



Widowed Dad Needs Milk (The Lactin Brotherhood #9)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Torin Barker is a devoted husband and father to his newborn daughter. But after a terrible accident takes his wife from them just months after the baby's birth, he's not sure how to move forward. He wants to provide the best of everything to his baby girl, but she's allergic to all the formulas he tries and he needs to purchase human milk. When the supply is low at the milk bank, he resorts to hiring a live-in wet nurse to make sure his baby's needs are always met.

But when the wet nurse shows up, he's shocked not only to find a man standing there...but the man who got away. His first crush from back in high school, when he wasn't sure if he was into men or women. The best friend he never thought he'd see again was standing on his doorstep with a suitcase and a smile.

Joss has been in a bit of a rough patch, couch surfing and taking freelance gigs while trying to figure out what to do with his life. So when the request for a live-in job comes up from The Lactin Brotherhood, he's in. All in.

Neither Torin or Joss expect to see each other on that doorstep, and when they do, the feelings they both tried to leave behind so many years ago come rushing back in.

Total Pages (Source): 17

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:48 am

Chapter 1

Torin

Bella looked so peaceful as she finished off the last of her bottle. The final bag of her mother's frozen milk from the supply I had been rationing to her each day.

After the freak accident that took my wife's life a month ago, I'd been doling out the frozen milk—cut with prescription formula—one little bottle at a time.

But Bella wasn't gaining weight because she couldn't process most of the formulas I'd tried. We finally found a prescription formula without the ingredient that seemed to bother her little tummy the worst, but it was ridiculously hard to get my hands on. The pharmacy allowed me to order a can each week, but as she got bigger, she'd need at least double that amount.

Human milk was the only other alternative that stayed down.

Jocelyn, the woman next door, was sympathetic to our situation after Stacy died and offered me up gallons of the frozen milk she had left over after weaning her son. That helped me supplement, but I was starting to get nervous about the future.

If I didn't find a milk bank or personal donor in the next couple of days, my baby would be hungry or in pain...or both.

Tears I didn't know I still had in me dripped down my cheeks as I thought about that possibility.

Bella was so sweet and innocent and deserved only the best things in life. She'd already lost her mother, and I wasn't doing the greatest job at being a single parent. Laundry was piled up, I'd been living off takeout, and my work was suffering. I could work remotely for the long-term as a project manager, but since I only had small bits of time to devote to work each day, I was missing more and more meetings because Bella needed me.

Once the bottle was bone dry and she was completely asleep, I slipped out of the chair and placed her in her crib.

The temptation to hold her a little longer and just stare at her sweet face was strong, but she was finally in a deep sleep, and I didn't want to ruin that with my fidgeting.

I snuck out of the nursery and went to bed myself. That had become my makeshift office, because after working from bed for a few days after the accident, it was getting harder to feel comfortable at my actual desk. Especially when all I wanted to do was sleep.

For the hundredth time, I checked in with the local milk bank to see if I had been matched up with a regular donator. The waiting list was long, and it took months to get matched. I'd gotten several offers of individual donations from kind moms who had extra frozen supply or had recently weaned like Jocelyn, but with Bella's allergies and sensitive stomach, the doctor recommended I find one person who could supply her through her first twelve months, if possible.

So far, it wasn't looking good.

I read through all the messages and was surprised to see several of the moms recommended the Lactin Brotherhood private milk bank. There wasn't a lot of detail about the organization, but each recommendation said they were reliable and adhered to all the same quality standards as the community milk bank. The downside I could

find was that they were pricey.

But price was no longer an issue for me. At first, free or very low-cost milk from the community bank sounded great. But now, knowing how difficult the process could be, I was willing to pay more than the highest quality bourbon just to make sure my baby was healthy and well-nourished.

I found a request form for a human milk service that offered the option for a fresh or frozen delivery service or for a live-in wet nurse. Wet nurses were practically impossible to find, and the waitlists were years out, so I didn't have much hope that would be a possibility. But I checked all three boxes and noted I would pay market rate for the first available wet nurse my daughter was compatible with.

That was the best I could do.

With that first step taken, I found a streaming movie that I'd started watching a few times, and tried watching it again. It was a romantic comedy about two pseudo celebrities who hated each other but were forced to make nice for the public and ended up falling in love.

Obviously, it was a fairytale.

In real life, love didn't work out that way. You either made bad decisions and destroyed a good thing when you had it, or fate stepped in and took good things away from you.

At least, that had been my experience.

Besides Stacy, there was only one other person who'd really made me feel things I could describe as anything other than love—even stronger than what I'd ever felt for Stacy—but he was a guy. And I wasn't into guys. At least, back in high school I

wasn't. Not that I could admit, anyway. Between my fundamentalist family and my fucked-up buddies, I was too afraid to be honest with him or myself.

I cared about him a lot but hurt him because of my own insecurities, and I'd never forgive myself for that. I was a stupid kid who made stupid choices. And then after college, I met Stacy. She was my best friend, and eventually, that friendship turned into love. It was never that fire in my belly, can't-breathe-without-her kind of love. But it was love.

For both of us.

We'd been married for two years and had a happy life for most of that time. I wouldn't change a thing about it because then I might not have Bella. She was the one who showed me what true and unconditional love really was.

When we found out Bella was coming, that seemed to be my signal from the universe that I'd made the right choice by settling down with Stacy. Just because my love for her was more like a friendship than a spouse, that didn't mean I wouldn't be content for the rest of my life.

And then, on a dark and stormy night, fate put Stacy in the path of a falling tree that changed our family forever. The coroner promised her death was quick and she didn't suffer, but Bella and I certainly did.

I'd lost my best friend, the person who I watched TV with, someone who could sit for hours sharing gossip about the neighbors, and my sweet baby girl lost her mother.

I already felt like I was failing as a parent because I wasn't able to provide her with a perfectly safe and consistent world. But adding in the risk of not being able to properly feed her was almost too much to bear.

Because of that stress, I wasn't eating well either and my sleep was fitful, leaving me in a constant state of exhaustion.

Although, that seemed to be part of the deal with having a newborn, so I couldn't blame it all on my depression.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:48 am

Chapter 2

Joss

I put all the dishes away and then started on dinner. That was the agreement I made with any of my friends who let me couch surf between live-in jobs. I cooked and cleaned in exchange for a place to sleep.

For most of my friends, that worked great.

But with Abel, it was exhausting. How one person could be such a slob was hard to conceive. It was like he purposely left shit behind just so I could clean up after him. I might have been resentful if I thought that was what he was actually doing, but he wasn't. His place always looked like a hoarder's haven, even when I wasn't around.

Abel just didn't think about things like putting trash in the garbage or washing dishes within two or three days of dirtying them. He grew up with money and servants, and never quite got the hang of being responsible for things like cleaning the toilet or putting moldy food in the trash instead of leaving it in the fridge forever.

And speaking of, the front door opened and the running dialogue of his entire day began.

I stared at him with as much fake interest as I could muster, throwing in all the appropriate wows and you're kidding and assholes comments I could before he finally took a breath and looked around the kitchen. "What's for dinner?"

“I was thinking of enchiladas. Does that sound good?”

He clasped his hands together in front of his chest and swallowed. “Yes. That sounds delicious. I’m gonna go take a shower. Call me if you need anything.”

As soon as he disappeared, I noticed that Abel had left his work bag on the kitchen table, an empty drink cup from his lunch, most likely, and a small handful of change that he must’ve pulled out of his pocket for some reason.

I cleaned up the table again before I started pulling out ingredients for enchiladas. I’d already done the prep work, including shredding a rotisserie chicken so I didn’t have to grill it first, so all that was left was to quickly assemble them and throw them in the oven.

As soon as that was going, I followed the trail of shoes and clothes that Abel had left on his way to the bathroom and picked everything up before dropping onto the couch to check my phone. I’d just delivered an updated milk sample to the brotherhood a few days earlier, so I was hoping they might have some live-in matches for me to meet with.

There were seventy-five new emails since I’d checked that morning, so I started thumbing through them to see if any of the jobs looked legit. Most were off-the-book private sessions that I wasn’t completely against, but I preferred to have just a single client to keep everything safe.

Abel wandered out of his room wearing just a pair of boxers and mumbled something about a customer who threatened to sue him, but I was too distracted by a new email to pay attention.

“Oh my god.” I read through the message again, making sure I wasn’t missing a key detail.

Abel thought I was talking about what he'd just said and huffed. "What? I wasn't even mean about it. All I said was?—"

"No, not that." I cut him off, not interested in rehashing his tale of woe. I read through it one more time to be extra sure I was getting all the points right. "I think I just got matched."

He sat down at the kitchen table and looked at me. "For a date?"

"No, a job. It's live-in, so I'd be out of your hair, and the salary is at the premium rate. I've never earned that much before in my life." Usually, the premium rate was reserved for difficult clients who couldn't keep their staff because they were such nightmares to work with. It was definitely concerning, but no one could be more difficult to look after than Abel.

"Congrats. That sounds like a sweet gig."

I glanced at my watch and groaned. "Fuck! They just closed." I sighed deeply just as the oven timer went off. "I guess I'll know more tomorrow."

Abel pulled open the bag of tortilla chips I'd left on the table and emptied it into the bowl I put beside it. I handed him the guacamole before plating portions of enchiladas. A few minutes later, we were both quietly eating at the table.

My thoughts were on the gig that seemed like a perfect fit, while Abel was probably thinking about all the people who'd wronged him in the world. The reality was that he was just very high maintenance and didn't understand what it meant to be a service worker.

Eventually, he came up for air and seemed to remember what we were just talking about. "What does it mean to be matched? Does that mean you both swiped right or

something?”

I chuckled and reached for a handful of chips. “Nah, it just means the kind of job I’m looking for has become available, and I’m likely to be a good fit for it.”

He shoveled a huge bite into his mouth and nodded. “Oh, that’s cool.”

“Yeah, it would be, but there are no guarantees. I still have to meet with the client and see their accommodations. Since it’s a live-in job, we both have to be comfortable living together before they can make an offer and I can accept one.”

“Have you ever been denied a job because they didn’t like you?” Abel belched and then reached for his water.

“Probably, but they don’t tell us why we don’t get a job. Usually, there are a few of us interviewing, so I don’t really know the reason if I don’t get selected. It could just be that they don’t like the taste of my milk or the schedules aren’t fully in alignment.” I shrugged and reached for my phone again, even though I knew there wouldn’t be a response until morning. “In this case, it’s working with a baby, so I hope it works out. Those are my favorite jobs.”

Abel just shook his head as he loaded up guacamole on a chip. “I don’t know how you do it, Joss. I can’t stand kids. They’re just so...needy.”

“Yeah, I guess when you’re the neediest of all, it’s annoying to have competition.”

“Exactly.” He shrugged, fully acknowledging his shortcomings. It’s good to be self-aware.

“I just love that they’re so sweet and innocent. And they love you back no matter what. It’s like having a puppy but way better.”

He cringed even harder. “A puppy? Those things shit everywhere. My sister just got one and already regrets it.”

“Yeah, that’s why babies are better. They’re all diapered up and self-contained. You can take them anywhere.”

He popped the last bite of enchilada into his mouth and got up for seconds. “Clearly, you aren’t eating in the same kind of restaurants I’m eating in because you should definitely not take a baby anywhere.”

Ignoring him, I brought up my mail app, just in case there was a response. To my surprise, there was. They must’ve really been anxious to fill this job if people were working late. “I have an interview. It says I have to be completely nut and mushroom free for twenty-four hours and then the client would like to meet with me.”

“Mushrooms? Oh, for fuck’s sake. Are mushrooms not PC anymore?”

I shoved his shoulder as I walked past him. “My guess is someone in the household is allergic to mushrooms, and having to be nut-free is pretty common in my line of work.”

“You’re a better man than me, Joss.”

I laughed at that. It was totally true, but Abel very rarely verbalized it. “I know. I’m the one who washes your sheets, remember?”

“Get used to it, milkman. You’re gonna be dealing with a lot more than spooge when you’re a full-time nanny.”

God, I hoped so. I washed my plate and left it in the drain board. “Do you need anything else right now? I might go for a run.”

“Nah, get out of here. I’ve got a date tonight, so I may or may not see you before tomorrow.”

“All right. Have fun, and be safe.”

He winked and then blew a kiss in my direction. “Safe, yes. But fun, I’ll let you know.”

I got changed then went outside to jump on the green belt that ran behind Abel’s condo. Once I got into a good rhythm, I took an inventory of everything I had eaten in the past twenty-four hours. No nuts or mushrooms were in my dinner. My sandwich at lunch was a BLT, so nothing unusual there, and all I had for breakfast was a sausage and egg bagel with... Dammit. An almond-milk latte. That was at 9 AM. That meant, as long as I scheduled my interview for sometime after nine or ten tomorrow, I would be fine. Besides, they didn’t always want to do a milk sample in the first interview. It was possible they just wanted to meet with a few people before making decisions about testing.

Either way, I’d find out in the morning.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:48 am

Chapter 3

Torin

The lactation consultant I was paired with was as surprised as I was to find a match so quickly.

She told me to prepare for weeks of interviews and false hopes because finding somebody who was allergen free and willing to stay that way for at least eight months while living on site was not as easy as it sounded. Most wet nurses had a family they needed to get home to at the end of their shifts.

I guess being completely alone had its benefits sometimes.

To sweeten the pot, I added exclusive use of our extra car, the highest salary tier, and medical benefits. I really needed somebody to commit for at least a year, so it was in my best interest and Bella's to find someone who wanted to keep the job just as much as we wanted and needed them to keep it.

After the agency had all the test results back that they required, we scheduled the in-person meeting. I really hoped the candidate, known only as Joss to me, not only liked us, but had milk that Bella tolerated. Once the last of the frozen milk was gone, I'd really start to panic.

The pharmacist's allotment of only one can of formula per week was not enough to sustain my baby.

I cleared my calendar for the day and cleaned the common areas, Bella's room, and the downstairs guest suite so it was as inviting as possible. The lactation consultant said that many live-in wet nurses were often willing to do household chores, like cooking or cleaning, as needed, but I didn't care about any of that.

I just needed somebody to feed my baby.

Glancing at my watch for the twentieth time, I started pacing near the front window. I was careful not to walk close enough that somebody outside would see me staring out like a weirdo but not so far back that I couldn't tell when a car pulled up.

And as soon as that little white hatchback rolled to a stop in front of my house, my heart started racing. I ran into the bathroom to wash my hands one more time and make sure there wasn't anything in my teeth and my hair wasn't sticking up, then I checked the camera app on my phone to make sure Bella was still asleep.

She was coming up on the tailend of her nap time, so it was likely she would wake up while Joss was still here, but even if she didn't, I would at least ask for a pumped sample for Bella to try out later.

There was a note on the front door that said to knock instead of ringing the bell, so as soon as I heard a soft rapping at the front, I took a deep breath and crossed my fingers that this would all work out.

I pulled open the front door, expecting to see a stern-looking woman reminiscent of Mary Poppins because that was the picture that kept coming up in my mind, but what I saw blew my fucking mind.

Joshua Cain.

My jaw dropped, and I almost couldn't catch my breath. "Joshua, what are you doing

here?”

He was the boy who got away, or rather, the man who got away back in high school. The one who had always been a ghost in the back of my mind, reminding me there was a different path I could have taken. Maybe even the path I should have taken...

And he was standing at my front door.

“It’s Joss now, and I have an interview with Bella.” He looked at his phone and then chuckled. “Let me guess. Bella is your wife.”

“No, um, my daughter. I guess they match you with the end user, not the parent.”

He looked past me and then down at his feet. “Oh, well, do you want me to leave?”

Did I? I wasn’t entirely sure. “No, but, um... The ad is for a wet nurse.” My initial shock was starting to wear off and confusion was setting in.

He met my gaze again, his stare harder than I remembered from those green eyes. “Yeah.”

Maybe there were different kinds of wet nurses and this was all a big misunderstanding. “I don’t understand. I mean, how?”

He took a deep breath and then turned to leave. “Yeah, never mind. This would never work out. Sorry to bother you.”

I reached out for his shoulder, grabbing him before he got too far. “No, please, come in. I’m just a little confused. We need a wet nurse. To feed my daughter... Um, milk.”

Joshua paused for a minute, and I wasn't sure if he was gonna walk away or turn around, but finally, he did turn and walk through the front door, nudging me on his way through.

I deserved that. I was shitty to him in high school, and if nothing else, I was happy to have this opportunity to apologize for the way I'd treated him.

Silently, we went inside, and I waved him toward the family room so we could both have a seat.

I sat down on the couch and realized I was still being rude. I hopped back to my feet. "Let me get you something to drink. Water? Orange juice? Beer?" Stacy had a beer a day when her milk first came in.

His eyes held on me and then he nodded. "Water would be fine. Thank you."

I ran into the kitchen and poured two glasses of cold water from the fridge and then sat across from him on the sofa. "So, how does this work?"

There were so many emotions on his face, but he finally settled on honesty, apparently. "I lactate. I have since college. I've nursed for many families and have had retail and private clients that I supply for various reasons." He clasped his hands together and let them hang between his knees. "I eat clean and was a match for your dietary requirements." He shrugged as if tossing the ball squarely into my court. "So, if you want to continue this discussion, I suppose I'm open to it. And if not, that's cool too." He looked around and glanced toward the staircase. "Is your wife gonna bring the baby out at some point?"

My head tilted and I looked at him intently. I had assumed he'd been given more background on my situation, but for privacy reasons, maybe they didn't divulge my whole life story. I wasn't sure I appreciated that because now I had to say it out loud.

“No, my wife was killed in a car accident about a month ago. My daughter is four and a half months old and has allergies to most baby formula. So far, there’s one that she can tolerate, although it makes her gassy and pretty uncomfortable. I’m basically out of the frozen supply my wife had, and a neighbor was kind enough to donate her leftover milk, but that’s almost gone too.”

The anger on his face disappeared and was replaced with sympathy. “I’m so sorry for your loss, Torin. That must’ve been terrible for you and your family.”

I nodded and cleared my throat. “Yeah. And Bella’s not eating well, so that’s just a whole other level of stress I didn’t imagine I’d be dealing with at this stage.”

Joshua took a moment to look around the room before finally exhaling a deep breath. “We could probably do this without it being live-in. I can come by a few times a day to feed her or drop off milk. That way, you don’t have to be around me any more than necessary.”

I flinched as if he had physically slapped me. “No, Joshua. Um, Joss. Let’s start by clearing the air, shall we? I was an asshole senior year. I treated you like shit and gaslighted you and that was completely inappropriate and wrong. I was scared and that’s no excuse, but I was never ashamed of you. I was ashamed of myself.”

He chuckled under his breath and clenched his hands tighter as if trying to keep from punching me. “Yeah, you made that shame pretty evident back then. A few times.”

Fuck. I’m not doing this right. “Look, I’m trying to apologize. I’m sorry for the way I treated you. It was wrong, and it took me a long time to understand that. Honestly, I cared about you a lot.”

His eyes finally flicked to mine and locked there.

“A lot. And I’ve thought about you many times over the years. I didn’t expect this day to come, but I’m really grateful it did. Even if you still hate me and refuse to do this job for me, I beg that you’ll consider it for my daughter.” My voice cracked, and I had to look up at the ceiling to keep the tears at bay. “Please, Joss.”

As if she could feel us thinking about her, Bella's cry sounded in the baby monitor, and we both turned toward the staircase.

“Would you like to go with me to get her? I can give you the tour and maybe show you why you should at least consider it.”

“Yeah, okay.” He nodded and stood up when I did.

Bella’s cries got more insistent as we headed upstairs to get her.

“Down that hall,” I pointed in the direction of his room as we started up the stairs, “is the guest suite. My room is just above yours.” I pointed toward the left. “And Bella is right here, across from the hall bathroom.”

“You’ve certainly done well for yourself, Torin. This is a nice house.”

I shrugged and looked at him over my shoulder before opening Bella’s bedroom door. “My company went public this year. It was just about being in the right place at the right time. But thank you. I fell in love with this house as soon as we saw it, but it’s just so big for the two of us. I’m not sure if I’ll stay.”

“You’re thinking of moving?” I guess that would play into his decision as well.

“Maybe.” We stepped into Bella’s room, and I went straight to her crib and lifted her up. “All right, pumpkin. Daddy's here.” I cooed near her ear and held her to my chest. “And I’ve got an old friend here I’d like you to meet.” I kept my eyes on my

daughter, unable to look at Joshua in case he corrected me, reminding me that we stopped being friends a long time ago.

I felt him step up right behind me, so he was directly in her line of sight. “Hi there, Bella. You sure are a pretty little thing, aren’t you?”

Her crying immediately stopped when she heard the unfamiliar voice.

“That’s Joss. He’s here with that yummy milk you miss so much.” I swallowed hard and turned to place her on the changing table so I could get her into a fresh diaper.

Her eyes continued to track Joshua, watching him as he smiled at her and made silly faces.

As soon as she was dressed, I turned to him. “Would you like to hold her?”

“Sure.” I probably shouldn’t have been surprised by how comfortable he was reaching for this infant and cuddling her to his chest, but he was definitely a natural.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:48 am

Chapter 4

Joss

Bella was the sweetest little thing. Gorgeous blue eyes that looked exactly like her daddy's. I cradled her against my chest and glanced up at Torin. Fuck, he looked even better than I imagined he would after a decade. He'd obviously kept up his gym routine because he was just as bulky as I remembered, but his jawline was more defined, and the dusting of blond whiskers was fucking hot.

In high school, he was always a clean-cut, preppy jock. And I was the Goth kid with eyeliner and a trenchcoat in the middle of summer that he would never be seen with. At least not publicly. He didn't seem to mind watching me through my bedroom window as he did his homework right across the yard in his own room. We were neighbors for years before the first time he climbed through my bedroom window.

The attraction and lust between us was white-hot, and sneaking in and out of my window became a nightly habit for those last few months of high school.

At least until graduation when my inappropriate congratulations to him in front of his group of friends destroyed it all. Our secret world fell apart as he acted like I was a freak for even saying hello. In front of our families and all his friends, Torin made it crystal clear that he never wanted to speak to me again, and that was the end of that.

The next day, I left town to stay with my uncle for the summer and work in his custom fab shop. By the time I got home at the beginning of fall, Torin was long gone. He left for college and his parents downsized to a different house, so I truly

never expected to see him again.

Yet, here I was, holding his newborn daughter in my arms, and seeing the man I'd spent so many years pining over look at me as if... Well, I didn't know what that look meant. I cleared my throat and handed the baby back to him. "I guess my only questions are if you're still meeting with other candidates and when you plan to make a decision?"

Bella started to fuss as soon as he put her against his shoulder, so he nodded for me to follow him back downstairs. "There are no other candidates, Joshua. Uh, Joss. Finding someone completely allergen-free and willing to stay that way for at least the next eight months is practically impossible." He stopped midway down the stairs and looked at me. "If your milk is compatible, I'll do just about anything to get you to stay. You're really our last hope."

Well, fuck. I couldn't exactly say no to that. We went down to the kitchen and he mixed a bottle with a couple ounces of thawed milk and a couple ounces of formula. "I am?"

He opened the fridge and showed me four freezer bags sitting on the center shelf. "That's all I've got left from my neighbor. I have a couple cans of the prescription formula saved up, but I don't know how long those will last. So, yes, you are."

"Yeah, of course." I glanced down at Bella and then at the bottle he had just prepared. "I can try to feed her directly, but if she's been on a silicone nipple for the past month, she probably won't take skin. Especially with my physique." I shrugged as my cheeks heated. "It takes some effort to latch on and isn't as easy for a baby as a nipple that just flows down their throat."

Torin glanced down at my chest, and I could almost feel the weight of his stare penetrating right through me. "Can you pump?"

I turned toward the living room where I left my bag. “Yeah, I brought one if you’d like to try that.” I pressed against each of my pecs and they were sensitive enough that I knew I could pump out at least four to six ounces. “If you want to hold off on giving her that bottle, I can probably have a full bottle in the next fifteen minutes.”

“Seriously? Thank you.” The relief that washed over his face was so genuine that his teary eyes made me tear up too. “You have no idea how much I would appreciate that.”

Swallowing hard, I went and grabbed my bag then sat on the couch with my back toward the front window. I didn’t want to flash the neighbors if they were the nosy types.

After going through my standard ritual of wiping my chest with hospital-grade sanitizing wipes, I attached both pumps and kept my head down, unable to look Torin in the eyes. I’d never been ashamed of my gift before, but I was suddenly self-conscious. Would he look at me the same after watching me pump? Would he still think of me as a man or would I just be a milk factory?

It didn’t matter anyway since he was clearly into women these days.

I took a deep breath and looked around the room, actively avoiding the section where Torin was pacing with Bella in his arms. There were photos on every surface and the walls, including a huge wedding photo above the fireplace that showed a gorgeous couple. My guess was it had been taken recently because Torin looked exactly the same. “Your wife was beautiful.”

He stopped pacing a few feet away. “Yes, she was. Thank you.”

I stared at the photo but focused on Torin instead. “When did you get married?”

“Two years ago. She was my best friend at work. My work wife from day one, and eventually, things just clicked.”

I called up all my courage and glanced at him, keeping my shoulder forward to block him from having a full view of the pumps. “If I didn’t say it earlier, I’m very sorry for your loss, Torin. I can’t imagine what it would be like to lose the love of your life or for Bella to lose her mother.” I checked the containers and was pleased with how much had already been drawn. My body seemed to know when it needed to hyper produce and rarely disappointed. “I’ve got a bit more than what you had in your bottle. Do you want me to keep going or is this the right amount?”

“To be honest, I’ll take every single drop you’ve got.” Torin chuckled softly. “In case you decide not to come back, I need every drop we can get.”

Now I felt bad for being such a dick earlier. “I’ll stay for as long as you need me, Torin.” I met his stare and held it. “I was just shocked to see you, and the hurt I’ve held onto for so long came to the surface. But I need this job as much as you need the milk, so if this works out, it’s a win-win for both of us.”

“Thank you, Joss. In that case, you can stop at any time. We’ll know pretty quickly if your milk is compatible with her tummy and stays down.” He bounced Bella in his arms, still trying to soothe her while she patiently waited for her lunch.

I turned off the machine and disconnected the vacuum cables before carrying the attachments to the kitchen sink. I grabbed an empty bottle from the drying rack and transferred my milk into her bottle before washing the connectors and taking her bottle back to Torin. “Here goes nothing.” I handed him the bottle and then sat on the couch.

“God, I hope she likes this.” Torin glanced at me and gave me a half smirk. “For all our sakes.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:48 am

Chapter 5

Torin

Bella finished every drop of Joss's milk and then passed out hard. Joss and I had lunch and basically watched and waited to see how she'd react to it. She was usually a restless sleeper, but she barely moved at all during her three-hour nap. I had to keep checking to make sure she was still breathing because she was so content.

"So, I think it's safe to say she's nice and full." I leaned back in my chair at the dining table and stared right at Joss. "What do you say? Will you take the job?"

He opened his mouth and then closed it before sucking in a deep breath through his nostrils, as if needing to ground himself. "Just like that? You're not interviewing other people?"

"There are no other people, Joss. No one is willing to follow the strict dietary restrictions we have, and I'd really prefer someone who can live in. It's just too risky to have to rely on someone stopping by with milk a few times a day to make sure she doesn't go hungry." I bit my lip, hoping he wasn't gonna play hardball on this. "If it's about the money, I'm sure we can work something out. Stacy had a life insurance policy that is mostly going to Bella's college fund, but feeding her in the short term is really my priority."

He lifted his hands up as if to stop me. "No, the money's fine. In fact..." He looked away and I could tell he was struggling to find words to convey what he wanted to say. "Are you sure this is a good idea, Torin? I know I was just an experiment or

whatever to you, but you were more than that to me, and it really fucked me up when you stopped talking to me. I know we're adults now and you're clearly straight, so I'm fine with taking the job if you're comfortable with the fact that I'm still not straight. Like, at all."

Fuck me. I knew we'd have to have this conversation, but I didn't expect it to be under these circumstances. "Of course I'm okay with you not being straight. Like I said earlier, I'm really sorry about the way I treated you back then. I was confused and scared and...an asshole. There's no other way to describe it. But I hope that we can at least be friends now."

He took a deep breath as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Okay, then. Friends it is."

"So you'll take the job?" I wanted to jump up and pull him into my arms... Which was a weird reaction for someone I was hiring. "Really?"

Joss chuckled and rolled his eyes. "Yes, really. When do you want me to start?"

"Now. Today. I mean... When can you move in?"

The smirk he flashed was familiar. The same one I used to see when I glanced at him at the back of the class or across the cafeteria. The one that made my dick twitch back then and... seemed to still have that same effect. What the hell?

I hadn't been attracted to a man in a decade. At least, not one who made me hard. Obviously, I could appreciate an attractive man as much as any attractive woman, but no one got me worked up like when I was a teenager. No one but Joshua.

"Yeah, I just need to go get my stuff from my buddy's house, and then I can be back in a few hours. Is that good?"

“It’s great.” I smiled but tried to keep things casual, like I wasn’t jumping for joy on the inside. “Is there anything you’d like me to pick up at the store? Any food or drinks that you like? I’m not a bad cook, so if you have favorite meals, I’ll do my best.”

“No, but thank you.” His eyes softened as he swallowed and looked away. “I really appreciate you asking, but I’m not picky. I’ll eat anything that’s on Bella’s diet.”

And now I needed to take a moment to look away. How could he be such a good guy? Always thinking of others without an ounce of entitlement or self-interest. It felt like it had been ages since someone put me and my daughter before themselves, and it was fucking nice.

As if Joss could sense my discomfort, he sat up from the table and took his plate and mine to the sink to quickly rinse them off. I should’ve stopped him, but I kinda liked the way he looked in my kitchen, taking care of things as if he belonged there.

Shortly after, Joss headed out and Bella woke up. She was giggly and happy with a full tummy, and for the first time in a month, I didn’t feel terrified about how I was going to take care of my daughter.

I actually felt some hope that there was somebody ready to step in and provide what she needed...

And maybe what I needed too.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:48 am

Chapter 6

Joss

Why did he say that? Yes, it would be good for me because I needed the job. And yes, it would be good for Bella because she needed the milk. But what was his excuse? Was there a reason he wanted me in his life? Deep down, I knew I was being completely selfish by hoping there was still a spark. That seeing my face could bring back some of the interest I knew he felt all those years ago.

I had no right to even hope for a real friendship when this was all said and done. We'd tried that once and failed. Miserably. But good sense never stopped me from hoping.

Since graduation, I'd thought about Torin a lot. I didn't have many friends in high school, so I didn't keep in touch with anyone after that last day. But the spirit club was highly engaged, and I got quarterly updates on the important people. And as captain of the football team, I'd definitely gotten a lot of updates about Torin.

At some point after he got married, there was an announcement in the newsletter, and that was the last time I opened one of those damn things.

It wasn't healthy to carry a torch for someone you'd never speak to again.

And then suddenly, I was in his house. Holding his daughter. Planning to move into his guest room. What the hell was I thinking?

Mostly I was thinking about that sweet baby who had no fat on her bones and needed some proper nutrition that had apparently been hard for them to come by. I wouldn't let her suffer because I was being petty about a fling a million years ago. Torin was straight, and I was a professional. We could make this work.

It didn't take me long to gather up the few things I had in Abel's condo and send him a text to let him know I got the live-in job and would catch him for brunch over the weekend.

An hour later, Torin was showing me where the linens were and how to operate his coffee maker.

It was all a bit surreal.

I put my duffel on the dresser and turned to look at the room. "Well, I can unpack later. Right now, I should probably pump before Bella gets hungry again, and then I can pump again right after so we can start building up a supply."

Torin closed his eyes and tilted his head back as if overcome by emotion. Before I could prepare myself for it, he stepped up to me and wrapped his arms around me, holding me tightly against his chest. It took a second for me to lift my arms and wrap them around him too. "Thank you, Joshua. You have no idea how much... Just, thank you."

I allowed myself to inhale deeply at the crease of his neck. He still used the same shampoo that he did when we were kids. No matter how much time had passed, I'd never been able to smell that green-apple scent without thinking of him. I gave him a quick squeeze before releasing him with an honest smile. "I'm happy I can help, Torin. Truly. You don't have to do this alone anymore."

His hand slid up my back until he was cupping my neck, pressing me against him. "I

can't believe it's really you, Joshua.”

Me neither.

Torin excused himself while I took a quick shower and then pumped two full bottles of milk. By the time I took them out to the kitchen, Bella was ready for one, and I put the second one in a freezer bag with the date written across the front.”

Torin put a nipple on the bottle and sat down at the kitchen table with Bella on his lap. “If you don't have any preferences for tonight, I was thinking of baked chicken and rice. Is that okay?”

“That sounds delicious. Would you like me to get anything started?” I leaned against the kitchen counter and looked toward the fridge.

“No, I like to cook, so I don't mind taking care of everything.” He looked down at Bella and then back at me. “Unless you'd like to feed her, and I can get dinner started.”

I couldn't help grinning. “Yeah. I'd love to.”

He transferred her into my arms and she immediately reached for my chin, rubbing her fingers across the short whiskers I'd neglected to shave for the past few days.

I positioned her open palm against the side of the bottle to get her used to holding it in place while she continued to explore the curves and prickly hairs of my face and staring straight up at me.

Her eyes never strayed far from mine, even as she glanced around the features of my face.

Bella finished her bottle, and I burped her and then changed her while Torin finished dinner. She was happy to sit in her bouncy chair while we ate and awkwardly discussed the weather and his job.

When we were done eating, I got up and took both our dishes to the sink.

“You don’t have to wash them. That’s not officially part of your job.”

I shrugged and turned on the hot water. “It doesn’t take me very long to pump, so if I’m working here full-time, I’m gonna need other things to do. Since you like to cook, I’ll plan to clean and help out with anything else around the house you need.”

Bella started to fuss, so he lifted her from her chair and held her against his shoulder. Torin just stood there as if he had more to say, but after a moment, he sighed and looked down at his daughter. “I’m gonna get her in a bath and start her bedtime routine. Is there anything else you need tonight?”

“Nope. I’ll clean up in here and then get unpacked and head to bed. I’ll pump before I go to sleep, but if I hear her in the night or if she wakes up, feel free to wake me up to pump again so she can have a warm bottle.”

Torin smiled. “Just put whatever you pump tonight in the fridge, and I’ll throw it in the warmer. No need for you to wake up. I’m already used to operating on very little sleep.”

Part of me wanted to let him dismiss me like that, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night knowing I wasn’t fully earning my keep. “You have me now, Torin. You can sleep through the night. What time does she usually wake up?”

He glanced at the clock on the microwave and thought about it for a moment. “If she takes a full bottle at seven-thirty or eight, she’ll probably be up around midnight for a

diaper. But then again, she might sleep longer with your milk.” His cheeks got pink, and his eyes flicked to mine before looking away again. “I just mean, she’s already more content today than she has been all month.”

I felt both proud and sad by that, but mostly relieved to finally be available to help him. “Do you have a baby monitor?”

“Yeah, of course. It’s just an app on my phone that goes off when she wakes up.”

I went to the table and grabbed my phone. “Let’s put that app on mine too so when she wakes up, I can get up with her and you can sleep through till morning. You’re the one with a job you have to be alert for. I, on the other hand, can nap when she naps throughout the day if I’m tired.”

“Are you sure?” He was already pulling out his phone to look up the app before I even responded. Poor guy was desperate and clearly exhausted.

“Of course, I’m sure.” When he looked up at me, I winked. “I’m a full-service provider.”

Torin’s breath hitched and his pupils widened in his crystal-blue eyes. He swallowed hard as he nodded. “I’m beginning to understand that, Joss.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:48 am

Chapter 7

Torin

I gave Bella her bath, and by the time I went back out for a bottle, the kitchen was cleaned up, and Joss was tucked away in his room. She fell asleep before she even finished the bottle, which I hadn't seen her do in over a month. The weight that lifted from my shoulders was tremendous as I put her in bed and then crawled into my own bed.

Fuck, I was completely exhausted.

I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow, and if it weren't for the soft noises coming from the monitor, I would've stayed asleep all the way through the night. That would have been another thing that hadn't happened in months.

At first, I thought the voice I heard in my head was just a dream. A good dream. The kind that made me wrap my hand around my dick in my sleep and rub it as if I were with a woman.

But I didn't hear a woman. And I certainly wasn't thinking of a woman.

I was thinking of Joshua. A man. The only man I'd ever seriously thought of that way. The only man I'd kissed and touched and allowed to touch me with abandon. I was never the same after him.

After letting my fear destroy the best thing I'd had up to that point, I avoided

relationships, afraid I would hurt somebody if I cared for them too deeply. So I never got close to anyone.

Stacy eventually burrowed her way under my skin, but that took years. A lot of years. And the love we had was more of a friendship than that deep burning lust I felt for Joshua all those years ago.

That last thought made me stroke myself even faster like a damn teenager.

And then I heard him again through the baby monitor.

Soft cooing filled the air, and I realized why I'd woken up. Bella needed me.

I pulled on a pair of shorts over my boxers but didn't bother with a shirt as I shuffled to her nursery.

Joss was sitting in the glider, his body slightly tilted toward the window with Bella over his shoulder. She was in different pajamas from what I put her to sleep in, so she must have woken up wet and he had to change her.

Apparently, I slept through a lot because there was a half-empty bottle on the table beside him as he softly rocked her back to sleep. Tears filled my eyes and an emotion I couldn't quite name clogged my throat as I watched this man who had once left my life so suddenly—and then reappeared just as fast—care for my daughter in a way I didn't think anyone else ever would.

Her eyes fluttered open and connected with mine. I expected her to start screaming for me once she knew I was there, but she didn't. She stared at me for a moment before her eyelids got too heavy and drifted shut again.

Within moments, she was asleep.

“That’s right, Angel. Let’s get you back into your bed so Daddy can keep sleeping. He’s been so tired lately, but I’m here now. I can take care of you and help him out too.”

Without noticing me in the doorway, Joss stood up and carefully lowered her into the crib. “You’re one lucky little girl, Bella. If I had a daddy like yours, I’d be the happiest boy ever.” He stood over her for another moment and sighed. “And you might still be a little bit sad right now, but someday, you’re gonna be the happiest little girl ever too.”

Before he saw me, I slipped back to my room. Like a coward, I peeked through the crack in the door and watched him walk out and down the hall. Even in the dark, I didn’t miss the glance he spared in my direction before disappearing down the stairs.

He was perfect for Bella. Exactly what she needed. I couldn’t let my confusion and loneliness mess this up for her.

Joss was definitely off-limits. I’d made a stupid mistake before and hurt him more than I’d ever imagined possible. I wouldn’t do that again.

I went back to bed, but I was too awake to immediately fall asleep. For the first time in a long time, I felt the stirrings of a hard-on, so I grabbed my tablet and went to a porn site.

It was rare that I actually watched porn because it didn’t do much for me. It could get me hard, but it took forever for me to get off, and for the most part, I didn’t have that kind of time or energy. It just wasn’t worth the effort.

But I was certainly willing to try. As I was perusing my usual horny-housewife videos, my mind started to drift to the guy in the room just below me. And instead of my attention being on the woman and what she was doing, my attention was wholly

focused on the man and the way his thick cock slid right into her.

I changed the category to anal and that definitely helped get me close, but it wasn't until I turned off my tablet and thought back to those days of pressing Joshua into his mattress and plowing into him as he screamed into his pillow, that I was finally able to come.

Fuck, that felt good. Really good.

Afterward, when I should have felt shame and mortification for thinking of a man that way, I rubbed my slippery cream into my skin until I was a dry but sticky mess and then finally fell asleep with my hand still cupping my balls.

What was happening to me? Just because my wife was gone, I was suddenly into guys again?

A little voice in the back of my head knew that the truth was obvious, even if completely devastating.

Whether or not I was fully into guys, I'd always been into Joshua. I loved Stacy and didn't regret our time together because she gave me Bella, but Joshua was always the one I truly wanted.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:48 am

Chapter 8

Joss

Even though I was tired from getting up in the middle of the night, I hopped out of bed as soon as my alarm went off at six so I could shower and pump before anyone else was up. Torin was still asleep when I went to check on Bella. She was quietly moving around in her crib, so I got her changed and fed and brought her into the kitchen to make breakfast.

Torin had assured me that he ate a standard diet with the exception of tree nuts, and they weren't aware of any food allergies for Bella, even though he'd been erring on the side of caution. But he basically gave me the green light to cook anything I found in the house. That made it easy.

After digging around for a few minutes, I decided on an egg frittata with broccoli and cheese. Not too fancy, but it would keep well if he slept for a few more hours.

Bella was a good baby while I was occupied. She chewed on her fist and then clamped her fingers in her tag blanket. I put it over her lap as she watched me around the kitchen. As soon as I had the coffee going, Torin walked in wearing basketball shorts and a snug T-shirt. Although they were slightly more rounded than sharp, Torin had muscles bulging from his chest down to his abs and throughout his arms. As fit as he was, I might have mistaken him for a professional athlete.

The universe certainly gave with both hands when he was created...

“Good morning.” I only allowed myself a quick once-over before turning back to the cabinet and grabbing a mug for him. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please. It smells great.”

“I added a dash of cocoa and cinnamon.” I looked over my shoulder at him. “I hope you don’t mind.”

He shook his head and shrugged. “Not at all. Sounds delicious.”

“It’s my favorite.” I poured him a mug then turned to face him. “Sugar?”

“No, thanks. I wanna taste that recipe of yours before it gets buried under sweetness.” Torin went straight to Bella and pulled her out of her carrier. He held her at arm's length as he looked at her outfit then back at me with a grin. “This is cute. Was it in her closet?”

“Yeah. I hope it’s okay to put it on her. There are so many things in there with the tags on them that she’s gonna grow out of soon, so I figured she might as well wear them once.”

He wrapped his arms around her as he held her to his chest. “Good idea. I mostly keep her in onesies and pajamas, so I haven’t done a lot of exploring in her closet.”

“She’s got some good stuff in there, Daddy. We’ll show it all off for you while we can.”

Torin’s breath hitched as he looked at me. I wasn’t sure if I had crossed a line, but as he slowly exhaled and swallowed, I figured he wasn’t upset. “Please do. I don’t want anything to go to waste, so definitely open up things that are still in the package and dress her in anything that’ll fit. Oh, that reminds me.” He opened the far drawer in the

kitchen island and pulled out a credit card. “This was Stacy’s card, but you can use it until I get one in your name. Any shopping or supplies you need to buy for the house or for Bella put on this card. You can just tap it at most places, but if they require a signature, just scribble something.”

I raised an eyebrow and crossed my arms over my chest. “You want me to forge your dead wife’s signature?”

He rolled his eyes and huffed as if I were being difficult. “Well, when you put it like that, it sounds bad, but I want you to feel free to buy whatever we need. This is the easiest way to do it. I can give you one of my cards, but it’s the same thing. You’ll have to write my name instead.”

I shrugged and reached for the card. “Yeah, okay. Thank you. I don’t mind doing the grocery shopping and taking care of other chores if that helps you out. Just let me know what you need, and I’ll keep a running list as well.”

He put Bella back in the bouncy seat and then finally took a sip of his coffee. Torin inhaled the aroma after his first sip and then took another. “This is really good. Tastes like...Christmas.”

I grinned widely because that was my thought as well. “I’m glad you like it. Is there anything in particular you need me to do today? Bella already ate, so I was thinking I could take her for a walk in the stroller while you get some work done. Or we can just play here. What’s your usual day like?”

Torin scoffed and then took another drink. “Everything you just said sounds a million times better than our usual day, so feel free to go for a walk or play in her room. She doesn’t do much, so if you just put her on her play pad, she can entertain herself for a while. She’s just starting to roll, so be aware that she’s not always where you put her when you turn back, but she doesn’t get far.”

I chuckled as I imagined that tiny baby rolling throughout the house. “Well, she liked when I read to her, so we’ll probably do that.” I remembered an ad I saw recently and pulled out my phone. “Actually, I think the library does storytimes every day before lunch. Maybe we’ll go do that.”

“Yeah. That sounds fun.” Torin bit his lip and looked away as if suddenly feeling uncomfortable.

Maybe he wasn’t ready for me to leave with her. That was fair. I was basically a stranger. “Never mind. We don’t have to go anywhere. We’ll be fine to just stay here and play. I don’t mean to be taking over so quickly. I just wanna make your life a little easier, but we can work up to outings.”

He quickly turned back to me and shook his head. “No, it’s not that at all. I trust you, Joshua.” He held my gaze as he reached for Bella’s foot and rubbed the bottom of it. “I’ve always trusted you, Joshua. I was just thinking it might be fun if I could go with you. But I don’t want to make you feel like I’m hovering.”

I smiled. “She’s your baby, Torin. You’re allowed to hover. And if you have time, that would be fun. In fact, if you’d prefer to take her on your own, I don’t mind hanging back and maybe doing laundry or whatever else needs to be done so you can have some bonding time with her.”

He considered the offer but then shook his head. “No, I want you to take her. Let me know what time you’re gonna go, and if I can get away from work, maybe I can join you. If not, you guys can go and have fun. I can whip up some soup or sandwiches for when you get home.”

Now I really wanted him to come. As dangerous as it was for me to play house with the man I’d always hated to love, some of that hatred was melting away, and I was remembering why I fell for him in the first place.

I took one more sip of my coffee then left it on the counter and pulled Bella out of her seat. “You hear that, Bella? Daddy wants to go with us to storytime today. Let’s go play on your mat for a little bit while I see what time we should get there.” I couldn’t resist glancing back at Torin as I left the kitchen to take Bella to the living room where her floor mat was set up.

His eyes were locked on me, but low, like he’d been checking out my ass. When he looked up and realized I’d caught him, I couldn’t help smirking as I left the room. Just because Torin was now straight, didn’t mean he couldn’t appreciate the memories of when he used to own my ass back in the day.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:48 am

Chapter 9

Torin

When we left for the library, I handed Joss the keys to Stacy's BMW. "You can drive. That way, if you have any questions about the car, I can answer them for you."

He stared down at the emblem for a moment before pocketing the key fob. "Okay, thanks. My car basically runs on prayers and bubblegum, so yeah, I probably will have some questions."

I chuckled as I lowered Bella into her car seat and then stepped back. "You know how to adjust this?"

"Yeah." Joss nudged me out of the way with his hip and went to work buckling her in. "How's this, sweetheart?" He pulled the chest connector up to exactly where it belonged. "We got you all strapped in and ready for a ride with Joss and Daddy."

There was something about the way he talked to her that made my breath catch every time.

Whenever Stacy had called me Daddy, it was just the name Bella would use for me. I had no physical response to it. All I felt was the emotional pride of being Bella's father.

But when Joshua referred to me as Daddy, something in my belly tightened up and the urge to pull his hair back and tell him to say it again was overwhelming. "Yeah."

I cleared my throat and focused on the moment. “That looks good.”

Joshua had no trouble with the car, but I did have to show him how to adjust the radio.

Apparently, he wasn’t as much of a country music fan as Stacy was. He turned it to an alternative rock station, and I couldn’t help smiling at the memories it conjured up. “Do you still listen to this stuff?”

“What?” He looked at me and then at the radio. “Oh, yeah? Do you remember this song?”

“I remember everything.” I tried to keep the wistfulness out of my voice, but I didn’t think I did a good job of it by the way Joss inhaled and slowly blew it out.

“Yeah, those were some of the best and worst days of my life.”

Fuck. Why did I keep bringing this up? “Sorry.” I crossed my arms over my chest and stared out the passenger window. No matter how much time had passed, I couldn’t erase the way I’d treated him. A simple apology certainly wasn’t gonna do it. Then I felt his hand on my shoulder, giving me a gentle squeeze.

“Torin, I’m not talking about you.” He barked out a soft laugh. “Well, the good times were you. But, in general, I didn’t love high school. And it sure as fuck didn’t love me. Oh. Sorry.” He glanced at the rearview mirror to see if Bella had heard him. It was sweet that he was aware of his language around her.

“Yeah, same for me.”

“Seriously? You had the best kind of high school experience. The football team, the cheerleaders, the friends, the grades. You were a Norman Rockwell high school

student. How could it have possibly been any better?"

I sighed but kept my eyes focused straight ahead. I'd made my choices and to play the victim now wasn't fair. "Yeah, I guess you're right. It's stupid to live with regrets. It's not like I can go back and change things. And if I had changed some things, most of the others would've gone away too."

When he didn't say anything in response, I looked at Joss and saw it. The tight look on his face as he stared at the road. Why couldn't I be better at keeping the mood light?

Bella was awake when we got to the library, so I held her in my arms as we went inside to find the kids section.

I was slightly embarrassed not to know my way around the library, but I hadn't been inside it since I was a kid, and they'd remodeled it at least a few times since then. But Joss seemed to know where he was going, so I followed him until we found the storytime area.

There were several chairs set up in a half circle and a handful of caretakers and babies and toddlers already waiting. I sat down in a chair at the end, assuming Joshua would sit in the chair beside me, but to my surprise, he dropped to his butt on the floor beside my leg and folded his elbows over his thighs.

He looked just as comfortable sitting on the floor and ready for a story as the other children who were patiently waiting. I suddenly had the urge to run my fingers through his hair, but I resisted, distracting myself by pointing out various colors and pictures to Bella.

The librarian, or someone who looked like a librarian, sat down shortly after and read three picture books. Bella alternated between staring at me and watching the other

kids squirm and fidget.

When she began to get a little squirmy, Joshua instinctively reached for her and settled her on his lap on the floor. From that vantage point, she had a better view of the other babies and was instantly content until the end of the last story.

I did an admirable job of keeping things professional the entire time, even though staring at Joshua while he held my daughter as if he'd been doing it since the day she was born did stuff to me.

When everyone had filed out and it was time for us to leave, I reached out to take her from his arms and whispered close to his ear, "I don't know who enjoyed that more. You or Bella."

Joshua chuckled as soon as I backed away. "Might've been a tie. For a minute there, I thought that penguin wasn't gonna find his way home." He paused and caught my eye as he lowered his voice too. "But nature always finds a way to put you where you need to be."

Fuck me. Was he flirting? I couldn't handle him flirting. He just looked too good, and I missed him too much to be able to hold back if he showed even the slightest bit of interest.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:48 am

Chapter 10

Joss

Our first few nights together were good. We were both extra polite as if trying to be on our best behavior with a stranger. But within a few days, Torin started to relax and accept that I really was there to help him.

After a few weeks, he was happy to hand off more of the household chores to me and encouraged me to take Bella out on several walks throughout the day when he was on video calls and needed a quiet space. Bella was rarely fussy, but she was very verbal for an infant and liked to scream and laugh as soon as her daddy had to get on a work call.

That was usually my cue to take her out to look for butterflies and ladybugs and squirrels that liked to run across the fence and torment the dog next door.

“That’s right, Bella. We’ll drop off this package for Daddy at the post office, and when we get back, you’ll get a bottle and it’ll be nap time.”

She shook the crinkly caterpillar in her chubby fist and watched me talk as if she understood every word I said.

“And then I get some alone time with Daddy.” I wagged my eyebrows as if that meant something special. It didn’t. Torin had zero interest in me beyond my milk. I mean, he was straight and still mourning his wife. No matter how many times I walked out of my room in just a pair of shorts or left my door open when I was in the

shower, he wasn't gonna change who he was.

That was the hardest part about living with the only guy I'd ever loved. Those feelings would never truly be gone. I'd managed to mostly forget about him during the decade we were apart, but as soon as my initial hatred for him wore off, I was back to my pathetic longing for the straight boy who was just looking to kill time.

Only difference was now he wasn't a horny kid anymore. He had self-control and free access to porn and didn't feel the urge to climb into my bed at night like he did back then. Now, I fell asleep in the room directly below him while I imagined what he looked like all naked and sexy in his bed every night.

And as I stroked myself to sleep, I pictured Torin holding my hair as he choked me with his dick and told me to make Daddy come. "Oops, not the time for thoughts like that."

I had to adjust my dick in my shorts as we passed by a bus stop with an older woman. She was giving me a stern look for no good reason.

I smiled as I passed. "Hello, there."

"Hello." She craned her neck to look in the stroller. "Isn't it a little chilly for no socks?"

"What?" I glanced at her and then down at Bella. "Oh, she pulls them off. Those little tootsies like to feel a breeze, I guess."

"She'll catch her death if you don't put a blanket over those tootsies !" She huffed her disdain and turned back toward the street.

Geez. It wasn't actually cold outside. It was 75 and sunny, but I felt guilty and a little

self-conscious for my bad caretaking skills, so I covered her feet with a burp cloth and rushed her back home, worried she really was gonna get sick.

I'd never forgive myself if I let Bella get sick because I was too busy daydreaming about her sexy daddy to notice her feet were frozen. Well, more like perfectly normal temperature, but I still felt like I'd officially screwed up, and I hated that. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. Let's get you inside. Clearly, I need to do a better job of focusing on you and not my silly fantasies."

My stomach started to feel unsettled as we turned the corner to Torin's house. "Let's just hope Daddy is still on his call so he doesn't see how dumb I've been." I took a deep breath and felt another spike of guilt and discomfort in my gut.

She started to fuss right as I parked the stroller in the corner of the porch and pulled her into my arms. "Okay, okay. I know you're hungry. Let's get you inside." Instinctively, I wrapped my hand around her feet to keep them warm. Honestly, they felt warm, or at least the same temperature as my hand, but that wasn't a good gauge.

That grandma probably knew way better than I did about what was smart outerwear for infants.

I opened the door and stepped inside just as Torin was walking by with a slice of toast in his hand. "Hey, that was quick."

Nodding, I walked straight to him. "Do her feet feel cold? Or her hands? Her socks were off and I took her out without thinking." I handed Bella to her father and turned my back to him. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Torin's arm slid across my lower back, and he pulled me against his side. "What's wrong, Joshua?"

Fuck, why did my dick twitch every time he called me by my full name? The name I'd had to change just to help me forget about him. "Some lady said she was gonna get sick because she wasn't wearing socks." I turned toward Torin, forgetting how close we were until my face was basically touching his. "But it wasn't cold at all. I promise."

"She's fine, Joshua." His arm slid up my back until his hand was against my neck, holding me to his shoulder. "You're doing such a good job with her. I'm really proud of you."

A tear I didn't expect to release slipped down my cheek, so I subtly pressed it to his shirt, hoping he wouldn't notice. "You are?"

"Yes, Joshua. You're amazing, and you treat her like she's your own. I trust your judgment completely, and that lady was probably just having a judgy day."

I nodded into his neck and sniffed. "Yeah, she seemed a little cranky before she even looked into the stroller."

Torin pressed a kiss to the top of my head and squeezed me for a long moment before stepping back. "Don't let anyone make you second-guess yourself. I'm so grateful we found you." He lifted my chin up so I was looking into his gorgeous blue eyes. "Or that you found us. I mean it, Joshua. I'm so happy you're here."

Chapter 11

Torin

Witnessing Joshua's meltdown triggered something inside me. The urge to make him happy came back the moment I saw him on my porch, but the need to take care of him and make sure no one ever hurt his feelings or anything else was new. Not completely new, but not something I'd felt for anyone other than Bella.

And now that I'd held him in my arms, brushed my lips across his head and inhaled that musky scent that was uniquely him, I was right back there in high school. Desperate to get my hands on his whole body and remembering how good it used to feel.

After Joshua, I didn't sleep with anyone until Stacy. I'd been with plenty of girls in high school but those were just to maintain my image as the popular jock. Those girls wanted my notch on their nightstands as much as I needed theirs. But they didn't mean anything. The only person I felt real feelings for was the one person who was completely off limits.

Well, maybe not just the person but the entire gender.

As far as my parents were concerned, guys like me weren't gay. Joshua pulled it off because his parents weren't particularly religious and were very open-minded. But my devout parents would have sent me to a conversion camp if they knew the truth. And if they were still around, they'd be sending women to my house on a weekly basis to become Bella's new mommy.

But Bella didn't need a new mommy. She had me, and now she had Joss too.

As long as I didn't scare him away.

After dinner, I got up to give Bella her bath, and Joss took our dishes to the sink to clean up. Before I left the room, I turned back and asked one of the dumbest or best questions of my life. "Would you like to watch a movie later? After Bella goes down?"

Even from across the kitchen, I could see his body tense and hear his breath catch. After a moment, he nodded without looking at me over his shoulder. "Yeah, that sounds cool."

"Cool."

I took Bella to her room to get her ready for a bath while trying to rationalize what I had just done. There was no rationale. I kept trying to convince myself that I just wanted to be friends again, but we were never really friends. He was my dirty little secret, and I was his fantasy come true. That was egotistical and conceited, even as a thought in my mind, but it was true.

Even as a stupid kid, I knew how much he cared about me and would've done anything for me, and I completely disregarded his feelings every step of the way.

I was crouched beside the plastic tub while Bella splashed, but her eyes were already drooping before I even poured the first cupful of warm water over her hair. Instead of making it a play night, I quickly dried her off and put her in her pajamas.

Just as she was ready for her last bottle, Joss appeared in the doorway with warm milk in his hand. "Are you ready for this?"

I nodded and reached for the bottle, then sat down in the glider as Joss quietly disappeared. I watched the empty space for a moment before starting the lulling motion that always put her to sleep. While we rocked, I noticed the photo I had turned down earlier was standing upright again as if he had fixed it for me. Why was he always trying to help!

Guilt knotted up my belly for what I'd been thinking of doing, but then I felt even more guilt for knowing I was probably going to do it regardless of how bad of an idea it was. "Please don't hate me for this, Stacy," I whispered to the photo.

Bella's little hand clenched around my finger as she slowed down on the nipple.

"And you, sweet girl, can't hate me either. I'll do my best not to screw up again, but no promises."

Her eyes opened for just a moment and then drifted shut again as she released her suction on the nipple and turned away.

With a soft sigh, I lowered the face of the photo once again and put Bella in her crib. I was either correcting the worst mistake of my life or making another one.

Either way, I couldn't have Stacy watching me while I did it, staring at me with hatred and judgment. Questioning every moment we spent together. Did I ever really love her if I never stopped caring for Joshua?

I thought I had gotten over him, and I did love her very much, but I never felt this all-consuming angst in my belly when I was within arms' reach of Stacy. And that was exactly how I felt with Joshua.

But that was the past. Stacy was gone now, and as much as I would bring her back so Bella could have her mother again, I was starting to realize that maybe I didn't need

her back for me anymore. If I had to choose who to be with today, would I choose Stacy or would I choose...

Fuck!

How could I even be thinking those thoughts? Mourning was supposed to take years. There was no world in which a man was supposed to be thinking about someone else so soon after his wife's death, but also...how could I not?

The love and care Joshua had for Bella was obvious in everything he did. He changed his whole life just to be here for us, and that was hard to ignore. Hard to not interpret as a sign of just how perfect this family dynamic truly was.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:48 am

Chapter 12

Joss

There wasn't anything else left for me to clean, and after giving Torin the bottle, I really had nothing to do other than wait around. I took a quick shower and had a clarity wank to hopefully not embarrass myself during our Netflix and chill night, but that didn't take nearly long enough either.

I was always close to the edge when Torin was being nice to me or brushing past me or holding me and kissing my head.

What the hell was that anyway?

That kind of comfort and care was beyond employee and employer. Really, it was beyond friends too.

The way he held me was intimate. Loving.

Fuck! I turned off the water and started to dry myself as my dick began getting hard once again.

I went through my dresser and found a pair of underwear that was tight. Too tight. I hated wearing them because they gave me a stomachache after a while. But tonight, I needed the extra support, and at the last minute, I grabbed a second pair and slipped them on too. Two barriers trying to keep my dick under control had to be better than one at keeping my hard-on from tenting the front of my sweats. Then I grabbed a T-

shirt before heading out to the couch.

I picked up a book about babies' first year at the library and was combing through that when Torin walked in, fresh out of his own shower with drops of water still clinging to the tips of his light blond hair.

A smile instantly covered my face when I saw him in black sweats and a gray T-shirt because he was wearing almost the exact same outfit I was wearing. "Hey, we're twinning."

He looked down at himself then back at me and grinned. "Yeah, I checked the nanny cam in your bedroom to see what you were wearing before I got dressed."

My jaw dropped and my heart jumped right into my throat as I stared at him.

"I'm kidding, Joss." Torin burst out laughing. "I promise, no nanny cam in your room or anywhere else. Just the one over the crib that you have access to."

I smiled, but wasn't entirely sure if I should believe him. Then I decided I didn't really care. If he wanted to watch me sleep, he totally could. And if he wanted to mess with me, two could play at that game. "Well, if you were watching me, you'd be getting quite a show every night."

Now it was his turn to be shocked and wide-eyed. "Oh yeah?" Instead of moving to the armchair or the far end of the couch I was sitting on, Torin sat down in the middle of the couch, right beside me. With one knee up on the cushion so he was facing me, he slung his elbow over the back. "What kind of shows would I be getting?"

Fuck, we were really doing this. "Well, did I tell you I'm a nudist now? As soon as I get into the room, I take off all my clothes. Then I usually do a little exercise. Ya know, jumping jacks, burpees, situps, some good ol' calisthenics." I looked him in his

eyes. “Floor work. Lots of floor work.”

“Floor work.” I wouldn’t have heard his whispered words if I wasn’t watching his mouth move.

My lips started to twitch, but I could tell Torin was getting hot from the visual, so I kept going. “And then, I usually take a shower to wash all the sweat off me.” I ran my hand down the side of my belly then over toward my cock. “I don’t know if you remember how sweaty I can get in certain places. And after that, I go back to the room and attach the suction cups to both sides at once to get every last drop of milk out before I lean back in bed...” I paused for dramatic effect and then shrugged nonchalantly. “After I pump, I usually get hard. It’s just a biological thing, but if I have time, I take care of that, then read or watch TV until I fall asleep.”

Torin’s hand was casually resting in his lap, but I could tell he was trying to subtly adjust himself without drawing any attention to his movements.

Turning away to give him a moment of privacy, I reached for the remote and flipped on the TV. “So, what do you wanna watch?”

It took him a second to clear his throat and turn his body so he was facing the TV. He pulled a blanket off the back of the couch and positioned it on his lap, leaving half of it piled up beside him, presumably for me to use. “You can pick. Whatever you’re in the mood for.”

I considered my options and decided if I was going to push him, this was the night. It might be the last night I lived in his house, but with the day I’d had, I needed nothing more than for him to hold me again, maybe steal a kiss if he was feeling nostalgic. “Maybe something old-school. Brokeback Mountain?”

His breath hitched and then he chuckled softly. “Fuck, Joshua. I haven’t seen that

since the weekend I stayed at your house when your parents were out of town.”

Also known as the best weekend of my life. I searched through three streaming services before I found the movie and hit play. “Yeah, I haven’t seen it in a long time either.” I glanced at him and sighed. “It always made me think of you, so…”

The arm that had been perched over the back of the couch, straightened out and landed across my shoulders. Torin pulled me to his side briefly, and then righted me but still didn’t remove his arm. He slid his hand over until it was cupping the back of my neck with a solid grip. “You know, I don’t think I ever really got over you, Joshua.”

I hit pause on the movie while the credits were still rolling and looked at him with a sharp eye. “I think marrying a woman and having a baby with her would suggest that you did.”

Torin screwed his eyes shut in pain, but still shook his head a single time. “Just because I was able to love Stacy and planned to build a life with her doesn’t mean I ever stopped caring about you. I didn’t think I’d ever see you again, so I had to move forward with my life, obviously.” He opened his eyes and raised an eyebrow at me. “But you were always there. In the back of my mind.”

I choked out a pissed-off scoff. “Yeah, always in the back of the room. Hidden. A dirty secret.” I pulled away from him. “Let’s just watch the movie.” I thought about it for a second and then tossed him the remote. “Actually, put on whatever you want. Maybe a horror movie would be better.”

“No way.” He hit play and put the remote on the far side of the couch so I couldn’t reach it. “I want to watch this tonight.” Torin glanced at me briefly then looked forward again. “With you.”

Chapter 13

Torin

Holy shit. I forgot how hot this movie was. I really hadn't watched it in a very long time, and having Torin sitting right next to me while two supposedly straight guys went at it on the screen was a real mindfuck.

I'd been hard as a rock since I sat down beside Joss, and after an hour, it was starting to hurt. I readjusted the blanket so I had some space to press my hand over my dick and put some pressure on it to take the edge off.

But Joshua glanced in my direction and scoffed, making it even worse. Or better. No, definitely worse. "So, have you had a lot of boyfriends over the years?" What the fuck kind of question was that? The kind of question I didn't actually want the answer to.

Joss shifted his weight under the blanket as well. "A few. Some more serious than others." He cleared his throat and sighed. "The last guy I was with was a little too...dominant for me."

I turned and raised an eyebrow. "You don't like dominance?"

"Oh, I like it, for sure. But I guess maybe rough is a better word to describe him. He was a bit more of a disciplinarian than I like." Joss nudged my shoulder and wagged his eyebrows. "I like a sweet and cuddly Daddy, as you know."

Fuck me. I fully grabbed my shaft and gave it a few tugs, not even caring that Joshua obviously noticed the movement. He wasn't ignorant to what I was doing.

I looked him in the eye, hoping his gaze would stay locked with mine so he wouldn't notice what was happening beneath my blanket.

Joss and I had just started to explore kink in high school. There were some websites that gave us more of an education than was probably appropriate for high schoolers barely past losing our virginity. But we quickly discovered where we fell on the kink charts, and I was firmly in the Daddy Dom range, and Joshua was solidly submissive with service tendencies. That was certainly still true today. My boy liked to take care of us.

I rolled my eyes at myself for that ridiculous thought. He was not my boy. Hadn't been for a long time and maybe never would be again. "Did he hurt you?"

Joss shrugged and shook his head. "No, he was fine. Just didn't work out. No happily ever afters for me."

I caught the edge in his voice as he crossed his arms and looked back toward the TV. "I'm happy that you found someone, even if it was short-term. That's better than never finding love at all. Or so I've been told."

I tried to watch the movie again, but there was still so much to say. I reached back to where my hand had been resting on his neck and teased the hairs there. "Yeah, I'll always be grateful for my time with Stacy, but it's becoming more and more obvious that what she and I had is not what..." I motioned toward the TV. "Well, what Jack and Ennis had." I squeezed his neck. "Or what we had."

Joss sucked in a deep breath and blew it out. "Seriously, Torin? Are you trying to torture me? It's one thing to be flirty and tease you with a sexy movie, but you're

playing dirty. Telling me I meant more to you than we both know is true is just mean. And you've never been mean. Well, except for the one time."

Fuck, I would never live that down. And I didn't deserve to. "And you've never deserved anyone to treat you like anything other than the perfect boy you are."

His head swiveled to face me. "Don't tease me, Torin. Please." His voice broke and it almost broke me.

"Joshua." I pulled him closer and wrapped my arms around him, holding him in a way I hadn't done in so long.

His fingertips dug into my ribs and then finally his palms relaxed and spread across my back. "Please, Torin. I can't do that again."

"Neither can I. I can't deny you any longer." I chuckled and laid on my heaviest accent as I mimicked Jack from the movie. "I wish I knew how to quit you."

Joss chuckled and pulled me tighter to him. "I wish you wanted to keep me forever."

I lowered my lips to the crook of his neck and pressed a soft kiss there. "I'm beginning to think maybe I do." I kissed up to his earlobe and whispered into his ear, "Would you let me try again? Would you let me try to be a better man for you this time?"

His breath hitched as he slowly pulled back and looked up at me. "Do you mean it? Do you really want to be with me again?" Joss swallowed hard, and he sucked in a quick breath. "Like, in public. Or just at home?"

My eyes drifted shut as I pressed my forehead to his. "I'm so fucking sorry for the way I treated you. But I'm grown up now, Joss, and I understand my feelings a lot

better. At least, I'm starting to. And I don't give a fuck what other people think about me, including my parents. I would be so proud to show you off to the world and to let them all know you're helping me raise Bella."

A choked sob escaped his throat as a tear fell from each of his eyelids. "I want that so fucking bad, Torin."

I cupped his cheek and brushed my thumb across his smooth skin. "May I kiss you, Joshua? The way I've been dying to kiss you since you first showed up here."

He nodded almost imperceptibly and leaned forward slightly, forcing me to close the distance as I pressed our lips together.

Finally. Fucking finally.

Chapter 14

Joss

I was floating on endorphins and fantasies as Torin pressed his lips to mine. Still completely shocked by what he'd said, I opened my mouth and his tongue tentatively brushed across the tip of mine.

We both shifted positions at the same time. Torin leaned back as I pushed against him until I was lying on top of him across the sofa. Neither of us could pretend not to notice the pair of hard cocks pressed between us, but mine was painfully restricted in those fucking tight shorts.

Everything that was happening and the pressure around my middle was making me dizzy, so I kissed him harder, gnashing teeth and tongues together as I lowered my inside pair of underwear below my balls so they had some space.

Torin took my unveiling as an invitation and followed my hand below my sweats, teasing my head with the tip of his finger as I forgot how to breathe.

“Yes, Daddy. Take what you want. It's all yours.”

“Fuck, Joshua.” His full grip closed around my shaft, and he began to stroke me slowly from base to tip. “I'd forgotten how big and thick you are.”

Finally, hearing him talk to me like that again—touch me like that—was too much. Within seconds, I was right there at the edge, doing my best to hold back when all I

wanted was to explode in his grip. “I’m close, Torin.”

Torin’s mouth crashed against mine as he kissed me like it was the first and last time all mixed together. He continued to stroke my length furiously while keeping every nerve in my body lit like a match. “God, I’ve missed you. I didn’t even realize how much until this moment.” He licked along my chin and closed his teeth on my earlobe as he humped against my thigh.

I did nothing to relieve him. All I could do was fist his shirt like I might fly away if I wasn’t physically grounded to him. “Me too. So much.”

“Come for me, Joshua. Come for Daddy.”

“Fuck.” I arched my back, allowing every bit of my willpower to break free. The pent-up energy within me as well as the emotion I’d been holding back for so long. I shot a thick stream inside my shorts and against my belly as tears streamed down my face. God, I hoped he meant it this time.

“Shh.” Torin kissed my cheeks and eyelids, holding me tightly even as he teased my balls with his slick fingers. “It’s okay, Joshua. I’ve got you. I promise, I’m not letting go.”

I choked out a sob as my arms slipped under his neck, holding him to me like he might slip away. “Don’t make a promise you can’t keep.”

He kissed my mouth, softer this time. It was just warm lips on mine with a soft tease of his tongue while I took shuddering breaths between swipes. “I will, though. I’m ready.”

For several minutes, I couldn’t speak. It was too much to believe what he was saying was true, so I just sat there, clinging to Torin to keep the moment from fading.

“Let’s get you to bed.” His hand slid down to my hips and he lifted me off him.

I looked away and sucked in a slow breath, finally feeling composed again. “Yeah, okay. Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Never be sorry for how you feel. I deserve your pain and fear and frustration.” He sat up and tilted my head so I was facing him again. “And I hope that someday, I’ll deserve your admiration and trust and... maybe more than that.”

I wanted to tell him he already had it all. He owned every part of me since that first night he snuck in my window. But he was right. We needed more time. I trusted Torin with my life, but I wasn’t sure I could trust him with my heart. That would take more time.

After slowly stretching, I got up and padded toward my room. Once I got inside, I pulled off my shirt and headed toward the bathroom to shower.

Torin reached for my arm and stopped me. “Joshua?”

This was it. This was the easy letdown. I looked at him, unable to ever resist when I heard him say my name like that. “Yeah?”

“You know where to find me if you need anything.”

I held his gaze and saw nothing but sincerity. “I know. Good night.”

Torin leaned forward and kissed my cheek before slipping out of my room, gently closing the door behind him.

What was actually happening?

After my shower and pumping, I set an alarm for 3 AM and fell right to sleep. The alarm seemed to go off about five seconds after I fell asleep, but when I checked the monitor, Bella was still soundly asleep in her crib.

“Thank god!” I set another alarm for five and passed out again.

When I woke up the second time, Torin was giving Bella her morning bottle. He was softly talking to her so gave them some bonding time and decided to bake some muffins for breakfast.

I was just pulling the tray out of the oven when Torin walked in and stopped behind me. “Good morning, Joss.”

“Morning.” I stood up and put the tray on the counter, then turned slightly toward him.

I wasn’t even fully around before he pulled me to his body and softly kissed my lips. “Did you sleep well?”

I was dumbstruck for a second, partially shocked that he didn’t regret last night and also that he was openly holding and kissing me, even with Bella in his arms. Leaning forward again, I pecked his lips and then dropped a kiss on her forehead. “I slept very well, thank you. I checked on Bella in the middle of the night and she was still out. Did she sleep through the night?”

A huge grin covered Torin’s face. “Ten hours, baby.” He was a little giddy in his excitement as he bounced Bella in his arm and looked down at her. “Isn’t that right, sweet girl? You slept all night so Daddy and Joss could get some rest too.”

Her eyes stayed locked on his face as he spoke, but she didn’t seem particularly interested in his words. She was as smitten with her daddy as I was.

“That’s amazing. Hopefully, that was the start of a new trend.”

Torin sighed wistfully. “You have no idea how nice that would be. Well, you do know because you’ve been getting up with her lately, but if we could actually sleep all through the night...” He barked out a low scoff. “I wouldn’t walk around like such a zombie anymore.”

I held out my arms to take her from him, and Torin readily handed her over. “Well, then let me take her while you have a muffin, and then I might go run some errands lately. We could definitely use some groceries.”

“Yeah, these smell delicious.” Torin pulled a muffin out of the tray and bounced it between his hands for a minute until it cooled off. “And hot!”

I sat down at the dining table and chatted with Bella until Torin came over and stood facing me. He took a bite of the muffin and then moaned. “These are really good, Joshua.” He broke a piece off the top and held it up to my mouth. “Have a bite.”

I opened my mouth and let him gently put the piece on my tongue. “Thank you,” I said around the bite as I chewed it.

Torin took a few steps back then leaned on the counter, still staring at me. “I really like this.”

I was pretty sure I knew what he was talking about and felt the same way. But I needed to hear him say it. I would need to hear him say it for a long time before I fully believed it. “What’s that?”

“This.” He waved between the two of us. “Me and you. With Bella. Having breakfast together. You look good in my life.”

I chuckled, deciding to keep it light. “I’ve been trying to tell you that forever. Next time, just listen to me.’

He laughed as he came back and kissed me again, this time more soundly on my mouth. “You’ve always been the smart one.”

Maybe he really is more serious about us this time.

Chapter 15

Torin

I could finally breathe.

After our night together on the couch, I knew things would go one of a few ways. Joss would wake up and tell me off or he'd pack his bags and leave. Or, best-case scenario, he would still be happy about this thing developing between us.

Thankfully, it was the latter.

I didn't sense an ounce of regret in his smile or his words or the way he kept glancing at me as he inhaled three of his muffins with my coffee.

It really was nice. Better than that, it was perfect. For the rest of the day, Joss found chores to do around the house in between taking care of Bella and running a few errands.

For the next several days, we kept things casual. Constant glances across the table, brushes of hands or light kisses, and cuddles on the couch in the evenings. But nothing got really physical again until Friday night.

My CEO mentioned me by name as a key driver for the project that was touted as "product of the year" by several news outlets, and I was walking on air when I shut down my computer at the end of the day.

“Let’s do something special tonight.” I wrapped my arms around Joss from behind as he was vacuuming. “I’ll cook, and you keep Bella awake as long as possible so she sleeps well tonight.”

Joss laughed. “Well, I’ll do my best. She’s been sleeping pretty well this week, so we’re probably fine.” He turned in my arms and placed his elbows on my shoulders. “What’s the occasion?”

I shrugged and kissed him. “Just want to have some alone time with you.” I pulled back and waggled my eyebrows. “Some grown-up time, if you’re ready for that.”

Joss fell against my chest and squeezed me to him. “God, yes. Every day has been torture. I thought you’d changed your mind.”

“No way.” I placed my hands on his cheeks and tilted his head so I could slowly kiss him, practically climbing right inside him. “I just didn’t want to move too quickly. But I want you so fucking bad.”

He filled his cheeks with air and slowly exhaled. “Are you really sure you want to be with me? I mean, what about women? I’m not a woman just because...” He gestured to his chest. “You know.”

I laughed and kissed him again. “I know you’re all man, Joshua. And I love that about you.” I held his gaze. “All of you.”

Joss’s eyes sparkled as he smiled. “Okay, then. You cook. I’ll be on tire-out-the-baby duty and we’ll meet back here in...an hour?” He looked at his watch as if we were actually timing it.

“I might need more like an hour and a half, but I’ll let you know when I’m ready.” I cocked my head and tapped my finger to my chin. “Do we have enough stored milk

that I can liquor you up tonight?”

Joss chuckled and pulled back. “I’m definitely up for a glass or two, but that’s about as liquored up as you’re gonna get me. But yes, we have plenty stored, so Bella won’t go hungry. In fact, I’ll pump after dinner, so she can still have a warm bottle tonight.”

Fuck, I really did love him. Maybe I always did. But in the past few days, it really hit me that the kind of love I felt for Stacy was more like a sister or best friend. With Joss, my whole body wanted to intertwine with his. I wanted him to be mine in every way, and I hoped to drive that home tonight. Preferably, in my bed where I wanted him to stay indefinitely. “All right, then. I’m gonna run to the store, and I’ll be back in a few minutes. Do we need anything else?”

“Nope. I went this morning, so I think we’re good on all the basics. I might have even gotten stuff for a charcuterie board on Sunday while you watch the game.”

Once again, the words were on the tip of my tongue. But I held it and gave him a peck on the cheek instead. “Text if you need anything else.”

As much as I wanted to go all out for dinner, I also wanted to make it quick. Steaks on the grill, baked potatoes in the oven, and a frozen peach pie sounded romantic enough for me. I also picked up a broccoli salad from the deli because Joss was constantly reminding me how important it was for him to eat his greens while he was feeding.

With the steaks resting, I dressed our potatoes the way I knew Joss liked and plated our dinner. Joss used some of his milk to make a small amount of rice cereal for Bella to help fill her tummy for a good night's sleep. At first, I was hesitant to introduce any kind of solid food, but the doctor assured me there was no reason not to try since we wanted to get as many calories in her as possible.

And she seemed to enjoy the change of texture in her mouth. At least as much as she actually kept in her mouth. Most of it ended up smeared in her face and hair and all over me or Joss.

I looked at him over my shoulder. “You about ready?”

Joss looked over at me and smiled. “Yeah. It smells so good. She’s just about done, so we should be able to tag team eating, and then I’ll give her a quick bath.”

I brought our plates to the table and set one in front of him. “I’m gonna take a quick shower too, so I can take her in with me. We could both use a quick rinse.”

Joshua looked up at me with big eyes. “Yeah, I guess I’ll take a shower too then.”

I swallowed. “Good idea.”

And so began the most angst-filled meal of my life. Joss and I made small talk about Bella actually wanting to crawl, and then I told him about the meeting I had with my CEO. But in the back of our minds, we were both thinking the same thing. We are getting laid .

At least, that’s what I was thinking.

And by the way Joss’s knee shook the whole time, whether Bella was on his lap or not, I was fairly confident he was thinking it too. When he cleared the table and I took the baby into my room for a quick shower, we were both just counting down the moments until we were back together again.

Bella loved being in water, and although she was slippery, I was able to get her rinsed off and myself washed up in just a few minutes. I slipped on a pair of loose shorts with nothing underneath then got her dressed for bed.

Joss snuck in and put a fresh bottle on her dresser while I was changing her, so I quickly finished up her bedtime routine then met him out on the couch.

He had two bottles of wine out and two empty glasses on the table as he glanced up at me. “I didn’t know if you’d be in the mood for white or red so I didn’t open either.”

I looked at him, carefully watching his reaction. “Do you have a preference?”

“I usually drink white,” he said.

“Done.” I opened that bottle and poured both of our glasses. After handing one to Joss, I held mine up for a toast. “To reconnecting with the people we were supposed to be with all along.”

His stare was heavy as he looked at me with so much emotion. “To reconnecting with the people we wanted to be with all along.”

“Cheers to that.” I clicked my glass against his and we each took a drink, still staring into each other’s eyes.

Instead of taking a sip, Joss finished half his glass and then put it on the table. “Wow, that’s good. I haven’t had wine in a long time, but I like it.”

“I can tell.” I chuckled and took one more drink before putting my glass on the table too. Once my hands were free, I put them on Joss’s waist and pulled him closer to me. “I want you so bad, Joshua.”

“Me too,” he whispered.

I leaned into his neck and inhaled his warm, clean scent. “Everything. Every drop.”

Joss was still but didn't question me. Instead, he turned and pressed his lips to mine. We started off with slow, lazy kisses, but they quickly evolved into desperate pleas for more. Before things got too far, I pulled back and pressed my forehead to his. "Can we take this to my bed?"

"Yes, please."

I smiled as I dragged Joshua up the stairs into my room. We put our phones on the nightstand so we could hear the monitor if it went off, but my attention was one hundred percent on the man standing at the side of my bed. "Take off your clothes, Joshua."

He pulled his T-shirt over his head and slipped off his sweats.

I grinned when I saw he wasn't wearing underwear either. At least we were both on the same page on that. My hands immediately went to his pecs as I kneaded his muscles then slid over his biceps to get a good grip on him. "I want you to be mine, Joshua. I want to fuck you and remind you why we found our way back to each other. Do you want that too?"

"Yes, Daddy. Fuck me hard."

When that word came out of Joshua's mouth in the bedroom, it was completely different from when he uttered it in the context of me being Bella's daddy. One was strictly paternal. But when Joshua said my name like that, it was primal and needy for me to claim him. Exactly what I planned to do.

I pressed him back onto the mattress, taking a moment to just appreciate how beautiful his body was. Joss didn't spend a lot of time in the gym, but he was still perfect in every way. Even more so now that his body had evolved to be not only more manly but with a gift I never imagined he could give me.

My shorts were released, and I lowered to my knees so I could take him into my mouth. The second his hard length landed on my tongue, I remembered how much I enjoyed giving him blow jobs. It has been one of my favorite things to do, and I had forgotten how much I got off on having complete control over this man's release.

He didn't come until I allowed him to, and the feeling of owning his pleasure in that way was heady. "I'm too close, Torin."

Good. This wasn't gonna be a one and done. He was gonna come until he was bone dry and begging for mercy.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:48 am

Chapter 16

Joss

When I looked down and saw Torin staring up at me with my dick halfway down his throat, that was it. I couldn't hold back. I pushed in even deeper and shot my load into his mouth, watching as he pulled off just far enough for a few drops to collect at the corners of his lips before he licked them up. "Fuck, that felt good."

He continued sucking until I started getting hard again... and then he pulled off. Bastard. "Don't stop now."

"Wouldn't think of it." He kissed the inside of my thigh and then slowly worked his way up my belly and chest, dropping wet kisses along my skin until he was back at my mouth. "I'm just getting started, babe."

He'd never called me that before, and I liked it. "What else are you gonna do?"

Torin stuck out his tongue and dragged it from my chin, along my jawline and up the shell of my ear. As he did that, I felt a fingertip trail down my taint and press against my opening. "I miss this." He tapped my opening. "So fucking bad."

I rolled my hips, pushing against his finger. "Then get in already. You promised me a mindblowing fuck and you're just teasing me..."

His teeth closed hard on my earlobe, making me flinch as my breath caught. "Who's fucking teasing you now, boy?"

A full-body shudder rolled through me as he pushed the tip in dry, reminding me of what it felt like to be owned by this man. “You, Daddy. You’re teasing me with your finger, but I want that big cock inside me.”

“You sure about that?” Torin lifted up onto his hands, hovering above me so he could look right into my eyes. “If we do this, it’s gonna be different this time. I want you to be mine, Joshua. Completely. Wholly mine. Are you ready for that? Because if you’re not, we can wait until you are.” He grabbed a handful of my ass cheek and squeezed. “Once this is mine, it’s mine forever.”

I nodded and sniffed back the emotion building in my throat. “I’m ready. I’ve been ready for a long time. Take me. I’m yours.”

“Fuck yeah, you are.” He fumbled with the nightstand and pulled out a new box of condoms and lube. With my eyes glued to his hands, I watched him tear open the box and prepare himself. When he was ready, he pressed my knees up toward my armpits to get in the position he liked. “Any last requests before I fuck you into this mattress and claim this ass once and for all?”

“Just promise you won’t leave me.” I shouldn’t have said it, but it was the only thing I was afraid of. I could handle anything else but Torin walking away again. Not only would I be losing him but Bella too. The family I’d quickly merged with and didn’t think I could survive without.

“Never again. I promise.” He brushed his lips over mine as his slick finger pushed inside me.

It had been a while since I’d been penetrated by anything, so I had to breathe through the first few minutes of his gentle stretching. But Torin never let me get in my head. He kissed my mouth and whispered words of praise and adoration as he added more fingers, opening me wide for his thick dick.

My body squirmed and writhed beneath him, anxious for more and scared of it too. But more than anything, I needed to feel that closeness I hadn't felt with anyone since the last time I was with Torin. "Now. I'm ready now."

Without any other words, Torin added more lube and slowly pushed his cock inside me. Unlike the stretch of his fingers, his girth filled me up in every direction and the burn felt satisfying. Like every inch of my channel was touching every inch of his cock in a way no other man ever had. "God, I love you. I'm sorry for saying it now, but I can't keep it to myself anymore." I rolled even higher so the angle was deeper.

Torin bottomed out and then leaned forward to kiss my mouth, making me feel like I was about to split in two in the best way possible. "I fucking love you too, Joshua. So fucking much." He pulled out and slammed back into me, fucking me rough while keeping his lips close to mine, either kissing me or breathing against me but never pulling away. "This ass is mine."

"Yes, Daddy." I fisted the comforter to keep from digging my fingernails into his flesh as I quickly moved through the stages of hints of an orgasm to full-blown, barely holding it back. "Come in me so I can come on you."

He ground his teeth together and pulled up high enough to get better traction as his pace increased, fast and deep so he was pegging my prostate with each thrust. "Come for me, Joshua. Every drop."

I threw my head back and allowed the shaking that was building in my belly to extend through me as my balls constricted before finally releasing all the pent-up tension that had been building for weeks. An explosion of come splashed across my chest and chin as Torin squeezed my thighs and moaned through his own climax.

"Fuck yeah." He held me in a tightly curled ball for several seconds before finally pulling back and falling onto my chest. "How does that feel so good?"

I choked out a grunty sound. “Who cares how. Just promise you’re gonna do that again.” I licked his shoulder then kissed it. “In like ten minutes.”

He chuckled and then kissed my neck. “I’ve got a bit of cleanup to do first.” He slid down my chest and began licking up my spunk. “Just as good as I remember.”

“Glad to know it hasn’t changed over time.” I slid my fingers through his short hair and gently held the back of his head.

His tongue dragged over my nipple, and he circled it as he glanced up at me with a raised eyebrow.

“You want to taste that too?”

He grinned and kissed my pert tip. “Kinda. Is that weird?”

I had to laugh at that. “It would be weird if you weren’t at least curious.”

He lifted up and rested his chin on my stomach. “So, can I?”

“I told you I’m all yours. Every part of me.” I scratched his head and nodded. “Just close your mouth over the full nipple and suck. But be prepared for a mouthful because I usually have a lot after I come.”

Torin stared down at my nipple and then closed his eyes and followed my instructions, taking a deep pull. Instantly, my ducts opened up and sprayed into his mouth, giving him a mouthful. He swallowed it and kept drinking, suckling like a pro.

My dick started to get hard again, but that didn’t stop him. He just kept sucking as he took me into his hand and slowly worked me again.

One thing was for sure. Torin really was going to drain me of every drop, and I was here for it. Now and always.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 3:48 am

I had no idea what I'd been missing. Ten years of not having Joss in my life was way too long, but I couldn't go back in time and change things. I could only go forward. And as he slept beside me, curled into my arms after allowing me to taste everything he had to offer, I finally felt whole.

The years we spent apart changed us personally and physically, but what mattered was that we had found each other again. And more importantly, I'd gotten my head out of my ass and was finally where I should have been, which was willing to accept that I liked men. Or more specifically, one man. The sweet and gorgeous man who was still covered in our combined come but refused to leave the bed long enough to shower.

I held him a little tighter and closed my eyes. He would still be there in the morning. And with luck, every morning after that.

It was still dark when Bella started to cry. I rolled to the side of the bed to get up but Joss stopped me. "I'll get her." His lips pressed to my shoulder and then he was up. "Go back to sleep and you can take the morning shift."

"Deal." I scooted back to the middle of the bed to keep it warm for when Joss returned. "Call out if you need me."

"I will." He leaned down and kissed me one more time before disappearing down the hall.

"And you better come back here after. This is your bed now." He didn't respond, but I knew he heard me.

The baby monitor was on so I could hear his quiet murmurs and humming as he changed Bella and then took her to the kitchen for a bottle.

He was a dream come true for both me and Bella. Our family was now complete. Not whole without Stacy around to be the mother Bella deserved, but he rounded out what I didn't even realize I'd been missing.

Before the bed got cold, Joss was back, sliding in beside me and snuggling against me. "Oohh, you're warm."

I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him in tight. "And you're nice and chilly. Even your toes are frozen."

He pressed his feet under my calf and cupped my cheeks with his cold fingers. "Warm me up, Daddy."

As much as I wanted to take his sweet ass again, it was late and we both needed to sleep. "Tomorrow, Joshua. For now, get some sleep."

We both fell asleep easily, and when I woke up again, Joss was sprawled on top of me and lightly snoring. It was adorable. I knew Bella would be up soon, so I carefully slid out from underneath him and went to get her bottle ready. By the time I slipped into her room, she had rolled to the edge and was staring at the doorway, clearly waiting for one of us to arrive.

"Good morning, sweetheart." I lifted her up and held her against my chest. "You look happy today."

She cooed and reached for my nose.

"Okay, okay. Diaper first, then bottle, then play time."

She didn't argue, so I took that as agreement and got to it. Twenty minutes later, we were on the floor in the living room with a kids' music show playing in the background. Joss came in a few minutes later with a mug in his hand. "Coffee?"

"Yes, please!" I put Bella on her mat and got up to give him a proper morning kiss. "Thank you, babe."

He grinned. "I love when you say that."

"Oh yeah?" I took a sip, looking at him over the edge of the cup. "Babe?"

Joss bit his lip and nodded. "Yeah, no one's really called me that before."

I walked to him and pressed my chest up to his. "I like when you call me Daddy."

He rolled his eyes and dropped his forehead to my shoulder. "Why does that embarrass me when we're not fooling around?"

I shrugged and reached for his ass, giving him a light squeeze. "We can fool around, if that helps."

"Maybe during naptime, but I'm gonna go make breakfast and you're gonna play with your daughter. This is her favorite song and she likes when you sing along."

I stopped to listen to the words and cringed. "Fruit salad. Yummy, yummy?"

He grinned and repeated the silly lyrics back to me. "There's a dance that goes with it. You'll want to pull up the video."

"Uh, no. I won't." I kissed him again, hoping he'd forget about that ridiculous dance idea. "But if we have any fruit, that sounds pretty good."

Joss nipped at my lip and then pulled away. “One fruit salad coming up for Bella and Daddy.”

I watched him leave and then turned back to Bella. “I hope you’ve enjoyed having Joss around because I think we’re gonna keep him.”

She looked at me and giggled. Yeah, she agreed. He was ours, and we weren’t letting him go.