-dusted t-shirt, his eyes darkening as they took in my bare chest. His fingers traced the lingering bruises on my arm where he'd grabbed me during the car incident, his expression clouding.

"I'm sorry for these," he said softly.

"Don't be," I whispered, covering his hand with mine. "They remind me that you saved my life."

His eyes met mine, intense and searching. I held his gaze, wanting him to see that I meant it. After a moment, he nodded and lowered his head to press a gentle kiss to each bruise, his beard tickling my sensitive skin.

"Beautiful," he murmured against my shoulder, his large hands spanning my waist.

I flushed under his praise, suddenly self-conscious of my slender frame compared to his muscular build.

As if sensing my thoughts, he straightened and shrugged off his flannel shirt, revealing a tight black t-shirt beneath.

When he pulled that off too, I couldn't help the small gasp that escaped me.

Daddy's chest and arms were covered in intricate tattoos—swirling patterns that accentuated his powerful muscles. Scars marked his skin here and there, telling stories of a life I knew nothing about. I reached out hesitantly, tracing a particularly prominent scar that ran across his left pectoral.

"Afghanistan," he said quietly. "Shrapnel."

I nodded, continuing my exploration of his body, and receiving the occasional verbal explanations. He stood perfectly still, allowing me to touch him, to learn him. When my fingers reached the waistband of his jeans, his abdominal muscles tightened visibly.

"Matty," he said, his voice deeper than I'd ever heard it. "We can stop anytime."

"I don't want to stop," I replied, looking up at him through my lashes. "I want you, Daddy. All of you."

He growled—there was no other word for it—and suddenly I was being lifted and deposited gently on the bed. He followed me down, his larger body covering mine without crushing me. The weight of him felt incredible, grounding me in the moment.

His mouth found mine again, the kiss deeper and more insistent now. I arched against him, desperate for more contact. He shifted, sliding one powerful thigh between my legs, giving me something to press against. I moaned into his mouth, my hands clutching at his broad shoulders.

"Tell me what you need," Daddy murmured against my throat, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin there.

"Everything," I gasped, my head falling back to give him better access. "Anything. Just... don't stop touching me."

His lips curved into a smile against my skin. "I can do that."

With deliberate slowness, his hands moved to the button of my jeans.

He looked up, silently asking permission, and I nodded frantically.

He undid the button and zipper, then eased the denim down my legs along with my underwear.

I fought the urge to cover myself as his gaze traveled over my now-naked body.

"Perfect," he whispered, and the reverence in his voice chased away any lingering insecurities.

His hands skimmed my sides, tracing every curve and plane of my body with an artist's attention to detail. When he finally wrapped his fingers around my length, I

gasped, my hips bucking involuntarily into his touch.

"Easy," he murmured, his free hand pressing gently on my hip to steady me. "We have all the time in the world."

But I didn't want to go slow. After days of fear and uncertainty, I craved intensity, something to drown out everything else. I reached for his belt buckle, fumbling in my eagerness.

"Please," I whispered, my voice breaking. "I need to feel you."

Something in my tone must have conveyed my desperation, because Daddy's pupils dilated. He stood, quickly removing his remaining clothes, and I couldn't help but stare at the magnificent sight of him—all muscle and tattoos and raw power.

When he returned to the bed, he positioned himself above me, supporting his weight on his forearms. "Tell me if anything doesn't feel good," he instructed, his eyes serious despite the flush on his cheeks.

I nodded, reaching up to trace the lines of his beard. "I will. But right now, everything feels amazing."

His smile was slow and devastating. "It's about to feel even better."

True to his word, Daddy took his time preparing me, his thick fingers gentle as they worked me open.

The initial discomfort gave way to pleasure so intense I had to bite my lip to keep from crying out.

By the time he finally positioned himself between my bent legs, and dragged a pillow

under my ass, I was trembling with need.

He quickly smoothed on a condom. "Look at me," he commanded softly, and I obeyed, meeting his intense gaze as he pressed forward.

The stretch and burn of him entering me made me gasp, my fingers digging into his biceps. He paused, giving me time to adjust, his breathing ragged with the effort of restraint.

"Okay?" he asked, his voice strained.

"More than okay," I assured him, wrapping my legs around his waist to draw him deeper.

Daddy groaned, his control visibly slipping as he began to move. Each thrust sent waves of pleasure through me, building a pressure that made my toes curl and my back arch. I clung to him, overwhelmed by the sensations and the sheer damn goodness of everything.

"So perfect," he murmured against my ear, one hand sliding beneath me to change the angle. "So good for me, baby."

The endearment sent a shock of warmth through me, different from but connected to the physical pleasure. I turned my head to capture his mouth in a desperate kiss, trying to convey everything I couldn't put into words.

When his hand wrapped around me, stroking in time with his thrusts, I knew I wouldn't last much longer. The dual sensations were too intense, too perfect.

"Daddy," I gasped, a warning and a plea.

"Let go for me, little one," he growled, his rhythm never faltering. "I've got you."

Those words broke something loose inside me.

With a cry that seemed torn from my soul, I came apart in his arms, my body shuddering with pleasure so intense it bordered on pain.

Through the haze of my release, I felt Daddy's movements grow erratic, his breathing harsh against my neck before he groaned deeply, his powerful body tensing above me.

For several moments, we remained locked together, both of us breathing heavily.

His weight pressed me into the mattress, but I welcomed it, wrapping my arms around his broad back to keep him close.

Eventually, he softened and slipped out.

He shifted to the side, careful not to crush me, but kept one arm draped possessively across my waist.

"You okay?" he asked, his voice a low rumble that I could feel vibrating through his chest.

I nodded, suddenly shy despite what we'd just shared. "More than okay."

His fingers traced idle patterns on my skin, sending pleasant shivers through my still-sensitive body. "That wasn't... I didn't plan for this to happen," he admitted.

"I know," I said, turning to face him. "I wanted it. I still do."

His blue eyes studied me carefully. "No regrets?"

"None," I whispered, reaching up to trace the line of his jaw. "For the first time in days, I don't feel afraid."

Something complex flickered across his face—tenderness mixed with what might have been guilt. Before I could decipher it, he leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead.

"We should get cleaned up," he murmured. "And then talk."

My stomach tightened at those words. Talk. About what had just happened? About my behaving Little and calling him Daddy? About the fact that someone was still trying to kill me?

"Hey," Daddy said softly, tilting my chin up. "Stop overthinking. One step at a time."

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I nodded, letting him help me to the bathroom. He was surprisingly gentle as he cleaned both of us up, his touch clinical but tender. When we returned to the bedroom, I expected awkwardness, but Daddy simply pulled back the covers and gestured for me to get in.

I slid between the sheets, watching as he moved around the room, collecting our scattered clothing. He pulled on a pair of sweatpants before joining me, his large body radiating heat as he settled beside me.

"So," he began carefully, "how are you feeling? Really?"

I considered the question, trying to sort through the tangle of emotions inside me.

"Conflicted," I finally admitted. "Part of me is terrified about everything that's happened—the car, the man in your house, my godfather wanting me dead.

" I swallowed hard. "But another part of me feels. .. safe. With you."

Daddy's expression softened. "You are safe with me, Matty."

I stared at him. "But just for how long the contract lasts." Daddy's face changed, a shadow crossing his features as he sat up straighter against the headboard. He ran a hand through his hair, his expression suddenly grave.

"Matty," he said, his voice lower than before, "there's something I need to tell you about the contract. About why I agreed to marry you."

My stomach dropped. "Two million dollars is a lot of money."

"That's not it," he said quickly, reaching for my hand. "What I'm trying to say is that I had my own reasons for agreeing to this marriage. Reasons that had nothing to do with money."

I pulled the sheet higher, suddenly feeling exposed. "What reasons?"

Daddy took a deep breath. "Your godfather, Harold Coombes... I knew him before I ever heard about you."

"What?" I whispered, trying to process this information. "How?"

"Eight years ago, Coombes was involved in some shady real estate deals in my hometown," Daddy explained, his eyes never leaving mine.

"My parents owned a small hardware store.

It wasn't much, but it was their life's work, and it came with a huge lot they'd never been able to afford to develop. Coombes wanted that land."

I felt cold despite the warmth of the bed. "What happened?"

"When my parents refused to sell, things got ugly. There were 'accidents' at the store—broken windows, inventory damaged. Then a fire." His jaw tightened. "The insurance company claimed it was arson, implied my parents did it themselves. They lost everything."

"Daddy," I breathed, horror washing over me. "I'm so sorry."

"My father couldn't handle the shame, the whispers around town. He had a heart

attack, but he never fought to survive. It was like he was crushed." Daddy's voice remained steady, but I could see the pain in his eyes. "A year after we buried my dad, my mom had a stroke and followed him."

I reached for his hand, squeezing it tightly. "And you blame Harold."

"I know it was him," Daddy said firmly. "I just could never prove it. I was still in the army when my dad died."

Understanding dawned, sharp and painful. "But how did you know Ricky's ad referred to me..." then I huffed. "Digger."

"I saw an opportunity," he admitted, his voice rough. "A way to get close to Coombes, to finally get justice for my parents."

I pulled my hand away, trying to absorb what he was telling me. "So this was all... revenge?"

"At first," Daddy acknowledged, reaching for me again. "But Matty, you have to believe me—that changed the moment I met you."

I stared at him, irrationally hurt. "When? When did it change?"

"The car. I've never been so terrified in my life. The thought of losing you..." He trailed off, his eyes intense.

My head was spinning with this revelation. "You married me to get revenge on my godfather."

"Yes," he admitted, not looking away. "But that's not why I'm still here."

That's not why I've been taking care of you, protecting you.

" His large hand cupped my cheek. "I care about you, Matty.

More than I expected to. More than it makes sense for me to given how little time we've known each other. "

I pulled back slightly, needing space to think. "Harold tried to kill me. Twice. And you knew he was dangerous all along."

Daddy's expression darkened. "I knew he was ruthless in business. I never imagined he'd try to murder his own godson, or to offer me a bribe to leave you." He ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "When that car nearly hit you, everything changed. My priority became keeping you safe."

"And the club?" I asked. "Do they all know about your vendetta?"

"Jono, Digger, and Cruise do," he admitted. "They helped me set up the meeting with Ricky, made sure my background would pass your screening."

I laughed humorlessly. "So Ricky was in on it too? Of course he was."

"No," Daddy said firmly. "Ricky had no idea. He genuinely thought I was interested in the arrangement for the money. He was trying to help you."

I wrapped my arms around myself, suddenly chilled despite the warm room. "It would be incredibly hypocritical of me to take exception to your reason when I...I wanted revenge as well, or to stop him." I closed my eyes for a few seconds.

"Believe this," Daddy said, reaching for me again. "Whatever my initial intentions, what I feel for you now is real. When I saw that gun pointed at you in this house,

when I realized how close I came to losing you, again..." His voice broke slightly. "I've never felt terror like that."

I studied his face, searching for deception but finding only raw honesty. "It's okay." And it was.

"I wish I'd told you sooner," he said, and I scoffed.

"When exactly?" I shook my head. "In the whole week we've been married? At the courthouse? After you saved my life?"

"You don't hate me?"

"How can I hate you when you did what I needed?" I whispered. "I offered money. Your reasons for accepting that aren't mine to judge." And it was true.

"They aren't?" he asked, his voice quiet but steady.

I closed my eyes, trying to sort through the tangle of emotions.

Daddy hadn't betrayed me. Who was I to judge his own truths against mine?

I remembered how he'd held me through my panic attacks, how he'd washed my hair when I was too hungover to stand.

No," I finally admitted. "But I don't know where we go from here.

" He didn't seem to mind me calling him Daddy, anyway.

Should I make sure I didn't do it too much?

Daddy nodded, accepting this. "Where we go is making sure you're safe."

"You said Harold tried to bribe you to divorce me?" I asked, recalling his earlier revelation.

"Today, at the bar," Daddy confirmed. "Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars to walk away. I pretended to consider it to buy us some time."

I processed this, trying to understand Harold's desperation. "Did he say why?"

"Claimed it was for your own good," Daddy said, his voice hardening. "Talked about you like you were a burden, a problem to be managed. Called your Little space 'childish episodes' — like it was something shameful."

Heat flooded my cheeks. "You don't mind? About... the occasional Little things?"

Daddy's expression softened, and tugged at the whiskers on my chin. "Matty, you've been in your Little space for the past three days. After the attack here, you retreated completely."

"Oh god," I whispered, memories flooding back. Dinosaur pajamas. Coloring books. Being carried to the bathroom. Calling him "Daddy." Mortification burned through me. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't," Daddy said firmly, catching my hands as I tried to cover my face. "Don't apologize for that. Ever."

"But it's weird," I protested weakly. "It's not normal for a grown man to—"

"It's beautiful," Daddy interrupted. "That you trusted me with such an important part of yourself means everything."

I stared at him, confused by his acceptance. "You don't think it's... disturbing?"

"Disturbing?" Daddy repeated, looking genuinely perplexed. "Matty, I spent the last two days reading you dinosaur books, helping you color, and making sure Patches and Bear were properly introduced to Princess. None of that was disturbing."

Despite everything, a small laugh escaped me. "Princess?"

"Annabel's stuffie," Daddy explained with a slight smile. "Bolt's Little visited. You had a playdate."

I remembered but I groaned, covering my face again. "How many people saw me like that?"

"Just a few," Daddy assured me. "Daisy, Bolt and Annabel, Maria. And they all adored you." His voice softened. "No one thought less of you, Matty. In fact, quite the opposite."

I peeked through my fingers. "Really?"

"Really," he confirmed. "Daisy's practically adopted you. And Bolt was incredibly helpful with advice on how to care for you properly."

"You asked for advice?" I couldn't hide my surprise.

Daddy looked slightly sheepish. "I wanted to do right by you. Bolt's been a Daddy for years."

The term sent a shiver through me—not unpleasant, just complicated. "So what happens now?"

"Now," Daddy said carefully, "we focus on keeping you safe while we get evidence on Coombes to prove he's stealing from your trust fund. If we can prove it, along with his connection to the attempts on your life, we can put him away for good."

I stared at him, trying to process this new information. "He's been stealing from me?"

"For years," Daddy confirmed grimly. "At least five million, maybe more."

"Five million?" I repeated, stunned. "How did I not know?" The pieces were falling into place—Harold's insistence that I was financially irresponsible, his control over my accounts, his determination to prevent me from fulfilling the trust conditions.

"He never wanted me to get control of the trust," I realized. "He's been using it as his personal piggy bank."

Daddy nodded. "And when you found a way to meet the marriage requirement without his approval..."

"He decided it was easier to kill me," I finished, a cold certainty settling in my bones. "My own godfather."

Daddy's arm wrapped around my shoulders, pulling me against his solid warmth. "I won't let him hurt you, Matty. I promise you that."

I leaned into him, too emotionally exhausted to maintain my distance. "I believe you."

"Can I ask how he knows?"

I looked up at Daddy and snuggled closer. "Degrassi, definitely," I whispered, but another memory teased at me.

We sat in silence for several minutes, his hand stroking my arm in a soothing rhythm. Finally, I gathered my courage to ask the question weighing on me.

"What about us?" I whispered. "Is this... are we..."

"Real?" Daddy supplied. "That depends on you. My feelings are real. What happens next is your choice."

I looked up at him, studying the sincerity in his blue eyes. "I don't know what I want yet. This is all... overwhelming."

"Take your time," he said gently. "We still have a contract, if nothing else. I'll keep you safe until this is over, regardless of what you decide about us."

"And my Little side?" I asked hesitantly. "What if that happens again, like for days?"

Daddy's expression softened. "Then I'll be your Daddy for as long as you need me to be. No judgment, no expectations. Just care."

Something warm unfurled in my chest at his words. "You'd do that? Even if I decided we shouldn't be... together romantically?"

"Yes," he said without hesitation. "That part of you deserves protection and nurturing, regardless of what happens between us as adults."

I nodded, oddly comforted by his certainty. "Can we just... stay like this for a while? I need time to think."

"Of course," Daddy agreed, settling back against the headboard and drawing me closer. "Take all the time you need."

As I rested my head against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart, I felt strangely calm despite everything. "I guess it's karma in a way."

"Karma?" Daddy queried.

"I was a grade-A bitch to any submissive I thought was a threat, especially a Little, in the club in Charlotte.

Rowan was a sweetheart and I was a bully.

I wanted the Dom he eventually ended up with.

So I suppose I deserve everything." And it was true, and I knew in my heart eventually Daddy would realize that as well.

Chapter fourteen

Novo

I froze at Matty's confession, my heart clenching at the self-loathing in his voice. "That's not how karma works," I said firmly. "No one deserves to have someone try to kill them. No one."

Matty shrugged against my chest, not meeting my eyes. "I was horrible to Rowan. Just because I wanted his Dom to notice me instead."

"And now?" I asked carefully. "Would you do the same thing today?"

He shook his head immediately. "God, no. I was insecure and jealous. I didn't understand... I didn't know what it was like."

"Then you've already changed," I pointed out, tilting his chin up so he'd look at me. "We've all done things we regret. That doesn't mean we deserve punishment."

Matty's eyes searched mine, looking for judgment he wouldn't find. "How can you be so understanding?"

"Because I see you," I said simply. "Not just who you were, but who you are. And who you're becoming."

A small, hesitant smile touched his lips, then his belly rumbled loudly and I grinned. "Seems like someone needs feeding."

Matty flushed. "I suppose I need a shower."

I nodded, releasing him reluctantly. I wanted to help, but this Matty was independent. He wouldn't want me washing his hair and soaping him.

As Matty disappeared into the bathroom, I pulled on a shirt and headed to the kitchen, my mind racing with everything that had happened.

I'd finally told him the truth about my connection to Coombes, and instead of the anger or betrayal I'd expected, he'd responded with a kind of understanding I wasn't sure I deserved.

And then there was that moment of vulnerability—his confession about bullying another Little. The self-recrimination in his voice had hit me hard. Matty carried wounds that went deeper than I'd realized.

I was pulling ingredients from the refrigerator when my phone buzzed. Jono.

"Yeah?" I answered, keeping my voice low.

"We've got movement," Jono said without preamble. "Coombes made three calls after leaving you. One to a burner phone we can't trace, one to his lawyer, and one to the bank."

My grip tightened on the phone. "He's moving money."

"Looks that way," Jono confirmed. "Digger's watching the accounts we have access to. So far, nothing unusual, but we're on alert."

"He's planning something," I said, glancing toward the hallway where I could still hear the shower running. "Keep eyes on him."

"Already done. How's Matty?"

I hesitated, unsure how to answer. "Back to himself. I told him everything—about my parents, about why I agreed to the marriage."

"How'd he take it?"

"Better than I deserved," I admitted. "But we're not out of the woods yet."

"Never are," Jono replied philosophically. "Club's got your back. Both of you."

"Appreciate it," I said, ending the call as I heard the water shut off.

I returned to preparing dinner, pulling out ingredients for a simple pasta dish. My mind was still processing everything—Matty's reaction to my confession, his vulnerability about his past behavior, and now Coombes's suspicious activity. Something was coming, and we needed to be ready.

Matty appeared in the doorway a while later, showered and shaved, dressed in sweatpants and a plain t-shirt.

I missed his dinosaur ones, and while I understood he wasn't in that head space right now, it was a bit of a slap in the face.

His hair was damp, curling slightly at the ends, but he looked even younger than before, if that was possible.

"Smells good," he said, hovering uncertainly at the edge of the kitchen.

"Just pasta," I replied, gesturing toward the counter. "Want to help?"

He nodded, seeming relieved to have something to do. As he moved beside me to chop vegetables, I noticed how careful he was to maintain a small distance between us. The easy intimacy we'd shared in bed had been replaced by a cautious awareness.

"Jono called," I said, deciding honesty was the best approach. "Coombes has been making calls, moving money around. We're keeping an eye on him."

Matty's knife paused mid-chop. "He's planning something."

"Probably," I admitted. "But we're ready. The compound is secure, and we've got people watching his movements."

He resumed chopping, his movements precise and controlled. "I should be more afraid, shouldn't I? My godfather is trying to kill me, and I'm standing here making dinner like it's just an ordinary day."

"Shock does strange things," I offered. "And you've been through a lot."

"Yeah." He was quiet for a moment, focused on the vegetables. "It's weird, though. Part of me feels... relieved."

I glanced at him. "Relieved?"

"That I finally know," he clarified. "I've spent years missing him. Wondering why he never acted like he cared anything about me." he paused. "But why now? What changed in two years? With the money I mean."

"Because he's made some bad financial decisions and he's had to dip quite significantly into your funds to shore his own up." Matty slid the chopped vegetables into the pan.

"That makes sense. He never cared what I spent before."

We worked in companionable silence for a few minutes, the sizzle of vegetables and the bubbling of pasta the only sounds. It was strangely domestic, this careful dance in the kitchen, and I found myself wondering if this was what our life could be like if circumstances were different.

"I've been thinking," Matty said finally, his voice deliberately casual. "About what happens after this is over."

I kept my attention on the sauce, giving him space to continue at his own pace.

"The contract says two years," he went on, "but once Harold is dealt with and the trust fund is secure, there's really no reason for you to stay married to me." His voice was carefully neutral, but I caught the slight tremor in it.

I set down the wooden spoon I'd been using to stir the sauce, turning to face him fully. "Is that what you want? To end the marriage early?"

Matty shrugged, not meeting my eyes as he focused intensely on arranging the garlic bread on a baking sheet.

"I just mean... you didn't sign up for all this.

The attempts on my life, the Little stuff, any of it.

I know I said a Daddy, but that was really Ricky's idea and I went along with it.

I hadn't realized about my Little. So, once you get justice for your parents, you should be free to live your life. "

I studied him, noting the tension in his shoulders, the way his fingers trembled slightly. "And what about what I want?"

"What do you want?" he asked quietly, finally looking up at me.

I held his gaze, wanting him to see the truth in my eyes. "I want to see where this goes. Not because of a contract or revenge or money, but because I care about you. Because when I thought I might lose you, nothing else mattered."

A flush crept up his neck, and he looked away again. "You barely know me."

"I know enough," I said simply. "I know you're stronger than you think. I know you care deeply, even when you try to hide it. I know you're kind to everyone except yourself."

His eyes flickered back to mine, surprise evident in them.

"And I know," I continued softly, "that I want the chance to learn more."

The stove beeped, breaking the moment. Matty turned away quickly, busying himself with the pasta while I slid the garlic bread into the oven. The conversation hung between us, unfinished but not forgotten.

As we moved around each other, setting the table and then serving the food, I could sense Matty processing what I'd said. I didn't push, giving him the space he needed.

"This is good," he said after taking his first bite of pasta.

"Thanks. Old family recipe," I replied, watching him carefully. "My mom taught me."

"She must have been a good cook."

"She was," I said, a familiar ache in my chest at the memory. "Sunday dinners were sacred in our house. No matter how busy the store got, we always sat down together."

Matty's expression softened. "That sounds nice."

"It was." I took a sip of water. "What about your parents? What were they like?"

"I don't really remember them. I was three when they died."

I could have kicked myself and it must have shown on my face. I knew that.

"It's okay. Like I said, I don't really remember them." I knew he didn't have any other family because of the details Ricky had sent and what Digger told me, but I ached to give him just that—a family. But I'd pushed him enough for one day.

"Maybe you could tell me about Harold," I suggested. "Before all this, I mean."

Matty pushed pasta around his plate for a moment before answering. "He was... distant. Always has been. I lived with him after my parents died, but I barely saw him. There were nannies, housekeepers. Then boarding school from age six."

I tried to imagine Matty as a small boy, sent away by the only family he had left. "No visits home?"

"Holidays, sometimes." He shrugged, aiming for casual but missing by a mile. "Usually he'd be 'unexpectedly called away on business' halfway through. I spent most breaks at school."

The matter-of-fact way he described his isolation made my chest ache. "That must have been lonely."

"You get used to it," he said, but the slight tremble in his voice betrayed him. "By high school, I preferred staying at school. At least there were other kids."

I thought of Matty in his Little space, his delight over simple things like dinosaur pajamas and pancakes with faces. How much of that came from a childhood of neglect?

"When did you first realize you were a Little?" I asked carefully, watching his reaction.

He tensed, then deliberately relaxed his shoulders. "Submissive," he corrected me. "College, I guess. I started going to clubs, met some people in the scene." He took a sip of water. "The Little, I would never even acknowledge to myself. I guess I'm broken."

"You're not broken," I said firmly.

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Matty's lips curved in a small, sad smile. "Tell that to Harold. He walked in on me once, just after I arrived back from Charlotte, when I was... in that headspace. I'd found a box at the bottom of my wardrobe with some old toys in it I didn't even remember I had.

Buzz Lightyear. Woody. Even an old teddy.

Before I knew what I was doing I was playing and imagining they were saving the world. I'd thought he was out of town."

I set down my fork. "What happened?"

"He looked at me like I was something disgusting," Matty said, his voice soft but steady. "Sitting on my bedroom floor with cowboy dolls and stuffed animals. He didn't yell, just... stared. Then he said, 'I see you haven't grown up after all.' And left."

"Matty—"

"Two days later, he introduced me to James Degrassi." His fingers tightened around his water glass. "Said he'd found someone who wanted what I could offer. Maybe even 'fix' me."

White-hot rage surged through me at the thought of Coombes deliberately placing Matty with an abuser to "fix" him. "There's nothing to fix," I said, fighting to keep my voice level.

"I know that now," Matty replied. "Most of the time, anyway. It was that experience

that made me get my own place... such as it was."

He got a kiss for that confession and I got a smile.

We ate in silence for a few minutes, both processing. I wanted to ask about Degrassi, about what he'd done, but I didn't want to push too far.

"Can I ask you something?" Matty said suddenly.

"Anything."

"How much experience have you had before? I get Dom vibes from you, but is that recent, or..."

I hesitated, setting down my fork. "I've been in the lifestyle on and off for about ten years, but it's been... situational."

"What does that mean?" Matty asked, genuine curiosity in his eyes.

"It means I've had Dom tendencies with certain partners, but I've never been in a formal Dom relationship." I met his gaze directly. "What happened with you these past few days—that was new territory for me."

"Yet you seemed to know exactly what to do," Matty observed.

I shrugged slightly. "I followed my instincts. And Bolt gave me some guidance."

Matty's cheeks flushed. "I'm still embarrassed about that."

"Don't be," I said firmly. "Your Little side is beautiful, Matty. The way your face lights up when you're coloring, how carefully you introduce your stuffies to each

other—it's a gift to witness that kind of joy."

His blush deepened, but I could see him processing my words, perhaps reconsidering his shame.

"When I was deployed," I continued, sensing he needed to hear more, "I saw the worst of humanity.

The cruelty people are capable of. Coming home was.

..difficult." I paused, gathering my thoughts.

"Finding the lifestyle, discovering I could provide structure and safety for someone who trusted me completely—it helped heal something in me. I wish I'd had time for more."

"So you're saying my Little side is therapeutic for you?" Matty asked with a hint of playfulness.

I smiled, recognizing the defense mechanism. "I'm saying we might be good for each other in ways neither of us expected."

He looked down at his plate, pushing the remaining pasta around with his fork. "And if I don't go into that headspace again?"

"Then we figure out what works for us as we are now," I replied simply.

"No pressure either way." But I honestly didn't think that door was closed. Sure, it might have cracked wide open when he was stressed, but I'd bet when Matty learned to trust the safe space I could create, he would find it easier to let go.

I wanted his Little side to be fun, and not so much a trauma response.

Right now he was embarrassed and panicking.

Matty nodded slowly, then looked up with determination in his eyes. "I want to help bring Harold down. Not just hide while you and the club do all the work."

The sudden change of subject surprised me and I immediately tamped down the initial alarm, but I recognized the importance of his request. "What do you have in mind?"

"I don't know," Matty said, his jaw set with determination. "But I can't hide forever. And I want to help."

I considered his words, weighing the immediate sick feeling of him putting himself in danger with his need for some self-respect. "Whatever we do we do, we do it carefully."

"Thank you," Matty said, genuine relief in his voice. "For taking me seriously."

"I've always taken you seriously," I replied, reaching across the table to cover his hand with mine. "Even when you were building block towers with Patches supervising."

He rolled his eyes, but the tension had broken. As we finished dinner, we chatted about growing up. Matty listened attentively.

"My mom would have loved you," I said honestly.

"I miss the idea of her," Matty replied, and his brutal honesty slayed me.

"I bet you were cute growing up," I said with a smile.

"I was a little shit at school," he admitted. "I wasn't big enough to intimidate physically so I learned how to bully verbally."

I considered my response, knowing brushing it off was insulting.

"I think we're all products of our upbringing," I said.

"My biggest shame was watching my dad work seven days a week and barely making a living and not wanting that for myself.

" My laugh didn't contain humor. "I had my head full of being a hero, but for totally the wrong reasons.

I've asked myself a million times, if I hadn't joined the army maybe Dad would still be alive. "

Matty reached his hand out across the table and snagged mine.

I changed the subject a little. Made it lighter, telling Matty some funny stories of pranks and how the army had made me grow up. And all the while he never let go of my hand.

After we'd cleared the dishes, Matty hesitated in the kitchen doorway. "I should probably call Ricky, let him know I'm okay. He's been texting."

"Good idea," I agreed, noting how he seemed uncertain about claiming space. "You can use the living room. I've got some calls to make too."

He nodded and headed for the couch, already pulling out his phone. I retreated to my

bedroom to give him privacy, using the time to update Jono on our bank plans and request additional security.

When I returned to the living room twenty minutes later, I found Matty curled in the corner of the couch, his expression troubled.

"Everything okay with Ricky?" I asked, taking a seat at the opposite end.

"Yeah, he's fine. Worried about me." Matty picked at a loose thread on the cushion.

"He wants to come visit tomorrow, but I told him it wasn't safe yet."

I nodded. "Probably smart for now. I'm sorry you're so isolated."

Matty glanced at me, then away. "He asked about us. If we were... you know. Real."

"What did you tell him?" I asked carefully.

"That I didn't know yet." He looked up, his eyes uncertain. "Is that okay?"

"Of course," I assured him. "You don't owe anyone explanations about us, not even me."

He seemed to relax slightly at that. "He says Chris would like you to call him. If there's anything he can do to help."

I nodded seriously. When Digger had looked into Rent-A-Daddy he'd found the security business and that they were ex-military.

It was a good idea. We sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, the day's revelations and emotional roller coaster catching up with us. I noticed Matty stifling a yawn.

"Tired?" I asked.

He nodded reluctantly. "It's been... a lot."

"Why don't you get an early night," I suggested. "At least there's two bedrooms so I won't wake you with my snoring."

Matty sent me such a wounded look I knew immediately I'd screwed up.

"Scratch that," I said immediately. "You're mine. We sleep together." I caught the small, pleased smile on his face just before I stood and tugged him up. His hand stayed in mine as we went into the bathroom.

Chapter fifteen

Novo

I woke up to the harsh sound of my phone ringing. Beside me, Matty stirred but didn't wake, his breathing still deep and even. I fumbled for the device, squinting at the screen: Cruise.

"Yeah?" I answered, keeping my voice low as I carefully extracted myself from Matty's warmth.

"Bear, the Glitter Bomb's on fire," Cruise said without preamble, his voice tight with tension. "Started about thirty minutes ago. Fire department's on scene, but it's bad."

I was instantly alert, moving to the closet to grab clothes. "Anyone hurt?"

"Three dancers with smoke inhalation; they're on their way to County General. Place was closed, thank fuck, but the night security guy's got some burns. Nothing life-threatening, but the building is destroyed."

"I'm on my way," I said, pulling on jeans with one hand. "Call Jono if you haven't already."

"Already done. He's heading there now."

I ended the call and turned to find Matty sitting up in bed, his hair tousled from sleep, eyes wide with concern.

"What's happening?" he asked, already reaching for his clothes.

"Stay here," I said firmly, pulling on my shirt. "The Glitter Bomb is on fire. I need to go deal with it."

"I'm coming with you," Matty insisted, already halfway out of bed.

I shook my head. "Not happening. It's not safe."

"But—"

"Matty," I cut him off, my voice leaving no room for argument. "Someone just tried to kill you two days ago. I'm not taking you to a public emergency scene where anyone could be watching."

He froze, conflict clear on his face. "You think this is connected to Harold?"

"I don't know," I admitted, pulling on my boots. "But I'm not taking chances with your safety."

Matty's expression hardened with determination. "I'm not helpless, Novo. I can't just sit here while—"

"You can and you will," I interrupted, softening my tone as I crossed to him. I cupped his face in my hands, forcing him to meet my eyes. "Please. I need to know you're safe while I handle this. Tex will be right outside. No one gets in without my say-so."

I saw the moment Matty's resistance crumbled, his shoulders slumping slightly. "Fine," he conceded, leaning into my touch despite himself. "But call me. Let me know what's happening."

"I will," I promised, pressing a quick kiss to his forehead before stepping back. "Stay inside, doors locked. I'll be back as soon as I can."

I grabbed my cut and keys, pausing at the bedroom door. "And Matty? This isn't about you being helpless. It's about me not being able to focus if I'm worried about you."

Something softened in his expression. "Be careful," he said quietly.

"Always am," I replied, forcing a confidence I didn't entirely feel.

Outside, I briefed Tex on the situation, making it clear that Matty was not to leave under any circumstances. He nodded solemnly, hand resting on his holstered weapon.

The ride to town was tense, my mind racing with possibilities.

I led the way. Gunner, and Brick slid in behind me.

The timing was too convenient to be a coincidence.

First the attempts on Matty's life, then my meeting with Coombes, and now this?

The Glitter Bomb was one of our most profitable businesses—its destruction would hit the club hard financially.

I could see the glow of flames from blocks away, an angry orange haze lighting up the night sky.

As I pulled up across the street, the full devastation became clear.

The three-story building was almost completely engulfed, flames shooting through

what remained of the roof.

Fire trucks surrounded the scene, firefighters working to contain the blaze and keep it from spreading to neighboring structures.

On one side there was an empty lot; on the other, our other bar.

I parked my bike and jogged over, the heat from the inferno intense even from this distance.

Jono and Cruise had beaten me by maybe a minute and were standing with Fire Captain Reynolds.

Behind them, Sergeant Hargrove—fresh from the precinct—watched with arms folded, jaw tight.

I groaned. Hargrove hated MC clubs and had made it his mission in life to cause us as much trouble as possible.

“Bear,” Jono nodded. “Captain Reynolds was just briefing us.”

Reynolds, a weathered man in his fifties, gave me a measured look. “Multiple points of origin, witness reports.”

“Arson,” I said flatly.

Reynolds shrugged. “I won’t confirm until lab analysis. But two of the girls said the fire escape was blocked. If it hadn’t been for one of them smelling smoke in the bathroom, the casualties could’ve been catastrophic.”

I exchanged a glance with Jono—this was no random accident. Before I could speak,

Sergeant Hargrove stepped forward.

“Hold your horses,” he barked. “Club folk, back to the sidewalk. You’re not here to help—so don’t get in our way.”

Jono bristled. “Sergeant, we’re just asking—”

“Save it.” Hargrove turned on me. “Your sprinklers didn’t go off? Alarm system dead? Seems convenient, doesn’t it?” He raised a clipboard. “I’ll need your club’s entire safety file by tomorrow.”

I closed my eyes. “Sergeant, right now we need answers, not permits.”

He tapped his pen. “Answers come after paperwork. Now step back.”

I stepped aside, watching as a part of the roof caved in.

“Security footage?” I asked Cruise.

“Don’t know yet,” Cruise said.

“What about nearby businesses?” Jono asked the captain, as despite the sergeant's orders he walked over to us.

“We’ll canvas once we’ve got this contained,” Reynolds replied. “Given the hour, most places are closed. Footage might be scarce.”

My anger buzzed beneath my skin. This was a message—a war declaration. Coombes was escalating, moving from threats to outright attack.

“How’s Trixie?” I asked Cruise.

“En route,” he replied. “She nearly had a heart attack when I called.”

As if on cue, a black SUV screeched to a halt. Trixie emerged, her perfect hair now askew, face ashen. She ran to us, eyes never leaving the blaze.

“My girls,” she whispered, voice tight. “Are they all right?”

“Three with smoke inhalation, but they’ll be fine,” I said. “Mack, the security guy, has burns but nothing critical.”

Trixie’s tears caught in the glare of the fire. “I just finished redoing the VIP rooms,” she said, the mundane detail making it sting harder.

I put an arm around her shoulders. “We’ll rebuild. Better than before.”

“Damn right,” Jono said, voice hard. “This building isn’t the business—our people are.”

Trixie squared her shoulders. “Any idea who did this?”

“We have suspects,” I said, voice low because Hargrove had followed the captain.

Hargrove snorted, crossing his arms. “Suspects or nightclub drama? Want me to file charges against you lot while you’re at it?”

“Back off, Hargrove,” Jono growled.

At that moment, a firefighter jogged up. “Captain, got a minute?”

Reynolds excused himself and he and the sergeant followed the man toward a truck. I watched him go, then turned back to the wreckage. More of the roof caved in, sparks

drifting into the night.

“Too coordinated,” Cruise observed. “First Matty, now this.”

“Harold Coombes is sending a message,” I said. “He offered me hush money yesterday to step away from Matty. When I said I'd think about it, he warned things could get... complicated .”

“Burning our top-earner is a hell of a complication,” Jono muttered. “Digger’s been watching Coombes’s burner phones. He tracked a call right when the fire started.”

My phone buzzed—Matty.

Are you okay? What’s happening?

Club’s a total loss. Everyone’s alive. Stay inside.

This is my fault, isn’t it?

I sighed when I read his reply .

No. Harold’s fault. Never yours.

I stared at the phone, wanting to reassure Matty more thoroughly, but this wasn't a conversation for text messages. "I need to get back to him," I told Cruise. "He's blaming himself."

Cruise nodded grimly. "Go. We've got this covered. Digger's already pulling security footage from the gas station across the street."

"This is war," I said quietly, unsurprised he hadn't given me the week. "Coombes just

burned down a million-dollar business to send a message." It wasn't just the girls here; we did a brisk illegal gambling business from downstairs.

"And we'll send one back," Cruise promised, his eyes reflecting the flames. "But smart, not hot-headed."

I glanced at the devastation one more time.

The Glitter Bomb had been more than just a strip club—it was the livelihood for dozens of people, from dancers to bartenders to security.

Rebuilding would take time and money we hadn't planned to spend.

I knew there was no way insurance would pay out for arson.

"I'll meet you at the clubhouse tomorrow morning," I said, already heading for my bike. "And have someone check on the other businesses. If Coombes is targeting club assets..."

"Already on it," Cruise assured me. "Digger's got prospects watching The Last Keg and the auto shop."

The ride back to the compound was tense, my mind racing with implications. Coombes was escalating—moving from direct attacks on Matty to economic warfare against the club. He was trying to make protecting Matty too costly, too dangerous.

It wouldn't work.

When I pulled up to the cabin, I saw Tex standing alert, hand resting on his weapon until he recognized me. "All quiet, Bear," he reported. "He hasn't tried to leave."

I nodded my thanks and headed inside, finding Matty pacing the living room, still in his sleep clothes but clearly wide awake. He spun toward the door as I entered, relief washing over his face before being replaced by concern.

"You smell like smoke," he said, crossing to me. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I assured him, locking the door behind me. "The club's destroyed, but everyone got out alive."

Matty's face crumpled. "This is because of me, isn't it? Because you wouldn't take Harold's money?"

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"No," I said firmly, pulling him into my arms despite the smoke clinging to my clothes. "This is because your godfather is a sociopath who will destroy anything in his path to get what he wants."

Matty stiffened, then melted against me, his arms wrapping tightly around my waist. "I'm so sorry," he whispered against my chest.

"Don't," I said, pulling back to look him in the eyes. "Don't apologize for his actions. Ever."

Something shifted in Matty's expression—a hardening, a resolve I hadn't seen before. "Should we go to the cops? There must be someone that he isn't bribing."

I considered his question, stroking his hair back from his face.

"We can try, but honestly, Harold's connections run deep. Without solid proof linking him directly to the attempts on your life or the fire, it would be his word against ours. And he's a respected businessman while I'm..." I gestured to my cut.

Matty nodded, understanding flickering in his eyes. "A scary biker," he finished, his lips quirking slightly.

"Exactly. But we'll get him, Matty. We just need to be smart about it." I pressed a kiss to his forehead.

"Maybe I should go see him?" he asked, his voice taking on a slightly higher pitch that made me pay closer attention.

"Absolutely not, little one," I said carefully, noting how he shifted his weight from foot to foot, a gesture I'd seen when his Little side was emerging. "It's late. We should try to get some sleep."

Matty nodded but made no move toward the bedroom. Instead, he bit his lip, eyes downcast. "Is everyone really okay? From the club?"

"They're going to be fine," I assured him, keeping my voice gentle. "The girls are being treated for smoke inhalation, and the security guard has some burns but nothing life-threatening."

"That's good," he murmured, his fingers beginning to fidget with the hem of his t-shirt. "I was scared."

I watched him carefully, recognizing the signs of his headspace shifting. The stress of the night and the guilt he was feeling were pushing him toward the comfort of his Little space.

"Come on," I said softly, holding out my hand. "Let's get you back to bed."

He took my hand without hesitation, his fingers curling trustingly around mine. "You smell like smoke," he repeated, wrinkling his nose.

"I know, little one. I should shower first."

Instead of pulling away, he leaned closer. "Can I... can I wait for you? Don't wanna be alone."

"Of course you can," I said, leading him to the bathroom. "You can sit right here while I get cleaned up, okay?"

He nodded, perching on the closed toilet lid while I turned on the shower. As steam began to fill the room, I noticed him eyeing Patches, who sat on a shelf. I wondered how he'd gotten in the bathroom, but assumed Matty had put him there earlier.

"Would you like Patches?" I asked, already reaching for the stuffed dog.

Matty hesitated, conflict clear on his face. Part of him—the adult part—was fighting the need. But as I held out the worn stuffie, his desire for comfort won.

"Yes, please," he whispered, accepting Patches with careful hands and hugging him close.

"I'll be quick," I promised, stepping into the shower.

True to my word, I washed efficiently, rinsing away the smoke and grime. Through the shower curtain, I could see Matty's silhouette, still seated, head bent over Patches as he whispered something to the stuffed dog. The sight made my chest tighten with an emotion I couldn't quite name.

When I stepped out, towel wrapped around my waist, Matty looked up with heavy-lidded eyes. The adrenaline that had kept him awake was clearly wearing off.

"Sleepy?" I asked, grabbing another towel to dry my hair.

He nodded, yawning widely. "Patches is tired too."

"Then let's get you both to bed," I said, pulling on clean boxers and a t-shirt.

I held out my hand again, and Matty took it without hesitation, allowing me to lead him back to the bedroom. He climbed into bed, Patches tucked securely under his chin, watching me with those wide, trusting eyes that made my protective instincts

surge.

"Will you stay?" he asked, his voice small and uncertain.

"Of course," I assured him, sliding under the covers beside him. "I'm not going anywhere."

Matty immediately curled against me, his body fitting perfectly against mine. I wrapped an arm around him, holding him close as his breathing began to even out.

"Daddy?" he whispered, the word slipping out as sleep began to claim him.

"Yes, little one?"

"Don't let the bad man hurt anyone else."

My arms tightened around him. "I won't," I promised, pressing a kiss to his hair. "I'll keep everyone safe."

I just didn't know exactly how.

Matty

I woke up slowly, warmth surrounding me and the comforting weight of Daddy's arm draped across my waist. The events of last night filtered back—the fire, Daddy coming home smelling of smoke, the way I'd... slipped again.

Shame flooded through me. I'd promised myself I wouldn't do that anymore, wouldn't be a burden when Daddy—no when Novo already had so much to deal with. And now Harold had burned down his business because of me.

I carefully extracted myself from Novo's embrace, sliding out of bed without waking him. Patches tumbled to the floor, and I stared at the stuffed dog for a long moment, torn between the urge to snatch him up and the need to prove I could be an adult.

In the end, I left him there and padded quietly to the bathroom, closing the door before leaning heavily against it. My reflection in the mirror looked tired, younger than my twenty-seven years. I splashed cold water on my face, trying to wash away the lingering fog of Little space.

"Get it together," I whispered to myself. "He needs a partner, not another problem."

After brushing my teeth, I headed to the kitchen, determined to be useful. I started coffee brewing and rummaged through the refrigerator, pulling out eggs and vegetables for an omelet. The least I could do was make breakfast.

As I chopped peppers and onions, my mind wandered to the night before. The thought of people being hurt because of me sent a flutter of anxiety through my stomach, but I pushed it away, focusing on the steady rhythm of the knife against the cutting board.

"Morning," Novo's deep voice came from behind me.

I turned, forcing a smile. "Hey. I'm making breakfast."

He studied me, his eyes missing nothing. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," I said automatically, turning back to the vegetables. "Just fine."

Novo was silent for a moment, then moved to pour himself coffee. "You left Patches on the floor."

My hand stilled. "I... yeah. I don't need him right now."

Another silence, heavier this time. "Matty, look at me."

Reluctantly, I set down the knife and turned to face him. He stood with his coffee mug in hand, expression gentle but serious.

"What's going on?" he asked quietly.

"Nothing," I insisted. "I'm just... being an adult. Like I should be."

Understanding dawned in his eyes. "Because of last night?"

I looked away, unable to hold his gaze. "You have enough to deal with. Your business burned down because of me. You don't need..." I gestured vaguely, "...this too."

"This?" Novo repeated, setting down his mug. "You mean your Little side?"

I nodded, still not meeting his eyes.

"Matty," he said, his voice impossibly gentle, "look at me."

I forced myself to meet his gaze, expecting to see frustration or disappointment. Instead, I found only concern.

"You are not a burden," he said firmly. "Not in any headspace. Not ever."

"But the fire—"

"Was Harold's doing, not yours," he interrupted. "And my club will rebuild. That's

business. You..." he stepped closer, "you matter more."

Something tight in my chest loosened slightly. "I just don't want to make things harder for you."

Novo shook his head. "Your Little side isn't hard for me. If anything, it's..." he paused, seeming to search for the right words, "it's a privilege. That you trust me enough to show me that part of yourself."

I blinked rapidly, fighting unexpected tears. "But I should be helping. Being strong."

"Strength comes in different forms," Novo said, reaching out to brush my hair from my face. "Sometimes it's fighting, sometimes it's vulnerability. Both are valuable."

His words struck something deep inside me, a truth I'd been running from for years. My Little side wasn't a weakness—it was another part of me, one that deserved care just as much as my adult self.

"I don't know how to balance it," I admitted quietly. "I've spent so long hiding that part of me."

"We'll figure it out together," Novo promised. "No rush, no pressure. Whatever headspace you're in, I'm here."

I nodded, some of the tension leaving my shoulders. "Okay."

"Now," he said, glancing at the half-chopped vegetables, "how about we finish breakfast together?"

I managed a small smile. "Yeah, I'd like that."

As we worked side by side, I felt something shifting inside me—a gradual acceptance of all the parts that made me who I was. Maybe I didn't have to choose between being an adult and having my Little space. Maybe, with Novo, Daddy , or whatever I called him I could just be myself—all of myself.

After breakfast, Daddy made several calls while I cleaned up the kitchen, listening to the deep rumble of his voice as he coordinated with club members about the fire investigation. When he finally hung up, his expression was grim but determined.

"So," I said, drying my hands on a towel, "what's the plan for today?"

"I need to talk to the guys. I'd like you to walk over with me."

I nodded and lifted my chin. He smiled slightly, a flash of pride in his eyes that made my heart flutter. "Then let's get ready."

As I headed to the bedroom to get dressed, I really wanted Daddy to come and do it or even pick out my clothes for me. I sighed and picked up Patches. Why was this so hard?

Chapter sixteen

Matty

Two days later I was struggling with everything because we still didn't have any answers, and worse, I couldn't hide in Daddy's cabin today.

I found myself standing in front of the closet, staring at my options with growing anxiety.

On one side hung the plain t-shirts and jeans I'd brought from my apartment—adult clothes, practical and unremarkable.

On the other side, the colorful t-shirts with dinosaurs and superheroes that Daddy had ordered for me—clothes that made my Little side feel safe and happy.

My fingers brushed against a soft blue t-shirt with a cartoon T-Rex wearing sunglasses. Just touching it made something in my chest loosen, a small bubble of joy rising despite my anxiety.

"Everything okay in here?" Daddy's deep voice came from the doorway.

I snatched my hand back from the shirt, embarrassed to be caught. "Just...trying to decide what to wear."

Daddy came to stand beside me, his eyes taking in my internal struggle without judgment. "The barbecue is just club members and their families," he said carefully.

"No one who isn't safe."

"I know," I replied, still staring at the clothing options. "It's just..."

"Just what, little one?" The endearment slipped out naturally, and I found I didn't mind it.

"What if they laugh at me?" I finally admitted, the fear that had been gnawing at me all morning finally spoken aloud. "If I wear...those." I gestured to the Little clothes.

Daddy's expression hardened slightly. "No one will laugh at you. Not if they want to keep their teeth."

Despite my anxiety, I snorted. "You can't threaten everyone who might think I'm weird."

"Watch me," he said with such calm certainty that I actually believed him. His expression softened as he reached past me, pulling out the dinosaur shirt I'd been eyeing and a pair of comfortable khaki shorts. "Wear what makes you happy, Matty. The club accepts you either way."

I took the clothes from him, running my fingers over the soft fabric. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure," he confirmed. "And if it helps, Annabel will be there too. Bolt texted earlier."

That did help, actually. Knowing there would be another Little present made the idea of embracing that side of myself in public less terrifying.

"Okay," I decided, setting the clothes on the bed. "I'll wear these."

Daddy smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling in a way that made my heart do a little flip.

"Good choice. The T-Rex matches your fierce spirit." Daddy calmly slipped the bathrobe off my shoulders. He hadn't exactly been a Daddy this morning. He'd helped me shower, but we'd gone in together and that had been utterly amazing.

It never ceased to amaze me just how strong he was, but he could hold me up in there easily, as he'd demonstrated this morning.

Then he hadn't exactly been a Daddy at breakfast. Sure he'd cooked, and we'd shared the same plate, but as he pointed out, if we were eating the same thing why dirty two?

He used the same argument with the fork, and then because there was only one, he'd fed me.

I got my own glass of milk, though.

I felt my lower lip stick out a bit at that. It had been a plain glass, and I knew for a fact that there'd been dinosaur ones in the cupboard. There was this really cool one where the T-rex's head and neck were the straw. But that had stayed in the cupboard.

Probably because when Daddy asked me if I wanted it, I'd said no. But he hadn't asked me about sitting on his lap while he fed me, so why did he make me chose a grown-up glass? It was mean and I could easily sulk if I didn't have these new clothes to put on.

When we were ready, Daddy turned me so I was standing in front of the mirror examining my reflection.

The shirt was comfortable, and the dinosaur design was cute.

It was a picture of a baby dinosaur sitting in a teacup with the words Tea-Rex underneath.

The shorts fit perfectly, and I realized Daddy must have paid attention to my sizing when ordering them.

I glanced at Daddy. He hadn't put his shirt on yet, and not that I minded looking at Daddy's muscles, but I wasn't thrilled about Sophie seeing them, assuming she would be there.

"What are you wearing?" If he was going in his usual black t-shirt then I was taking mine off. Daddy grinned.

"Didn't want you having all the fun." He reached into his closet and yanked a t-shirt off a hanger—yep, black—but then slid it over his head and arms and turned around.

I gaped.

There was a picture of a T-rex with tiny arms and the words, "If you're happy and you know it, clap your... oops. I stared at the shirt, then met Daddy's eyes, then promptly burst into tears. Before I knew what had happened, I was sitting bawling into Daddy's neck.

Daddy's arms wrapped around me immediately, one hand cradling the back of my head while the other rubbed soothing circles on my back.

"Hey, hey, what's wrong?" he murmured against my hair. "Don't you like it?"

I hiccupped, trying to get my breathing under control. "I- I-love it," I managed between sobs. "You got a m-matching shirt."

"Of course I did," Daddy said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "We're a team, aren't we?"

That just made me cry harder, burying my face deeper against his neck.

No one had ever done something like this for me before—something so simple yet so meaningful.

Harold had always been mortified by my "childish tendencies," and even the few Doms I'd dated had treated my Little side as something to be indulged in private, never acknowledged publicly.

But here was Daddy, this massive, intimidating biker, voluntarily wearing a dinosaur t-shirt to match mine, ready to stand beside me in front of his entire club.

"I'm s-sorry," I stammered, finally pulling back enough to wipe at my eyes. "I don't know why I'm crying."

Daddy's thumbs gently wiped the tears from my cheeks. "It's okay to be emotional, little one. Big feelings are hard sometimes."

I nodded, taking a shuddering breath. "Thank you. For the shirt. For...everything."

"You don't need to thank me," he said softly. "Seeing you happy is thanks enough."

I managed a wobbly smile, feeling a calm settle over me. With Daddy by my side, wearing his dinosaur shirt, maybe this barbecue wouldn't be so scary after all.

"Ready to go face the hungry hordes?" Daddy asked, his voice lightening as he saw my tears subsiding.

"Ready," I confirmed, reaching for his hand without thinking.

His large fingers enveloped mine, warm and secure, as we headed out of the cabin.

The compound was already buzzing with activity, the smell of grilling meat filling the air.

Several picnic tables had been set up in the grassy area behind the clubhouse, and children of various ages ran around playing tag while adults clustered in small groups, beers in hand.

I felt a momentary flash of panic as we approached, my grip on Daddy's hand tightening. He squeezed back reassuringly.

"Look who's here," he said, nodding toward a corner where Bolt stood flipping burgers at a grill. Beside him, Annabel sat cross-legged on a blanket, Princess the teddy bear in her lap as she carefully arranged what looked like a tea party.

"Matty," she called out when she spotted us, waving enthusiastically. "Come see. I brought Princess's tea set."

I gave Daddy's hand a final squeeze before making my way over to Annabel, oddly relieved to have somewhere specific to go. As I approached, I could see she had an elaborate miniature tea set laid out on a flowery cloth, with Princess seated as the guest of honor.

"Hi," I said, hovering at the edge of her blanket. "That's a really nice tea set."

"Thank you," she beamed, patting the space beside her. "I brought it special for today. Princess has been asking for a proper tea party for forever. Where are Patches and Bear?"

My stomach dropped. I hadn't brought them because I was worried it would make me look stupid. "I... I left them at home," I admitted, my voice small.

Annabel's face fell for just a moment before she brightened again. "That's okay. Princess can share her friends." She reached into a small backpack and pulled out two more stuffies—a small pink unicorn and a floppy-eared rabbit. "This is Sparkles and Hoppy. They can be your tea party guests."

I settled onto the blanket, accepting the offered stuffies with a surprising sense of gratitude. "Thank you. That's really nice."

"Your shirt is super cool," Annabel said, carefully pouring imaginary tea into tiny cups. "I love dinosaurs too."

"Daddy has a matching one," I told her, feeling a flush of pride as I glanced over to where Daddy stood talking with Bolt at the grill.

"That's so sweet," Annabel squealed. "Bolt never wears matching shirts with me. He says they don't make them big enough for his muscles."

I giggled at that, relaxing further as we fell into the rhythm of the tea party.

Annabel was easy to be around—her Little space seemed so natural, so unforced.

She handed me a tiny cup and saucer, instructing me on the proper way to hold it—"pinky out, very fancy"—while explaining all her stuffies' backstories.

I was so absorbed in our game that I didn't notice the two figures approaching until a shadow fell across the blanket.

"Well, isn't this just precious?" came a woman's voice, dripping with sarcasm.

I looked up to find Sophie standing there, arms crossed over her chest, with a prospect I didn't recognize smirking beside her. The prospect wore his cut, but it looked newer than most of the others I'd met.

"Playing with dollies while the men do the real work," Sophie continued, her eyes fixed on me. "How fitting."

Annabel's smile faltered, her hands tightening around Princess.

"We're not hurting anyone," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "And they're stuffies, not dolls."

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The prospect snorted. "Same difference. Grown men playing with toys." He glanced at Sophie with a conspiratorial grin. "Guess we know who wears the pants in their relationship, don't we?"

Something hot and uncomfortable twisted in my stomach. I set down my teacup carefully, not wanting Annabel to see how my hands had started to shake.

"Is there something you need?" I asked, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

Sophie leaned down slightly, her voice lowering but still loud enough for me to hear.

"Just wondering when Bear's charity case is going to stop playing make-believe and start acting like an adult.

The club has real problems to deal with, you know.

Or while you were playing with your dollies, did you miss that people got hurt? "

I flinched, her words hitting exactly where I was most vulnerable.

Daddy had told me the girls were fine and so was the security guard, but they'd been hurt originally.

I knew Sophie wouldn't know it had anything to do with my godfather.

Beside me, Annabel's eyes had gone wide, her lower lip trembling slightly.

"You're being mean," she said quietly. "Daddy says mean people have to leave the tea party."

The prospect laughed. "Hear that, Sophie? We're not invited to the baby party."

"Such a shame," Sophie replied with exaggerated disappointment. "And here I thought we could all share sippy cups and take a nap after."

I felt my cheeks burning with humiliation. Part of me wanted to stand up and argue, to defend myself and Annabel, but the words stuck in my throat. Another part—the Little who'd been so excited about matching dinosaur shirts just minutes ago—wanted to curl up and hide.

"Problem here?" Daisy's voice cut through my spiraling thoughts. "Sophie? Rider?" She appeared beside Sophie, dish towel over her shoulder and a dangerous glint in her eye.

Sophie straightened immediately, her smirk fading. "No problem. Just saying hi."

"Is that right?" Daisy said, her tone deceptively pleasant. "Because from where I was standing, it looked an awful lot like you were harassing my friends. I'm sure Bolt and Bear will be delighted to hear about it."

Rider shifted uncomfortably. "We were just joking around."

"Hilarious," Daisy replied flatly. "Now, I believe Jono needs help moving the beer kegs. And Sophie, Maria's looking for someone to scrub the grill pans." Her expression made it clear these weren't suggestions.

After a moment of tense silence, Sophie rolled her eyes and stalked off toward the clubhouse. Rider then followed, muttering under his breath.

Daisy watched them go, then turned to us with a softer expression. "You two okay?"

Annabel nodded quickly, though she still clutched Princess tightly to her chest. "We're fine. Princess is a little upset, though."

"Well, we can't have that," Daisy said, crouching down to eye level with the stuffie. "Princess, I promise those party poopers won't bother you again. And if they do, you just let me know, okay?"

Annabel giggled, some of the tension leaving her small frame. Daisy turned her attention to me, her eyes assessing.

"You good, sweetie?"

I nodded, though I wasn't entirely sure it was true. "Yeah. Thanks, Daisy."

"Don't let them get to you," she said, patting my shoulder. "Sophie's just jealous because Bear never looked at her the way he looks at you."

I blinked, surprised by her frankness. "Really?"

"Oh honey, yes. She's been trying to get Bear's attention for years, but he never gave her the time of day." Daisy's eyes crinkled with amusement. "And now here you come along, and he's wearing matching dinosaur shirts. That's gotta sting."

Despite everything, I felt a small bloom of warmth in my chest. "I didn't know." I mean, Daddy had told me but it was nice to hear from someone else.

"Well, now you do," Daisy said, straightening up. "You two enjoy your tea party. I'll make sure no one else bothers you."

As she walked away, Annabel leaned closer to me. "Daisy's the best," she whispered. "She always makes the meanies go away."

"She's pretty awesome," I agreed, picking up my teacup again, though my hands still trembled slightly.

"Are you really okay?" Annabel asked, her expression serious beyond her Little persona. "Sophie can be super nasty."

I hesitated, then admitted, "It's hard. I'm still getting used to...all this." I gestured vaguely to encompass the tea party, my dinosaur shirt, the whole Little dynamic.

Annabel nodded sagely. "It was hard for me too, at first. I used to only be Little at home with Bolt. But then I realized something."

"What's that?"

"The people who matter don't mind, and the people who mind don't matter." She smiled, adjusting Princess's tutu. "That's what Daddy always says."

I considered her words, finding unexpected wisdom in them. "Your Daddy sounds pretty smart."

"He is," she agreed proudly. "Almost as smart as Princess." She giggled, then held out the teapot. "More tea?"

I smiled, feeling some of the tension leave my body. "Yes, please."

We continued our tea party, and gradually I relaxed again, letting myself enjoy the simple pleasure of make-believe with someone who understood.

Across the yard, I occasionally caught glimpses of Daddy at the grill with Bolt, his eyes finding mine every so often, checking in silently.

Each time our gazes met, he'd give me a small smile or a wink, and something in my chest would settle a little more.

About twenty minutes later, I felt a large presence behind me and looked up to find Daddy standing there, a plate in each hand.

"I heard there was a fancy tea party happening," he said, his deep voice gentle. "Thought the guests might be hungry."

"Daddy," I exclaimed, then immediately blushed at how easily the word had slipped out in public.

But Daddy just smiled, his eyes warming at my greeting.

He lowered himself to sit cross-legged on the edge of the blanket, carefully setting down plates loaded with burgers, corn on the cob, and potato salad.

"These look yummy," Annabel said, setting Princess aside to make room. "Thank you, Daddy Bear."

"You're welcome, sweetheart," Daddy replied, then turned to me. "Everything okay over here, little one?"

I hesitated, not wanting to cause trouble, but something in his steady gaze made lying impossible. "Sophie and some prospect were being mean," I admitted quietly. "But Daisy made them go away."

Daddy's expression darkened briefly, his jaw tightening. "What did they say?"

"Just...stuff about me being childish," I mumbled, looking down at my plate. "And something about me being a charity case."

A low growl rumbled in Daddy's chest. "Which prospect?"

"The new one," Annabel supplied helpfully. "The skinny one with the bad haircut."

"Rider," Daddy muttered, his eyes scanning the yard. "I'll handle it."

"Please don't make a scene," I whispered, grabbing his arm. "It's not worth it."

Daddy covered my hand with his, his touch gentle despite the anger I could feel radiating from him. "No one talks to you like that, baby boy. Not in my club."

"Daddy says the same thing," Annabel nodded sagely. "That's why nobody's mean to me anymore."

"Smart man, Bolt," Daddy said, his expression softening as he looked between us. "Now eat up before it gets cold. Bolt's been standing over that grill for hours."

I took a bite of my burger, surprised by how hungry I was. As we ate, Bolt joined us on the blanket, his massive frame looking comically large next to Annabel's dainty tea set. He greeted me warmly, complimenting my dinosaur shirt and asking if I was enjoying the barbecue.

"It's nice," I said honestly. "Different from what I expected."

"In a good way, I hope," Bolt replied with a wink.

I nodded, feeling unexpectedly comfortable in this strange mix of biker culture and Little space. Annabel chattered happily about the tea party while Bolt listened with

complete attention, treating her stuffie-related concerns with the same seriousness he might give club business.

Watching them, I felt a pang of something like longing. They had such an easy rhythm, such obvious comfort with their dynamic. Would Daddy and I ever have that? Or was our relationship too complicated by revenge plots and murder attempts to ever be so straightforward?

After we'd finished eating, Daddy leaned close to my ear. "I need to talk to Jono for a few minutes. Will you be okay here with Bolt and Annabel?" I nodded happily, but just after he walked away, Annabel announced she needed to go potty.

Bolt glanced over at me, and I assured him I was fine, and pointed to Daisy, and said I was going to talk to her.

Besides Tik Tac was also hovering as usual, so I had added security.

Bolt nodded and scooped Annabel up, and I stood, intending to go over to where Daisy and Maria were, just as my phone buzzed in my pocket.

I was surprised at first because no one called my new phone except Ricky and Daddy, so I fished it out and read the text.

Very cute. Hope you're having a nice party. Not sure your new friend will look as pretty after we set fire to the clubhouse she just walked into. Bombs planted just like the whorehouse. Your only chance to stop it happening is go back to your cabin. Now.

And we're watching.

My blood turned to ice. I looked up frantically, scanning the area. Daisy had just

disappeared into the clubhouse with Maria. Annabel and Bolt were heading toward the bathrooms in there. Daddy was deep in conversation with Jono near the grill, his back to me.

I froze, paralyzed with indecision. If I ran to Daddy, whoever was watching would see and set off the fire bombs, and if it was someone here, they obviously had access. There were a lot of people. A lot of kids.

No. I couldn't let anyone else get hurt because of me.

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With my heart pounding, I casually pocketed my phone and began walking toward the cabin, trying to appear normal while fighting the urge to sprint. I kept my eyes forward, not daring to look for Daddy. If they were watching, they'd know if I tried to signal for help.

The distance to the cabin felt endless. My legs trembled with each step, my breath coming in short, panicked gasps that I fought to control. I thought of Daisy's kindness, of Maria's warm smile, of all the people inside the clubhouse who had no idea of the danger.

As soon as I reached the cabin, I slipped inside and locked the door behind me. My hands shook so badly I could barely manage the deadbolt. I pressed my back against the door, sliding down until I hit the floor, tears streaming down my face.

The phone buzzed again in my pocket.

Good boy. Now stay there. And remember, we're watching. Any attempt to warn them, and we push the button.

I pulled my knees to my chest, wrapping my arms around them as I rocked back and forth. What had I done? I'd walked right into their trap. Now I was alone, and Daddy wouldn't know where I'd gone. He'd be worried, maybe angry, but at least he'd be alive.

Unless there was no bomb at all. What if this was just a trick to get me alone?

The thought had barely formed when I heard a soft knock at the back door.

I froze, my breath catching in my throat.

The knock came again, more insistent this time.

I rose shakily to my feet, looking around for something—anything—I could use as a weapon.

My eyes landed on a heavy cast-iron skillet hanging above the stove.

I grabbed it, the weight reassuring in my trembling hands, and crept toward the back door.

At the same time, my phone buzzed. I pulled out my phone to check the message.

Open the back door now or we blow the clubhouse. Your choice.

My blood turned to ice. If I ran, people would die. If I screamed, people would die. If I warned Daddy somehow, people would die.

With a trembling hand, I reached for the deadbolt on the back door. The metal was cool beneath my fingers as I slid it open, every instinct screaming at me to run. But I couldn't. Not when so many lives hung in the balance.

I gripped the skillet tighter in my right hand as I turned the knob with my left, pulling the door open just a crack.

"Smart boy," came a voice from outside. "Now put down whatever weapon you're holding and step back."

How did they know? I hesitated, the skillet suddenly feeling inadequate against whatever waited outside.

"Three seconds before I press this button," the voice warned. "One..."

I dropped the skillet with a clatter and stepped back, my heart hammering so hard I thought it might burst from my chest.

The door swung open, revealing two men in dark clothing, their faces obscured by black ski masks. The taller one held what looked like a remote detonator in his gloved hand. The other pulled a black package out of his pocket.

"Not a sound," the tall one warned, stepping inside. "You know what happens if you try anything."

I nodded, tears streaming silently down my face as I backed farther into the kitchen. The second man followed, closing the door quietly behind him.

"Stand still," he ordered, and I watched in horrified fascination as the second man pulled out a syringe.

"This won't hurt for long," he said almost gently. "Just a little pinch."

And that was it. Panic gripped me and I turned to run.

I made it two steps before cruel hands bit into my arms and a hand slapped over my mouth, just as a sharp pain registered in my neck.

I struggled, but after a few seconds it was like trying to swim in quicksand.

My arms felt heavy and before I knew it, one of them slung me over his shoulder.

The world tilted once, twice, then everything went dark.

"Package secured," someone said from very far away.

Then nothing.

Novo

I finished my conversation with Jono, my eyes automatically scanning the yard for Matty.

He wasn't sitting on the rug. Not unusual—he'd probably gone to talk to Daisy or get another drink.

But as I continued to search, a prickle of unease crawled up my spine.

I couldn't spot him anywhere. I approached Annabel and Bolt, who were returning from the clubhouse.

"Have you seen Matty?" I asked, trying to keep my voice casual despite the growing tension in my gut.

Bolt shook his head. "He said he was going to talk to Daisy while we went to the bathroom."

I nodded my thanks and made my way to where Daisy stood by the food table, arranging a platter of cookies.

"Daisy, have you seen Matty?"

She looked up, surprised. "No, honey. Haven't seen him since I chased Sophie off. Everything okay?"

The unease solidified into dread. "When did you last see him?"

"Maybe fifteen minutes ago? He was still with Annabel at the tea party." Her expression shifted as she registered my concern. "Bear, what's wrong?"

"I can't find him," I said, already scanning the compound again. "He wouldn't just wander off."

Not after Sophie's comments. Not after everything that had happened. My instincts were screaming that something was very wrong.

"Jono," I called, motioning him over urgently. "Matty's missing."

Jono's expression hardened instantly. "How long?"

"Fifteen, maybe twenty minutes. I was talking to you, took my eyes off him." Self-recrimination burned in my chest. After everything that had happened, how could I have let him out of my sight?

"Prospects," Jono barked, and all four hurried over. "Search the compound for Matty. Every building, every corner. Now." I caught the sneer on Rider's face before it was quickly hidden, but I didn't have time to deal with that now.

I was already moving toward our cabin, breaking into a run as soon as I cleared the crowd. The door was locked when I reached it, which wasn't unusual—Matty knew to keep it secured. I fumbled with my key, hands less steady than I would have liked.

"Matty?" I called as I pushed the door open. "Little one, are you in here?"

Silence greeted me. I moved through the cabin quickly, checking each room. The bedroom was empty, and the bathroom too. Nothing seemed disturbed until I reached

the kitchen and saw the cast iron skillet on the floor near the back door.

My blood ran cold. The deadbolt on the back door was unlocked—something I never would have left that way.

Matty had tried to defend himself.

I pulled out my phone and called Jono. "Back door of my cabin was unlocked. Skillet on the floor. Someone took him."

"Fuck," Jono breathed. "I'm calling everyone in. Check his phone—can you track it?"

I'd already set up tracking on Matty's new phone after the first attempt on his life. I pulled out my own device, opening the app with trembling fingers. The signal showed the phone was still in the cabin. I swept through the rooms again, finally spotting it on the kitchen counter.

"His phone's here," I told Jono, my voice tight with barely controlled panic. "They made him leave it."

I picked up the device, noticing it wasn't locked. When I checked the screen, my stomach dropped. There were a few text messages from an unknown number.

The first: "Very cute. Hope you're having a nice party. Not sure your new friend will look as pretty after we set fire to the clubhouse she just walked into. Bombs planted just like the whorehouse. Your only chance to stop it happening is go back to your cabin. Now. And we're watching."

The second, sent a few minutes later: "Good boy. Now stay there. And remember, we're watching. Any attempt to warn them, and we push the button."

And finally, the last message: "Open the back door now or we blow the clubhouse. Your choice."

"Jesus Christ," I breathed, rage and fear colliding in my chest. "Jono, get everyone out of the clubhouse. They threatened to bomb it to lure Matty away."

"On it," Jono replied, and I could hear him already shouting orders. "Are there specifics?"

"I don't know," I admitted, scanning the texts again. "Could be a bluff to isolate him, but after the strip club..."

"Not taking chances," Jono said firmly. "I'm evacuating now."

I ended the call, my mind racing. Matty had gone willingly to protect everyone. He'd walked into danger alone rather than risk the lives of people he barely knew. The thought made my chest ache with a complicated mix of pride and terror.

I moved through the cabin again, searching for any clue about where they might have taken him. The back door opened onto a secluded path that led to a service road—perfect for a quiet extraction.

My phone rang—Digger.

"Bear, we've got something. Club security picked up a black van leaving by the service road about fifteen minutes ago. No plates visible."

"Direction?" I demanded, already heading for my bike.

"Headed east toward the highway. Jono's organizing pursuit teams now."

"I want anything you can get, traffic cams, everything," I ordered. "And call Outback. I want to know if Coombes has moved from his estate."

"Already on it. Outback says Coombes has been home all day, but he made a series of calls right before the van was spotted."

I swore under my breath. Coombes was too smart to dirty his hands directly, but this had his fingerprints all over it.

"Bear," Digger said, his voice uncharacteristically gentle, "we'll find him."

I ended the call without responding, running back to the clubhouse. "Jono," I bellowed just as the members checking the building all came out shaking their heads.

"It's safe."

Not that I doubted it, because there was no way even a trusted member could get away with planting bombs. Then I registered the texts. I stopped by Jono and practically dragged him out of earshot. "I found his phone and whoever was texting him had eyes on him. It has to be someone here."

Jono's mouth firmed. "Likely possibilities?"

"Sophie and Rider for starters."

He nodded and immediately had Tex, Tik Tac and Gunner secure them both and drag them to the basement. Sophie started screeching, but Rider looked like he was gonna pass out. Bolt stepped up. "Annabel is with Daisy. It's been a while but I'm with you."

I nodded and glanced at Jono. "I'm doing this." If they were involved, I was going to

find out.

Chapter seventeen

Matty

I woke to the sensation of something cold and metallic encircling my neck. My eyelids felt impossibly heavy, but I forced them open, blinking as the world slowly came into focus.

The first thing I registered was that I was sitting in a chair, my wrists bound to the armrests. The second was that I wasn't alone.

"Welcome back, pet," said a voice I'd hoped never to hear again.

James Degrassi sat across from me, legs crossed casually, watching me with the detached interest of someone observing an insect under glass. He looked exactly as I remembered—perfectly tailored suit, silver cufflinks, that thin smile that never reached his eyes.

I tried to move, only to discover my ankles were also secured to the chair legs. The metal around my neck, I realized with growing horror, was a collar—heavy and unyielding. A chain ran from it to Degrassi's hand.

"Where am I?" I asked, fighting to keep my voice steady. "What do you want?"

"This?" He waved his hand airily. "This is a temporary holding place. As for what I want..." He stood, moving behind me, his fingers trailing across my shoulders. "I want to finish what we started. Before you so rudely ran away."

I shuddered at his touch, memories flooding back—the pain, the humiliation, the fear. "Harold sent you," I said, not a question.

Degrassi circled back into view, smiling thinly. "Coombes and I have a mutually beneficial arrangement. He wanted you gone; I wanted you back. But there's been a slight change of plans."

My heart sank. "What change?"

"Harold was quite insistent that you should meet with an unfortunate accident." Degrassi shrugged, as if discussing the weather. "But I convinced him there was a better solution. One where he still gets what he wants, and I get what I want."

"Which is?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

"You, boy. " His fingers touched my cheek, and I flinched away. "Properly trained this time. No more of this childish regression. No more tantrums. Just instant obedience."

"My husband will find me," I said, clinging to the thought of Daddy like a lifeline. "He'll tear this place apart."

Degrassi laughed, genuinely amused. "Your 'husband'? The biker? Oh, Matthew." He shook his head as if I'd told a particularly amusing joke. "That man is a mercenary, nothing more. Do you really think he cares about you? He married you for money."

The truth of his words stung, even though I knew there was more to it now. "You're wrong about him."

"Am I?" Degrassi walked to a small table and picked up what looked like a remote control.

"Harold told me everything. How your 'Daddy' met with him just days ago to discuss a buyout.

Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars to walk away from you.

" He clicked his tongue. "Not a very devoted husband, is he? "

I tried to keep my expression neutral, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of seeing my doubt. "And he turned him down," I said fiercely.

"Ah, yes, but he's now lost a million-dollar business that no insurance company will touch, as it's been proven arson." Degrassi said almost casually. "He might not want to give you up just yet, but do you think he'll feel the same when the next bar goes poof?" He flicked his fingers.

I swallowed my whimper. "Does my godfather know—"

"Your godfather is impatient and sloppy, and is doing an excellent job of running all his businesses into the ground," Degrassi replied dismissively.

He moved closer, his fingers playing with the chain attached to my collar.

"But I made him a better offer. You see, your continued existence is actually quite valuable to me—as long as you're under proper control. "

"What are you talking about?"

"Your trust fund, Matthew. With the right paperwork—which we've already prepared—your new lawyer is going to make everything tidier.

You will get an immediate annulment and your new husband—me—will take charge

of your inheritance.

He smiled coldly. "Your biker gets his payout to keep quiet.

Harold recoups his losses, and I get my boy back and my continued expenses very generously paid. Everyone wins."

"Except me," I whispered.

"Oh, you'll adjust," Degrassi assured me, his tone almost gentle. "You always were so adaptable. Remember how quickly you learned to kneel properly? How fast you picked up the correct way to present yourself?"

I closed my eyes, trying to block out his words and the memories they evoked. "Novo won't do it."

"He will when he sees what happens if he doesn't." Degrassi turned his phone screen to me showing security footage of the Diamond Kings compound. "We have eyes everywhere, Matthew. Your precious Daddy, his club, all those children at the barbecue..." He let the threat hang in the air.

Fear clawed at my throat. "You're bluffing."

"Am I?" He zoomed in on one of the cameras, showing Daisy organizing the evacuation of the clubhouse.

"They're in quite a panic right now, aren't they?"

Searching for bombs that don't exist—at least, not yet.

"His smile turned cruel. "The strip club was just a demonstration.

Imagine what we could do to a building full of families. "

I strained against my restraints, fury and terror making my voice shake. "You're a monster."

"I'm a businessman," Degrassi corrected. "And you're an investment that's about to pay significant dividends." He set down the remote and moved to a cabinet on the far wall. "Now, let's discuss your new rules."

When he opened the cabinet, I saw an array of implements that made my blood run cold. Paddles, whips, canes—tools designed for pain and submission. Degrassi selected what looked like a riding crop, testing it against his palm with a sharp snap that made me flinch.

"Rule one: You will address me as sir at all times." He approached slowly, the crop tapping rhythmically against his leg. "Rule two: That childish headspace you retreat to? Forbidden. Rule three: Complete obedience, without hesitation."

I kept my mouth shut, refusing to acknowledge his rules. Defiance might be foolish, but it was all I had left.

Degrassi sighed, as if disappointed by my silence. "I see your time away has made you forget your training." He reached out, gripping my chin painfully. "That's alright. We have all the time in the world to relearn."

"They'll find me," I repeated, meeting his gaze. "Novo won't stop looking."

"Such faith," Degrassi mocked. "Let me show you something."

He released my chin and took out his phone again. After typing briefly, he turned the screen toward me. It showed a news article with the headline: "Biker Gang Violence

Escalates: Strip Club Torched in Territorial Dispute."

"The official story," Degrassi explained. "A rival gang burned down your husband's establishment. The police are already focusing their investigation in that direction—with a little help from some well-placed bribes."

My heart sank. If the police believed it was gang-related, they wouldn't look for other connections.

"And when you disappear?" Degrassi continued. "Well, the tragic story writes itself. Young man caught in the crossfire of gang warfare, body never recovered." He shrugged. "Your biker moves on, seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars richer."

"You don't know him," I insisted, though doubt crept in like poison. Would Novo really keep searching when everyone believed me dead? When his club was threatened?

"I know men like him," Degrassi replied confidently. "Everyone has a price. His is just higher than most, and don't forget he's been bought once."

They didn't know. My heart leapt. They thought Daddy was doing this for the money and he wasn't.

He set the crop aside and pulled a syringe from his pocket. "Now, I think we need to start your reconditioning. This will help you relax into your new role, as I have to go out for a few hours, and I don't want you getting any foolish ideas."

I struggled against my restraints, panic rising. "No, don't—"

"Shh," he soothed, as if comforting a child. "Fighting my will only makes things worse. You remember that, don't you?"

As he approached with the needle, I desperately searched for anything that might help me. The room was windowless, the door heavy and likely locked. The only furniture besides my chair was Degrassi's desk, the cabinet of implements, and a bed in the corner that made my skin crawl.

"Please," I whispered, "you don't have to do this. We can work something out."

Degrassi's eyes glittered with amusement. "We already are working something out, pet. This is just to help you understand your new reality."

As the needle approached my arm, I made one last desperate attempt. "Harold will kill me eventually, anyway. You know that, right? Once he has control of my money, I'm worthless to him."

Degrassi paused, his head tilting slightly. "Perhaps. But by then, you'll be properly trained and completely mine. Your godfather's plans for you aren't the same as mine. My plans..." His fingers stroked my cheek, making my skin crawl. "Well, let's just say I have a long-term investment in mind."

The needle slid into my arm before I could respond. Almost immediately, warmth spread through my veins, making my limbs heavy and my thoughts fuzzy. I fought against wanting to sleep with everything I had.

"That's it," Degrassi murmured, his voice seeming to come from far away. "Let go. When you wake up, we'll begin your real training."

As my vision blurred, I clung to one thought: Daddy would come for me. He had to. Not because of money or revenge, but because...because he cared. He'd said so, hadn't he? The memory of his voice calling me "little one" floated through my drug-addled mind, a lifeline in the darkness.

Then nothing.

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I drifted in and out of consciousness, aware of movement, of hands on my body, changing my clothes, of being moved to the bed.

Time became meaningless—I couldn't tell if hours or days had passed.

Each time I surfaced, Degrassi was there, speaking in that calm, controlled voice about rules and expectations and consequences.

When I finally woke fully, I was no longer in the chair.

Instead, I lay on the bed, still clothed but in different garments—plain cotton pajamas that reminded me of hospital clothes.

The collar remained around my neck, but my hands and feet were free.

The chain still attached to the collar was now secured to a ring on the wall, allowing limited movement around the room.

"Ah, there you are," Degrassi said from his position at the desk. "I was beginning to think I'd miscalculated the dosage."

I pushed myself up slowly, my head pounding. "How long?" My voice came out as a rasp.

"Just over twenty-four hours," he replied, checking his watch. "Enough time for the search for you to become quite frantic, I imagine."

Twenty-four hours. A day of my life gone, and Novo was probably going out of his mind with worry. Or had he already given up? Accepted Harold's offer?

No. I wouldn't believe that. Couldn't.

"Water?" I managed to ask.

"Beg," he ordered, a sly smile on his face.

I closed my lips mutinously, and he laughed.

"Just this once I will allow that defiance, but consider this your final time." He walked to a small refrigerator in the corner and retrieved a bottle of water.

"You'll find I can be quite reasonable when you're cooperative.

" He approached the bed, unscrewing the cap before handing me the bottle.

My hands trembled as I accepted it, desperately trying to fight the lingering effects of whatever drug he'd given me.

"Slowly," he cautioned as I gulped the water. "If you make yourself sick, you will be forced to clean it up yourself."

I forced myself to take smaller sips, hating how his concern mimicked care. It was all part of the conditioning—alternating cruelty with kindness until the boundaries blurred, until any small mercy felt like a gift to be grateful for.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked when I'd drained half the bottle. "You could have just killed me like Harold wanted."

Degrassi smiled, perching on the edge of the bed at a distance that was both too close and deliberately non-threatening.

"Because you're special, Matthew. You always were.

Most submissives break predictably—but you?

" He shook his head in what looked disturbingly like admiration.

"You have depths I've barely begun to explore. "

I shuddered at his words. "I'm not your submissive. I never consented to this."

"Consent is such a fluid concept," he replied dismissively. "You consented when you first knelt for me. Everything since has merely been...refinement."

"I was manipulated," I said, anger giving me strength. "Harold set me up. You both did."

Degrassi sighed, as if disappointed by my lack of understanding.

"Harold sought a solution to his financial problems. I sought a perfect subject for my particular interests.

You were the answer to both our needs." He leaned forward, eyes gleaming.

"And now, with the proper motivation, you'll be exactly what I require. "

"Which is?"

"The perfect combination of submission and spirit," he said, his voice taking on an

almost reverent quality. "Broken enough to obey, but not so broken that you become...boring."

My stomach churned. "And if I refuse?"

Degrassi's expression hardened. "Then people die. Starting with your biker friends. One by one."

I looked away, unwilling to let him see how effectively his threat had landed. "You can't keep me here forever."

"I don't need forever," he replied calmly. "Just another day to complete the financial arrangements. After that..." He shrugged. "We'll relocate somewhere more comfortable. I have properties overseas where no one would ever think to look for you."

The thought of being spirited away to some remote location, truly beyond all hope of rescue, sent ice through my veins. I had to stall, had to give Novo time to find me.

"Harold will double-cross you," I said, forcing myself to meet Degrassi's eyes. "Once he has the money, he'll have no reason to risk me being alive. Or to keep paying you."

"Oh, I've considered that possibility," Degrassi replied with a thin smile.

"Which is why I've taken certain...precautions."

Documents implicating Harold in various financial improprieties, held by my attorney with instructions to release them should anything happen to me.

" He leaned closer. "Your godfather isn't the only one who knows how to play this game, boy. "

I swallowed hard, trying to think through the fog still clouding my mind. There had to be a way out of this, some angle I wasn't seeing.

"What about the trust?" I asked. "There are conditions—the marriage has to last two years."

"Easily managed," Degrassi said with a dismissive wave. "The marriage to your biker will be annulled on grounds of coercion. You are still under the two-year deadline, so no legal manipulation is necessary."

"That won't work," I insisted, desperation making my voice sharper. "I would have to agree—"

"All manageable problems when you have enough money and influence," Degrassi cut in. "Now, I think you are sufficiently awake enough to begin your training. Let's see if you can remember to kneel. Half of me is hoping you will be sloppy. We both know how much I love to correct your mistakes."

Chapter eighteen

Novo

"I'm telling you, I don't know anything," Sophie screamed, straining against the zip ties securing her to the metal chair. Her mascara ran in black rivulets down her cheeks, but I couldn't find any sympathy for her.

"You've been trying to get close to me for years," I growled, leaning down so we were eye to eye. "Always hanging around, always asking questions about club business. And suddenly Matty disappears and there's a convenient bomb threat?"

"I didn't do anything," she sobbed. "I was jealous, okay? Is that what you want to hear? I was jealous of your little boy-toy, but I would never betray the club."

I slammed my palm against the wall beside her head, making her flinch. "Someone had eyes inside our compound. Someone helped those men take Matty."

Bolt placed a hand on my shoulder. "Bear," he said quietly. "She's not breaking. And we're wasting time."

I knew he was right, but rage and fear made it hard to think clearly. Every minute that passed was another minute Matty was in danger.

"What about Rider?" I asked, straightening up.

"Jono is with him now," Bolt replied. "So far, he's just crying and pissing himself."

I ran a hand through my hair in frustration. "Bring him in. Let's see if facing both of us changes his tune."

Bolt nodded and left the room. Sophie continued to sob quietly, but I ignored her, pacing the small basement room like a caged animal. When the door opened again, Jono shoved Rider through. The prospect stumbled and fell to his knees, his face pale with terror.

"Please," he whimpered, looking up at me. "I swear I don't know anything about Matty."

I hauled him up by his cut and slammed him into the chair opposite Sophie. "Twenty-four hours ago, you were making fun of him at the barbecue. Called him childish, said he was playing with dollies."

"I was being an asshole," he shrieked. "Just to get in with Sophie, I admit it. But I didn't hurt him, I swear."

I studied his face, looking for any sign of deception. "Who recruited you to the club, Rider?"

"Brick," he replied immediately. "He's my cousin's friend."

"And what were you doing when the alarm about Matty went out?"

Rider's eyes widened. "I was helping set up the beer kegs with Cruise. You can ask him."

I exchanged glances with Jono. Cruise had indeed mentioned Rider helping with the kegs when we'd been coordinating the search parties.

"And your phone?" I demanded. "Where was it during the barbecue?"

"Jono has it," Rider said quickly. "I swear I didn't text anyone except my girlfriend.

Check it if you want." Jono nodded so he'd obviously checked.

Something about his earnestness rang true.

I'd been so focused on Sophie and Rider because of their comments to Matty that I might have overlooked the real traitor.

"Who else was recruited around the same time as you?" I asked, a new suspicion forming.

Rider thought for a moment. "Just me and Tik Tac. We were the only new prospects in the last six months."

Tik Tac. The quiet one who always seemed to be hovering nearby. Who'd been assigned to security after the first attack on Matty.

"Jono," I said quietly. "Where's Tik Tac now?"

Jono's eyes narrowed as he caught my meaning. "He volunteered to check the perimeter cameras. Said he might be able to find footage of the van."

"With access to our security system," I muttered. "Son of a bitch."

"I'll get Digger to see what he looked at," Jono said, already pulling out his own device.

I turned back to Rider and Sophie. "If either of you is lying to me, I'll be back. And

next time, I won't be asking questions."

Sophie sobbed harder, but Rider just nodded frantically. "I'm not lying, Bear. I swear on my mother."

I left them tied up—we couldn't risk either of them warning Tik Tac, if they were involved after all—and followed Jono up the stairs.

"Digger," Jono barked into his phone. "Find Tik Tac. Now."

As we emerged into the main room of the clubhouse, Cruise approached, his expression grim. "Tik Tac's gone. His bike's missing, and the security footage from the east gate shows him leaving about thirty minutes ago."

"He disabled the cameras we have on the service road," Digger called from his laptop. "But he forgot about the gas station across from the highway entrance. His bike passed their cameras heading east ten minutes ago."

"That's our confirmation," I growled. "Get me everything on Tik Tac. Real name, known associates, properties. Anything that might tell us why he's involved."

Digger's fingers flew across his keyboard. "His real name is Timothy Kowalski. Goes by Tim or Tik Tac. Former military—discharged three years ago. No criminal record."

Digger kept scrolling. "His father owns a small construction company in town—Kowalski & Sons.

" Digger's voice trailed off as he pulled up another document.

"Someone died on site around five years ago. They proved it was negligence and..."

Digger whistled.

“The whole thing went away. The company settled out of court and kept their licenses.

" He frowned. “The majority of their work since has been with Coombes Construction.”

"Blood money," I growled. "Coombes bought his loyalty."

"Or threatened his family's livelihood," Bolt suggested. "Either way, we need to find him."

"His phone just pinged at a gas station on Highway 16," Digger reported. "Heading out of town and could be going to Coombes's estate."

"Let's move," I ordered, already heading for the door.

Jono grabbed my arm. "Bear, wait. We need a plan for when we catch up with him. We can't just storm in. The place is like a fortress."

"Watch me," I snarled, yanking my arm free.

"And get yourself killed?" Jono countered. "How does that help Matty?"

The mention of Matty's name cut through my rage. He was right. Charging in blindly wouldn't save Matty—it would just get me killed or arrested, leaving him with no one to rescue him.

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to think. "Digger, what else do we know about Tik Tac? Does his father have any other properties or connections?"

Digger's fingers continued to fly across the keyboard. "Nothing I can see. Just his home, the main offices in town, and two equipment warehouses."

"Addresses for the warehouses?" I demanded.

Digger read them off. "Neither of them are near Coombes place."

I swore. If we picked the wrong place, it would waste precious minutes where fuck knew what was happening to Matty.

"Bear, we can't be everywhere. We need to get to Tik Tac and see what he knows.

I hated it, but Jono was right. "Agreed. Cruise, you and three others head straight for Coombes's estate. Jono, Bolt, Tex, we follow Tik Tac."

"I'm coming too," a voice said from behind me. I turned to find Daisy standing there, a determined look on her face.

"This isn't your fight," I told her.

"The hell it isn't," she replied, crossing her arms. "That boy was at my table, eating my cookies. And someone took him on my watch. I'm coming. Besides, you're all going on your bikes, and you need a truck to bring Matty back in. You've left the others guarding the clubhouse."

I swallowed hard and Daisy met my gaze. We both knew she meant if Matty was hurt.

"Fine," I conceded. "But you stay back until we secure the scene."

"I'll bring my first-aid kit," she said, already moving. "I'm going to have Maria get

the doc to be on standby.”

Twenty minutes later, we didn't need to say anything as Digger confirmed Tik Tac had stopped at a modest single-story home on Maple Street. The mailbox confirmed what Digger had already told us over comms—this was his mother's place.

"Wonder why he stopped here first," Jono muttered as we parked our bikes around the corner, out of sight. "Family goodbye or getting instructions?"

I watched the house through narrowed eyes. "Or grabbing something Coombes needs."

Bolt adjusted his earpiece. "Digger says Tik Tac's phone is still active inside. No outgoing calls yet."

We waited, engines off, the afternoon sun beating down on us. Daisy and Bolt were on their way in the truck. Every minute that passed felt like an eternity, my mind conjuring increasingly horrific scenarios of what Matty might be enduring.

"Movement," Tex whispered, nodding toward the house.

Tik Tac emerged, his posture rigid with tension. He glanced around furtively before heading to his bike, a small duffel bag now slung over his shoulder. Whatever was in there, it wasn't clothes—the bag hung too heavily, its contents dense.

"Now," I ordered, and we moved as one.

Jono and Tex circled wide to block the street exit while Gunner and I approached directly. Tik Tac didn't notice us until I was almost upon him, his eyes widening in shock as he fumbled for something in his cut.

I tackled him before he could reach whatever weapon he was going for, driving him to the ground with enough force to knock the wind from his lungs. The duffel bag and a phone skidded across the asphalt.

"Where is he?" I growled, pinning him with my forearm across his throat.

"Bear, I can explain—" he choked out.

I increased the pressure. "You've got ten seconds."

Tik Tac's eyes bulged as he struggled for air. "My dad," he gasped. "I had to."

I eased up slightly, just enough to let him speak. "Keep talking."

"Coombes has been blackmailing him for years," Ti-Tac wheezed.

"There was an accident at the construction site—it wasn't an accident.

Dad cut corners on safety equipment to save money because the recession meant he was losing everything.

When that worker died, Coombes stepped in.

Paid off the family, the inspectors, everyone. "

"In exchange for what?" Bolt demanded, retrieving the duffel bag and checking its contents.

"Loyalty," Tik Tac said bitterly. "Dad's company does whatever dirty work Coombes needs. Builds to less-than-code when required, demolishes 'problems,' no questions asked."

"And you?" I pressed, my voice deadly quiet. "What was your price for betraying the club?"

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He shook his head. "I was deployed when everything went down, and I came out to find Dad up to his eyeballs in this mess. Mom..." he swallowed. "She's just finished her second round of chemo. She can't...she's not strong enough for this. If Dad went to jail, it'd kill her."

"Fuck," I snapped and let Tik Tac go.

"But he won't hurt him," Tik Tac rushed out. "One of his old Doms has done a deal with Coombes. I said I couldn't be involved if he was going to get hurt. Coombes told me this guy has got a ton of fancy foreign houses, and he just wants to take Matty and spoil him."

My blood ran cold. "And you fucking believed him?" I roared.

Tik-Tac flinched under my fury, his face ashen. "I didn't have a choice."

"There's always a choice," Jono said, his voice low and dangerous. "You chose wrong."

I grabbed Tik Tac by his cut, hauling him to his feet. "Who's this Dom? Where did they take Matty?"

"I don't know his name," Tik Tac stammered. "Coombes just said he had history with Matty."

My mind raced, connecting dots. "Degrassi," I growled. "James Degrassi."

Tik Tac's eyes widened in recognition. "Yeah, that sounds right. Rich guy, fancy suits."

"Where?" I demanded, shaking him. "Where would they take him?"

"I don't know exactly," Tik Tac said, his voice breaking.

"What about your dad's places?"

He shook his head then paused. "My dad is keeping a warehouse sitting empty, which makes no sense."

"Address," Jono snapped, already pulling out his phone. Tik Tac rattled it off, while Jono snatched his duffel and looked through it. A couple of changes of clothes, a small amount of cash.

"Mom has a sister who has a place up in the mountains. I was going to get it ready. Then Aunty Kath is bringing Mom up there tomorrow now that she's finished the treatment."

Jono glanced at me. "We can't let him go. All it would take is them threatening his mom."

Tik Tac met my gaze. "I'm sorry. I really liked Matty, but Mom only has me. Dad is useless. I couldn't do anything until she'd finished the treatment. They only contacted me when they found out about you."

"My worry is if they have him in some warehouse, the moment they see us, he'll be—" Jono didn't finish the sentence. He didn't have to.

"Tie him up in the truck while we get Matty back, then we'll decide."

“Wait,” Ti-Tac said. “What if I go? This guy knows who I am. I can say Coombes sent me. Make up some shit about Degrassi needing to pay me to keep my mouth shut. It would get the door open, and then it would be up to you.” He hesitated. “You just gotta promise my mom will be okay.”

"You don't really think that either of them will leave loose ends like you, do you?" I asked baldly, and Tik Tac blanched even more.

I closed my eyes to concentrate. I hadn't done any sort of extraction since I left the army, and that was with trained professionals.

“Bear?” I glanced at Bolt. “If Tik Tac can get Degrassi to at least see him, it gives us a chance to get to him. These guys have money and connections. They’re just tying up loose ends, then they’ll move him to fuck knows where.

And what happens if this guy thinks Matty is too much trouble?

Coombes wants him dead. What if he persuades Degrassi that would be better all the way around? I don't see that we have a choice.”

Matty

I stared at Degrassi, my knees already aching from the hard floor.

I'd been kneeling naked for what felt like hours, my back straight, hands resting palms-up on my thighs just as he'd demanded.

The position itself wasn't difficult—I remembered all his training—but the mental strain of staying perfectly still under his critical gaze was exhausting, and being in this position for so long, I could barely feel my legs.

"That's it," he murmured, circling me like a predator. "You do remember. Your form is almost perfect." He tapped my shoulder with the riding crop. "Chin higher."

I adjusted my position, hating how easily my body responded to his commands. It was muscle memory, conditioned responses he'd convinced me were how a submissive should behave over those terrible months before I ran.

It had started innocently. After suffering rejection after rejection, I'd trawled different clubs, getting increasingly desperate, and the first time someone showed an interest, I'd fallen quickly.

I'd been so stupid, I'd even moved into his house for three months.

After all, it was a luxury home, and what I felt I deserved back then.

But then the slight frowns of displeasure started. Small comments about my position, my submissive nature. So, I tried harder, and harder, until he locked me in the cellar for four days.

The first chance I got after that I ran back to my godfather's. A month later I rebelled again, but this time it was to get the apartment and a job.

"Good boy," he praised, the words making my skin crawl. He continued circling, assessing me from every angle. "You know, Matthew, this could be so much easier for both of us if you simply accepted your place."

I kept my eyes forward, focusing on a point on the wall. Don't engage, don't argue. That only made things worse. I'd learned that lesson painfully during our previous "relationship."

"Nothing to say?" Degrassi asked, his voice dangerously soft. "That's unusual for

you. You always had such... spirit."

When I remained silent, he moved to stand directly in front of me, crouching down to my level. His face was inches from mine, his cologne overwhelming—expensive and cloying, just like everything about him.

"I wonder," he said thoughtfully, "what your biker would think if he could see you now? Kneeling so prettily, so well-trained." His fingers brushed my cheek, and I fought the urge to flinch away. "Do you kneel for him like this? Or does he prefer you playing with dolls?"

My breath caught. He was trying to provoke me, to make me react, to give him an excuse to punish me. I kept my eyes fixed on that spot on the wall, trying to empty my mind.

"It's fascinating, really," Degrassi continued, standing again. "This regression of yours. I've studied it extensively since you left. Such an interesting psychological phenomenon." He tapped the crop against his palm rhythmically. "A response to trauma, perhaps? Or simply weakness of character?"

Don't react. Don't give him what he wants.

"I bet he indulges it, doesn't he? Your 'Daddy.'" The word sounded obscene in his mouth. "Buys you toys, lets you play make-believe, coddles you like the child you pretend to be."

Something must have flickered in my expression because Degrassi smiled, the kind of smile that never reached his eyes.

"Ah, there it is. You're thinking about him now, aren't you? Wondering if he's looking for you. If he'll rescue you." He walked backwards. "Crawl to me."

I gritted my teeth. My legs were numb, but as I fell forward, the sudden blood flow to them made me cry out in agony. I heard the hiss of air, then pain bloomed on my back so sharply my arms gave out and I fell forward. He'd been holding the crop for hours, but this...he'd hit me with it.

"Get up, he snarled. "Crawl over to me and kiss my boots."

But I couldn't move. My arms were shaking so much they wouldn't lock.

"Pathetic," Degrassi spat, delivering another strike that sent fire across my shoulders. "Perhaps you need motivation."

He walked to his desk and picked up his phone, tapping the screen before turning it toward me. My blood froze as I saw what appeared to be live footage of the Diamond Kings compound.

"Such a nice place," he remarked casually. "Would be a shame if something happened to it...or to those adorable children I saw at the barbecue."

With renewed determination, I forced my trembling limbs to move, crawling inch by agonizing inch across the cold floor toward him.

Each movement sent sharp needles of pain through my legs as circulation returned.

When I reached his polished shoes, I hesitated only a moment before lowering my head to press my lips against the leather.

"Good boy," he murmured, the praise making my stomach turn. "You see? You can be obedient when properly motivated."

He stepped back, leaving me on all fours, head bowed. "Today is just the beginning,

Matthew. By the time I'm finished, you'll be begging to serve me."

A knock at the door interrupted whatever he planned to say next. Degrassi frowned, setting the crop aside.

"Wait here," he commanded unnecessarily—where exactly did he think I could go?

Degrassi moved to the door, opening it just enough to speak with someone outside. Their voices were too low for me to hear clearly, but Degrassi's posture stiffened. And then I heard it.

Gunfire.

Chapter nineteen

Novo

We were lucky. The warehouse was exactly that.

Low tech, thank fuck, because we had nothing with us.

Degrassi was either stupid or so convinced of his superiority he wasn't worried about being caught.

But then, he assumed I could be paid off.

They had no idea about my own personal revenge. Which pulled me up short.

I'd been right when I'd said Mom would have loved Matty . She'd have smothered him with as much care and attention as he could stand, and neither of my parents would have judged me for the choices I made.

I'd spent years consumed with the need for revenge until Matty had snuck up on me and snuggled into my heart.

And now he was all I wanted, and I knew Mom and Dad would be the first to agree. I also knew that if Coombes walked away and left Matty with me, he could take every cent. I just wanted my baby boy back in my arms where he belonged.

Jono whistled low for the signal, and we watched Tik Tac drive up to the door.

The warehouse entrance was guarded by two men in dark suits—private security, not street muscle. I watched from our position behind stacked shipping containers as Tik Tac approached them. He swaggered, cocky and ready to cause trouble.

"Remember," Jono had told him, "you just need to get inside. Once they open the door, make some noise."

Tik Tac nodded to the guards, saying something we couldn't hear. One guard spoke into a radio while the other patted him down. Then Tik Tac became belligerent, and a third guard arrived.

"Now," I ordered. We moved as one unit, silent and deadly, approaching the entrance from three different angles. The guards never saw us coming.

I took the first one down with a choke hold, dragging him into the shadows while Jono and Bolt neutralized the second and third. Tik Tac followed us. No shots fired—we couldn't risk alerting anyone inside.

"Clear," Jono whispered, retrieving the guard's radio and gun.

We moved forward into a dimly lit corridor. The warehouse had been partitioned into smaller spaces, making it impossible to see what lay ahead. We moved carefully, checking each doorway.

"Stairs," Tik Tac pointed to our right to stairs heading down. "I was only here once a year ago, but it looks the same."

Of course Degrassi would keep Matty underground. Somewhere isolated, soundproof.

We descended silently, weapons ready. At the bottom, a long hallway stretched before us, fluorescent lights buzzing overhead. Three doors on each side, one at the

end. Which one held Matty?

A muffled shout from the far end answered my question.

"Go," I ordered, abandoning stealth for speed, but two guards came out of the end door and raised their guns.

Jono and I dropped them one two without drawing breath.

I caught a glance of Degrassi as he saw us and fumbled for his own gun, but Bolt didn't give him a chance.

I shot inside the room, stepping over the fucker's dead body and my eyes fell to the shivering, naked man on the floor.

I bent and, with exaggerated care, picked Matty up from the floor. "Little one," I whispered.

He blinked and opened dazed eyes. "Daddy," he whispered back.

It was the best word I'd ever heard in my entire life.

For the first time in fifteen years, I let someone else ride my bike.

Daisy drove the truck, and I held Matty carefully wrapped in a blanket and in my lap.

He had a scraped and bruised neck from the collar, and two welts where the fucker had hit him, but curled into me, he wasn't putting any pressure on them.

Matty didn't say a word the entire ride back to the compound.

He just clung to me, face pressed against my chest, fingers twisted in my shirt like he was afraid I'd disappear if he let go.

I kept one arm wrapped securely around him, the other gently stroking his hair, murmuring reassurances that probably made no sense but seemed to soothe him anyway.

We'd left Gunner and Cruise in charge of making sure there was nothing to tie us to the place, forensically or otherwise, and they would put in an anonymous tip to the cops as soon as they'd finished.

When we arrived back at the compound, I carried him straight to our cabin, ignoring the concerned looks from club members who had gathered to welcome us back. Questions and explanations could wait. Right now, all that mattered was getting Matty somewhere safe and taking care of him.

"I've got the doc waiting," Daisy said softly as she held the cabin door open for us.

I nodded my thanks and carried Matty through to the bedroom. Dr. Mitchell was already there, his medical bag open on the dresser.

"Set him down gently," the doctor instructed. "Let me take a look at those welts."

I tried to lay Matty on the bed, but he whimpered and clutched me tighter. "No, Daddy, please," he whispered, his voice so small it broke my heart.

"It's okay, little one," I soothed. "Doc just needs to check you over. I'll be right here the whole time."

After some gentle coaxing, Matty finally allowed me to set him down on his stomach. I kept hold of his hand, sitting beside him on the bed while Dr. Mitchell carefully

examined the angry red marks across his back.

"These should heal without scarring," the doctor said, applying a soothing ointment. "Any other injuries I should know about?"

I looked at Matty, who shook his head slightly. "Just those," I confirmed, relief washing through me. It could have been so much worse.

"I'd like to take some blood," the doctor continued. "Based on his pupils and slight disorientation, he's been drugged. I'd like to know what we're dealing with."

Matty tensed at the mention of needles, his grip on my hand tightening.

"It's okay," I murmured. "Just a quick pinch, then it's over."

He buried his face against my thigh but offered his arm to the doctor. I stroked his hair as Dr. Mitchell worked quickly and efficiently, drawing blood with practiced ease.

"All done," the doctor announced, placing a dinosaur Band-Aid over the small puncture. I raised an eyebrow at him, and he shrugged. "I have unicorn ones for Annabel. Says regular ones are boring."

A tiny smile flickered across Matty's face at that, the first I'd seen since finding him.

"I'll run these samples right away," Dr. Mitchell said, packing up his equipment.

"In the meantime, keep him hydrated and try to get some food into him.

Nothing too heavy—clear broth, crackers, maybe some applesauce.

If he shows any severe symptoms—difficulty breathing, seizures, hallucinations—call me immediately. "

I nodded, already planning what I'd make once Matty was settled. "Thanks, Doc."

"I'll check in tomorrow," he said, giving my shoulder a brief squeeze before leaving.

When we were alone, I carefully helped Matty into a sitting position, mindful of his injured back. "Do you want a bath, little one? Or just to sleep?"

He looked up at me with those big, vulnerable eyes. "Bath, Daddy," he whispered. "Feel dirty."

My heart clenched at the implication, but I kept my expression gentle. "Of course. Let me get it ready for you."

I ran a warm bath, adding some of the lavender and vanilla bubble bath Daisy had left for us. When I returned to the bedroom, Matty was sitting exactly where I'd left him, staring blankly at the wall.

"Ready?" I asked softly.

He nodded, allowing me to help him stand. His legs were unsteady, either from the drugs or from kneeling too long—probably both. I supported him as we walked to the bathroom, then gently lowered him into the tub.

Matty sighed as the warm water enveloped him, not even wincing when the water hit his back, some of the tension visibly leaving his body. I knelt beside the tub, rolling up my sleeves.

"Is it okay if I help wash you?" I asked, wanting to be absolutely clear about

boundaries after what he'd been through.

"Please," he nodded, his voice still barely above a whisper.

I took my time washing his hair with gentle, rhythmic motions that made his eyes flutter closed. I cleaned every inch of him with careful tenderness, as if I could wash away not just the physical grime but the memory of Degrassi's touch as well.

When I reached his back, I moved with exaggerated care around the welts. "Tell me if it hurts too much," I murmured.

Matty shook his head. "S'okay. Not that bad. My knees hurt, but that's it."

It was the most he'd spoken since we found him, and relief flooded through me. As I continued washing him, he gradually relaxed further, leaning into my touch rather than flinching from it.

"There," I said when I was finished and his hair rinsed. "All clean."

I helped him out of the tub and wrapped him in the fluffiest towel we had, patting him dry with the same careful attention I'd used in the bath. When I reached for his dino pajamas, he made a small noise of distress.

"What is it, little one?"

"Can I...can I have the blue ones?" he asked hesitantly, as if afraid I might refuse.

"Of course you can," I said immediately, retrieving his plain blue ones from the drawer. I helped him into them, careful of his back, then settled him on the bed propped against pillows to keep pressure off his injuries.

"I'm going to get you something to eat," I said, brushing his hair back from his forehead. "Will you be okay for a minute?"

Matty's fingers tightened around mine. "Don't go," he whispered, panic flashing in his eyes.

"Just to the kitchen," I assured him. "You'll be able to see me the whole time if I leave the door open."

He hesitated, then nodded reluctantly. "Okay."

I left the bedroom door wide open so he could watch me move around the kitchen.

I worked quickly, heating chicken broth and arranging crackers on a plate, adding a small cup of applesauce with a dinosaur shaped spoon.

Throughout, I kept up a steady stream of reassuring chatter, letting him hear my voice constantly.

When I returned with the tray, Matty had Patches clutched to his chest, his eyes never leaving the doorway.

"Here we go," I said, setting the tray on the nightstand. "Think you can eat something?"

He nodded.

I sat beside him on the bed, balancing the bowl of broth carefully. "Let me help you."

I fed him slowly, one spoonful at a time, praising him softly with each bite he managed. He ate about half the broth and a few crackers before turning his head

away.

"That's good, little one," I encouraged. "You did so well."

He looked up at me, his eyes suddenly filling with tears. "I was so scared," he whispered, voice breaking. "I thought...I thought maybe you wouldn't come."

"Oh, baby," I set the bowl aside and gathered him gently against my chest, mindful of his injuries. "I will always come for you. Always."

"He said you'd take the money," Matty continued, tears flowing freely now. "That you'd let him have me because...because I'm not worth it."

Rage flashed through me at Degrassi's psychological torture, but I kept my voice gentle. "Nothing in this world could make me give you up. Not money, not threats, nothing."

Matty sobbed against my shirt, his whole body shaking. I held him, rocking slightly, letting him purge the fear and pain he'd been holding inside. I murmured reassurances against his hair, promising safety, promising protection, promising I would never leave.

Eventually, his sobs quieted to hiccups, then to the occasional snuffle. His body grew heavier against mine as exhaustion took over.

"Sleepy," he mumbled against my chest.

"Then sleep, little one," I said. I gently repositioned us, easing him down onto the pillows while keeping him close. "I've got you. You're safe now."

His eyelids fluttered, fighting sleep even as exhaustion claimed him. "Don't leave," he

whispered, fingers still twisted in my shirt.

"Never," I promised, pressing a kiss to his forehead. "Close your eyes, baby boy. I'll be right here when you wake up."

He finally surrendered to sleep, his breathing evening out as his body went limp against mine.

I stayed perfectly still, afraid to disturb him, watching the gentle rise and fall of his chest. Each breath he took felt like a miracle after the hours of terror when I'd thought I might never see him again.

A soft knock at the door broke the silence. I looked up to see Jono standing in the doorway, his expression somber.

"How is he?" he asked quietly.

"Sleeping," I replied, my voice barely audible. "Doc says he'll be okay physically."

Jono nodded, understanding the unspoken concern about Matty's mental state. "We need to talk about Coombes."

"Not now," I said firmly, my arm tightening protectively around Matty's sleeping form.

"Bear," Jono sighed, stepping into the room. "Degrassi is dead, and the guys are handling the clean-up. But Coombes is still out there, and he'll know we have Matty back."

I closed my eyes briefly, wishing I could shut out the world for just a few hours.

"What about Tik Tac?"

“We let him go as agreed. His story checks out—his mother's medical records, the blackmail, all of it. He's cooperating, gave us everything he knows about Coombes's operation. I thought he was gonna puke when he saw what they'd done to Matty.”

I nodded, unsurprised. Tik Tac had been caught between impossible choices. I couldn't forgive his betrayal, but I understood it.

"We've doubled security around the compound," Jono continued. "No one gets in or out without verification. But we need to decide our next move."

I looked down at Matty's peaceful face, the dried tear tracks still visible on his cheeks. "Tomorrow," I said firmly. "We'll deal with it tomorrow. Tonight, I'm staying right here." I'd promised, and this was one I'd never break.

Jono studied me for a moment, then nodded. "First thing in the morning. Get some rest."

After he left, I carefully shifted into a more comfortable position, keeping Matty cradled against me. Despite my exhaustion, I knew sleep would be elusive. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Matty kneeling on that cold floor, naked and trembling. If we'd been just an hour later...

I pushed the thought away, focusing instead on the warm weight of him in my arms. He was safe. He was here. Nothing else mattered.

Chapter twenty

Novo

The next morning Matty was even quieter. Physically, the doc was pleased with him, but he wasn't interested in watching cartoons or coloring. I'd made soft boiled eggs and toast soldiers to dunk in the egg, but he didn't seem interested in eating much either.

When he left Patches on the floor where he'd fallen off the bed, I knew I needed help.

The guys also needed to talk to me, and it wasn't a conversation we could have in front of Matty.

So, when I opened the door to reinforcements, it felt like I took my first deep breath since Matty had been taken.

Gunner had escorted Daisy and Annabel and would wait outside.

"Matty?" I called softly to where he was curled up on the sofa.

"Daisy and Annabel are here. They're going to stay with you while I go talk to Jono and Bolt. I won't be long."

His eyes widened in alarm but he didn't say anything. I decided to be as quick as I could and jogged to the meeting room in the clubhouse. The only bright point was that everyone stopped me to ask how Matty was.

The room was tense, all my brothers gathered around the big table. Digger and Bolt were in a heated discussion crowded around his laptop.

"Bear," Jono called, motioning me over. "How's Matty?"

"Honestly? I think he's still in shock. He's not talking to me much," I said, taking a seat. "What's the situation?"

"Digger pulled everything we have on Coombes. Financial records, property holdings, known associates." Jono tapped a stack of printouts. "The man's been busy."

"And hemorrhaging money," Bolt added, sliding a financial report toward me. "His development company is underwater. Three failed projects in the last year, lawsuits from investors, and he's been covering it by siphoning from Matty's trust."

I scanned the numbers, my jaw tightening. "How much has he stolen?"

"Almost seven million," Digger said from his laptop. "Through a series of shell companies and fake invoices. Very sophisticated setup."

"That explains the urgency," I muttered. "The trust audit when Matty could access his money would have exposed everything."

Jono nodded grimly. "And with Matty dead, he inherits as next of kin. Clean slate."

"He's not getting near Matty again," I growled, the protective rage I'd been tamping down threatening to surface.

"Agreed," Jono said. "But we need to decide how to handle this. Going after Coombes directly is risky—he's connected, protected."

"I don't care," I said flatly. "He hurt Matty. He tried to kill him. Twice."

"And burned down our club," Cruise added from across the table. "Don't forget that."

"What we need," Bolt interjected, "is leverage. Something that makes him back off permanently."

A small notification bleep seemed loud in the still of the room, and Digger immediately changed screens. He whistled. "You all need to see this."

"What is it?" I asked as we all stood and walked behind Digger.

"A police raid on Coombes's estate."

I watched in shock as SWAT officers poured from multiple cars and forced their way inside. Five minutes later a handcuffed Harold Coombes was led to a waiting car. "The fuck?" Jono asked.

"I'm working on it," Digger said as his hands flew over the keys.

I leaned back against the wall, too afraid to believe we might be getting a break.

"The warrant is for embezzlement," Digger looked up at me. "First-degree felony, which can carry thirty years if proven, but they wouldn't be sending in SWAT if they didn't have something else as well."

"We didn't have time to do anything but make sure the place was clean," Cruise said. "I'd have loved to plant evidence, but we didn't have any."

Bolt stood up. "Let me make some calls."

I glanced at Jono with a raised eyebrow but Jono just grinned. "Did you know Annabel's older brother works with the district attorney?"

I was relieved but I had to get back to Matty.

Jogging back to the cabin, my mind raced.

If Coombes was truly going down for embezzlement, it could solve our problems permanently.

Matty would be safe. The trust would be protected.

We could finally move forward without constantly looking over our shoulders.

When I nodded to Gunner and opened the door, my heart sank because it didn't look like Matty had moved.

Annabel was sitting quietly coloring, and Matty had made no attempt to get involved.

Patches was laid on the floor, face down.

By unspoken agreement Annabel and Daisy left. Daisy squeezed my hand as she walked past. I closed the door behind them, my heart sinking as I turned to face Matty. He sat perfectly still on the couch, staring at nothing.

"Little one?" I said softly, approaching him. "Would you like some lunch? I could make dinosaur-shaped sandwiches."

His shoulders tensed. "I'm not hungry."

The flatness in his voice worried me more than his refusal. I sat beside him, careful to

leave a little space between us. "The police arrested Harold this morning. Embezzlement charges. You're safe now."

Matty nodded, but there was no relief in his expression. Just...emptiness.

"Maybe we could watch a movie?" I suggested. "Or I could read to you?"

"Stop it," he whispered, his hands clenching into fists on his lap.

"Stop what, baby boy?"

"That." His voice cracked. "Stop treating me like I'm...like I'm..."

"Like you?" I asked gently.

He flinched as if I'd struck him. "I can't be that anymore."

A protest rose in me, but I bit it back. My heart ached. "Matty—"

"No." He shot to his feet so fast he winced, back arching. The welts would still hurt. "I thought I could keep being...like that. But James was right. It's weakness. It's what got me in this mess."

I rose slowly, raising my hands in surrender. "Degrassi is wrong about everything. Your Little side isn't a weakness—it's beautiful, and part of who you are."

He laughed without humor, the sound bitter. "Who I was," he spat. "It almost got people killed. Got you hurt. Your club burned down." He hugged himself as if trying to staunch his own bleeding heart. "I can't...I can't be like that ever again."

My ribs felt bruised by the weight of his shame. "Matty, look at me." I waited until

his gaze, wary and trembling, locked with mine. “What happened wasn’t because you’re a Little. It happened because your godfather is a greedy bastard who was stealing from you. None of this is your fault.”

He swallowed, blinking rapidly against tears. “But if I hadn’t...” His voice trailed off. “If I hadn’t been so needy, so childish, maybe I could’ve protected myself. Maybe I wouldn’t have been so easy to manipulate.”

My poor baby. So much guilt. “Come here,” I said, opening my arms.

He shook his head, stepping back. “I need to be stronger.”

“You’re the strongest person I know,” I told him, voice firm. “It takes more courage to be vulnerable than to put on a mask.”

“You don’t understand.” His voice cracked like glass. “When he had me...he called my Little side disgusting. Said it was pathetic.” He spat the last word as if it burned in his mouth. “And I have to believe him.”

A flash of rage flared in me. “That’s what abusers do, Matty. They twist the things you love about yourself until you hate them.” My hand struck the wall softly—but hard enough for him to flinch. I exhaled, ashamed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

He stared at me, wounded. “What if he’s right? What kind of grown man needs dinosaur pajamas and stuffed animals—”

“The kind who survived hell and found comfort where he could,” I said, stepping forward. “The kind who’s brave enough to show his whole self in a world that tells men to hide.” I paused, voice dropping to a whisper. “The kind I love.”

Matty’s head snapped up, eyes wide and glassy. “What did you say?”

My throat tightened. I hadn't planned to say it now, not like this, but the words tumbled out anyway. "I love you. Not just as your Daddy or your husband on paper—I love you , Matty. All of you."

For a moment, he didn't move. Then tears spilled down his cheeks. "But why? I'm such a mess."

"Because you're kind," I said, stepping even closer. I reached out, brushing a tear from his cheek. "Because you're brave. You gave up your safety to save strangers at the barbecue. Because you're cute. You stick your tongue out when you color. You're clever and strong in ways you don't even see."

A small, broken sound escaped him. "I don't feel strong right now."

"You don't have to be right now," I whispered. "I'll be strong for us both. I'll hold you when you can't stand. I'll love every part of you—adult and Little."

His shoulders trembled, the rigid control he'd maintained since the rescue finally cracking. He took a hesitant step forward, then another, until he collapsed into my arms, knees buckling.

I caught him, cradling him gently, mindful of his injured back. His whole body shook with sobs, face buried in my chest, as the fear and trauma he'd bottled up poured out.

"That's it," I murmured, stroking his hair. "Let it out, little one. I've got you."

"I was so scared," he gasped. "He said nobody would come. That nobody wanted me."

"He lied," I said, voice fierce. "I will always come for you, Matty. You're mine."

I guided him back to the couch and settled him into my lap, wrapping my arms around him. He curled in tightly, small and fragile against me, tears soaking my shirt.

"I don't want to be scared anymore," he whispered once his sobs quieted to hiccups. He looked up at me, eyes red-rimmed but clearer than they'd been all morning. "I keep hearing his voice...telling me I'm weak for needing..." He trailed off, too ashamed to say the words.

"For needing your Little space?" I finished softly.

"There's nothing weak about finding comfort.

The world is hard enough without denying yourself what brings you peace.

"I paused. "It's like riding my bike. Brings me peace.

"I chuckled. "They don't call me Bear just because of my size, you know.

Daisy said I'm like a bear with a sore head when I don't get to ride. "

He was quiet for a long moment, his fingers absently playing with the hem of my shirt. "When I was there, all I could think about was you. About coming home to you." His voice dropped to a whisper. "About being your little one again."

My throat tightened with emotion. "You can always be my baby boy. Whenever you want, however you want."

"Even after everything?" he asked, vulnerability written across his face.

"Especially after everything," I assured him. "Nothing has changed how I feel about you. If anything, I love you more for surviving."

Matty's eyes widened at my words, a flicker of hope replacing some of the shadows. "You really meant it? You...love me?"

"With everything I am," I said simply.

He reached up hesitantly, his fingers brushing my cheek. "I love you too," he whispered. "Not just because you rescued me or protect me. But because...you see me. All of me. And you still want me."

I turned my face to press a kiss against his palm. "Always will."

Something shifted in his expression then, a softness returning to his features that had been missing since his rescue. "Daddy," he said, the word tentative but deliberate, "can I have Patches?"

Relief flooded through me at this small but significant step. "Of course you can, little one." I reached down to where the stuffed dog had been abandoned on the floor and handed him to Matty, who clutched him to his chest with both arms.

"Sorry I dropped you," he whispered to the stuffie, then looked up at me with the ghost of a smile. "He was worried."

"I bet he was," I agreed. "He missed you very much." We both did.

Matty settled more comfortably against me, his body gradually relaxing as the tension he'd been carrying began to ease. "Can you tell us a story?" he asked softly. "Something with a happy ending?"

"I think I can manage that," I said, adjusting our position so his back wouldn't be strained. "Once upon a time, there was a very brave little boy who lived in a big, scary world..."

By the time I reached the part where the hero found his way back to the people who loved him, Matty's eyes had drifted shut, his grip on Patches relaxing slightly as sleep claimed him.

I continued the story anyway, my voice soft in the quiet cabin, promising safety and happy endings and a future where no monsters could reach him. When I finally fell silent, I just watched him sleep, grateful for each peaceful breath, each tiny movement that proved he was here, alive, with me.

A text from Jono vibrated in my pocket. I carefully shifted to check it without disturbing Matty.

DA confirmed Coombes is facing multiple charges. Financial crimes, conspiracy to commit kidnapping, attempted murder. Apparently—and get this—it was Degrassi. His lawyer was instructed to release everything if he died, and they've got enough evidence to send him away for life.

I frowned, wondering how Degrassi had that kind of access. Before I could respond, another text came through.

Bolt says Degrassi must have been gathering dirt on Coombes for years. Smart bastard.

A cold satisfaction settled in my chest.

How long will he be away? I texted back.

With the charges they have? 20+ years minimum. He's not getting out, Bear.

Relief washed through me. Matty was truly safe now. We both were.

I set my phone aside and carefully adjusted our position, settling in for what would likely be a long nap. Matty needed the rest, and I needed to hold him, to reassure myself that he was really here.

As I drifted toward sleep myself, I made silent promises to the man in my arms. To protect him always. To love all sides of him. To build a life together where he never had to be afraid again.

And as if he could hear my thoughts, Matty snuggled closer, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth even in sleep.

Chapter twenty-one

Matty

"Are you sure, Daddy?" I asked, eyeing the clothes Daddy had laid out for me. The brightly colored dinosaur shirt and comfy shorts felt like a public declaration I wasn't ready to make.

Three days had passed since my rescue. Three days of barely leaving our cabin, of jumping at shadows and unexpected noises. Three days of slowly, carefully letting myself slip back into my Little headspace—but only behind locked doors, only with Daddy.

"Only if you want to, little one," Daddy replied, his voice gentle as he sat beside me on the bed. "No one will judge you either way."

I ran my fingers over the soft fabric of the shirt, tracing the cartoon stegosaurus. "But what if they do? Sophie already made fun of me once."

"Sophie has left town to go stay with her sister and won't be coming back," Daddy said firmly. "And anyone who has a problem with my baby boy will answer to me."

The protectiveness in his voice made something warm unfurl in my chest, but anxiety still churned in my stomach. The club was throwing a "celebration barbecue"—ostensibly to mark Harold's arrest, but really, I knew, to coax me out of hiding.

"I don't know if I can," I admitted, my voice small. "What if I panic? What if I can't breathe again?"

Yesterday, I'd tried to step outside just to sit on the porch, and a sudden overhead shadow—just a bird—had sent me into a full panic attack. Daddy had held me through it, rocking me gently until I could breathe again.

"Then we come back inside," Daddy said simply. "We take it one step at a time. And if today isn't the right day, we try again tomorrow."

I looked up at him, at the unwavering patience in his eyes. "You've already missed so much club stuff because of me."

"I'm exactly where I want to be," he replied, brushing my hair back from my forehead. "The club understands. They're not rushing us."

I picked up the dinosaur shirt again, feeling its weight in my hands. "Will Annabel be there?"

"Yes. Bolt texted earlier to say she's very excited to see you. Apparently, Princess has been asking about Patches every day."

A small smile tugged at my lips and the pressure in my chest lifted a little. "Patches has missed her, too."

Daddy's expression softened at my response. "You know, you don't have to decide right now which headspace to be in. You can just be you—whatever feels right in the moment."

I considered his words, rolling them over in my mind. The idea of not having to choose, of just being whatever version of myself felt safest in the moment, was

strangely freeing.

"I want to try," I decided, picking up the dinosaur shirt. "But...can I change if I get uncomfortable?"

"Always," Daddy assured me, pressing a kiss to my forehead. "We can come back any time you want."

I nodded, feeling a small flutter of courage. "Okay. I'll wear this one."

"That's my brave boy," Daddy said, his smile warming me from the inside out, and proceeded to put on his own dinosaur t-shirt, which made me feel a bit braver.

I changed slowly, still wincing slightly when the fabric brushed against my healing welts. Daddy watched me with careful eyes, ready to help if needed, but letting me do it myself. I'd said I wanted to dress myself, but now I was regretting it. I wanted Daddy to, and I knew he wanted it as well.

He also wanted me to go talk to someone and promised he would go with me. I knew it was a good idea, but I wasn't ready yet.

When I was dressed, I hesitated at the bedroom door. "Can Patches come too?"

"Of course he can," Daddy said without a moment's hesitation. "He's family."

I scooped up my stuffie, holding him close for reassurance, leaving Bear to guard the cabin just like his namesake was protecting me. "I'm ready," I said, though my voice trembled slightly.

Daddy held out his hand. "Remember, we go at your pace. Just say the word and we'll come back."

The walk to the compound's main area felt endless. Each step away from the safety of our cabin made my heart beat faster, but Daddy's steady presence beside me kept the panic at bay. I could hear music and laughter growing louder as we approached, and my grip on Daddy's hand tightened.

"Breathe, little one," he murmured. "I've got you."

We rounded the corner, and suddenly the barbecue came into view. Club members milled around, some at the grill, others setting up tables. Children played on the grass, their shrieks of laughter punctuating the air. It looked so...normal. So safe.

Feeling a little braver, I waved as both Maria and Daisy turned to look at me, and my feet stopped moving of their own accord. One by one, all the old-ladies turned to look at me, then the brothers, and finally the prospects, and I gaped. "Daddy," I breathed out the word in astonishment.

Because every single one of them was wearing a dinosaur t-shirt.

Daisy opened her arms for a hug, and I ran into them, feeling Maria very gently at my back, then a giggling Annabel squished into our cuddle sandwich.

"Princess has been so worried," Annabel said, holding up her stuffie. "She's been asking about Patches every day."

I felt a small smile tug at my lips. "Patches missed her too," I said, lifting him slightly.

"Want to come sit with us?" Annabel asked, gesturing to a colorful blanket spread under a tree at the edge of the yard. I glanced back at Daddy, who gave me an encouraging nod.

"Go ahead," he said. "I'll bring you both some food in a bit."

I hesitated for a moment, then followed Annabel to her blanket, Patches clutched tightly to my chest. As I settled onto the soft fabric, I noticed she had her tea set arranged in the center, along with coloring books and crayons.

I noticed she'd even brought a little cart she could wheel the stuffies in which could be fun.

"I brought extra stuff today," she explained, arranging Princess and Patches side by side. "In case you wanted to color or have tea."

"Thanks," I said softly, touched by her thoughtfulness. I reached for a coloring book, flipping through until I found a page with dinosaurs. The simple act of choosing colors and staying inside the lines felt soothing, grounding.

As I colored, I gradually became aware of the activity around us. Club members moved about, setting up food, talking in groups, occasionally glancing our way with small smiles. But no one stared. No one pointed or whispered behind their hands. They just...accepted.

"Everyone got dinosaur shirts," I said, still amazed by the sight. "All of them."

Annabel nodded, carefully coloring a unicorn's mane in rainbow hues. "Daddy said it was to show sol..."

"Solidarity?" I offered.

"Yeah, that. So you'd know you're not alone." She looked up at me with earnest eyes. "And that nobody thinks it's weird. Because it's not."

A lump formed in my throat. I hadn't expected this level of acceptance, this deliberate show of support. These tough, intimidating bikers had put on cartoon shirts just to make me feel comfortable.

"That's really nice of them," I managed, blinking back sudden tears.

"The club is family," Annabel said with complete conviction. "And family takes care of each other."

We colored in companionable silence for a while, the peaceful activity helping to ease my lingering anxiety. Occasionally someone would walk by and compliment our artwork, or ask how we were doing, but no one hovered or made me feel self-conscious.

Bolt appeared with plates of food for both of us, settling them carefully on the edge of the blanket. "How are you doing, Matty?" he asked, his voice gentle.

"Better," I admitted. "Thank you for the shirts. All of them."

Bolt grinned, smoothing a hand over his own shirt, which featured a T-Rex trying to play guitar. "Jono's idea, actually. We may have cleaned out three different stores."

"Where's Daddy?" I asked, suddenly realizing I hadn't seen him in a while.

"Talking to Doc by the grill," Bolt said, gesturing behind him. "Want me to get him?"

"No, that's okay," I said, surprising myself. "I'm okay here with Annabel."

Bolt's smile widened. "Good to hear. Eat up before it gets cold."

After he left, I took a bite of the burger he'd brought, realizing suddenly how hungry I

was. As Annabel chattered about Princess's adventures over the past few days, I found myself relaxing more, the constant knot of tension in my chest loosening incrementally.

From my spot under the tree, I could see Daddy talking with the doc, his expression serious but calm. He glanced over, catching my eye, and his whole face softened. He gave me a small wave and a questioning thumbs-up. I nodded, managing a genuine smile in return.

"Your Daddy really loves you," Annabel observed, following my gaze.

"Yeah," I agreed, warmth spreading through me. "He really does."

"Daddy says Bear was super scary when you were missing," she continued, arranging Princess's tiny teacup. "Like, even scarier than when Cruise crashed the pickup into Bear's favorite bike."

I wasn't sure how to respond to that but was saved by Daisy approaching with a tray of cupcakes, each topped with colorful frosting and tiny plastic dinosaurs.

"Special delivery for my favorite artists," she announced, setting the tray down on our blanket. "The dinosaurs are clean—you can keep them after."

"Thank you, Miss Daisy," Annabel said, immediately reaching for one topped with pink frosting.

I selected one with green frosting, carefully removing the little stegosaurus perched on top. "These are amazing," I said after taking a bite. "Did you make them?"

"Maria and I stayed up half the night," Daisy confirmed with a wink. "Worth every minute to see you out here with us." She reached out, giving my shoulder a gentle

squeeze before moving on to distribute the rest of the cupcakes.

As the afternoon progressed, I found myself gradually relaxing and my Little coming out more and more. When Annabel invited me to join her tea party, I did so without hesitation, making Patches speak in a gruff voice that had her giggling uncontrollably.

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Annabel suddenly yawned, which set me off, and we both giggled, especially when two Daddies swooped down and lifted us both up. "Ready for home, little one?"

I nodded and realized I had questions, now that I felt safe to ask them. I wanted to know about my godfather, the money, and what Daddy thought I should do with it. I didn't really want anything to do with it, but it wouldn't just go away on its own.

As Daddy carried me back toward our cabin, I rested my head against his shoulder, surprisingly tired after the party. The dinosaur from my cupcake was clutched in one hand, Patches in the other.

"You did so well today," Daddy murmured, his voice rumbling pleasantly against my ear. "I'm so proud of you."

"Everyone was nice," I said softly. "And the shirts... I can't believe they all wore dinosaur shirts."

Daddy chuckled. "Jono said some of the older brothers grumbled, but not one of them refused once they understood why."

We reached the cabin, and Daddy set me down gently on the porch while he unlocked the door. Inside, the familiar comfort of our space welcomed me, but it no longer felt like a hiding place. Just home.

"Bath before bed?" Daddy asked, already moving toward the bathroom.

I nodded, but hesitated. There were questions swirling in my mind, things I needed to

know now that I felt safe enough to ask.

"Daddy?" I called, making him turn. "Can we talk first? About...everything?"

Something in my tone must have signaled I wasn't asking from my Little headspace. Daddy studied me for a moment, then nodded.

"Of course. Let me make us some tea."

I settled on the couch, tucking my legs beneath me as Daddy busied himself in the kitchen. When he returned with two steaming mugs, he sat beside me, leaving a respectful distance that I quickly closed by scooting next to him.

"What's on your mind?" he asked gently.

I took a deep breath. "Harold. What exactly happened?"

Daddy's expression turned serious. "Are you sure you want to know all of it right now?"

"I need to," I insisted. "I can't move forward if I'm always looking over my shoulder, wondering."

He nodded, understanding. "Degrassi was smarter than we gave him credit for. Apparently, he'd been keeping detailed records of all Coombes's activities he knew about—insurance, he called it. When he died, his lawyer automatically released everything to the authorities."

"So, Harold really is going to prison? For good?"

"Yes," Daddy confirmed. "The evidence is overwhelming. Embezzlement, fraud, conspiracy to commit kidnapping, attempted murder... The DA says he's looking at

twenty-five to thirty years, minimum. If he gets out, he'll be a very poor old man."

Relief washed through me, so intense it made me dizzy. "He can't hurt us anymore."

"No, he can't," Daddy agreed, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. "You're safe now, Matty. We both are."

I leaned into his warmth, processing this information. "What about...the money? My trust fund?"

"That's still being sorted out," Daddy said carefully. "The forensic accountants are tracking what Harold stole, but it's going to take time. The good news is that at least half of your inheritance is still intact."

I nodded slowly, turning my mug in my hands. "I don't want it," I said quietly. "Any of it."

Daddy's arm tightened around me. "That's a big decision, little one. One you don't have to make right now."

"It's never brought me anything but pain," I insisted. "People either want to use me for it or resent me because of it."

"Not everyone," Daddy reminded me gently. "And that money could do a lot of good if you wanted it to."

I looked up at him, struck by the thought. "Like what?"

"Whatever you want," he said simply. "Charities, foundations, scholarships. You could help people who need it."

The idea settled in my mind, taking root. I hadn't considered that possibility—that the

money that had been such a burden could become something positive.

"I could help other Littles," I said slowly. "People who don't have safe spaces or support systems."

Daddy smiled, pride evident in his expression. "You could. That's a beautiful idea."

"Will you help me?" I asked, suddenly uncertain about the logistics of such an undertaking.

"Every step of the way," he promised. "But not tonight. Tonight, you've already done enough brave things for one day."

I nodded. "Bath now?"

"Bath now," Daddy agreed, pressing a kiss to my temple.

I lifted my chin, asking for another kiss. This one wasn't just a peck. "Annabel says some Daddies like to give their Littles special touches in the bath." Daddy hummed as if he liked that idea.

"Let's get in the bath and see what I can do." He pulled me closer. "Arms up," he instructed softly, and I obeyed, letting him pull the dinosaur shirt over my head. His fingers skimmed lightly over the healing welts on my back, his touch feather-light.

"They're looking better," he murmured, pressing the gentlest kiss between my shoulder blades and I shivered, my cock hardening.

"They don't hurt much anymore," I said, leaning back into his touch. "Not when you're the one touching me."

Daddy's hands moved to the waistband of my shorts, easing them down along with

my underwear. His touch made me groan.

"Into the tub, little one," he said, helping me stand.

I stepped into the warm water, sighing as it enveloped me.

Daddy hadn't added bubbles this time, leaving the water clear.

I watched as he stripped off his own clothes, the powerful lines of his body making my breath catch.

The dinosaur shirt joined mine on the floor, and then he was stepping into the tub behind me, his strong thighs bracketing mine as I settled back against his chest.

Daddy washed me slowly, teasingly, until I was gasping and aching for more.

His hands slid lower, one gripping my inner thigh possessively while the other traced searing patterns on my stomach. "Tell me what you want, Matty," he demanded against my ear, his voice a low rumble. "What do you need from me tonight?"

"Touch me," I rasped, arching sharply into his hands. "Remind me who I belong to."

"You're mine," he growled, his hand finally clutching my cock. "Never forget that."

I gasped at the contact, my body jolting with instant need. I could feel his own hardening length, insistent and demanding, pressing into my back.

I turned my head, hungry for his mouth. The kiss was deep and consuming, his tongue claiming mine as his hand stroked my cock relentlessly. When we broke apart, both panting heavily, I knew exactly what I needed.

"Want you inside me," I pleaded. "Want to feel you take me."

Daddy groaned, his hips grinding involuntarily against my back. "The bed. Now."

He helped me stand, water sluicing down our bodies as we stepped out of the tub.

Daddy dried me with fierce concentration, his touch lingering on each part of my body as if staking his claim.

I did the same for him, marveling at the hard muscles of his chest, the powerful thighs, the impressive length of his cock I couldn't wait to feel.

When we were both dry, he lifted me effortlessly, carrying me to our bedroom and laying me roughly on the sheets.

He retrieved lube from the nightstand drawer, then settled between my spread thighs.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured, leaning down to press a fierce kiss to my inner thigh. "So perfect for me."

I reached for him, craving his weight, his heat. "Daddy, please."

He slicked his fingers, warming the lube before circling my entrance with insistent pressure. The first finger slid in, his eyes watching my face for any sign of discomfort. "More," I demanded, pressing down against his hand.

He added a second finger, stretching me with urgent need, finding that spot inside that made me cry out and arch off the bed.

"So responsive," Daddy praised, his voice a deep rumble that resonated through me. "Such a good boy for me."

I writhed beneath his touch as he worked a third finger inside, the stretch intense and perfect. My hands fisted in the sheets, desperate for more.

"Now, Daddy," I pleaded. "Need you now."

He withdrew his fingers slowly, then positioned himself between my thighs. "We're both gonna get tested," Daddy decreed. I watched, breath caught in my throat, as he pulled out a condom and slicked his impressive length with lube. The sight of him—powerful, beautiful, and mine—

"Eyes on me, little one," he commanded softly as he lined himself up. "Stay with me."

I nodded, locking my gaze with his as he pressed forward and sank deeper, inch by inch, his eyes never leaving mine.

"That's it," he murmured. "Taking me so well."

When he was fully seated inside me, he paused, giving me time to adjust. I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him impossibly closer.

Move," I whispered. "Please."

Daddy began to rock his hips in a relentless rhythm, each thrust perfectly angled to brush against that spot inside me. I moaned, my hands reaching up to grip his shoulders, needing an anchor in the sea of sensation washing over me.

"Mine," he growled, increasing his pace. "My beautiful boy."

"Yours," I agreed breathlessly. "Only yours, Daddy."

He leaned down to capture my mouth in a searing kiss, swallowing my moans as his thrusts grew more urgent.

One large hand slid between our bodies to wrap around my neglected cock, stroking

in time with his movements.

I broke the kiss on a gasp, my back arching as pleasure built to an almost unbearable peak.

"That's it," Daddy encouraged, his voice strained with his own approaching climax. "Let go for me, baby boy. I've got you."

His words pushed me over the edge. I came with a cry of his name, my body clenching around him as waves of pleasure crashed through me. Daddy followed moments later, his rhythm faltering as he groaned and spilled inside me.

He carefully lowered himself to rest on his forearms, keeping most of his weight off me while we both caught our breath. His forehead pressed against mine, our panting breaths mingling in the small space between us.

"I love you," I whispered, the words coming easily now, as natural as breathing.

"I love you too, little one," he replied, pressing a tender kiss to my lips. "More than I ever thought possible."

Later, clean and warm in my dinosaur pajamas, I curled against Daddy's side in our bed. Patches was tucked securely under my arm. "Daddy?" I murmured, already half drifting.

"Yes, little one?"

"Thank you for finding me. For not giving up."

His arms tightened around me, his voice thick with emotion. "I would never."

"I know," I whispered, and realized I truly did. Whatever came next—the legal stuff,

decisions about the money, building a life together—I wasn't facing it alone anymore.

I was safe. I was loved. And for the first time in my life, I was exactly where I belonged.