

BEAR'S HOUSE



HAPPY
HALLOWEEN



FOUR HEARTS, ONE BED.



AN MM+ ROMANCE NOVEL
BY ROAN SOLANO

BEAR'S HOUSE

An MMMM Daddy Romance

ROAN SOLANO

LUSTPAD BOOKS

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Bear's House

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This book is intended for adult readers only. All romantic and sexual characters are consenting adults.

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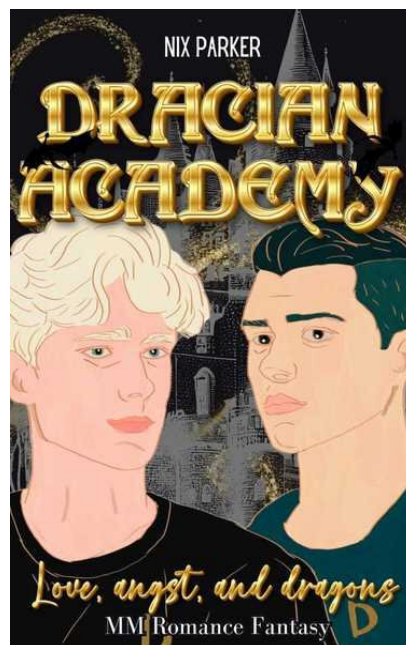
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I always knew I'd have to go serve at the Dracian Academy, as Maëy's totalitarian government wasted no forces when it came to Dragon Riders. What I didn't know was that I'd get the cutest guy in the world as my roommate, Yuri, who would soon become my best friend. Also, I didn't know that the school Leader, Attila, the most annoying jerk of all time would also fall for me. How can I manage that while also keeping my neck intact while riding a dragon? I don't know how I'll survive...

This story is an MM Romance Fantasy with dragon riders, magical military academy, Qi control, complex worldbuilding, two best friends in love, also two enemies in love, and the relationship drama that comes with it... mature readers only with a HEA!

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CONTENT & TRIGGER WARNINGS

Bear's House is an adult MMMM romance centered on one Daddy and three adult submissive partners. It contains explicit sexual content, BDSM, power exchange, age-play elements, and consensual kink.

Please check the content notes below before reading:

- BDSM and consensual power exchange
- Daddy/boy dynamics
- Age play / adult characters engaging in age-play dynamics
- Diapers, pacifiers, chastity cages
- Discipline and punishment
- Restraint, tying up, and gagging
- Kidnapping / abduction themes and scenes involving being taken or held
- Possessive and protective behavior
- Explicit sexual content involving multiple adult partners
- Polyamorous / MMMM relationship dynamics
- Emotional vulnerability, jealousy, and relationship conflict
- Military / Army-related themes

The central romantic and sexual relationships are between consenting adults. This is fiction, not a guide to real-life BDSM or kink practices.

If any of these topics are difficult for you, please prioritize your wellbeing.

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BEAR'S HOUSE

One Daddy. Three boys.

Welcome to Bear's House.

Sullivan has built exactly the life he wants: a warm home, a crackling fireplace, and three very different boys who fill every room with chaos, laughter, and more trouble than one Daddy should reasonably have to manage.

There's JJ, the bratty little menace who can turn almost anything into an excuse for a spanking. Sawyer, the capable big brother who spends so much time looking after everyone else that sometimes he forgets how good it feels to let Daddy take control. And Mikey, the sweetest of them all, happiest when he can leave the grown-up world behind and curl up safe and small in Daddy's arms.

Their days are filled with chore charts and cuddles, diapers and collars, movie nights and punishments, trips to their favorite kink club, ridiculous sibling

arguments, quiet moments of submission, and plenty of very adult rewards.

But underneath all the play is something softer.

Because at Bear's House, being loved doesn't mean being perfect. It means being known. Being corrected when you need it, held when everything gets too heavy, and reminded—again and again—that no mistake, bad day, or bratty little disaster can make you stop belonging.

Bear's House is a cozy MMMM romance featuring consensual adult age play, BDSM, domestic discipline, Daddy/boy dynamics, found family, lots of kink, and four men building a home where they can be exactly who they are.

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CHAPTER 1. JJ

My heart was pounding a thousand beats per minute, perfectly in sync with the music. The Hearth never played it too loud — they didn't even kill the lights, just kept everything bathed in this warm amber glow — but it was still an upbeat pop song, and I could barely keep myself together. I was bouncing up and down, singing every word I knew by heart, and every time Daddy looked over at me, he'd let out this little laugh that made my chest go even warmer. He was sitting at one of the wooden tables, relaxed, watching everything with that calm that was just so him.

The Hearth was an exclusive club. You could only get in if someone who already came here had invited you — that way, everyone looked out for everyone else. It was a space just for littles and their Daddies and Mommies, and it was nothing like anywhere else. There was room for scenes, of course: spanking benches, cages, spaces for training subs, everything from floggers to much, much more. But there were also these big, heavy oak tables with chairs around them, amazing food — not just drinks — and little rest areas where boys and girls could color or just decompress if they needed to. There was even a separate room for anyone who needed a break from the noise and sensory overload that a place like this could bring. In the middle of the main floor sat an enormous stone fireplace, protected by a sturdy grate — because the last thing anyone wanted was a little boy or girl getting too close to an open flame.

The place was incredible.

The one who'd first invited me was my best friend, Henry, who was now jumping up and down right beside me as we belted out the latest Shakira song together. Henry and I were definitely the most chaotic ones there. Some of the other boys wrinkled their noses at us — they were well-

behaved, did everything their Daddies and Mommies told them — but honestly, we were also admired by plenty of people at the club, mostly because we were always getting into trouble.

Which brought me to tonight.

This time it was entirely Henry's fault. Not that I'd say that out loud, since Daddy would probably punish me just for blaming someone else. But the truth was, I had only suggested the idea — I hadn't actually expected anyone to listen. That was usually how it went. My best ideas always got ignored.

Just not this time.

Henry was my height, dark-haired and dark-eyed, with a short, neat beard. Tonight he was wearing a pink silk lingerie top with gorgeous lace trim and little leather shorts that hugged his ass and showed off his incredible body. I was the complete opposite. Blue-eyed and blond, and even though we were the same height, he was way more built than me. I was on the skinnier side, and I dressed like I was heading to the mall — a Pink Floyd tee and black jeans. Some of the boys here had given me grief about listening to music that old, and once, one of them even got corrected by his Daddy for saying it, which I found absolutely hilarious. I was definitely the most troublesome one in my family, but I liked dressing simply, and Daddy supported that. The leather, the lingerie — none of it called to me.

The dance floor at The Hearth was everywhere: around the oak tables, alongside the spanking benches. There wasn't one dedicated area for dancing, which just meant we could dance anywhere we liked. Doms liked having their subs close, and sometimes they didn't want to stand on a dance floor — or sometimes their subs didn't.

Henry and I were near a small stage where announcements and events occasionally happened. The club manager — who was a boy, and when I say boy, I don't mean his age, I mean his place in the dynamic — was speaking into the microphone. His name was Gustav. Long red hair, genuinely gorgeous, green eyes, and one of my closest friends. I was one of the veterans here by now, same as him.

"Tonight we'll be kidnapping volunteers," he announced with a wicked grin, "tying them up and gagging them. You can sign up with our kidnappers."

He pointed to his two helpers. One was Mel — also a sub, just to be clear — wearing a tiny pink dress that barely covered her, long brown hair, dark eyes. Also a friend of mine. The other was a newcomer, a big guy, and I wasn't sure yet whether he was a sub or a Dom, but he looked excited to get started. And that was all that mattered.

That was when the idea hit me.

I stopped bouncing for a second. I looked at Henry with my best mischievous smile.

"What if I signed Daddy up to be kidnapped?"

Instead of telling me no, like any sane person would have, he burst out laughing. Henry didn't have a Dom at the moment, but sometimes Daddy and others would give him a spanking or a scene when he consented — and he loved playing with Daddy. I loved getting in trouble alongside him too.

"Great idea, JJ," he said. "Stay here."

"What do you mean, stay here?" I asked, already getting a little nervous.

He just grinned and said nothing, then headed across the floor toward Mel.

"Henry! Wait up!" I yelped, running after him.

Too late. Mel gave him the smile of someone who had just been handed the greatest idea in the world, made a beeline for the newcomer, and the two of them walked straight toward Daddy, who was sitting near the fireplace talking with two other Dom friends of ours.

Daddy was the most handsome one there, obviously. He was a bear — big and broad — and when he hugged me, it was the best thing in the world. He had a long, thick beard, reddish in some patches, and short dark hair. His eyes were always warm, always soft, like two little glowing embers even when he was scolding me — which I had probably deserved.

Mel and the newcomer went right up to him, and I was close enough to hear.

"Sir, you're being kidnapped," Mel said, already wrapping a hand around his wrist to guide him. People at the club didn't usually touch each other like that without asking first, but Mel and Daddy had known each other for a long time, and consent was well established between them.

He looked confused for a second. Then, right there in the middle of his friends at the table, his eyes swept slowly around the room — and landed exactly on me. As if none of my collar brothers could possibly be responsible. Only me.

"Kidnapped?" he said in that deep, delicious voice of his.

"Yes, sir," Mel said, continuing to guide him. She wasn't pulling hard — it was more of a suggestion, and he could absolutely refuse.

The corner of Daddy's mouth curved into a smile. Not a warm one. The dangerous kind. The one that said I was going to pay for this. And I knew I was.

I tried to give him my most angelic smile. Too late. His eyebrow was already raised in my direction. Even so, he pushed back from his chair and said:

"Well then. Let's go."

And he let Mel lead him away.

I thought maybe — maybe — if I intervened right now, I could save my behind from something much worse than if I'd just kept my mouth shut. I hurried over to where they were heading, toward the stage.

"Mel, this is a terrible idea. Let my Daddy go. Right now."

"I'm sorry, JJ," she said without slowing down. "He's been captured. And this was all your idea."

"Daddy, I tried to stop her! And Henry! It's their fault, both of them—" I said, trying to do damage control before my fate was sealed. I was deliciously nervous, my heart already going haywire.

"Funny," he said. "Mel told me it was entirely your idea."

Mel gave me an innocent smile. I loved and hated her in equal measure.

Daddy raised his eyebrow at me again. That was never a good sign.

"I'm sure you and I are going to have a very long talk once I'm released."

"Sure," I agreed, "but only after."

And I kept following them to the front of the stage. Eleven chairs had been set up, and Doms and subs alike were helping tie up the captives — except that so far, only subs had actually been kidnapped. Daddy was the only Dom who'd been seated in a chair.

Mel looked at me and said, "Come tie him up."

Daddy looked up at me with a smile that was pure sweet poison.

"Yeah, JJ."

"Well — no, thank you very much," I said, my voice coming out smaller than I wanted, my hands already shaking.

"That's an order," he said, in that calm that was so much worse than any raised voice. "Come tie me up."

And that was when I knew I was completely done for.

I went. Fingers trembling. I stepped close, took his wrists — so much bigger than mine — and started binding them together behind his back. He stayed completely still, letting me do it. I was definitely not a switch, and part of me already wanted to cry and beg him not to make me go through with it — but it was way too late for that. The scene had attracted the attention of half the club by now. Daddy was deeply respected here, and seeing him like this was genuinely shocking to people. But I think everyone was also thoroughly enjoying the drama of it all. I would have been too, if I weren't the one in trouble.

I finished. I stepped around to face him.

"Sorry, Daddy," I tried.

He just looked at me — eyebrow up, smile that said these were my final hours.

"Oh, you're not sorry yet. But you will be. Don't worry, JJ."

My stomach dropped. And to make everything worse, Gustav — who was clearly having the time of his life — said:

"Don't forget the gag."

And handed me a ball gag.

I stared at Daddy.

"Please use your safeword so I don't have to do this," I said.

He laughed.

"Not a chance. You started this — now you finish it."

And he opened his mouth.

I felt like I was putting my hand into the mouth of a predator as I set the ball in place and fastened the gag behind his head. He held my gaze the

entire time, expression perfectly calm — which I knew was entirely for show.

I finished. I looked at him, still shaking. Then I turned to Henry, who had watched the whole thing from the audience.

"You are going to regret this."

"JJ," said one of Daddy's Dom friends, Jeffrey, "still blaming other people? That's not going to help with your punishment."

"JJ," Henry added, visibly delighted with himself, "own your actions."

I wanted to throw something at both of them.

I scanned the crowd and found my collar brothers. Mikey was watching with the expression of someone who could not believe what he was seeing — absolutely stunned. He was a twink like me, lean, with black hair and green eyes, genuinely beautiful — but a good boy, an obedient boy, nothing like me. He only ever got into trouble when I talked him into it.

My other brother was Sawyer, a Middle — which meant that within the dynamic, he was the oldest of us, even though in real life I was the oldest at twenty-eight, Mikey was twenty-four, and Sawyer was twenty-five. In the dynamic, though, Sawyer held the big brother role. Short brown hair, brown eyes, the most built of all of us because he lived at the gym. He loved giving me lectures and even spankings when Daddy let him, and honestly, he was stricter than Daddy sometimes — but I loved him anyway.

Right now both of them were staring at me, mouths open, wearing matching expressions of total disbelief. Mikey looked adorable, honestly.

"You know what?" I announced, loud enough for the whole club to hear. "I think this is a great time for me to go hide. Bye."

"Hiding won't do you any good, JJ," said a Domme from the crowd. Her name was Elizabeth. Long black hair, blue eyes, an absolute goddess.

"I'm going to try anyway," I told her, and walked away while half the room watched me go, some of them laughing, some of them shaking their heads.

CHAPTER 2. SULLIVAN

Something about the chair was more comfortable than it had any right to be, which was its own kind of amusement. I'd sat straighter, let the ropes do their work, and watched the room with patience. I knew exactly how this evening was going to end. Now Mel's fingers were at my wrists, untying the restraints she'd helped JJ secure earlier in the evening, and the crowd around us was still humming. Everybody was delighted when someone had made a decision they were going to regret.

I rose to my full height and rolled one shoulder, working out the slight stiffness that had settled there. My shirt had creased a little at the back from the chair; I smoothed it with one hand and scanned the room. The amber sconces and low-hung fixtures cast the same warm glow they always did, the stone fireplace crackling steadily at the center, and somewhere in all that light was a blond math teacher who thought he'd found a hiding place.

Mikey appeared at my elbow before I'd finished the thought. His green eyes were wide. Mikey had an excellent poker face, and the fact that he was deploying it now, standing so close I could see the corner of his mouth twitching, meant he was absolutely delighted.

"He's behind the bar," Mikey said. "Far end, crouched down."

I handed him my drink without looking at him. "Thank you, baby boy."

The crowd parted for me. The room had been watching this unfold since the moment Mel had wrapped her hand around my wrist and led me to the stage. People stepped aside with grins. I moved through the gaps between tables, unhurried.

Behind the far end of the bar, tucked into the narrow space between the ice well and the service shelf, JJ was crouched with his knees drawn up to his chest, blond hair falling across his forehead.

I reached down and took him by the ear.

He came up with a sharp yelp and a string of half-formed protests.

“Daddy, wait — I was going to come back, I swear — Henry started it — Mel said —”

I kept walking. His heels skidded slightly against the floor as he scrambled to keep pace with me, one hand reaching up to where my fingers held his ear. The crowd around us had gone quiet with delight. Jeffrey was standing near his usual table, arms crossed. Elizabeth was a few feet away, her blue eyes amused, one eyebrow raised.

“He's going to get it good. Teach that naughty little bottom a lesson,” she said.

JJ's face went a shade pinker. “Elizabeth, come on —”

“Keep talking,” I told him, “and see what happens.”

He closed his mouth. For about three seconds.

“But Daddy—”

I stopped in front of the spanking bench and released JJ's ear. He straightened, rubbing at the spot with one hand, his blue eyes wide and already starting to shine. I gave him one look. He stopped talking.

I sat down on the edge of the bench, my weight settling into the sturdy frame, and reached for him. He came across my lap, his body folding over my thighs, his fingers finding my ankles.

“Daddy—”

“Quiet.”

When I hooked my fingers into the waistband of his jeans and briefs and pulled them down to his knees, JJ made a desperate sound into the leather padding.

“Please—”

“No begging, boy. It will do you no good,” I said.

I brought my hand down with a firm slap — palmed, not curled, the way he liked it best — and JJ jerked across my lap with a yelp that he tried, and failed, to stifle in the crook of his elbow. I gave him a second to catch his breath, then landed another, and another, settling into a slow rhythm. JJ's breathing went from steady to shredded in the space of a dozen swats. He

made these frantic gasps with every impact, burying his face deeper into the leather padding like it would save him. It wouldn't.

His hips twisted with each strike, and his legs kicked in a way that was more spectacle than escape. If he'd wanted out, he'd have used his words. This fighting was for the audience as much as for me. His sneakers kept losing traction on the floor, his jeans and briefs tangled around his knees, and his hands scrabbled uselessly at the legs of the bench. I kept him anchored with one arm around his waist, hand pressed flat to the stretch of pale skin, feeling the nervous tremble and the heat blooming under my palm.

Gustav was pretending to polish glasses behind the bar, Mel and Henry were peeking around, and even the two new girls at the corner table had stopped their conversation to stare. I never minded an audience for this sort of thing. Neither, if I was honest, did JJ.

I let each swat fall exactly where it would do the best, spacing them just far enough apart for the sting to build. Pink blotches were already blooming across his skin, and I shaded in every spot that looked neglected. JJ tried to squirm away from the next strike, and I shifted my hold, moving the hand at his waist down to steady his thighs. He let out a helpless, whimpery "Daddy!" and I almost laughed, but didn't. He'd get exactly what he'd earned, not a moment less.

After a minute or two, JJ's struggles turned to shivers, and his voice pitched up, each cry ragged. I felt the shift. He was close to the edge of what he could take, but not past it — he wanted to be wrung out, wanted to be seen and punished and forgiven in front of the people he loved. I made sure to give him everything he needed.

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I picked up the pace, alternating harder, sharper smacks with the occasional long, gentle press of my palm, letting him feel both the bite and

the comfort. JJ's breathing fractured into the kind of sobs that meant he was almost there, almost empty enough to let go of everything else. He made one last wild kick and went limp across my knees, hands slack.

I leaned in so he could hear me. "I know you can take a bit more, baby. You're doing so well."

He nodded without lifting his head, hair wild and sticking to his damp forehead.

"Good boy," I said, and finished the set, painting the last few strokes with the same calm. When I stopped, JJ was shaking, his pale skin shot through with red. I let him breathe, just for a moment. Then, for the audience, I ran my hand down the length of his back, slow and gentle.

When I reached for my belt, JJ's whole body went rigid.

I rose and planted my feet firmly behind the bench, nudged JJ upright by the shoulder, and gave him the look that meant I wouldn't repeat myself. He moved to obey, and as he bent over, he gripped the sides of the bench with both hands, bracing for what was coming. His jeans and briefs were still bunched around his knees. If he was embarrassed by the exposure, he never let it slow him down; JJ's embarrassment was the battery that powered half our household. And the boy was hard as a rock.

The hush in the room was even more pronounced now. I could feel every pair of eyes watching the drama at center stage, greedy. Nothing here made the regulars happier than someone committing to a scene with everything they had. I let the silence stretch long enough for JJ to start squirming. Then I doubled the belt in my hand and let the end dangle, just enough for him to hear the faintest whisper of leather brushing the floor. He tensed. His shoulders hunched, and he pressed his face into the padded top of the bench.

When the first strike landed, he tensed harder. The line of red bloomed across his skin, and I admired the contrast. I gave him a beat to process, just a heartbeat or two, and then I brought the belt down again, carefully spaced beside the first. JJ's whole body flinched, and for a half-second I thought he might let go of the bench, but he only dug his fingers in tighter. His voice was ragged and wet.

"Daddy, please, I'm really sorry — I didn't mean — I'll be good—"

He wasn't lying, but he wasn't trying to get out of anything, either. JJ's talent for disaster was only rivaled by his appetite for consequences. I focused on keeping my own emotions out of it, kept my hands steady, my voice even. I bent low, close enough that he could hear me. "Not yet, baby. You know better."

He shivered. I watched the way his back rose and fell with each breath, the way his thighs trembled against the bench, and I measured out the next blow — never too much. If you were going to correct someone, you had to do it right: with intention, with the kind of care that made the point stick but didn't break anything.

The third stroke landed, and this time JJ kicked his foot behind him, purely reflex, but didn't lose his hold. I watched his knuckles go white, and I slowed down, just a little, to give him a chance to catch up.

I looked up and caught Mel's eye; she was grinning, like she'd gambled on JJ's antics and won big. Henry was biting his lip, torn between horror and delight. Even Gustav, who'd seen everything, was leaning in, trying not to look too obvious about it.

I returned my focus to the boy bent in front of me. He was shaking. He needed to feel the forgiveness burn its way through every layer of guilt and adrenaline. I knew exactly how to get him there. I shifted my stance, angled the belt a fraction higher, and delivered a fourth, then a fifth. JJ's cries got higher, breathier. A few tears spilled down his cheeks and soaked into the bench padding.

He gasped, "Daddy, I can't — I can't—"

I set my hand on the small of his back. "Yes, you can, sweetheart. Just a bit more."

He sobbed. I kept going. JJ's hips squirmed and stilled and squirmed again, his fingers clenched white around the bench, his voice thin and breaking around apologies that came faster with each stroke. I only stopped when it crossed from performance into real surrender. Then I gave him the final few strokes, because JJ had a talent for bouncing back from consequences faster than they could settle, and I wanted this one to stay with him. When I stopped, I laid my hand flat against the warm skin of his ass and let it rest there.

"Are you sorry now?" I asked.

“Yes,” he said, his voice thick and small. “Yes, Daddy. I’m so sorry.”

I smoothed my hand over the heated skin, gently.

Then, I stood him up slowly, my hand at his elbow steadying him as his legs found their balance. His face was flushed, his eyes wet at the corners. I cupped his jaw in my palm and tipped his face up to mine. His eyes were glassy, the blue gone soft and unfocused, and then I kissed him.

“Good boy,” I murmured against his lips, and felt the shudder that ran through him at the words. “You took that so well. So beautifully. Every single stroke. I’m proud of you.”

His breath hitched. His eyes fluttered open, wet and enormous, and he looked at me, unguarded, showing he’d been wrung out properly. No performance left in him. Just JJ, emptied and open and waiting. I let my hand drift down to his chest, settling over his T-shirt and feeling the rapid flutter of his heartbeat beneath my palm. He was still shaking, his legs unsteady beneath him, and he was hard. Achingly hard. When my fingers brushed lower, he made a soft, desperate noise and pressed his hips forward without seeming to realize he was doing it.

“Colors, baby,” I said, keeping my voice low and even. “Tell me.”

“Green,” he whispered, and his voice cracked on the word. “Green, Daddy, please — I’m okay, I’m — green.”

I held his gaze for a beat longer, reading the honesty in it. No hesitation.

“Good boy,” I said again, and watched the relief wash through him. I pressed one more kiss to his forehead and felt him lean into it with his whole weight.

CHAPTER 3. SULLIVAN

“On the bench,” I told him, and my voice had dropped into the register that made him move without thinking. “Hands and knees. I want you where I can see you.”

He went. Clumsy, unsteady, his jeans still tangled around his knees, but he went. He crawled onto the bench.

The same rope. The one JJ had used to bind my wrists behind the kidnapping chair earlier tonight, coils of it still sitting on the floor where Mel had dropped it after untying me. I picked it up and felt the weight of it in my hands. JJ watched me over his shoulder, his blue eyes tracking the rope as I measured out a length between my palms.

His chest was pressed against the burgundy leather padding through his T-shirt, his arms stretched forward along the frame, and I took his wrists one at a time and secured them to the recessed D-rings. JJ’s body trembled under my hands. His face was turned to the side, cheek against the leather, and I could see the flush spreading down his neck, the way his lower lip had caught between his teeth.

Gustav appeared at my side. He held the red silicone ball gag in one hand, the black leather strap dangling from his fingers, and his green eyes were bright with delight.

“Thought you might need this,” he said, and handed it to me.

I took it without comment. I fit it into JJ’s mouth with my thumb against his chin, feeling the resistance of his jaw for half a second before he opened for me, and buckled the strap at the back of his head with two firm tugs.

His blue eyes went glassy and very wide. His breath came fast through his nose, his chest rising and falling against the leather padding, and his fingers curled against the edge of the bench as if he needed something to

hold onto. I checked the restraints. Ran my thumb over the rope at his wrists, testing the tension. Checked his hands — fingers pink, circulation good, no blanching. Checked his face — the gag seated properly, the strap not cutting into the corners of his mouth, his eyes holding mine.

My hand rested at the back of his neck for a moment. Warm. His skin was damp with a fine sheen of sweat, his pulse jumping under my palm, and I let my thumb trace the curve of his spine.

He was bare from the waist down against the burgundy leather, flushed and trembling, the marks from my hand and belt standing out in warm patterns across his skin. So hot.

I took my time. My hands on his hips, his lower back, the curve of his ass, touching him. JJ made a muffled sound around the gag, his hips shifting against the bench, and I leaned down close to his ear.

“Stay still,” I said, and felt the shiver that ran through him at the sound of my voice.

The spanking bench was the perfect tool for this: built by hand, the same way everything important at The Hearth seemed to be, every detail tailored for the needs of its regulars. Heavy oak, lacquered smooth, the kneeling shelves measured precisely to fit the range of bodies that ended up over it each week. I’d watched it absorb a hundred different surrenders.

He made a show of squirming his knees into place and arching his back, but I could see the effort it took to keep his reactions on a leash. I let him wait, just long enough. Sometimes that was the hardest part, the stretch of time between anticipation and the real thing, but it was also where the best kind of fear lived. I circled him once, measuring the spread of his arms, the way the rope at his wrists held his elbows right at the edge of comfort. I ran my palm along his back, down the heated curve of his ass. I could feel the way he trembled beneath my hand.

The marks I’d left on him were blooming across his skin, a web of handprints and belt stripes. I set my hand on the back of his neck and leaned in so close that my beard brushed his ear. He shivered.

It was easy, sometimes, to forget how many years we’d been doing this, how long it had taken him to trust me enough to let go as fully as he did now. Watching him here, on display, I found myself wanting to draw it out as long as possible, to keep him suspended in that star-bright place where

his need and my attention met in perfect balance. I let my thumb stroke the nape of his neck, then followed the line of his spine down until my hand was resting on the small of his back. He made a noise around the gag, part protest, part plea. I couldn't help it — I smiled and then leaned my weight into him.

JJ let out a noise that was unmistakably relief, followed a second later by a ragged, desperate whine as my fingers pressed into him. He was so ready it was almost funny, but I made him wait anyway, fucking him with my fingers until his whole body trembled with the effort of holding still. For the next several minutes, I worked him slowly, my fingers inside him, slick with lube from the bottle I had brought, alternating between rough and gentle, cruel and kind.

My other hand wrapped around his cock, and I felt him buck against me, a sharp, desperate jerk of his hips that he couldn't control. He was already slick with pre-come, hot and hard in my palm, and when I squeezed just enough to make him feel it, he made a sound around the gag that went straight through me.

I set a rhythm. Slow strokes with my right hand while my left kept working him open, two fingers now, curling just so every time I pressed in. JJ's whole body was shaking, his thighs trembling against the bench, and the sounds he made were muffled and wrecked and perfect. I watched the way his fingers tightened against the padded rails, the way his back arched and then went slack and then arched again, chasing something he couldn't quite reach.

"Easy," I murmured, though I wasn't sure he could hear me over the pounding of his own pulse. "Easy, baby. I've got you."

I twisted my wrist on the upstroke the way I knew he liked, and his hips slammed back against my fingers so hard the bench creaked. I let him have it. Let him chase. I matched the pace of my hand to the rhythm of my fingers inside him, slow and deep and then faster, building him up in layers until he was making these broken, keening sounds through his nose, his chest heaving against the leather padding.

I could feel the weight of every pair of eyes on us, but I didn't look up. My attention was on the boy beneath my hands, on the way his visible skin had gone from flushed pink to a deep, feverish red, on the way his cock jumped in my grip every time I curled my fingers just right.

I leaned down close to his ear again, my beard brushing his jaw. “You’re doing so well,” I told him, and felt the full-body shudder that ran through him at the words. “So good for me. Taking everything I give you.”

He whined around the gag, high and desperate, and his hips stuttered, losing the rhythm I’d set for him. I tightened my grip on his cock just enough to slow him down, to keep him right there on the edge where the need was brightest.

“Not yet,” I said, and my voice came out rougher than I meant it to. “Not until I say.”

His fingers clenched white against the padded rails. His whole body was trembling now, fine and constant. I kept my hand moving, kept my fingers working him open, and watched the way his face pressed into the leather, the way his eyes squeezed shut and then flew open, glassy and unfocused.

I pressed into the spot inside him that made his whole body go rigid, deliberate and unhurried, while my hand tightened around the base of his cock, holding him right there. JJ screamed into the gag. The sound was muffled but unmistakable, raw and shattered, and his hips jerked so hard the bench shifted against the floor.

“Now,” I said, and finally let him buck against my hand. He came undone so suddenly that he nearly banged his head on the bench, and I caught him just in time, holding him tight with my arm around his hips so he could ride out the whole shaking, gasping crest of it. I didn’t stop. I kept touching him, kept praising him, low and steady, letting the words fill the space between his sobs: “That’s it. Good boy. Let go. I’ve got you.”

After he’d spent himself, he slumped forward, boneless and trembling, the way he always did when he’d given everything.

From a few tables back, Mikey watched with his arms crossed and his composure doing its absolute best work. His green eyes were fixed on us, and I could see the lust in them.

Sawyer had the expression of a man who was simultaneously mortified and completely unsurprised. His brown eyes were steady, his arms folded across his chest, and the set of his jaw said he would be having a conversation with JJ about appropriate club behavior tomorrow, delivered in the particular older-brother tone that JJ pretended to hate and secretly craved. Sawyer was our little soldier boy.

I gave him a moment to breathe. His chest heaved against the padding, his skin slick with sweat, and I smoothed my hand down the curve of his spine and felt the aftershocks ripple through him.

Then I reached for the gag.

The buckle came loose with a soft click. I slid the silicone ball from his mouth and set it aside on the bench frame. His lips were red and wet, his chin damp, and he turned his face toward my hand the moment it touched his cheek.

“Easy,” I said.

The wrist restraints came next. I untied the rope and JJ’s arms came free and dropped to his sides, complete exhausted. I gathered him against my chest right there at the bench, one arm around his waist, the other cradling the back of his head, and JJ pressed his face into my shoulder and held on.

He was warm and trembling and thoroughly undone, his skin pink and marked, his breath hot against my collar. I felt the damp spot where his cheek pressed into my shirt, and I didn’t care. My hand moved in slow circles at his back, between his shoulder blades, and JJ made a soft noise into my shoulder.

I held JJ until his breathing evened out and his grip on my shirt loosened. Then I helped him to his feet, steadied him with a hand at his elbow, and reached down to pull his briefs and black jeans back up his thighs. He stood there blinking, his hair mussed, his face flushed.

“Can we go home now, Daddy, please?” he asked, his voice rough. I kissed his forehead.

“Yes, baby boy,” I said. “We can go home.”

CHAPTER 4. MIKEY

We got home at two in the morning. I normally went to bed at eleven, and I was not happy about the disruption to my schedule. Honestly, I only went to The Hearth to make Daddy happy — left to my own devices, I would much rather stay home on the couch watching movies with my stuffed bear, my dolls, and my big drawing pad.

JJ was already half-zombie with tiredness, the way he always got. He walked in and flung one of his shoes into the air, which made Daddy say "JJ" in that warning tone that didn't need any other words attached to it. JJ went back, picked up the shoe, and put it where it belonged, huffing and rolling his eyes the whole time. Such a brat.

Bola — our cat — stretched, yawned, and went straight to the couch, where he flopped down and sprawled out all four paws, eyes already closing. He had more sense than JJ did at that moment.

Our living room was the coziest and best place in the whole wide world. We'd bought the biggest sofa we could find, and the softest too — I remembered going to so many different stores and sitting and lying down on every single one until we found the perfect one. It was huge and creamy-colored, and the cushions swallowed you whole when you sat down. I loved it so much. There was also a fireplace along one wall, just like the one at The Hearth, with an iron grate around it for safety. One of our rules was that we weren't allowed to light it by ourselves.

Once, it was just me and JJ at home and I was cold — I wanted to light the fireplace, but of course I wasn't going to break the rules like that. JJ, who did not have the same sense of self-preservation that I did, said, "Leave it to me," and went ahead and lit it. It went exactly as badly as everyone always worried it would, which was why the rule existed in the first place:

he almost burned himself. Daddy had been very firm about it afterward. JJ was in trouble for a long time, and I told Daddy I was the one who'd said I was cold. But Daddy was always very sweet with me because I tried to follow the rules — he said he worried about scaring me too much. The truth was I had always been a good boy, no matter what.

Besides the fireplace, we had a giant TV on one of the walls. Sawyer picked up the remote to put something on, but JJ vaulted over the back of the sofa, landed in the cushions, and announced:

"That's not fair, you always get the remote! It's my turn. I want to watch Hazbin Hotel."

"Get out of here, brat," Sawyer said while JJ tried to grab the remote out of his hand. "I'm choosing because I'm older. I want to play video games."

Daddy walked straight over to where both of them were and took the remote out of Sawyer's hand.

"Neither of you is watching anything," he said, turning the TV off. "It's bedtime."

"Aw, no, Daddy," JJ whined. "Today's still Sunday. I only have one day left before Monday. I need to make the most of every second—"

"It's well past time for a little baby like you to be in bed. Way past time. Stop complaining and thank me for letting you stay up this long. Or do you want another round of what you got at The Hearth tonight?"

"No, Daddy," JJ mumbled.

I giggled watching the whole thing. He was terrible, but he was also really funny, and also a great brother.

"Both of you go get ready for bed," Daddy said. "Pajamas on, wash your faces. I'll come check on you in a little bit. You too, Mikey."

"Yes, Daddy," I said.

The three of us went up the stairs in very different ways: JJ huffing and rolling his eyes, Sawyer telling him to stop being a pain, and me walking quietly behind them both.

JJ and I shared a bathroom, but we each had our own bedroom — even though we almost always slept together in Daddy's room anyway. The only time we had to sleep alone was when we were being punished, and I

thought that was absolutely terrible. I hated sleeping by myself more than almost anything. But tonight everything was fine.

Sawyer, being the oldest in the dynamic, had his own bathroom.

"Go get yourself sorted, Sawyer," Daddy said. "I'll come check on you in a bit."

"You don't have to check on me, Daddy," Sawyer said. "I'm not a baby. I can do it myself."

"I'm sure you can," Daddy said, and let him go.

He came with us to our bathroom. JJ and I knelt on our little step stools at the sink, because we liked brushing our teeth that way. JJ's step stool was green — like most of JJ's things: green toothbrush, green water cup, green little plate. Everything of mine was pink.

Daddy handed me my toothbrush already loaded with toothpaste, and I gasped.

"The toothpaste is purple with glitter!" I said, so excited. It was so pretty — it looked like something a unicorn would use.

"It's a new flavor," Daddy said, and kissed my forehead. He was so much taller than us when we were kneeling on our stools. "I knew you'd love it, which is why I bought it, princess."

"Thank you!" I said, giggling. "You're the bestest!"

"Daddy, can I have a bubble bath?" JJ asked, eyes wide. "I want to make bubbles."

Daddy shook his head.

"Not tonight, baby. It's too late."

"Please," JJ said, making that enormous pout that only he could make. He looked especially small and sleepy when he did that, even at twenty-eight — he was slim and just a little shorter than me, five-six to my five-eight, with blue eyes and blond hair that fell across his forehead in a fringe. We were very different, him and me. But Daddy loved us both equally, which was my favorite thing.

"Not tonight," Daddy said again, firm but gentle.

JJ went sulky and started brushing his teeth by himself, all pouty about it. You could tell he was tired — the night had been long because of his punishment, and his eyes were a little red around the edges. Daddy was

right to send him to bed, but JJ would never in a million billion years admit that.

"Open up," Daddy said to me, and I opened my mouth and let him brush my teeth for me. It was one of my very favorite things — it made me feel so small and taken care of and cozy inside, like being wrapped in something warm.

When he finished, I spat and wiped my mouth, and he pressed a warm, damp cloth to my face to clean it properly. JJ did everything himself, still pouting.

"Come on, let's go," Daddy said to him, voice gentle. "I don't like seeing you like this. You had a big night. You were a brave boy. Okay?"

JJ shrugged. He was such a terrible brat sometimes — I honestly did not know how Daddy had infinite patience for it.

"Tomorrow, if you're good, you can have your bubble bath first thing after breakfast. How does that sound?"

"Fine," JJ said, still very pouty, but maybe a tiny little bit less.

"Good. Now both of you, clothes off. Diaper and pajamas."

"I don't want to wear a diaper tonight," JJ said, sticking his lip out again. He was being more stubborn than usual that night, but Daddy had so much patience — especially because he knew JJ was still wound up from the punishment.

"And if you have an accident in the night?" Daddy asked JJ, while I took my clothes off obediently and waited for my turn.

"I won't. I promise, Daddy."

"If you wet the bed because you refused your diaper, we're going to have a very big problem in the morning. You know that."

"I know," JJ said, rolling his eyes.

"And we're going to have a talk about this habit of rolling your eyes. That's not good behavior."

"It's not, Daddy," he said, catching himself.

I giggled.

"Go put your pajamas on and get into bed."

He finally went without arguing, which I thought was a small miracle.

Daddy turned to me.

"Come here, princess."

Oh, how I loved when he called me that. It made me feel so special and warm and glowy inside, like a little light had been switched on in my tummy.

I was already undressed, just in my diaper. I wore my chastity cage full-time on my little pee-pee — it was something I absolutely loved, unlike my brothers, who weren't as enthusiastic about it. Daddy only had them wear one when they were in trouble or when he wanted, but mine was part of my everyday rules. Because little boys weren't supposed to touch what belonged to Daddy. It was one of the things that made me feel most little, and I loved every single second of it.

I lay down on my bed and Daddy came over with my fresh diaper. He folded up the old one and put it in the trash, took out the new one, and spread it on the bed.

"Bottom up, baby."

I lifted my bottom up, and he dusted me with powder before sliding the diaper into place. Then he gave my chastity cage a little pat.

"Very well protected, like a good boy."

"Yes, Daddy," I told him, so happy.

He picked up my pacifier and popped it into my mouth, then chose my pajamas for me — my astronaut onesie with all the planets on it, which was my absolute favorite one — and helped me into it. When I was all done, he picked me up in his arms, because he was so much bigger and stronger than me, and carried me to the big bed.

Sawyer was already there, playing Pokémon on his handheld game console.

"What did I say about the video games?" Daddy said.

"But Daddy, I was already done and I was just waiting for you, so I figured I could play."

"You can play when I tell you it's okay." Daddy held out his hand. "Give it here. And you know very well you're not too old for my belt. Don't push it."

Sawyer handed it over. I giggled from Daddy's arms.

"Everyone ready?" Daddy asked.

We all said yes.

We all tucked ourselves under the covers. I liked sleeping on the side by the wall, so JJ lay down next to me, Daddy beside him, and Sawyer took the outside. JJ pulled a lot of the blanket over to himself, but when he realized he'd accidentally left me uncovered, he gave some back — because underneath everything, he was very sweet.

JJ kissed my cheek.

"Night night, little bro," he said.

"Night, JJ," I said, my pacifier still in my mouth, my words coming out a little muffled and soft.

Daddy went around the whole bed and kissed each of us, then settled back into his spot and pulled the covers over.

"Mikey, can you get the light, sweetheart?"

I stretched my arm out and pressed the switch on the wall.

The light went out.

And we all finally went to sleep.

CHAPTER 5. SAWYER

Sunday disappeared way too fast. The alarm went off before any of us were ready — including Daddy.

JJ, who was on the other side of Daddy in the big bed, shouted without even opening his eyes:

"Turn that thing off."

Daddy sat up, rubbing his face with both hands. Monday. Six-thirty, same as every weekday.

Mikey, who was usually the most obedient and well-behaved of all of us, had exactly one weakness: early mornings. The second the alarm went off, he burrowed deeper under the covers and shoved his head under the pillow, as if that was somehow going to make Monday stop happening. JJ was barely any better. I sat up first, because someone had to set an example for those two.

"All right, boys," Daddy said, getting to his feet and rubbing the back of his neck. "Quick showers and get dressed. I'll pick out your clothes, Mikey. And yours too, JJ."

"No, I want to choose my own outfit," JJ said immediately.

Even though he was the second youngest in our dynamic, with only Mikey younger than him, JJ loved pretending he was a big boy. And he loved getting corrected by Daddy for it even more, whether he admitted that or not.

Daddy looked at him. Just the look. Nothing else needed.

JJ went quiet.

We got up.

Which is to say: I got up. Mikey made a sound that was somewhere between a whimper and a sigh and pulled the blanket tighter around himself like it was going to protect him from Monday. JJ put his pillow over his face and went completely still, as if becoming invisible was a valid strategy. Daddy stood at the foot of the bed with his arms crossed, looking at the two of them with his infinite patience.

"Mikey," he said, gentle but firm.

A small hand emerged from under the blanket and groped blindly at the air, as if reaching for something to hold onto. It found nothing and retreated.

"Michael."

The blanket moved. Mikey's face appeared, his black hair completely flattened on one side, green eyes barely open, looking at Daddy with an expression of pure soft tragedy, like a very small animal being asked to do something unreasonable.

"Good morning, baby," Daddy said, and held out his hand.

Mikey took it and let himself be gently pulled upright. He sat on the edge of the bed blinking slowly, still wrapped in the blanket like a cocoon, his feet dangling. He wasn't awake. He was just upright.

Then Daddy looked at JJ, who still had the pillow over his face and hadn't moved a single muscle.

"JJ."

Nothing.

"James Joseph." A pause, and then, very quietly: "Don't make me get the belt before breakfast."

The pillow flew across the room.

"I'm up!" JJ announced, sitting bolt upright with his hair going in four different directions. "I'm completely up, I was already up, I've been up for ages."

Daddy looked at him.

"I might have been briefly asleep," JJ admitted. Daddy laughed. I was already at the bathroom door.

I was grateful for my own bathroom. I took a quick shower, made sure my beard was trimmed short and my face clean — the way Daddy liked it — and got dressed for the day.

I thought, while I was getting ready, about the strange chain of events that had landed me here. After high school I enlisted and served for four years. I loved the physical side of it, but by the end of my contract, I knew that environment wasn't for me. I decided to major in physical education, and now I taught it at the same school where JJ taught math. JJ, who was impressively intelligent — a completely different person at work than the chaos monster currently running around the house in dinosaur underwear.

It had been JJ, two years ago, who'd invited me to The Hearth. But before that, the single most embarrassing thing that can ever happen to a human being happened to us: we matched on a dating app for people into age play. Me as a switch, him as a sub. Of course we matched. We talked for a while before figuring out who the other person actually was — which wasn't that hard, because our town in Colorado has about eighty thousand people in it and isn't exactly sprawling. And then, to make it worse, we figured out we worked at the same school.

When he said "Mr. Thomas" — which was what my students called me — I wanted to pass out, die, and relocate to another state, in that order. But I couldn't just quit my job, so I had to show up the next day and see him in the cafeteria and pretend everything was normal. Neither of us said a word about it at first.

I should have recognized right then that this kid had no sense whatsoever — because we kept talking on the app anyway. I mean, he kept talking to me and forcing me to talk back; otherwise, he'd follow me around at school asking me why I was ghosting him. The truth was I'd genuinely liked him, despite everything. Once the shock wore off, we kept going, and eventually he invited me to check out The Hearth. The rest is history.

I was thinking about all of that while I listened to him running through the house, shouting that he wasn't going to wear the clothes Daddy had picked out, that he was going to choose his own, and that he also wasn't eating any breakfast that wasn't cereal. I was seriously reconsidering several of my life choices in that moment. He was in nothing but green dinosaur boxer briefs — because most of JJ's things were green — running laps through the house like that was going to solve anything.

"JJ, I'm going to count to three," Daddy said, in that calm that was so much worse than any raised voice.

JJ laughed and kept running. Meanwhile, Mikey was quietly and obediently putting on the clothes Daddy had set out for him, looking perfectly content about the whole thing.

I went downstairs to the kitchen. Just another normal morning. I made toast with eggs and bacon — enough for everyone — set the table, and Mikey appeared a few minutes later, already dressed and ready.

"Want help?" he asked.

I nodded, and he smiled. Mikey was genuinely sweet. The two of us put the plates out — the little ones for Mikey and JJ, regular plates for Daddy and me — and brought everything to the table with a pitcher of orange juice.

From the living room, we could hear Daddy and JJ. Based on the sounds, Daddy had finally caught him. I heard the smacks, one after another, and JJ yelling — more performance than anything else. Then quiet. Then about five minutes of calm.

JJ appeared in the dining room with puffy eyes, rubbing his backside with one hand. He was now fully dressed: jeans and a button-down shirt that Daddy had picked out for him. He looked good, actually. Put-together, like he wasn't being a complete disaster.

"Finally, everyone's here," Daddy said, sitting down at the head of the table. "Did you make coffee, Sawyer?"

"I did," I said.

"Thank you. Good boy — Daddy's proud of you."

I lived for those words. Genuinely, that was one of my favorite things in the world. I felt like a happy dog being praised by its owner — if I had a tail, it would have been going.

We started eating. JJ demolished everything in front of him with that energy of his.

"Dude, this is so good," he told me.

I was pleased, even if I didn't show it much. He was a terrible brat, but he was also genuinely sweet underneath all of it.

We finished eating. Mikey headed to his car — he had different hours at the bank — already in that adult posture, stepping out of the version of himself that existed inside this house, where we got to just be ourselves.

"See you guys later," he said.

"Have a good day, sweetheart," Daddy said, kissing his cheek.

Daddy was the only one of us who worked from home — his investments and his tech company had bought him that freedom. Lucky him. He came from money.

JJ and I drove in together. Everyone at school knew we were partners, and nobody said anything — homophobia wasn't something that flew there. We were extremely professional at work, and our colleagues didn't know anything about our preferences. And definitely not that we were polyamorous — I figured that was still a few steps too far for the entire school staff to process at once.

It was JJ's turn to drive, but he looked at me with those wide, innocent eyes of his that got him out of absolutely everything.

"Could you maybe drive just this week?"

"You say that every week," I said.

"Please, I hate driving, it stresses me out."

"Fine," I said, rolling my eyes.

He always got what he wanted from me. I was supposedly stricter than Daddy when it came to those two, but with JJ I had basically no defenses at all and we both knew it.

We got to school, said goodbye, and put our adult faces on, because we didn't have a choice.

The day moved faster than I expected for a Monday. Classes were actually decent — I liked the high school groups best, because the younger kids were still in full chaos mode and needed me in drill sergeant mode constantly. The older ones were calmer, more genuinely interested, and actually wanted to get better at things. We played basketball, which was always a good day.

At lunch I sat with JJ and a few other teacher friends. We talked about students who were causing problems, about who was going to volunteer for the winter formal, about the Super Bowl. I loved watching sports, and somehow so did JJ — despite not playing anything and actively avoiding physical exertion in his daily life.

When the last bell went, I met JJ at the car and drove us home. By the time we got there I was worn out from a full day of being someone other than who I actually was. JJ felt the same way — I could tell by the way he sagged into the passenger seat for the last few minutes of the drive.

Daddy met us at the door and pulled both of us into a hug.

"I'm soooooo tired and so huuuungry, what's for a snack?" JJ started immediately.

"Change out of your school clothes first," Daddy said. "Then we eat, and you both tell me about your day."

"Can I play video games after?" I asked.

One eyebrow went up. He thought I spent too much time on video games, which, fair.

"You can, but only once everything else is done. Check the chore chart. And I want us to go for a walk later."

"But it's coooooold," JJ whined, fully back in baby mode within approximately ninety seconds of coming through the front door.

"I know, sweetheart, but exercise is good for us," Daddy said, with that bottomless patience of his.

That right there was why I always said I could never be JJ's Dom. Daddy had levels of patience I simply did not possess and never would.

"Daddy," JJ said, in the tone of someone about to broker a peace treaty, "can we all play together tonight?"

Daddy considered it for a second. JJ watched him, hopeful. I watched him too, if I was being honest.

"Yes," he said finally. "But only if you both behave."

"Deal!"

We changed clothes. JJ put on a T-shirt and the little shorts Daddy had already set aside for him. I went with jeans and a T-shirt — in our dynamic I was somewhere around twelve or thirteen, so I dressed accordingly. No little shorts for me.

We ate the peanut butter sandwiches and milk Daddy made for us, then went to check the chore chart on the fridge. Daddy wrote it out fresh every day. I got dishes and taking out the trash — not bad, all things considered.

JJ had mopping the upstairs floors. Mikey, because he worked later, usually got lighter tasks.

"Chores are good for you," Daddy always said. "Builds responsibility."

I thought they were a pain, but they weren't negotiable, so there was no point whining about it the way JJ always did.

I finished mine quickly. Daddy reappeared and handed back the handheld console he'd confiscated the night before.

"One hour. That's it."

I tested him with a look. He gave me a steadier one back. I let it go.

"Fine," I said, and went to sprawl on the couch.

Mikey came in a while later, around five. He spotted me first, came over and kissed the top of my head.

"Hey, Mikey."

"Hey, big bro," he said.

"Hi, sweetheart," Daddy called from the kitchen.

"Hi, Daddy! Where's JJ?"

"Upstairs mopping the floor. His chore for today."

"He's actually doing it?" Mikey asked, visibly surprised, because that was genuinely unusual.

"We're waiting to see," Daddy said. "But if everyone's very good and well-behaved, we can do a scene together after dinner. What do you say, princess?"

Mikey lit up completely.

"I'd love that, Daddy."

"Good. Go change into something comfortable. Dinner's almost ready."

"Is there anything I can help with?"

"You can unload the clean dishes from the dishwasher," Daddy said, "but only once you're in comfortable clothes. Then you can play with your toys until dinner."

"Yay," Mikey said, already heading for the stairs.

Daddy watched him go, then turned to me with a specific look. The kind that meant something was coming.

"For the scene tonight — I want you helping me with the discipline. What do you say?"

I raised an eyebrow, surprised and immediately very interested.

That was a reward. I hadn't even thought I'd been good enough to earn it, but I wasn't about to argue.

"Yes, Sir," I said, without hesitating.

Daddy got that satisfied look on his face, the slightly dangerous one. I loved when he looked like that.

"Start thinking about what you'd like to do."

I nodded, already planning, and had just started running through the possibilities when I heard Mikey calling me quietly from upstairs.

I went up.

Mikey was standing in the hallway, eyebrows raised, guilty expression on his face, pointing toward JJ's room.

I looked.

JJ was asleep on the bed. The bucket and the mop were sitting completely untouched beside him.

"Typical," I said, and rolled my eyes.

I picked up the bucket and the mop and did the job myself.

About fifteen minutes later, Daddy came upstairs to check on things. I showed him JJ still asleep.

He shook his head, but there was a smile at the corner of his mouth.

"Thank you for helping your brother. You're a very good boy," he said.

The praise landed warm in my chest, the way it always did.

"And you can take it out on JJ during the scene," he added quietly, with that wolf smile of his.

I laughed quietly to myself so I didn't wake JJ up.

I could not wait.

CHAPTER 6. SULLIVAN

The fireplace had been burning since before dinner, and the living room held a warmth that made everything feel slower, softer. Amber light from the flames flickered across the ceiling beams and the deep cream-colored sofas we'd pushed back against the walls to clear a wide space in the center of the room. The heavy oak table that we usually used for dinner sat where it always did for scenes like this. I'd laid out the soft hemp rope on one end, the cane on the other, and a bottle of water beside my usual chair. Everything in its place.

Dinner had been simple: roast chicken, Sawyer's mashed potatoes, green beans that Mikey had actually eaten without making a face, and the dishes were done, the kitchen quiet. Now the three of them stood in front of me in a loose semicircle, waiting. JJ in his little shorts and a thin cotton tee he'd changed into after his post-dinner shower. Mikey in soft gray sweatpants and a pink hoodie, his black hair combed neatly. Sawyer in jeans and a henley, arms already crossed over his chest, his brown eyes steady on mine.

"Training scene tonight," I said. "Impact work. Cane. I'm going to demonstrate proper technique on JJ while Sawyer watches, and then Sawyer will practice on Mikey under my direction. Clear?"

JJ's shirt was over his head before I'd finished the sentence. He tossed it toward the sofa, missed by a foot, and was already moving toward the table, excited. No hesitation, no questions, just that eager, hungry forward momentum. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling.

Sawyer didn't move. He stood with his arms crossed, his jaw set, his weight shifted slightly onto his back foot. His eyes tracked from the cane to JJ's bare back to my face.

Mikey, by contrast, took one small step toward the table and then stopped. He straightened the collar of his hoodie. Smoothed his hair with one hand, even though it was already perfectly neat. Adjusted the drawstring of his sweatpants. A full ten seconds of very deliberate composure, his green eyes fixed on a point somewhere above my left shoulder.

I reached for him. One hand on his cheek, thumb brushing the curve of his jaw, and watched his eyes snap to mine.

“Come here, baby boy,” I said, quiet. “Daddy’s got you. You’re going to do so well.”

He leaned into my touch. I could see how nervous he was. He was a sensitive baby, and the cane was unforgiving. But I knew he was also a huge masochist. I kissed his forehead and felt him lean into it even more.

“That’s it. Such a good princess. Go on now.”

He went. Not fast, not the way JJ had gone, but he went.

I had them strip from the waist down first, then bound them side by side at the table. JJ went down flat against the wood, cheek pressed to the surface, his breathing already settling into that slow, even rhythm he only found when he was about to take something serious. No squirming. No commentary. Just JJ, quiet and present and waiting, his blond hair falling across his forehead, his fingers loose around the rope. It was rare to see him like that, so I had to take a second to appreciate my little boy.

Mikey was different. He bent forward with his chin up, his shoulders tight, the line of his spine holding tension. I ran my hand down his back, between his shoulder blades, and felt him shiver.

“Relax for me, sweetheart. You’re safe. Daddy’s right here.”

He nodded against the wood. His shoulders didn’t drop.

I picked up the cane. Rattan, thirty inches, flexible without being whippy. Sawyer moved to stand beside me, close enough that our shoulders nearly touched. His attention was absolute. I could feel the heat of him.

“Wrist,” I said, holding the cane at my side. “Not arm. The power comes from here—” I flexed my wrist, demonstrating the snap. “—not from your shoulder. Follow through. Let the cane do the work. You’re not hitting with your body; you’re guiding the cane to where it needs to go.”

Sawyer nodded.

“Spacing,” I continued. “Parallel lines. One stroke, pause, next stroke beside it. Not on top of it. You’re painting, not covering. And watch the body. Pay attention to the skin, but also breathing, tension, movement, everything. The person tells you more than the marks ever will. Anything unexpected, you stop and check.”

Another nod. His jaw was tight, his brown eyes fixed on the cane in my hand. Sawyer already knew his way around impact play and had good control of his body, but the cane required precision, and he was always eager for me to teach him more. I appreciated that.

I stepped behind JJ. Set my feet. Adjusted my grip.

“First stroke,” I said, for Sawyer’s benefit. “Wrist, not arm.”

The cane came down with a clean, sharp crack. JJ’s body jerked, hard, and then went perfectly still. A thin red line bloomed across the curve of his ass, exactly where I’d aimed. He didn’t make a sound. His breath caught, held for half a second, and then released in a long, controlled exhale. His fingers curled around the rope. That was all.

“Again,” I said. “Same angle, half an inch lower.”

Second stroke. Same crack. Same jerk, same stillness afterward. A second line, parallel to the first, the skin between them flushing pink.

JJ’s breathing had gone short. Controlled, measured, each inhale through his nose and each exhale through his mouth in a rhythm I recognized from a hundred scenes before this one. He was taking it. Really taking it. No performance, no dramatics, no begging or bargaining or the theatrical wailing he deployed when he wanted an audience. Just JJ, flat against the wood, taking what I gave him.

I worked through a set of six. Each stroke landing with the same clean precision, each line rising beside the last in neat, parallel rows across his ass and the tops of his thighs. The skin went from pink to red to a deep, warm crimson. “You see how it’s flicking at the end? That’s follow-through. The tip is the part with the most bite, so remember that.”

“Got it,” Sawyer said.

I set the last stroke, the sixth, across the crease where ass met thigh, and JJ’s whole body tensed for one perfect second before he went limp against the table, his exhale shaking slightly. The line rose red and precise.

I stepped back.

“Your turn,” I said, and held it out to him.

Sawyer took it. The cane hung at his side, and his eyes were on Mikey, who was still bent over the table with his chin up and his shoulders tight and his green eyes watching us over his shoulder with something between fear and want so naked it hurt to look at.

Sawyer moved to Mikey’s side of the table. I positioned myself just behind his shoulder, close enough that I could reach out and adjust his grip without stepping forward, close enough that he could feel the heat of me at his back. Mikey watched us over his shoulder, his green eyes wide.

“Feet,” I said to Sawyer. “Shoulder-width. Weight even.”

He adjusted. The cane hung at his side. Before he started, though, I saw how much Mikey was trembling. I put my hand on his back.

“I know it's not easy to take a cold caning like that. I know it hurts a lot. JJ was very brave, and now you will be too, won't you, baby?” I asked Mikey.

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Mikey’s eyes were glassy, his lower lip caught between his teeth, and the trembling had spread from his shoulders down through his spine and into his hips. He nodded against the wood.

“Yes, Daddy,” he whispered, and his voice cracked on the second word.

I kept my hand on his back, warm and steady, and leaned down close to his ear.

“Look at you,” I murmured. “Already being so brave. You haven’t even started and you’re already doing so well, princess. Daddy sees you. Daddy sees how hard you’re trying.”

His breath hitched. A tear slipped down the side of his nose and soaked into the wood of the table.

“I’m scared,” he said, very small.

“I know, baby. I know you are. And that’s okay. Being scared doesn’t mean you’re not brave. It means you’re choosing to be brave anyway, and that’s what makes you my good boy.”

I smoothed my hand down the curve of his spine, slow and deliberate, feeling each vertebra under my palm. His skin was warm through the thin hoodie, and the trembling eased, just slightly, under the pressure of my hand.

“You want this,” I said. It wasn’t a question. “I can see it. But if you need to, you can safeword at any time, right?”

“Yes, Daddy,” he whispered, and another tear tracked down his cheek.

“Good boy. That’s my good boy. You tell me your color, princess.”

“Green,” he said, and his voice was steadier this time, even though the trembling hadn’t stopped. “Green, Daddy. I want it.”

I kissed the back of his neck, right at the hairline where his skin was warm and damp, and felt him shiver under my lips.

“Then you’re going to get it, and you’re going to be so good for me. I can already tell. Look at you — already holding so still, already taking it like such a brave little boy. Daddy’s so proud of you.”

I straightened and caught Sawyer’s eye over Mikey’s shoulder. He was watching me with that measuring attention of his, the cane held loosely at his side, waiting.

“First stroke,” I said. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Sawyer brought the cane down in a clean, no-nonsense arc, but even from the sound, I could tell it wasn’t right. The stroke landed with a muffled thud instead of the sharp, singing crack I wanted. Too much arm, not enough wrist, and the cane struck flat, sapping all the bite out of the line and diffusing it across Mikey’s skin. Mikey’s whole body jerked, not the involuntary jolt of real impact but a startled, almost confused spasm. He made a sound into the polished wood of the table, a little “ugh!” that was more shock than pain.

Sawyer’s shoulders tensed, and I could see the color rising behind his ears. He didn’t look at me — he was too stubborn for that — but I could feel the self-critique happening in real time, the way he watched the cane in his own hand like it had betrayed him.

I waited a beat, letting the moment hang. Mikey made another little sound and wriggled his hips, like he was testing the unfamiliar sensation, then stilled — even his breath pausing in his throat. I stepped in close behind Sawyer, so our bodies nearly touched.

“Freeze,” I told him. He did, every muscle in his back going rigid, the back of his neck warm beneath his hair. With my left hand, I set two fingers on his wrist, nudging his grip until the cane sat in the right groove across his palm. He didn’t move, not even a twitch. I could feel his pulse ticking away under my fingertips, fast but steady.

“It’s wrist, not arm,” I murmured, low enough that only he could hear. “Let the tip do the work. See where you landed?”

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak. I let my hand linger a beat longer on his wrist, then drew a faint line above Mikey’s pale skin, just a half inch lower than the first. The spot where I wanted him to land it.

“Reset and try again,” I said, stepping back just enough to give him space but not so much he lost the sense of me nearby.

He took a breath. The second stroke came down cleaner — a bright crack, and Mikey made a soft, broken sound into the table surface that went straight through me. I turned my attention to Mikey before Sawyer could land a third. I leaned down close to his ear.

“You’re doing so well, baby,” I said, my voice low. “Such a good boy. Taking it so perfectly. Daddy’s so proud of you.”

His whole body shifted under the words. He made a wet sound.

“Again,” I told Sawyer.

The third stroke landed. Cleaner still. A neat red line across the curve of Mikey’s ass, parallel to the first, the skin between them flushing pink.

“Good,” I said to Sawyer. Then, to Mikey: “That’s it, baby. You’re taking it so beautifully. Every single stroke. Daddy’s right here.”

His shoulders dropped another inch. His breathing had gone ragged, each inhale shaking.

Sawyer was finding his rhythm. Each stroke came cleaner than the last, the cane finding its mark. I kept my hand on Mikey’s back between each one.

“Perfect, sweetheart. Such a good boy. Doing so well for your brother.”

By the eighth stroke, Mikey was flushed from his neck to the backs of his knees, trembling slightly against the table, striped pink and red across his ass in neat parallel lines. His breathing was soft.

Sawyer lowered the cane. His own breathing was uneven, his forehead damp with sweat.

“Good,” I said to him. “Set it down.”

He did. The cane went back on the table with a soft clack, and he stepped back, wiping his palm against his thigh.

I crouched beside Mikey. Got down to his eye level and cupped his face in my palm. His skin was hot, damp with sweat, and his green eyes were wet at the corners, lashes clinging together.

“Hey,” I said, quiet. “Look at me, baby.”

He did. His eyes focused on mine, blurry and huge.

“You were exceptional,” I told him. My thumb brushed the track of a tear. “Such a good boy. Extra good. Daddy is so pleased with you. So proud. You took every single stroke exactly the way you were supposed to, and you looked beautiful doing it.”

He nodded. His cheek pressed into my palm.

“Because you were so good,” I said, “you get a reward.”

His breath caught.

CHAPTER 7. SULLIVAN

“I’m going to fuck you right here. Just like this. While your brothers watch. How does that sound, princess?”

The sound he made then was desperately wanting, a whimper, and his hips shifted against the table.

I didn’t untie him or remove his chastity cage. Mikey didn’t like being unlocked — something about the vulnerability of coming undone with his wrists free made him anxious in a way that binding never did. The rope was safety, and so was his cage. So I left him tied and reached for the bottle of lube I’d set beside the water.

The cap clicked. I warmed the lube between my palms and then let my hand find him — one finger working into him while my other hand stayed flat between his shoulder blades, stroking the knobs of his spine in slow circles.

“Good boy,” I murmured. “Taking Daddy so well. So open for me.”

He gripped the rope and shook. His whole body trembled under my hand, his ass pushing back against my fingers, letting out desperate gasps. I worked him open with two fingers, then three, curling them just so every time I pressed in, watching the way his back arched and his thighs tensed and his face pressed harder into the wood. He was such a good boy.

When I was sure he was ready — more than ready, dripping pre-cum and shaking and making those broken little sounds with every curl of my fingers — I freed myself, lined up, and pushed inside him in one long, slow stroke.

Mikey came apart. His body went rigid for one perfect second before he collapsed against the table, boneless and shaking. I fucked him in long, deep strokes, giving him low praise between each thrust, telling him how

good he was, how perfect, how Daddy had him, Daddy wasn't going anywhere, and Mikey took it. His ass flushed dark red against my hips, the cane marks standing out, and every time I bottomed out he made that same shattered sound.

JJ watched from his side of the table. His blue eyes were dark, fixed on where my cock disappeared into his brother, and his breathing had gone shallow, his lower lip caught between his teeth. Sawyer stood a few feet back with his arms at his sides and his throat working, watching Mikey come undone.

I kept going. Slow. Deep. Letting Mikey feel every inch, every second, until his trembling turned to shivers. His face was pressed into the wood, his eyes closed, his breathing ragged and wet, and when I finally stilled inside him, he made moaned.

I came deep inside him. I pushed all the way in and held there, my hips flush against his marked skin, and let it take me. My hand pressed flat between his shoulder blades, feeling the fine tremor running through him, and I emptied myself with a groan I couldn't quite swallow. Mikey made a sound and his body clenched around me, like he was trying to keep every drop.

I stayed. Didn't pull out. Didn't move. Just kept my hand on his back and my cock buried in him and let the warmth spread between us. I could feel the aftershocks running through him in little ripples, each one drawing another soft, helpless sound from somewhere deep in his chest.

"That's it," I murmured, my lips close to his ear. "Daddy's got you. Daddy's right here. You took it all so beautifully, baby. Every single thing. You're perfect. You're my perfect boy."

He nodded against the table.

I leaned down, my beard brushing his ear. "You with me, baby?"

He nodded. His fingers loosened around the rope, and he went completely soft against the table, thoroughly used. I was still inside him, still close, one hand flat between his shoulder blades, when Sawyer spoke.

His voice was steady. Or he wanted it to be steady — I could hear the effort behind it, the careful control.

"Can I fuck JJ? Please, Daddy?"

I looked at JJ. He lifted his head from the table, turned to look at me over his shoulder, and his blue eyes were dark and clear.

“Yes,” he said.

I nodded.

“Sure. JJ was so good too. He was so brave and didn't brat at all, and he took every stroke without a single complaint. Not one word of protest, not one bratty comment. That's my good boy. That's my brave, perfect boy.”

JJ's face pressed harder into the wood, and I saw the flush crawl up the back of his neck, spreading to the tips of his ears. His fingers tightened around the rope, and he made a pleased sound, almost a purr.

“You did so well, baby,” I continued, keeping my voice low and warm. “Every single stroke. You held still, you took your breath, you didn't fight it. Daddy saw all of it. Daddy's so proud of you.”

He nodded against the table and his hips shifted just slightly, like he couldn't quite help himself.

“Good boy,” I said again, because JJ could never hear it enough. “Such a good boy. And now your brother's going to take care of you, and you're going to be good for him too, aren't you?”

“Yes, Daddy,” he whispered, and his voice was rough.

Sawyer moved to JJ's end of the table. He reached for the lube. JJ was still bound, wrists secure to the table, his ass marked with the parallel lines of the cane, flushed dark red. Delicious.

Sawyer's fingered him. One, then two, working into him. Sawyer had always been careful, even when he wanted something badly — and JJ's hands tightened on the rope, his hips pushing back against Sawyer's hand.

“Please,” JJ said, his voice rough against the wood. “Sawyer, please—”

Sawyer didn't make him wait. He freed himself, lined up, and pushed inside in one firm stroke that made the table creak and JJ's back arch and the rope pull taut against his wrists.

The pace was different from mine. Faster. Less patient. Sawyer's broad hands found JJ's hips and gripped hard, and JJ took it the way he took everything: loud. His head dropped. His forehead pressed into the wood, and the sounds coming out of him were completely unfiltered, a string of

gasped pleas and half-formed words that dissolved into moans every time Sawyer bottomed out.

I kept my hand on Mikey's back. He was still soft against the table, still breathing hard, but his eyes were open now, watching his brothers over his shoulder with a drowsy attention.

Every thrust drove a new sound out of JJ. He was close — I could see it in the way his thighs trembled, in the way his breathing had gone shallow and desperate — but Sawyer got there first.

One final, hard thrust, and Sawyer went rigid behind him. His forehead dropped to JJ's shoulder blade, and I watched the shudder run through him from shoulders to hips, watched his hands go slack on JJ's waist for one perfect second before he caught himself and held still.

JJ was shaking. His whole body was tensed, riding the edge, his fingers curled so tight around the rope I thought it might break. He was right there. Still bound, still shaking, his cock flushed dark and hard beneath him, slick with pre-come and straining. I wrapped my hand around him and felt the full-body jolt that ran through him at the contact — his hips bucking forward, his wrists pulling against the rope, a sound tearing out of him that was half sob and half my name.

"Easy," I murmured. "Easy, baby. Daddy's got you."

I didn't need to work him. He was already there, wound so tight that the first stroke drew a broken, desperate sound from somewhere deep in his chest. The second stroke made his thighs lock, his whole body going rigid against the table, and the third — just three, that was all it took — broke him open completely.

"Go ahead, baby," I said.

He came, his body jerking against the table so hard the wood shifted, and for a long moment afterward he didn't move — just lay there breathing, boneless and spent, his cheek pressed to the wood and his eyes closed.

I gave them both a minute. Let the room settle. The fire popped in the grate. Somewhere outside, a car passed on the street, its headlights sweeping across the ceiling and gone.

Then I moved to untie them.

I started with Mikey. His wrists first, working the knots loose with careful fingers, checking that his circulation was good, then rubbing the

marks the rope had left and easing the stiffness from his wrists with my thumbs. He watched me with heavy-lidded eyes, his green irises almost black in the firelight, and when his hands came free he didn't move them — just let them lie where they fell, palms up, like he was too tired to remember how his arms worked.

“Everything feel good?” I asked him.

He nodded. His voice, when he found it, was rough. “Yes, Daddy. Thank you, Daddy.”

“You're welcome, my sweet boy.”

I moved to JJ. His knots were tighter — he'd been pulling against them harder — and it took me longer to work them loose. His wrists were marked, the skin pink where the rope had pressed, and I rubbed each one between my palms, checking the warmth and color before working the stiffness from them. JJ didn't open his eyes. He lay there letting me handle him, which was unusual enough that I checked his breathing twice to make sure he was still with me.

He was. Just quiet. The way he got sometimes.

“Good?” I asked him.

He nodded against the wood. “Good.”

I helped them both to their feet. Mikey swayed, and I caught him with an arm around his waist, feeling the boneless weight of him against my side. JJ stood on his own, but his legs were unsteady, and when I reached for him, he came into my other arm without a word.

Sawyer had stepped back. He stood with his arms at his sides, his breathing even, his face composed in that way that meant he was feeling more than he wanted to show. I caught his eye and nodded.

“Come here,” I said.

He came. Shoulder to shoulder with me. Then I herded them toward the sofa.

The deep cream cushions swallowed them. I pulled the soft blankets from the basket beside the fireplace, and draped one over JJ, one over Mikey, one around Sawyer's shoulders even though he pretended he didn't need it. JJ tucked himself against my right side, his head on my shoulder, his body warm and loose and unusually still. Mikey curled into the crook of my left arm and was half-asleep before his cheek hit my chest, his eyes

already closing, his breathing slowing into the deep, even rhythm that meant he was seconds from dreaming. Sawyer sat close on JJ's other side, his thigh pressed against JJ's, and when I glanced at him, he was looking at the fireplace.

I let the quiet stretch. The fire crackled. Bola appeared from wherever he'd been hiding during the scene and leapt onto the arm of the sofa, settled into a loaf, and closed his eyes with the judgment of a cat who had seen everything and was not impressed.

"Mikey," I said, quiet. His eyes fluttered open. "What do you want for your reward, baby? You were so good tonight. Name it."

He didn't hesitate. Didn't even think about it.

"Hot chocolate," he said, his voice thick with sleep. "And the Barbie movie."

I smiled. "That sounds exactly right."

I extracted myself from the tangle of limbs as carefully as I could — JJ grumbled, Mikey made a small sound of protest, Sawyer shifted to fill the space I'd left — and made my way to the kitchen. Four mugs. Milk warming on the stove. Cocoa powder, sugar, a dash of vanilla the way Mikey liked it. Whipped cream from the canister in the fridge. Marshmallows for JJ, because JJ would complain if there weren't marshmallows.

From the living room, I could hear the opening credits of the Barbie movie playing — that pink font, that unmistakable soundtrack — and Mikey's voice, already narrating the plot to no one in particular in the drowsy cadence he used when he was half-asleep.

"And then she goes to the real world, and everything is different, and she doesn't like it at first but then she — JJ, stop laughing, I'm telling the story..."

"I'm not laughing, you're laughing!"

"Sawyer, tell him to stop..."

"I'm not getting involved."

I carried the mugs in on a tray, steam rising in soft curls toward the ceiling beams. I found three boys wrapped in blankets on the deep sofa, firelight moving across their faces, the pink credits rolling on the screen, and Mikey talking over all of it. JJ took his mug with both hands, blew on

the surface, and immediately took a sip too hot for any sane person. He yelped, laughed, and went back for more. Sawyer accepted his with a nod that tried very hard to be casual, like a big boy would nod.

Mikey was already asleep. His mug sat untouched on the side table, and he had one hand fisted in the blanket and the other curled against the cushion where I'd been sitting, like he was holding the space for me. I settled back into the space beside him. Picked up my own mug. Let the warmth of it seep into my palms, and the warmth of them seep into me, and the fire crackled, and the movie played.

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CHAPTER 8. SULLIVAN

It was one of my favorite days at The Hearth: the mornings when the Daddies and Mommies organized a playdate so our littles could run around and have fun while we talked and caught up. Only the regulars tended to show up, since there were no scenes involved and a lot of the newer people who had just started frequenting the place were looking for the usual club experience. But that only made it better, in my opinion. Cozier. Safer. Just our closest people.

The foam mat was laid out in the middle of The Hearth the way it always was for these events: soft, with the alphabet printed on it so the littles could learn their letters while they played. JJ and Henry were sitting side by side on it, talking animatedly while they built an enormous LEGO structure. But from the way they were arguing, they clearly did not agree on how it was supposed to look.

"That's a stupid idea," I heard JJ say, loudly.

Henry gave him a light shove. "It's not stupid, you're stupid."

"JJ," I called, raising my voice just enough to carry across the room.

He looked up at me with those enormous blue eyes and gave me an angelic smile.

"We're just talking, Daddy," he said.

"I don't like the tone of this conversation," I said. "If you're going to fight, you don't get to play together. Are we clear?"

"Sorry, Daddy."

"Sorry, Sir," said Henry.

Henry wasn't my submissive, but by general consent among the subs, the baseline honorific for all the Dominants there was "Sir" — they weren't

required to use it, but they could if they wanted to, and Henry liked to.

"It is stupid though," JJ muttered quietly, apparently convinced I wouldn't hear him.

I rolled my eyes, even though that wasn't exactly a great example to set. JJ was complicated — my naughty, delicious boy — but I could tell the two of them were just playing, so I let it go.

"Daddy, do you want some tea?"

Mikey was at my feet, holding up a little plastic toy teacup. I put it to my lips and pretended to take a long, satisfied sip.

"Delicious, princess," I told him. He smiled that smile that turned me inside out every single time.

"I think I'm going to make a strawberry cake for everyone now," he said, picking up his play food and heading back to the fluffy rug I'd placed beside the table in case he wanted to stay close to me. It was his favorite spot. Mikey was so much shyer than his brothers — he liked playing by himself, or with the big baby doll he was always carrying, feeding her with a toy bottle while murmuring sweet things to her. It was adorable. But I did worry a little about him being so alone — I'd gently suggested, more than once, that he try to make some friends here. He always smiled and agreed and then ended up back at my side anyway. At least he had his brothers.

It was also a special day because my closest friends had all agreed to come.

Elizabeth was at the table with me; her little, Lucy, was across the room playing makeup with the other littles, her short purple dress visible among the group. Gustav, who rarely got to be little because of his manager role, was there with them too — his Daddy, Cris, a slim, short man who was nonetheless unmistakably a Daddy in every way that mattered, had come along, and for the first time in a long while Gustav was playing without worrying about anything else. It was good to see him like that.

Jeffrey was sitting to my left — another bear, big and bearded, with black hair threaded with gray and warm brown eyes. No sub at the moment, but unbothered about it. *I want to spend some time just developing myself as a Dominant*, he'd told me once, and I believed him.

Sawyer was with the other middles — a small group, because middles were always in the minority. Larissa, a Brazilian girl with warm brown skin

and long curly hair, was one of them. Garrett, red-haired and blue-eyed, and John, who was Black and very handsome, completed the group. The four of them were playing video games on the TV Elizabeth always brought and we'd set up on top of one of the oak tables. Sawyer loved it — it was his main hobby, and sometimes I had to actually argue with him to get him to do anything else.

And then there was Dominic.

My old friend. He had long, meticulously kept hair and looked vaguely like Axl Rose in his prime, despite being almost my age — forty. He'd been down lately. His last sub, Sara, hadn't left because of incompatibility — she'd had to move away for work, and it had hit him hard. After she left, he almost stopped coming around entirely.

But this was a daytime event, no scenes, and he'd decided to show up. That made me very happy.

He was sitting beside me now, drinking a Diet Coke from the can — no alcohol allowed during playdate sessions — and watching everyone with that quiet stillness that was so characteristic of him. I wasn't going to bring up Sara and risk ruining the day, but he seemed lighter than the last few times I'd seen him. Maybe he was starting to find his footing again, slowly.

"How do you keep order with so many boys?" Jeffrey asked me, watching JJ and Henry, who had escalated back to arguing about the LEGO tower at increasing volumes.

"Patience," I said. "And the truth is I love this role."

And I did. I genuinely loved being Daddy to my boys.

"Lucky me that I only have Lucy," Elizabeth said, raising her Sprite. "I don't think I could manage all of that."

"It's easier than it looks," I said. "Our house runs well. I can't imagine the boys without each other — they'd miss it terribly."

And that was true. Every time one of them had somewhere else to be, the others complained. JJ got even more chaotic than usual. Mikey curled inward. Sawyer adopted a posture of calm responsibility that barely concealed how much he felt the absence too.

Just then Mikey stood up, holding the plastic strawberry cake that came apart in little slices, and came over to the table.

"Do you want a piece, Daddy?" he asked. Then he looked shyly at my friends. "Would the Sirs like some too?"

"I'll take a piece, thank you," Dominic said.

I was glad. He was engaging like this again — since Sara had gone, he'd stopped interacting with littles in any way at all, and it had made him visibly sadder. The fact that he was accepting Mikey's little cake was a good sign.

Mikey set a small plastic plate with a plastic slice in front of him with all the care in the world.

"Thank you very much," Dominic said, in that deep voice of his.

Mikey lit up completely.

"I'll have some too," Elizabeth said.

"Don't forget me," Jeffrey added.

Mikey gave everyone a little plate, delighted and animated, then went back to his fluffy rug and sat down.

"I'm going to make soup now," he announced. "Dessert first, then the meal." He giggled like the idea was outrageous.

"I'm sorry?" I said, putting on my best mock-stern voice. "That doesn't sound right to me, little boy."

He laughed. "Sorry, Daddy, but that's how my kitchen works."

"I think this kitchen might need to be inspected for rule violations," I said. "And there might need to be a little talk with the head chef. With some good spanks."

"Nooooo, Daddy! It's fine," he giggled. "I promise the dessert will come after."

"Very good. Good boy."

He laughed again and went back to his food set. My friends were watching the whole exchange with something close to pride in their eyes, and that made me happy. These were good people who understood our way of life, who shared the same values, who made this place a real community.

Just then Sawyer appeared in front of the table.

"Daddy, I'm hungry," he said. "Can I order a burger?"

"Of course, sweetheart," I said. It was almost lunchtime anyway. "Go get JJ and Mikey and go together."

"I'm nooooooot huuuungry," JJ said from the mat, stretching the words out, not even looking up from his blocks.

"Don't make me come over there, young man," I said.

Mikey was already on his feet. "I want to eat," he announced. "Cooking all of that was a lot of work."

I smiled. He was precious. "Sawyer, help them order. You can get whatever you want, just no sweets yet, all right? Food first."

"I know, Daddy," Mikey said, with that good-boy smile of his. "Food first, then dessert."

"That's my boy," I said.

Sawyer headed toward the food counter. Mikey trotted after him immediately, still clutching his toy ladle in one hand, already animatedly telling Sawyer what he wanted.

JJ did not move.

"JJ," I said.

"I'm literally not hungry at all," he said, not looking up from the LEGO structure. He and Henry had apparently reached a ceasefire on the architecture dispute and were now building in focused silence, which lasted right up until the moment he sensed my attention on him and went very still.

"I didn't ask if you were hungry," I said. "I asked you to go with your brothers."

"But Daddy..."

"JJ."

"It's just that we're in the middle of something really important and if I leave now the whole structural integrity of the tower is going to..."

"James Joseph."

The LEGO brick he was holding went down very carefully onto the mat. Henry, with the self-preservation instincts of someone who had been around long enough to know what that tone meant, leaned slightly away and became very interested in a different section of the structure.

JJ looked up at me. He read my face. His mouth opened, then closed.

"Fine," he said, and stood up as if he was being asked to march to his own execution. He shuffled toward the food counter with his arms crossed and his bottom lip out, pausing once to look back at the LEGO tower with genuine grief.

"JJ," I said, without raising my voice. "You're going to go back to your LEGO tower right after you eat, sweetheart. But it's time to eat now. Non-negotiable."

"I said *fine*!"

"Watch your tone, brat, or I'll go over there and warm your behind."

"I'm sorry, Daddy," he said, realizing I was serious. Disrespect was not something I tolerated.

He turned back around and kept walking.

I could hear that Mikey was already happily telling Sawyer he wanted chicken nuggets and also could he please have the fruit cup and also was there chocolate milk because he thought he saw chocolate milk on the menu. Sawyer was nodding at each item with the patience of a much older brother. JJ arrived, still sulking, planted himself beside them, and crossed his arms.

"I'm not hungry," he announced, to no one in particular.

"Okay," Sawyer said, already scanning the menu.

A pause.

"They have mozzarella sticks," Sawyer added, casually.

Another pause.

"...I could maybe eat a little something," JJ said. I laughed, shaking my head. They were impossible.

CHAPTER 9. SULLIVAN

"Do you all know about the new event happening here?" Elizabeth asked once it was just the four of us.

"Nobody tells me anything," Jeffrey complained. "It's because I don't have a sub."

"I don't know about it either, and I have three," I said.

They laughed.

"Gustav told me," Elizabeth continued. "The club is looking for new members, since some—" She paused for a fraction of a second. "—ended up leaving. So they're doing an open house."

Dominic's expression didn't change.

"Really?" I said, my eyebrows pulling together as my heart sped up slightly. "I didn't know that."

The idea made me uneasy. The Hearth worked precisely because we were very careful about who was allowed in. Opening the doors like that, without the filter of a personal invitation, was a risk.

"They even announced it on FetLife," Elizabeth added.

"How do you all feel about it?" I asked.

Jeffrey shrugged. "I think some new faces could be good. Maybe I'd finally meet someone compatible. It's true we haven't had a new member in almost two months."

"I'm not sure," Elizabeth said, looking as uneasy as I felt. "Every club I've been to that did this ended up with people who didn't respect the community."

"Don't worry," Jeffrey said, pointing to himself with both thumbs. "I'll be here and I'll keep an eye on things."

"When is it?" I asked.

"Next Saturday. Gustav asked us all to come — otherwise he'll be alone, with none of his friends around, having to manage everything himself if anything goes wrong. And he's just a little boy too, at the end of the day."

I nodded, even though I wasn't entirely comfortable with the idea of bringing my boys to an event like that. But we were a community, and we supported each other. And I wanted to make sure that anyone who decided to stay was the right kind of person — responsible Dominants who knew their limits, who did scenes with care and respect. Submissives who were thoughtful and safe.

"I'll be here," I said.

"Count me in," Jeffrey said with a smile.

Elizabeth, Jeffrey, and I all looked at Dominic. He'd been quiet until then.

"I can come too," Dominic said.

There was something in the way he said it, with none of the heaviness he'd carried for the past several months. I glanced at him. He was watching the room, his expression unreadable in the way that was just Dominic, always had been — that stillness that people who didn't know him well mistook for coldness, and people who did know him understood was simply the way he moved through the world. But there was something else underneath it that day. Something that had been absent for a long time.

He was paying attention. He watched the littles on the mat with the attention that I knew, in him, meant something. He watched Mikey hand out the plastic cake slices with an expression that was not quite a smile but was the thing that happened on Dominic's face where another person might have smiled.

I didn't say anything. Then Jeffrey, Elizabeth, and I exchanged a glance over the rims of our glasses, brief enough that Dominic wouldn't catch it. Elizabeth gave the smallest nod.

Good, it said. He's coming back.

Despite his almost angelic appearance, Dominic was genuinely feared among the littles in our community. They said it was because he was very strict and very serious about discipline. I found it funny how much they feared him — including JJ, who was afraid of almost no one. Once, JJ and

Sara had been getting into trouble together, and I'd let Dominic discipline JJ as well. He put them over his knee one after the other and was so thorough about it that JJ had trouble sitting properly for three days. I was never going to forget the look on his face.

"We're glad you're coming back," Elizabeth said carefully.

She herself had lost a sub she'd been very close to and had needed to step away from the community for a while — almost a full year. She understood better than anyone what Dominic had been going through. The level of trust that a dynamic required was so much greater than in an ordinary relationship. Those boys and girls trusted us with their physical and emotional well-being — sometimes they gave us complete control over their lives. Rules for everything, all the time. My boys were like that. The four of us were in a total power exchange, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. When a dynamic like that ended, it was psychologically devastating for everyone involved.

"I'm glad to be here," Dominic said.

I knew he was never sarcastic, never said things he didn't mean. But if someone didn't know him well, they might not be sure — because when he said he was glad, his expression stayed exactly the same, closed and still, no smile. I let out a quiet laugh at his particular way of being.

Just then Lucy came running from across the room to where her Mommy was sitting. She was a tall girl, five-nine, but in a short purple dress with a bow in her long dark hair. She threw her arms around Elizabeth's neck and settled into her lap, and Elizabeth opened her arms to receive her and kissed her cheek.

"What is it, my love?"

"JJ was mean to me, Uncle," she said, looking at me.

I always found it funny that she called me Uncle. Lucy was a little baby — I couldn't really argue with her about it. And I had a soft spot for little ones like her and Mikey.

"What did he do, sweetheart?" I asked. "Tell me and I'll go scold him."

"He stole my fries," she said, very seriously.

"He what?"

"Stole them," she repeated, and pointed across the room to where JJ was sitting, watching me with visible apprehension because he clearly knew the

conversation wasn't going well for him.

I took a deep breath and stood up. Elizabeth stood up too.

It was quite true that I wasn't the only one who had ever disciplined JJ at The Hearth. JJ was so badly behaved that most of the Dominants there — with my consent — had helped with some form of correction at one point or another. Elizabeth included. JJ had a particular respect for her, possibly even more than he had for me, which I found both funny and mildly insulting.

The two of us walked over.

"What's this about you stealing Lucy's fries?" I asked, putting my hands on my hips.

JJ was sitting at the table with Mikey, Sawyer, and Henry, all of whom went silent and looked at me. Elizabeth stood beside me with that serious, imposing posture of hers that made even the brattiest littles think twice.

"I think your Daddy just asked you a question, JJ," Elizabeth said.

"She started it," JJ said, sulking. "She wanted a bite of my burger and didn't ask — she just grabbed it out of my hand. I didn't like it."

"And instead of talking about it, you went and took her fries," I said. "And that's also very bad behavior, Lucy."

Elizabeth turned to her little girl, who was now smiling innocently.

"You forgot to mention that part, did you, princess?"

"I didn't think those details were important," Lucy said.

Lucy was a brat too. God help us all.

"Both of you, come here," Elizabeth said. "Sullivan, do you mind if I handle them?"

"Be my guest," I said. "You'd be doing me a favor."

JJ looked at me like I had personally betrayed him. He knew that if he genuinely didn't want this, he could use his safeword at any moment and we would stop immediately — but he didn't use it. He stood up alongside Lucy, who immediately began her defense.

"Sorry, Mommy, I only wanted a bite of his food, it was very mean of JJ not to share with me, and I know grabbing his burger was wrong but—" she spoke quickly, taking small steps backward without taking her eyes off Elizabeth.

"Both of you, on your knees," Elizabeth said.

She was very serious when she wanted to be. Serious and imposing in a way that would give even me pause. Imagine two little brats facing that.

"You'll have to catch me first," Lucy had the nerve to say.

I always found it impressive, honestly. The brats never feared the punishment and always seemed to want to make things worse for themselves. They only stopped when they were in much deeper than they needed to be.

"I'll just wait right here for you to come back and apologize on your knees," Elizabeth said clearly, without moving an inch. "You know I'm not going to chase you."

JJ looked at me like he was waiting for my opinion on the matter.

"You heard her," I said. "On your knees."

Lucy dropped down, huffing. JJ knelt beside her without being told twice — because, again, whatever else JJ was, he had a healthy and well-earned respect for Elizabeth that he did not entirely have for me, which remained mildly offensive.

"Daddy," JJ said, "can't you ask her to let it go just this once?"

"You were naughty and now you're being corrected," I told him.

He let out a long, dramatic sigh.

Elizabeth came back with a rope.

"Hug each other," she said, and pointed at the two of them.

They looked at each other.

"Oh no," JJ said.

But Elizabeth gave him a look, and the courage left him immediately. The two of them wrapped their arms around each other, still kneeling, and Elizabeth began to bind them together with a skill I genuinely admired. She was a master of bondage — she taught classes at The Hearth on the subject. She tied their ankles first, then secured their legs and thighs together, then their wrists while their arms stayed around each other in an embrace, and finally their torsos in complex knots that I wouldn't have the faintest idea how to undo. When she finished, the two of them were bound tightly together, kneeling, unable to separate or get up and having to actively work just to keep their balance.

"You'll stay right there until I decide you're sorry enough," Elizabeth said.

"Mommy!" Lucy protested.

"Yes, my love?" Elizabeth asked, with the innocence of someone who had no idea whatsoever what her little girl could possibly want at that moment. "Let's see if this teaches you both something."

I laughed.

JJ was going to complain until the very end. But I thought it was perfect — and those fries had absolutely, without any question, cost him far more than they were worth.

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CHAPTER 10. SAWYER

It had been a rough week at school. Rough was actually an understatement.

By Thursday I was seriously considering quitting and finding a different career entirely. It started when the seniors decided to pull a prank and released a box of ladybugs into my gym — ordered online and deliberately dumped somewhere near the bleachers. I was pretty sure releasing a shipment of insects inside a school had to violate some rule or law, but I also couldn't bring myself to kill the little things, so I spent an embarrassing amount of time scooping ladybugs into buckets with a broom and dustpan, trying to make sure none of them made it into my pants, which happened more than once anyway.

I called JJ to help me, and he showed up with three of our teacher friends in tow, including Silvana — an older woman who had essentially adopted the two of us — who immediately took the whole situation very personally on my behalf.

"You need to find out who did this and punish them," she said.

JJ looked at me sideways, grinning, clearly finding the word funny given our home life, but I didn't say anything. I was too busy trying to maintain some dignity while sweeping bugs off the gym floor.

"I'm not going to bother," I said. "They're just kids messing around."

"They are not that young anymore. Some of those seniors are basically adults," Silvana said, deeply offended on my behalf.

The next day, the principal stopped me in the hall. *I'd like to speak with you later.* I spent the rest of the day convinced I was getting fired. I wasn't even sure which offense had done it — the ladybug incident, or the fact that I'd left the staff microwave absolutely disgusting after heating up pasta and hadn't cleaned it out of sheer laziness, or the fact that I'd been two days late

submitting my lesson plans. That last one especially. If Daddy found out about the late lesson plans, I was going to be in serious trouble at home too. But mostly I was just certain I was losing my job.

I spent the whole day anxious. Daddy could give me as much money as I needed, obviously — but I didn't like that idea. I wanted my own income. And he always said it was good for us to keep our jobs, that some independence was healthy, that it taught us responsibility. He was going to be so disappointed. And I wasn't going to work with JJ anymore.

I showed up at the principal's office absolutely certain it was my last day.

He wanted to know if I could represent the school at the next regional staff development conference.

That was it.

I stood there for a second genuinely unable to process that nothing bad was happening. And then, because the week wasn't finished with me, the freshman class escaped from the gym during my last period and hid in the bathrooms, and I spent twenty minutes looking for them while other staff members watched me with expressions that were trying very hard not to be amused.

I definitely made a terrible career choice. Some days I loved it. Most of that week was not those days.

By Thursday morning I had a fever and body aches. I told myself it was probably just stress at that point, because admitting I might actually be getting sick would have required me to do something about it. And I hadn't said a word to Daddy about any of it — I wanted to seem capable, adult, like someone who handled his own problems.

Which was, obviously, terrible behavior on my part. One of our rules was that we were always supposed to be honest about what was happening in our lives. So on top of everything else, I was also quietly guilty about that, which only made everything worse. I felt myself tearing up. I almost never cried — unlike my brothers, who were much more little than me, and that was sometimes its own kind of weight in our dynamic. I liked being the oldest. But they demanded so much of Daddy's attention, and I didn't want to be another thing he had to manage constantly.

We were very different. Mikey played house and wore diapers. JJ needed constant attention. I liked older kid things — video games, going out with friends, getting my nails done — and most of all I liked hearing Daddy tell me I wasn't old enough to get out of a good spanking when I acted up.

But that morning I couldn't make myself get out of bed. I just didn't feel well.

Daddy sat down beside me, noticing immediately.

"What's going on, Soy?"

He put his hand on my forehead and his eyebrows went up.

"You're warm," he said.

I nodded and made a face without meaning to. I didn't like acting like a baby, but sometimes I couldn't help it.

"What's going on?"

"Things at school haven't been great," I said, low, looking at my hands.

I knew I was going to be in trouble for not telling him sooner, but he just looked at me with those warm eyes and that long, neat beard, patient and concerned.

"Tell me."

And then, before I could say another word, we heard my brothers yelling at each other downstairs.

"You're being an idiot!" JJ's voice.

"Don't talk to me like that!" Mikey's voice back.

Daddy sighed.

"I'm going to go sort that out," he told me. "While I do — I want you to call the school and let them know you won't be in today."

"I'm not that bad," I said. "It's more work to send plans for a sub than to just go in with a fever."

He shook his head.

"You're always responsible and you never miss work, but today you're not well. And it's not a suggestion." He paused. "I can call for you if you'd like, but I imagine they'll have some questions about who this man is and why he's calling in for one of their teachers."

We both laughed at that.

"But Sawyer," he continued, more serious, "you really don't look well. You've got dark circles and you're pale. You're staying home and I'm going to take care of you. You are not responsible for them not hiring enough substitutes. Send in one of your emergency plans. They'll survive without you for a day."

"Okay," I murmured.

I felt guilty. But also enormously relieved that I didn't have to go. He had taken the decision out of my hands, which meant I didn't have a choice — and there was nothing better than not having the weight of a choice to make. That was exactly why I liked being a sub.

I called the school bracing for pushback and got none. They just said fine. I emailed in one of the substitute plans I kept ready for emergencies, so it didn't take long. When I was done, I closed my laptop and lay back down, and for the first time all week I felt the real weight of my exhaustion settle over me.

The thing was, I still wanted to believe this wasn't a virus. That it was just stress.

Daddy came back with breakfast on a tray. A glass of orange juice and three pancakes stacked on top of each other, covered in maple syrup. He was spoiling me. He set the tray beside me while I sat up and leaned against the headboard and kissed my cheek.

"Now you're going to tell me what's been going on."

My eyes filled up.

"Sorry for not telling you sooner," I said.

"First of all, it's okay," he said. "But we do need to talk about why you felt like you couldn't come to me. Tell me — am I failing you somewhere? Because I need to fix it. I'm supposed to be your safe place."

"No, Daddy!" I said immediately, feeling awful. "It's not your fault. I just wanted to handle it myself."

"I know you're a big boy," he said. "But I'm here to take care of you and to help you. That's how this works. It doesn't matter how big you get — you're still my boy, and I need you to let me help you."

I nodded, embarrassed and sorry.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't worry about it right now. Tell me what happened."

So I told him everything. The whole week. The ladybugs, the principal, the class that disappeared, the late lesson plans. He listened to all of it without interrupting, and when I was done, he pulled me in and held me.

"Oh, sweetheart. You carried all of that by yourself all week. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault!" I said again, feeling worse because now he felt bad too. "I deserve a punishment for not telling you. Please, Daddy. I feel terrible about it."

He looked at me for a moment with those eyes that always seemed to see more than I said, and then he smiled — which immediately made me feel better.

"All right. I'll give you one. But only once you're feeling better. Deal?"

"Deal. I'm sorry."

We hugged again.

"Don't worry," he said. "What matters is you're here now. And I'm going to help you feel better, okay?"

I nodded.

"It's going to be just you and me today," he said, and something warm moved through my chest. "Your brothers are already at work. We'll go to the living room, you can sit on the couch and eat your breakfast there. I'll get you some Tylenol for the body aches. Today you rest — and if you're not feeling better tomorrow, you're not going in then either."

"Can I play video games?" I asked.

He nodded and kissed my forehead.

"Of course. But only if I get to play too."

We both knew Daddy had no idea what he was doing with a controller, and all three of us loved him for it. We called him old man about it, even though the age gap wasn't that extreme — he was forty-two — but it was one of our running jokes and this time was no different.

"If you play, I'm going to win every single time," I told him.

"You little brat," he said, and gave me a light smack on the behind as we headed for the stairs. "We're playing something cooperative and if you can't teach me how, I'm adding it to your punishment."

I laughed despite myself.

We settled onto the couch. I turned on the game and ate forkfuls of pancake between turns, and honestly I was already starting to feel better — or at least distracted enough that the body aches faded into the background.

Daddy came back with two white tablets, a glass of water, and — I stared at it for a second — a thermometer.

"Take those," he said, handing me the tablets, "and then drop your pants, hands and knees on the couch, facing away from me."

"What?" I said.

"Which part was unclear, boy?"

"What exactly are you going to do, Sir?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

He gave me a deeply evil smile.

"In this house, you know we take temperatures the old-fashioned way."

This was, obviously, said by the man who ran a technology company.

"Daddy, absolutely not," I said. "I'm way too old for that."

He pinched my cheek.

"You're going to be my boy forever, and you are never too old for me to take your temperature however I see fit. Now move along — don't make me say it twice, or I'll have to take it more than once to make sure the reading is accurate."

"Fine, fine, I'm going," I said, defeated.

I pushed my flannel pants down. Daddy's eyes went straight to my underwear and his brow furrowed.

"What is this, Sawyer?"

He was pointing at my boxers. I felt a jolt, because we did in fact have a clear house rule — boys wore diapers, little-boy underwear, or plain white briefs. No boxers, no adult underwear.

"It's because..." I started.

"Do you think you're too grown up to wear what I tell you to wear?" he asked.

"No, Sir," I said, trying very hard to keep a straight face.

"You know what this means," he said. "I'm going to warm your backside once you're better. And take those off and put your white ones on."

"But Sir, I'm basically an adult..."

"Who decides that here?" he said, and I bit the inside of my cheek.

"You do."

"No more arguing. Take them off. Or I can double the punishment — your choice."

I stepped out of them and he took them.

"I'm going to check your drawer," he added. "If you've been buying more unauthorized pairs without my knowledge..."

I gave him my most innocent look. The truth was I had about twenty pairs in there. It had been a long time since he'd done an inspection. I'd bought them ages ago specifically to be bratty about it, and then genuinely forgotten the rule and just kept wearing them normally.

"What if I hand over all my pairs? Does that earn me any forgiveness?"

"It earns you forgiveness," he said. "Not a clean slate. Do you think that's fair?"

I nodded, attempting to look very repentant.

He wrinkled his nose at me, faintly amused.

"Now — the thermometer."

I knelt on the couch with my back to him. I was already very hard, but he didn't comment on it — which I considered a minor miracle, because one of our favorite games was him making pointed observations about that exact situation while telling me off about something else. He applied lubricant to the tip of the digital thermometer, then worked it in slowly and held it carefully in place. I groaned, eyes closing, completely unable to help myself.

"Daddy," I said, pained.

"Just checking your temperature, Soy," he said, in the voice of someone being entirely reasonable.

He kept one hand steady at my hip while we waited for the thermometer to beep, and I buried my face in my arms.

"Good boy," he said.

A moment later the thermometer beeped. He removed it and checked the display.

"Little bit of a fever. You're staying quiet for the rest of the day." He paused. "You've escaped a spanking — you're the luckiest boy alive."

"Daddy," I said, turning around and making my situation rather obvious, "could you maybe..."

He shrugged.

"Boys sometimes get a little worked up when their Daddies take their temperature. Completely normal, sweetheart. Nothing to be embarrassed about."

"But..."

"Sick boys who stayed home from school don't get to play with themselves," he said, ignoring everything I wanted entirely. "That would be very poor behavior. I can't support it."

"Daddy, please," I said, dignity mostly gone at that point, "could you help me?"

He laughed. And shook his head.

"Sick boys rest. No touching today," he added, firmer. "And if I find out you've been sneaking around behind my back, it will be significantly worse."

"I won't," I said.

"I know you won't. Because you're going to be a very good boy." He kissed my cheek. "Now go get your proper underwear and bring me every single contraband pair. All of them, Sawyer... if I go in there and find you've held any back, it will be worse."

"Yes, Sir," I said.

I went and did as I was told. He confiscated every single pair of boxers, and I silently prayed I hadn't left any in the laundry by accident. My backside was already going to pay dearly for this, I didn't need complications.

But after all of that, we settled back onto the couch together and played video games. He was genuinely terrible at it in the most endearing possible way, and I walked him through the controls with a patience I didn't know I possessed. I couldn't believe how happy I felt. I'd taken a day off I never

would have taken on my own — but it was an order, so I obeyed. And there was nothing better than obeying.

At lunch he made spaghetti, and I got to help — chopping the garlic and onion, stirring the pot.

"It's good for you to start learning to cook," he said, inside our little theater of it. "Important to have responsibilities at your age."

I actually knew how to cook perfectly well. But I loved when he talked to me like that. It made me feel completely, specifically looked after.

We ate together at the dining table, and then he let me take a long nap. I slept almost two hours, and when I came downstairs, he'd made cookies.

"Can I have one?" I asked, already reaching for the pan.

"Careful, they're still hot," he said. "But yes."

I grabbed one and immediately burned my fingers, hissing and blowing on my hand, and he watched me with a smile, helping himself to one of his own.

"Your brothers will be home in about an hour," he said. "What do you want to do with our last bit of time, just the two of us?"

"A bubble bath," I said, without hesitating.

He laughed and nodded.

"But remember — sick boys don't touch their own pee-pees."

"What if my Daddy touches it for me?" I asked, innocent.

"Well," he said, with that wolf smile, "that's a different matter entirely."

And we went upstairs.

CHAPTER 11. SAWYER

Daddy's hand rested warm and heavy between my shoulder blades as we climbed, his fingers pressing just enough through my shirt to remind me he was there, that he was the one making the decisions, that I didn't have to carry anything by myself today. The bedroom door swung open.

"You need to get that fever down," he said, turning the water on, like that was the only reason we were here, and not at all because I'd been walking around with an erection since he'd taken my temperature on the couch.

The deep clawfoot tub stood under the window, filling with water warm enough to loosen the ache in my muscles without making me feel overheated. He added a capful of bubble bath under the tap — vanilla, my favorite, which was ironic, the scent that filled the whole upstairs hallway when it got going — and the suds rose in thick white peaks across the water's surface.

"Sit," he told me, pointing at the closed toilet lid. I sat. My body ached everywhere. Daddy knelt in front of me, hands on my knees, and I looked at the top of his head, at the neat dark hair and the clean part on the left.

"You've had a rough week," he said, and I nodded because my throat felt tight and I didn't trust myself to speak. "And you've been carrying it by yourself. I don't like that, Sawyer. Not one bit."

"I know," I said.

"I mean it. When you're in trouble, you come to me. When you're sick, you come to me. When you're anxious, or stressed, or just having a bad day —" His hands moved from my knees up my thighs, thumbs pressing into the muscle. "—you come to me. That's what I'm here for."

"I'll do better," I said.

“You will.” He smiled. Not the wolf smile, not the one he used when he was about to punish me, but the one that was just for moments like this. “Clothes off, boy. Let’s get you in the water.”

I stood and pulled my shirt over my head. My hands went to the waistband of my white briefs — the ones he’d made me change into, the ones that actually fit the house rules — and I hesitated, because I was still hard and it was impossible to hide, and he saw me hesitate and laughed low in his throat.

“What did I tell you about sick boys?” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“That you’d help,” I said.

“Exactly. Now stop stalling.”

I pushed my underwear down and stepped out of them. Daddy’s eyes tracked the movement, lingering on me, and I felt the heat in my face that had nothing to do with the steam. He reached for me. One hand wrapped around my wrist, pulling me forward, and the other found my hip and guided me toward the tub. I stepped in. The warm water made my skin prickle pleasantly, and I sank into it with a sound, my body going slack almost instantly, my shoulders dropping, my head tilting back against the curved porcelain edge.

“There you go,” Daddy said with pride in his voice. He rolled up his sleeves and sat on the stool beside the tub, one hand already reaching for the bottle of shampoo. “Lean forward.”

I did. His fingers worked into my hair, strong and careful, massaging my scalp in slow circles that made my eyes want to close. The shampoo smelled like cedar, and I breathed it in and let myself go limp under his hands, the way I only ever did for him.

“You’ve got the most stubborn hair,” he murmured, working a tangle loose with his thumbnail. “Always fighting me. Just like its owner.”

“I’m not stubborn,” I said, without opening my eyes.

“You’re the most stubborn person I’ve ever met. And that’s saying something, considering I live with JJ.”

I laughed, and his fingers moved from my scalp down to the back of my neck, finding the knot of tension I’d been carrying since Monday and pressing into it with the exact right amount of pressure. I groaned.

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

“Language.”

“Sorry, Daddy.”

He kept working. His thumbs traced the line of my spine between my shoulder blades, then outward along the muscles of my upper back, finding every sore spot. The water lapped at my chest. Bubbles clung to my skin, popping softly whenever I moved.

“How does that feel?” he asked.

“Good,” I said. “Really good.”

I opened my eyes. He was watching me, his expression serious, and I felt the familiar twist of guilt and gratitude that came with being known that well. His hands moved lower. Down my back, over the curve of my ass, and I shifted in the water, my cock hardening further against my thigh. He didn’t comment on it, but I felt his fingers pause for half a second, a little hitch in the rhythm that told me he’d noticed.

“Turn around,” he said. “Face me.”

I turned, water sloshing over the edge of the tub, and settled with my back against the far side, my knees drawn up. Daddy’s eyes were dark and steady on mine.

“You’ve been a very good boy today,” he said. His voice had dropped, the way it did when we shifted from caretaking into something else. “Taking your medicine. Resting. Being honest with me. I’m proud of you, Soy. Still feeling okay?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m good, Daddy.”

“Good.”

His hand found my knee under the water. Traced up my thigh, slow, and I held my breath. When his fingers wrapped around my cock, I let the breath out in a long, shaking exhale, my head tipping back against the tub’s edge, my eyes closing.

“That’s it,” he murmured. “Let go. Daddy’s got you.”

His grip was perfect. Firm, warm, his thumb brushing over the head with each stroke, spreading the pre-come that had been gathering there since he’d taken my temperature on the couch. The water moved around us, bubbles shifting and popping, and I could hear the sound of his hand moving under the surface.

“You’re so hard for me,” he said, and the approval in his voice went straight through me. “Such a good boy. Taking everything I give you. Always so ready.”

I made a broken and wanting sound, and his free hand came up to cup my jaw, thumb brushing my lower lip, and I turned my face into his palm and pressed a kiss there without thinking about it.

“Eyes open, baby. Look at me.”

I opened my eyes. He was watching me, focused, and his hand never stopped moving, the rhythm steady and relentless, and I was already close — embarrassingly close, after barely two minutes — and he could tell, because his smile turned knowing and his thumb pressed harder against the sensitive spot just under the head.

“Not yet,” he said. “You’re going to wait for me.”

“I can’t... Daddy, please...”

“You can. You will. Breathe.”

I breathed. His hand slowed, just enough to take the edge off, and I whimpered because it was cruel, and he leaned forward and kissed my forehead, his beard scratching gently against my skin.

“Good boy,” he whispered against my skin. “So good for me. My big boy.”

His hand sped up again. My hips moved, chasing, and he let me, his grip tightening just enough to make me gasp, and I was so close I could feel it building behind my navel, a hot, tight coil that was about to snap, and he read it in my face because his eyes went dark and his voice dropped even lower.

“Come for me, Sawyer. Now. Let go.”

I came with a broken sound, my hands gripping the edges of the tub so hard my knuckles went white. He worked me through it until the pleasure tipped over into something almost painful and I had to grab his wrist to make him stop.

He did. His hand went still, resting warm against my thigh under the water, and I sat there shaking, my chest heaving, bubbles clinging to my skin and my hair plastered to my forehead, and I looked at him and I loved him so much it hurt.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice wrecked.

“You’re welcome, baby.” He leaned forward and kissed me, slow and deep, his beard wet against my chin, and I kissed him back with everything I had, my hand finding the back of his neck and holding him there.

When we broke apart, his eyes were dark and his breathing had changed, and I knew exactly what I wanted to do.

“Move,” I said, and he raised an eyebrow at my tone but he moved, shifting back on the stool, and I pushed myself up in the tub, water sluicing off my body, and climbed out. Dripping on the bath mat, bubbles sliding down my legs, I knelt between his knees and reached for his belt.

“Sawyer,” he said, warning in his voice, but I was already unbuckling him, and I looked up at him with what I hoped was my most innocent expression.

“I’m showing gratitude,” I said. “It’s only polite.”

He laughed and then his hand was in my hair and I leaned into his touch, intent on returning even a fraction of what he’d given me all day.

I knew how to please him. Daddy had taught me, over years, with the same patience he brought to everything, and I’d learned because I wanted to make him feel good, because giving something back to him after he’d spent the entire day taking care of me felt right.

His hand tightened in my hair. I started moving my hand, giving him long strokes, then short ones, fast and slow, my thumb over the head, changing the pace.

“Fuck, Soy...” The sound of my nickname in that rough voice went straight through me. “Baby, I’m close...”

A moment later he went tense, then slowly relaxed again, his breathing rough. I stayed with him until he caught my wrist and stilled me.

“Enough,” he said, his voice rough. “That’s enough, baby. You’ve made your point.”

I sat back on my heels, dripping on the bath mat, my hair in my eyes, and grinned at him. He looked wrecked. His shirt was still on, his sleeves still rolled, but his hair was mussed where my hands had been and his face was flushed and his eyes were soft.

“Come here,” he said, and pulled me up into his lap, water and all, and I went, folding myself against his chest, my face pressed into the curve of his neck, and his arms came around me and held me there.

We sat like that for a long time. His heartbeat against my ear. The bathwater cooling behind us. My skin drying in the warm air, goosebumps rising along my arms, and he reached for a towel and draped it over my shoulders without letting go of me.

“Thank you,” I said again, into his neck.

“Any time, Soy. Any time at all.”

I pulled back enough to look at him. His beard was damp where I’d kissed him, and there was a streak of bubble bath suds on his collar, and I reached up and wiped it away with my thumb and he caught my hand and kissed my palm.

“You feeling better?” he asked.

I considered it. My body still ached, but the ache felt distant now, background noise behind the warmth spreading through my chest. I was probably still feverish, but right then it felt less important than his hands on my back and the smell of him and the way the afternoon light came through the bathroom window and turned everything gold.

“Much better,” I said.

“Good.” He kissed my forehead. “We should get you dried off before you get chilled.”

“I’m not going to get sick again from sitting in your lap for five minutes.”

“You absolutely might. You’re a delicate flower, Sawyer Thomas. Everyone knows this.”

I snorted. “I’m a P.E. teacher. I’m a badass.”

“Who came down with a fever after being too stubborn to tell his Daddy he was having a bad week.”

I didn’t have an answer for that, so I buried my face in his shoulder instead, and he laughed and stood up, lifting me with him like I weighed nothing, and set me on my feet. The towel came around me and he dried me off.

“Let’s go downstairs,” he said. “Your brothers will be home soon, and JJ already texted me that he somehow managed to set something on fire at work today, so I want to hear that story.”

I laughed, and he slung an arm around my shoulders, and we walked out of the bathroom together, dripping water on the hardwood.

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CHAPTER 12. JJ

The Hearth felt different than usual.

It was still the coziest place I knew — that hadn't changed — but there was a certain electricity in the air because it was an open house, meaning people from outside could visit for the first time. In all my years of coming here, that had never happened before. But unlike Daddy, who sometimes assumed the worst was going to happen automatically, I was excited. I didn't think anything bad was going to happen. We were going to meet new friends. I was practically bouncing in place.

Sawyer looked more like Daddy — completely serious, face closed off, scanning the room. Mikey didn't even seem to register that it was a different kind of night: he held his doll and smiled that soft little smile of his. For him, being with us and his toys was already enough, and we loved him for it.

"Be careful, boys," Daddy said at the door. "If any Dom approaches you in a way you don't like, or if any sub is doing something that doesn't look safe, come to me immediately."

We'd gotten red wristbands at the entrance, which meant we weren't available for scenes with anyone else — even though Daddy sometimes let us play with people he trusted, that didn't seem to be on the table tonight. I didn't mind. I just wanted to meet new people.

The Hearth was packed. The announcements had really worked — I had never seen the place this full. They'd pushed some of the tables toward the walls to open up more space in the main room. There was every kind of person: some in casual clothes like me, others in tiny lingerie, leather and latex outfits, or barely anything at all. There was also a boy in a full pup kit

— a leather dog hood that covered everything except his eyes. He crawled on a leash held by his owner, who was also dressed head to toe in leather.

"Daddy," I said, grabbing the sleeve of his white linen button-down. "We don't have any pups here. I really hope this one stays. Can I go talk to him?"

Daddy looked over at them twice. The two of them seemed relaxed. The owner was drinking a soda and taking in the room.

"That's fine," he said. "I'll come with you and introduce myself."

I bounced over and crouched down in front of the pup because he was on the floor.

"Hi! Are you a pup? We don't have any pups here at The Hearth. What's your name? What do you think of the place?" I asked all of this at once.

"JJ, ease up a little," Daddy said, arriving at my side. "You're going to startle them."

I frowned. I knew I could get too excited sometimes, but I didn't mean to scare anyone.

"It's all good," the pup's owner said. "Nice to meet you. I'm Esteban. Are these your boys?"

"They are," Daddy said, shaking his hand. "I'm Sullivan. This is JJ, that's Mikey over there, and the serious one is Sawyer. JJ spotted your pup and wanted to come say hi."

"Our pleasure," Esteban said. "We'd heard about this place but never managed to get an invitation before. We're really happy to be here. Shame there aren't any other pups."

"Sir, I will play with him!" I said, looking at the pup enthusiastically. "I mean, only if you want me to." I looked at the pup. "Do you talk or just bark? Is that an inappropriate question?" I continued before anyone could answer, unable to stop myself. "Because if it is, I'm sorry. I'm not trying to be bratty. I genuinely don't know."

Daddy and Esteban both laughed — always a good sign.

"I think it's adorable that you're this excited to meet my pup," Esteban said, putting his hand on the pup's hood. The pup barked twice, tail wagging. "His name is Rex. When he's in pup mode, he only barks."

"Rex!" I said, delighted. "So nice to meet you. Can I pet him, Sir?" I asked Esteban.

He looked at Rex, who nodded. Esteban smiled.

"Go ahead."

Esteban was a tall, handsome Black man with long hair that framed his face beautifully. I petted Rex's hood and he wiggled his bottom, the little plug tail swishing. I found that incredibly funny and incredibly cute.

"You're so cool, Rex," I told him. When I was in little space with Daddy nearby, I knew I didn't have to worry so much about filtering myself — he always kept me safe. "Do you want to be my friend?"

Rex nodded. I found it adorable even though it was clearly a very human gesture.

"Yay! I already made a new friend, Daddy!" I said, excited. "You have to meet my brothers. They're really great too. Even though Sawyer is kind of boring."

I glanced at Sawyer, who rolled his eyes.

"Can I go play video games?" Sawyer asked Daddy.

"You can," Daddy said, "but just for a bit. I want you trying to socialize with the newcomers too."

"What if I invite someone new to play with me?"

"Great idea, sweetheart," Daddy said, and Sawyer left looking pleased with himself.

Mikey was in full super mega baby mode that night — sometimes he went almost nonverbal, into his own little world. He was sitting without even noticing Rex, playing with his doll Teresa, a blonde baby in a pink dress. I didn't love it when Mikey got like that because he didn't want to play with me, but I understood — he needed that space without judgment.

"Daddy, can I take Rex to meet Gustav, Lucy, and Henry?" I asked.

"Sure, sweetheart," he said. "If Rex wants to."

"Do you want to meet my friends?" I asked Rex.

He wagged his bottom and barked twice.

"I think that's a yes!"

"Oh, JJ," Esteban said, "before you go — would you mind taking a friend of mine along?"

He pointed toward a boy coming in our direction. He was gorgeous — wearing tiny pink shorts and a white lace crop top. Blond like me, but his hair came down to his shoulders.

"His name is Max. He's an old friend of mine and I convinced him to come tonight. He's a very shy and sweet little. He'd run to the bathroom because he was embarrassed, but I told him there was no need."

I looked up as Max approached and immediately stood and waved.

"Hi!"

He looked a little startled that I'd spoken directly to him like that. I noticed he was wearing eyeliner and blush.

"How old is your little?" I asked him.

"Three," he said, still a bit uncertain, glancing at Esteban for reassurance.

"Oh wow, mine is five!" I told him. "So you're not that much of a baby. That's so cool — it means we can play together!"

He looked genuinely taken aback — I don't think he was expecting anyone to talk to him that directly right away. Sometimes I was a lot as a little.

"Is he your sub as well?" Daddy asked Esteban.

"No, no," Esteban said. "Rex and I are monogamous. Max is just my friend." He looked at Rex. "He's your friend too, isn't he?" Rex wagged his tail and barked. "Max is new to the community. He only recently figured out that he didn't need to hide or feel ashamed about being a little, and he's exploring for the first time with our help. We're really proud of him for reaching out."

Max got progressively redder as Esteban spoke. He still hadn't said anything else, which confirmed he was genuinely very shy.

"Come on, let's go play!" I told him. "I'll introduce you to my best friends."

I wanted to start running across the room but held myself back and looked at Daddy first.

"Can I?"

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He nodded, laughing.

"It's strange seeing you behave, JJ. I think last time's punishment is still fresh in your memory."

He was teasing, but I stuck my tongue out anyway, just to prove I was still a brat. Max's mouth fell open, eyebrows shooting up. Daddy reached out to try to catch my tongue between his fingers the way he sometimes did.

"You know what I do with naughty boys who stick their tongues out at me, don't you?"

"Yes," I said, giving him my most angelic look. "Sorry, Daddy."

"All right. Go find your friends."

"What do you do with boys who stick their tongues out?" Esteban asked Daddy, curious and amused.

"They get a spanking while their tongue is held in a clothespin," Daddy said, perfectly calmly.

Esteban burst out laughing. "Sounds appropriate."

I huffed like I was offended. In reality my cock got marginally harder just thinking about it, but that was a detail I was keeping to myself.

"Go on, sweetheart," Daddy said to me.

"Come on, Max. Come on, Rex," I said.

Max fell into step beside me. Rex stayed with Esteban — fair enough. Sometimes I just wanted to stay with my Daddy too.

I headed to where Henry was standing near the bar, drinking a beer. Henry was a little, but since he didn't have a Dom at the moment he did pretty much whatever he wanted — including drinking alcohol, which Daddy would never let me do and which I didn't actually like anyway.

"Henry, this is my new friend Max," I said.

Henry looked at Max and broke into a wide grin. His beard was freshly trimmed and his brown eyes were bright — he seemed very energized by all

the new people and the fuller-than-usual atmosphere.

"Hey, nice to meet you, Max," he said. "How did you already end up in JJ's clutches?"

"Hey!" I protested. "Be nice."

"I am being nice," Henry said. "I'm only bratty when I know it's going to earn me a spanking."

"I can ask my Daddy to give you one," I said.

"Absolutely not. Your Daddy hits too hard."

I laughed.

"What about you, Max?" Henry asked. "Do you like spankings? Want a beer?"

"I don't drink," Max said, still very quiet. "And I've never had a spanking. I'm a little scared of it, honestly. I watched some videos online and they scared me."

"Oh, don't worry," I said. "It's different in real life."

"It hurts more," Henry added, completely unhelpfully.

I smacked his arm.

"Stop scaring him, he's new to all this!"

"You're so annoying, JJ," Henry sighed.

Max looked like he was finding our dynamic a little bit funny.

"I'm kidding," Henry said, more seriously. "You don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with. You know all about safewords, right?"

Max nodded.

"I did a lot of research. I spent years just reading about it — I never thought I'd actually work up the nerve to come somewhere like this."

"The first time is always scary," I said. "But after a while it feels like a second home. Especially when it's not this crowded. They have tons of juices and sodas too, for people who don't drink. There are so many littles here — you can order whatever you want at the food stall, or ask permission from your Dom to order, the way I do."

"Or you can just order without asking for permission and deal with the consequences," Henry said.

"No, no, don't even think about that," I said to Max, giving Henry a look. "I personally can't risk it. My Daddy promised that the next time I act up, I'm getting figged."

"What's that?" Max asked.

Henry and I exchanged a glance.

"It's when they put a peeled ginger root in your bottom," I said. "It burns quite a bit."

Max looked shocked.

"But that's pretty niche, don't worry," I added quickly. "And you never have to do anything you don't want to."

"I think I'm more of a soft little," Max said thoughtfully. "Do you think I'll find a Dom who's okay with that?"

Henry and I both nodded enthusiastically.

"There are all kinds of Doms out there," I said. "You'll definitely find someone."

We crossed the main room toward the table where Daddy was sitting. The Hearth was beautiful that night — upbeat electronic music, the fireplace going as always, the amber light turned down even lower than usual for extra comfort. Lots of people dancing, talking, sitting at the big oak tables. All the kink equipment was in use — spanking benches, the cage, Saint Andrew's crosses.

I spotted Gustav rushing back and forth across the room. Poor guy — he almost never got to rest when he was on duty. I definitely would not want his job.

Sawyer was with the other middles, playing video games with about ten people watching around them. EA Sports FC. Sawyer was very good.

We reached Daddy's table. Mikey was in his lap, playing with Teresa the doll. Elizabeth, Jeffrey, Dominic, and Esteban were there too, talking. Rex was at Esteban's feet, looking perfectly content just to sit there. Lucy was in Elizabeth's lap — Elizabeth was brushing her hair with a hairbrush, and when Lucy reached up to interfere, Elizabeth gave her hand a sharp little tap with the brush.

"Hands down, princess. I'm the one doing the brushing."

"Yes, Mommy," Lucy said, immediately obedient.

Everyone seemed to be on their best behavior that night.

"What is it, my love?" Daddy asked when he saw me arrive.

"Can I order some juice and dinosaur nuggets, please?" I asked.

"Of course, sweetheart."

I was pleased. This whole behaving thing paid off sometimes.

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CHAPTER 13. JJ

I turned back to Max and Henry — and that was when I saw Max's expression.

He was staring. Fixed on someone.

Was it Daddy? I looked at Daddy, then back at Max. No. Not Daddy.

It was Dominic.

Max was looking at Dominic like he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing.

I frowned. Looked again to make sure. Yes. Unmistakable. That entire look was aimed directly at Dominic — the long blond hair, the sharp face, that imposing posture even just sitting down.

Interesting.

"Come on," I said, without mentioning it yet.

We stopped in front of Elizabeth on the way.

"Can Lucy come play with us, Ma'am?" I asked.

"No," she said. "She's my little doll tonight and she's staying in my lap."

I looked at Lucy. She didn't react — dolls don't talk, after all. I shrugged and moved on.

We went to the food counter. I ordered the dinosaur-shaped nuggets and a mango juice. Max just ordered water — I think he was too nervous to eat. Henry got another beer.

We sat at one of the tables near the stage. Unfortunately it was also near the spanking bench, where a girl was flogging a guy who was groaning and whimpering every time the flogger hit his back. The scene was fairly intense, and I thought it might be a bit much for Max right off the bat.

"You were looking at Dominic in a pretty impressed way," I said, trying to redirect his attention.

Henry laughed. "I noticed too."

"What?" Max went red. "No I wasn't. I just thought that man was very good-looking."

"Dude, you were basically hypnotized," I pushed.

He went even redder. "Do you think he noticed?" he asked, almost involuntarily.

"Probably," Henry said, making everything worse. "Dominic notices everything. He's one of those Doms."

"Really?" Max asked, looking alarmed. It was clear he wasn't comfortable anymore.

I gave Henry a small signal — I thought we were pushing too far, and Max clearly wasn't comfortable with where the conversation was going.

"Don't worry about it," I said, and my nuggets arrived right at that moment.

The three of us ate in relative quiet. I offered nuggets around, Henry took some, Max picked one up carefully. The mood had gotten a little heavy and I was worried I'd ruined the night.

Then I had an idea.

"Do you want to see the sensory room?" I said to Max. "It's a separate space where you can get a break from the noise. Much more chill."

Max nodded without hesitating.

The three of us stood up and left the main room. The sensory room was a closed space off the secondary hall, and it was exactly what the name said — somewhere to rest your senses, away from the music and the crowds. The sensory room was one of my favorite spaces in The Hearth.

It wasn't just a quiet little room with cushions on the floor — although it had that too, an area along the walls completely padded with soft foam, with low lighting and an even warmer amber tone than the main room. The big part of the space was an enormous play structure, the kind you'd find at a playground, only in an adult-sized version — a tall spiral slide, foam platforms at different heights, and in the far corner a ball pit that was genuinely large.

I walked in first. Obviously.

"BALL PIT," I announced.

Max stood in the doorway for a second, taking everything in with those big eyes of his. The softer light in here hit his face differently — he looked less scared than he had in the main room, or maybe it was just the fact that nobody was flogging anyone in here and the music was muffled by the walls.

"You can come in," I said, waving him over. "I promise they don't bite. The balls, at least. Henry I can't guarantee."

"Hey," Henry said, offended. "I only bite with consent."

Max gave a tiny smile. Tiny, but it was a start. He came in. He stayed near the entrance for a while, arms folded around himself, watching me and Henry throw balls at each other with no particular strategy or objective. I threw a green ball at Henry, Henry returned with three blue ones, I jumped to dodge and missed completely.

Silence. Max moved a little closer to the pit, looking into it with an expression I recognized — the expression of someone who really wanted to do something but thought they weren't allowed.

"You can get in," I said, quieter this time. "There are no rules here. This is literally what the room is for."

He looked at the ball pit for another second. Then he took his shoes off, set them neatly outside the pit, and stepped in. The balls rose up around him to his waist, and he stood very still in the middle, like he wasn't quite sure what to do with himself. I picked up a yellow ball and put it in his hand without saying anything.

He looked at it. Then at me. Then at Henry. Then he hit me directly in the nose with it.

"HEY," I said. Max's mouth fell open, clearly having not planned that at all.

"Sorry," he said immediately. "I don't know why I did that—"

"WAR," I declared.

What followed was the kind of thing none of the three of us would probably be able to explain to an adult in a way that sounded reasonable. Balls flying in every direction. Henry hiding behind a foam platform and

sniping from a distance. Me trying to climb the slide to get the height advantage and sliding back down before I got halfway up. Max — who at first was throwing very carefully, almost apologetically, each ball accompanied by a checking glance to make sure everything was okay — gradually getting more and more shameless, until he fully submerged himself in the ball pit, disappeared for a second, and surfaced on the other side to hit Henry in the back with a frankly premeditated quantity of balls.

"You were pretending to be a good boy," Henry said, indignant.

"I am a good boy," Max said, completely innocent.

"You're a brat," I declared, impressed. He went red again, but it was a different red than before.

"I'm not," he said.

"You are," Henry and I said at exactly the same time. He hid his smile behind his hand again, but this time he couldn't quite hold it back all the way.

I was in the middle of the slide — literally stopped midway, having gotten distracted — when the sensory room door opened.

"JJ."

I turned around.

Daddy was in the doorway, with Jeffrey and Dominic on either side of him. Daddy's expression was the kind that made me want to become invisible — not full anger, but concern in the process of becoming firmness, which was sometimes worse.

"You disappeared," he said.

"I didn't disappear," I said, finishing the slide slowly because there was no stopping the process at that point. "I came to the sensory room. Which is in the building. Which is safe."

"Without telling me."

"I should have told you," I agreed, because there wasn't much to argue with there. "Sorry, Daddy. I was showing Max the room." I pointed at Max.

Daddy looked at me for a long moment, reading my face the way he did — checking if I was okay, if anything had happened, if the apology was genuine. He must have decided the answer was yes on all counts, because his expression eased.

"Okay," he said, with that warm voice he used with new people, the one that made everyone feel immediately a little safer. "I'm glad JJ brought you here, Max." He looked back at me. "Next time you tell me before you leave the main room."

"Yes, Sir," I said.

"Good." He gestured toward the room. "Carry on."

Jeffrey was smiling beside. But what I noticed — what I couldn't not notice — was Max. Max had gone very quiet when the door opened. He stayed that way through the whole exchange between me and Daddy. But now he wasn't looking at Daddy, or at Jeffrey, or at me.

He was looking at Dominic.

And Dominic was looking at him.

His eyes moved over Max once, slowly, top to bottom, and then came back up to his face and stayed there.

Max went red to his ears.

Dominic didn't say anything. But the corner of his mouth moved.

"Let's go," Daddy said to Jeffrey and Dominic, and the three of them left.

The door closed.

Henry looked at me. I looked at Henry. Both of us looked at Max, who was standing in the middle of the ball pit pretending to be very interested in the blue ball in his hand.

I felt something light up in my chest. That specific spark I knew very well — the one that showed up right before I had an idea that was, objectively, the best idea anyone had ever had in the entire history of ideas.

Max and Dominic.

Dominic, who had been alone for so long. Dominic, who Daddy wanted so badly to see happy. Dominic, who had that look when he found something worth paying attention to — and who had just aimed that exact look at a blond little in pink shorts who clearly had no idea what to do with himself every time that man entered his field of vision.

It was perfect.

It was so perfect I almost screamed out loud right there.

I held it together. For now.

Operation Cupid, I thought. Starts now.

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CHAPTER 14. MIKEY

The next Saturday, we were all home.

I was sitting on our fluffy living-room rug, playing with my toy kitchen — one of my absolute favorite toys. Sawyer was on the couch playing video games, and incredibly, JJ was sitting right next to him scrolling on his phone without causing any trouble whatsoever.

We'd done our chores earlier. Since it was Saturday, they'd been lighter — I only had to clean the bathroom mirrors, and then Daddy let me come play. We weren't arguing, we weren't fighting, we weren't scheming anything. It was just a peaceful Saturday.

Daddy appeared in the living room doorway and stopped, looking at the scene.

He was in his navy blue pajamas — because Saturday was the day we were all allowed to stay in pajamas all day, one of the best rules in the house, and he took advantage of that benefit for himself just as much as we did. He put his hands on his hips and didn't say anything for a moment.

I looked up at him and giggled. JJ also took his eyes off his phone and stared. Only Sawyer kept jumping platforms in Mario, completely oblivious.

"What's up, Daddy?" JJ asked.

"You're all very quiet and well-behaved today," he said.

"If you want, I can go cause some trouble," JJ offered, with a grin.

"Don't you dare. I'm enjoying the peace," Daddy said. "And I think you all deserve a reward."

We looked at each other. This time even Sawyer paused his game. JJ put his phone away and gave Daddy his full attention.

"What kind of reward?" he asked.

"We're going out for dinner."

I cheered right where I sat, popping my pacifier out of my mouth.

"Yay!" I said.

"Yes, my love," Daddy said, laughing. "You deserve it. And I don't feel like cooking."

We laughed.

"Can we go to Olive Garden?" JJ asked. "I really, really want Olive Garden, please."

And then a miracle happened — because we almost always disagreed and argued about everything — Sawyer said:

"I want that too. I want pasta."

"Yay!" I said again.

Daddy looked genuinely surprised for a second.

"I think you've all been so good that you deserve another reward on top of that," he said. "Come here. Kneel in front of me."

All three of us got up and went to him, kneeling on the rug. I settled in the middle, JJ on one side and Sawyer on the other. Daddy looked at each of us with that warm, satisfied look that made me want to be good forever just to keep seeing that expression on his face.

He lowered his hand and stroked my hair first, then stroked JJ's, then Sawyer's.

"Daddy is very proud of you all today," he said. "You did your chores without complaining, you stayed quiet, you didn't fight. That's exactly what I expect from you, and when you give me that, it makes me very happy."

"We were very good," I agreed, pleased with myself.

"You were," he said, with a smile. "So before we go, each of you gets a few minutes with me. Okay?"

I nodded eagerly. I loved our individual moments with Daddy.

He called Sawyer first — probably because Sawyer was the oldest in the dynamic and always went first in these things. JJ and I stayed in the living room waiting. JJ went back to his phone, but I stayed with my toy kitchen,

putting together an imaginary dinner to bring to Olive Garden as a starter course. It seemed reasonable.

When it was my turn, I went to Daddy's bedroom. He was sitting on the edge of the big bed and held his hand out when he saw me appear in the doorway.

"Come here, princess."

I went. I settled into his lap with my back against his chest, and he wrapped his arms around me and held me for a little while just like that, without saying anything. I felt small and safe and warm and let my head rest on his shoulder.

"You were a very good boy today, Mikey," he murmured near my ear.

"I know," I said, satisfied.

He laughed quietly.

"That's right. Be proud of yourself." He ran his hand through my hair. "How are you feeling, sweetheart? Has it been a good week?"

"Good," I said. "The bank was a bit boring but nothing too bad." I paused. "Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think they'll have breadsticks at Olive Garden?"

He went quiet for a second and then laughed —making his chest move and shook me a little along with it.

"Yes, my love. They'll have breadsticks."

"Great," I said, very relieved. "Because I was worried."

"You were worried about the breadsticks, sweetheart?"

"It's a valid concern."

He hugged me tighter, still laughing.

"It's a very valid concern," he said. "I promise you: breadsticks."

I turned a little so I could look at his face properly. His beard was longer than last week and I liked it. It suited him. I ran my hand through it without asking permission because he was Daddy and I could.

He kissed the top of my head.

"Go get ready for dinner, my love. Put on that little blue dress you like."

I lit up immediately.

"The one with the bow in the back?"

"That one."

I jumped off his lap and ran to my room. The little blue dress with the bow in the back was one of my favorites — I'd asked Daddy to buy it months ago and he'd gotten it that same week because he was the best Daddy in the world. I put it on carefully, tied the bow behind me as best I could, and went to the mirror.

It looked beautiful. I looked beautiful. And he didn't mind if I wore a dress in public. He always said he'd defend me if anyone said anything. My Daddy was the best in the entire world.

I went back to the living room where JJ and Sawyer were already waiting. JJ had put on black trousers and an embroidered floral shirt he loved and had done his eyeliner, which made him look really pretty. Sawyer was in dark jeans and a fitted gray henley.

"You're wearing a dress?" JJ asked when he saw me.

"I am," I said, a little defiant.

"It looks beautiful," he said, just like that, and went back to fixing his hair in the window reflection.

I was very pleased.

Daddy came down last, already changed out of his pajamas into dark trousers and his favorite linen shirt, the beige one, with the top buttons open. Handsome as always. He looked at the three of us and got that expression on his face — the one he got when he was very satisfied with the family he had.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready," all three of us said together.

And we went.

Olive Garden was warm and fragrant and full of people, and I loved it from the moment I walked in. They took us to a big corner table, very cozy, and when the server set down the first basket of breadsticks, I looked at Daddy as if to say, *I told you so*.

He was smiling.

"I want the Fettuccine Alfredo," I announced, opening my menu with great seriousness.

"You haven't even finished looking at the menu," Sawyer said.

"I don't need to. I already decided."

"You always get that," JJ said, making a face. "You have to try the other options!"

"No, I get it because it's always the best."

"That's a logical fallacy," Sawyer said.

"I don't know what that is but that's fine."

JJ was studying his menu with unusual concentration.

"I think I'm going to get the Five-Cheese Ziti," he said.

"You've had that before," I said.

"I know. Because it's good."

"Then why did you tell me I have to try other options?"

JJ looked at me. I looked at JJ.

"That's different," he said.

"How?"

"It just is."

"That's a logical fallacy," I said, very pleased that I knew how to use the phrase now.

Sawyer laughed so suddenly he had to cover his mouth. JJ narrowed his eyes at me. "You don't even know what that means."

"I know it means you're wrong."

Daddy laughed.

Daddy placed our orders before giving the server his own, and when the server left he rested his arms on the table and looked at the three of us.

"I'm very happy with you all today," he said, simply.

Those words always warmed me. Always, every time, without exception. I knew JJ felt the same way — I could see it in the way he went a little quieter when Daddy said it.

"We were good," JJ said.

"You were," Daddy confirmed.

The breadsticks arrived. I took the first one before anyone else because it was only fair — I had been worried about them all afternoon — and it

was exactly as good as I knew it would be.

Dinner was the kind you didn't want to end. The food was good, the conversation was easy, Sawyer told a funny story about a student who had tried to form a human wall in the school corridor to block PE class, JJ laughed so hard he cried a little, and Daddy sat listening to all of it with that quiet smile.

For dessert I ordered the tiramisu and ate it with great seriousness and dedication, because it was a very serious and adult food – it had coffee in it! JJ stole two forkfuls and I pretended to be angry about it but wasn't.

On the way home I dozed off in the back seat, leaning against JJ's shoulder, and he didn't complain even a little. When we got home and Daddy carried me inside half-asleep, I heard him say, very softly:

"Good boy. My sweet boy."

And I smiled before falling all the way asleep.

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CHAPTER 15. SULLIVAN

The house was quiet.

Not the good quiet. This was the hollow quiet of absence. Sawyer was at the regional teacher conference out of town. Mikey was covering an extra shift at the bank because someone had called in sick. That left the house to me, to the fire crackling low in the living room grate, and to JJ. And JJ wasn't making any noise at all, which was the part that didn't make sense.

I'd been moving through the downstairs for twenty minutes, straightening things that didn't need straightening, refilling my coffee mug twice. Bola was asleep on the arm of the sofa with his paws tucked under his chest, the picture of feline indifference. I checked my email. I checked the fire. I stood in the kitchen and drank coffee and listened to the house breathe.

No thumping down the stairs. No voice calling questions from another room. No sudden burst of music.

I climbed the stairs slowly, one hand on the banister, coffee mug warm against my palm. The hallway upstairs was quiet too. Mikey's door was closed. Sawyer's was ajar, the room neat the way he always left it, bed made with military corners. I passed both and stopped at JJ's door, which was open about halfway.

He was sitting cross-legged on his bed with the velvet throw bunched around his hips, a math textbook open in his lap that he clearly hadn't looked at in some time. His blond hair was unbrushed, falling across his forehead in a way that made him look younger than twenty-eight. The cereal bowl on his nightstand had been abandoned. The milk had gone cloudy and the cereal had sunk to the bottom in a pale, sodden mass. He hadn't even bothered to put it in the kitchen. He was just sitting there. Not reading. Not scheming. Not performing.

His shoulders were pulled in. Not the theatrical slouch he put on when he wanted me to notice he was sulking. His fingers were working at a loose thread on the edge of the throw, twisting it around his index finger until the skin went white, then releasing it, then twisting it again. I stood in the doorway and watched him for a moment. He hadn't noticed me yet. The afternoon light came through his window and caught the dust motes in the air, turning them gold.

I stepped into the room. Set my coffee mug on his desk, beside the stack of graded papers he'd brought home from school. Sat on the edge of his bed. He didn't look up. The thread twisted around his finger again.

I waited.

"Mikey left his doll on the couch," he said finally. His voice was aiming for casual and missing by a mile. "Teresa. Just sitting there by herself. Kind of creepy, honestly. Like that horror movie where the doll..."

He stopped. The joke died before it reached the punchline. His mouth closed. He went back to the thread.

I didn't let it go.

"What's going on, JJ?"

He looked at the textbook in his lap, Algebra II, the unit on polynomials, a chapter he could teach in his sleep, and his thumb pressed down on the corner of the page.

"Nothing's going on," he said. "Just having a quiet day. Is that illegal now? Do I need to file paperwork?"

"Try again."

He was quiet for so long I thought he might actually refuse. His thumb kept pressing that corner.

Then he said, to the textbook, "I'm not like Mikey."

I waited.

"Mikey always knows what you need before you even say it. He's—" His fingers stilled on the throw. "He does everything right and he does it quietly and he never makes anything harder than it has to be." He paused. "And Sawyer's never late. Never out of line twice. Never has to be reminded." Another pause, shorter. "And then there's me. I'm always too loud. I'm always too fast, too much, always starting something that makes

more work for everyone else, and I know you think it's funny sometimes, I know you're not—" He stopped. Swallowed. Picked up the thread on the throw again and pulled it. "I'm afraid you're going to get tired of me."

He said it to the blanket. He didn't look at me.

I was still for a moment. Not because I didn't know what to say, but because I wanted to say it right — because JJ, who could take a cane set and come back smiling, who could be corrected and turn the correction into a game and make the whole room laugh, was sitting in front of me with his heart in his hands and a voice like he'd been carrying this weight for a while and hadn't known where to put it down. He was comparing the best parts of his brothers to everything he disliked about himself and believing that was somehow fair.

I said, "You noticed that Max was overwhelmed before anyone else in the room did. Three weeks ago, at the open house. You took him somewhere quieter before he had to ask."

He didn't say anything.

"You stayed up until two in the morning the Tuesday before Mikey's quarterly review helping him prep. You didn't tell me. He didn't tell me. I know because I got up for water and I heard the two of you in the kitchen, going over his talking points, and when I looked in you had a whiteboard out and Mikey was in his pajamas taking notes on a Post-it." I paused. "He got exceptional marks on that review."

JJ's hands had gone still.

"You have never, not once in the years I've known you, let one of your brothers go to bed thinking something was wrong between you and them, even when they'd driven you out of your mind all day, even when they tattled something to me and got you in trouble. Even when they deserved it. You don't let people feel forgotten." I turned toward him fully. "You think I don't notice that. I notice everything you do. I always have."

He pressed his lips together. His eyes had gone bright, the brightness that in JJ preceded the point of no return by about thirty seconds.

"You are not your brothers," I said. "You are yourself. You're exactly who I want."

He didn't say anything. He looked down at the throw, at the loose thread he'd been pulling, and took one breath. The textbook slid off his lap onto

the bed. He didn't move to catch it.

I reached for him.

He came without resistance — no quip, no redirect, no slight theatrical resistance that would let him pretend. He just came, and I drew him into my side and felt his forehead drop against my chest like something in him had finally given up the effort of holding itself separate. My arm went around him. My hand moved up and down the line of his spine, and I felt him exhale all the way down to his ribs.

We didn't speak. I don't know how long we sat like that.

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Then I put two fingers under his chin and tipped his face up to mine.

He looked at me — those blue eyes, clear — and I kissed him. Just slowly, my mouth moving over his. He kissed me back the same way.

I laid him back.

He let me. JJ, who was normally all forward momentum, always racing toward the next thing before the current thing had finished, lay still under my hands. I pulled his tee over his head. He lifted his arms to help me, and I looked at him, the blond hair fanned out, his chest rising and falling, and he didn't look away and he didn't make a joke, which from JJ meant everything. I put my hand flat at the center of his chest and felt his heartbeat.

“Hi,” he said, very soft.

“Hi,” I said.

I took my time with the sweatpants. My hands moved over his hips, his thighs, slowly, and he watched my face the whole time. He didn't rush me. He lay there and let me look at him and touch him and I felt him shiver once when my thumb pressed the inside of his hip.

My hand found his jaw. Then his wrist. Then the notch of his hip, the flat of his stomach, the inside of his thigh. He made a low, unguarded sound when my hand closed around him, and his back arched off the bed. I brushed my thumb along his jaw and held his eyes.

“You want me, baby?” He nodded first, then seemed to remember I needed more than that. “Yes, Daddy. I want you.”

“Easy,” I said.

He breathed. His eyes closed.

I undressed and came over him, and I remembered the fact of how small he was against me, his slim frame under my hands, the contrast of his pale skin against my darker skin, the way he looked when I settled my weight over him and his expression went to pure want. He wasn't performing it.

I took my time preparing him, slow and careful, never taking my eyes off his face for long. By the time I pushed inside him, he was ready for me. He gripped my forearms with both hands, fingers wrapping around the muscle.

I kept my pace slow, long strokes, taking my time about it, and I felt the grip on my forearms tighten and ease in rhythm.

“Daddy,” he said.

He turned his face into my neck. His breath went unsteady against my skin. His whole body moved with mine in that slow rhythm, his legs wrapped around my hips, and I felt him trembling slightly through the whole of it. So hot. Slow, romantic. Just us and the whole time in the world.

I kept my hand at his jaw. I kept him close.

When he came, it was quiet. A soft exhale, his fingers digging hard into my forearms for one moment, his whole frame tensing under me. Then he went loose. I followed soon after and stayed close when I did.

Afterward I didn't move away. I shifted my weight but kept him against me, one arm around him, and JJ lay with his cheek on my chest and his fingers loosely circled around my wrist. My thumb moved in a slow circle against his shoulder. His eyes were closed. His breathing had settled back into that deep, even rhythm, his chest rising and falling against my side, and the blond hair was still unbrushed and I didn't touch it, just let it be.

“You're my good boy,” I said. “You've always been my good boy. You're going to keep being my good boy. And I'm not going anywhere, JJ.

Not today, not tomorrow, not ever.” I felt him breathe against my chest. “You hear me? I love you. I love your brattiness. I love how funny you are, how kind and loving you are. I love your pranks and how silly you are. I love everything about you.”

He nodded against my skin.

“You have nothing to be afraid of. Nothing. I chose you. I keep choosing you. Every single day.” My thumb kept its slow circle on his shoulder. “And I’m going to keep choosing you, even when you’re being a brat, even when you’re being loud, even when you’re making everything harder than it has to be. Because that’s who you are, and that’s who I want.”

He made a sound: a laugh and a sob. “Okay,” he whispered.

“Okay,” I said.

We lay there. The light had shifted further, gone gold and long across the floor, and somewhere downstairs Bola’s bell jingled once as he jumped off the sofa and padded toward the kitchen, probably to check whether the cereal bowl had migrated downstairs on its own.

“You know,” he said, and his voice was still quiet but there was something in it now. “If you’re really not going anywhere, we should probably talk about what happens when I’m ninety and you’re a hundred and four and we’re both in diapers.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it.

“I’ll still be changing yours,” I said. “At a hundred and four. That’s the deal. You’ll always be my baby. Your little age will always be five.”

“Deal.” A pause. “Also, if I’m ninety and you’re a hundred and four, I’m going to be the one driving. Because your eyesight’s going to be terrible by then and I’m going to be, like, peak elderly hotness.”

“You’re already peak hotness.”

“Peak elderly hotness is different. It’s a whole category. I’ll have been preparing my whole life.”

I kissed the top of his head.

“You’re ridiculous,” I said.

“I know. But you love it.”

“I love it,” I confirmed. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Daddy.”

He settled back against my chest. We laced our fingers together, and he held on like that, our joined hands resting on my stomach, and for a while neither of us said anything.

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CHAPTER 16. JJ

Daddy had just hung up the phone. I'd been watching him the whole time he talked, wanting to bounce in place. I held it together — it was hard. He finished the call.

"Yes, let's do that. Yes, deal. See you then."

And he looked at me, smiling.

"Did it work?" I asked, my whole body buzzing. He nodded, laughing, probably finding it funny how I was acting.

"They said they can meet us there in an hour. Go get ready." I jumped in place, throwing a little fist pump into the air.

I'd asked Daddy to call Esteban, the Dom from the open house, and ask if he could bring Max and Rex to meet up with me. I really wanted to be friends with Max, but he hadn't come back to The Hearth since. I figured that if we met up, maybe I could convince him to come back.

It was Saturday, but my brothers were both out — Sawyer was away at the regional teacher conference, which was unusual for us because we rarely traveled anywhere without Daddy. I honestly couldn't imagine having to go somewhere on a trip without him — talking to strangers, keeping track of schedules, all of it sounded like a nightmare, and I knew that even though Sawyer was tough, he probably felt a little lost when he had to do that kind of thing too. Mikey had to cover a shift for a coworker, which I knew he hated — he was always getting stuck doing unfair favors, and I hated his job because of it. It always left my brother exhausted and unable to have any fun.

But the upside was that now I got this little bit of time alone with Daddy. We were going out with my new friends. This was amazing.

I went to my room and put on a black Ramones shirt — a punk band I liked — and light-wash jeans that made my butt look really good and were ripped at the knee, which I thought was pretty stylish. I put on my red Chuck Taylors. I checked myself out in the mirror, brushing back the fringe that always fell annoyingly into my eyes. I looked hot, exactly the way I wanted to look going out with Daddy and friends. I also put on my collar, black leather with a ring at the front. We didn't wear permanent collars because of our jobs, but I liked wearing mine when I could, even though it wasn't required. I liked showing that I belonged to Daddy.

When I found him in the living room, he was already ready too. He'd put on a black button-down and trimmed his beard a little to keep it neat. He looked delicious as always, and if we kept standing there looking at each other like that, we were going to miss meeting our friends entirely and end up right back in the bedroom, repeating what we'd already done earlier. That thought amused me and I laughed.

He came over and kissed me.

"You look gorgeous, baby," he said.

He always treated me like that, like I was something precious, and it sometimes brought tears to my eyes, because no matter how badly behaved I'd been, I knew he'd punish me but then hold me in his arms right after. And after the conversation we'd had earlier, I was feeling more loved than ever.

"Ready, sweetheart?" he asked.

I nodded, excited.

"I can't wait to see Max again. And Rex too — even though we didn't talk much, I bet we will this time. He seems really nice."

Daddy laughed. He always laughed at how much I talked.

"I'm sure, baby," he said. If I'd had a tail, it would have been wagging. I wasn't a hundred percent pup, but I got it in moments like that.

He held out his hand and I took it, and we headed to the car — a Jeep Wrangler he'd bought not too long ago. I felt so lucky to have him in my life, because he took care of us in every way — made my little kinky dreams come true, took care of us financially too if we wanted him to.

The café Daddy had picked was pretty upscale, and we'd been there a few times before. The vibe was casual but really lovely, with amber lighting

that gave everything a warm, golden glow, decorated couches and armchairs, and wooden furniture that looked expensive.

We got there and sat at a table for six. A pretty waitress came over to take our order. She gave my collar a good, long look, like she was saying *I know exactly what that means*. But I wasn't embarrassed — quite the opposite, I was proud. So I gave her a little smile. She didn't seem to have any judgment in her eyes — maybe she was even part of the community — but she didn't say anything. She had brown hair and brown eyes. Her face was beautiful and reminded me of a fox.

"What can I get for you gentlemen?" she asked.

"Can I order something already?" I asked Daddy.

In public, we avoided using our honorifics, just because people who hadn't consented to witness our dynamic didn't need to be pulled into it if they didn't like it or if it made them uncomfortable. And consent was everything.

"Order a drink. We'll wait for our friends before ordering anything else," he said.

I smiled, excited. That was already good enough for me.

"I'll have a green apple Italian soda, please," I told the waitress.

She nodded.

"And for you, sir?" she asked.

She seemed to have chosen to call him "sir" for a reason — that girl wasn't fooling me.

"I'll wait, thank you," Daddy said.

I was starving even though I'd eaten not that long ago — I think my metabolism still thought I was seventeen. It had never really changed since I was a teenager.

We didn't have to wait long. Esteban showed up right after, followed by Rex and Max — it looked like the three of them had come together. Rex wasn't in his pup gear, and it was the first time I'd ever seen him like that. He had black hair and blue eyes and was handsome, wearing a simple black collar even without the rest of his gear. I was so happy to see them and had to work hard not to look too happy about it.

"You came!" I exclaimed, trying to hold myself together.

"Of course we did," Rex said.

"Rick was dying to see you again," Esteban said.

"Rick?" I asked, tilting my head to the side, probably looking like a puppy. I noticed I'd been doing that a lot lately — was I developing a taste for pup play?

"That's my name when I'm not in my gear. But you can call me either one," he said.

I hated making decisions, so I looked at Daddy, unsure.

"Let's call him Rick outside of scene spaces. That work for you, baby?" Daddy asked. I nodded.

Max looked gorgeous as always — like a little doll, because his features were so delicate, and his blond hair made him extremely attractive. He looked just as good tonight as he had at the club. He was wearing a navy button-down and white linen pants, totally different from what he'd worn before, but he still turned heads.

They sat down at our table and I handed my menu over to Max, and Daddy handed his to Esteban, who passed it on to Rick. The waitress showed up soon after with my Italian soda and set it in front of me. I suddenly felt a little embarrassed for not waiting for everyone before ordering.

"Sorry," I said, but everyone shook their heads, saying it was fine. Max ordered a latte. Esteban ordered just black coffee. Daddy ordered a double espresso. Rick ordered a blended coffee drink. We'd move on to food after.

"So, JJ," Daddy said, "you mentioned wanting to see Max again."

"Yeah," I said. "Why haven't you guys come back to The Hearth? We've been waiting."

It was true — Henry and I really wanted to introduce Max to Lucy, since her Mommy hadn't let her play with us that first time.

"Sorry," Max said. "I ended up getting really nervous about it."

"You didn't have fun?" I asked, trying for a neutral tone that fooled absolutely nobody.

"I had a great time," Max said, and he sounded sincere. Actually, he seemed like the kind of person who could never lie — everything just showed up on his face. "It's just hard for me to go to new places."

"That's on us too," Esteban said. "Rick and I had to travel for a music festival, and we just didn't find the time. Max didn't want to go alone, which is understandable."

"But I was there!" I said.

"JJ, let's respect how he felt," Daddy said, and I realized maybe I was being a little insensitive.

"Sorry, Max," I said, nodding. "Come whenever you want, no rush. It's just that we really liked you and wanted you there. You guys too!" I added quickly to Rick and Esteban, because I didn't want them to feel left out.

They laughed when I said that. Sometimes I made people laugh without even meaning to — a lot of people told me I was really funny, but most of the time I wasn't even trying to make a joke, I was just saying things my own way. Well, at least it made people laugh — I guess that was better than making people cry.

"So why don't we lock it in for next Saturday?" Daddy asked the two of them. "What do you think?"

"I'd love that," Rick said. "We had a really good time and want to come back," he added, looking at me.

I was so happy to hear that. Max nodded too, and he was smiling — it looked genuine.

"It'll definitely be great," he said.

I felt all warm inside. Not just because I'd get my friend back, but because it was good to see that he'd felt welcomed. I'd been worried, thinking maybe he hadn't liked it at all, wondering if it had been something about how I'd acted — sometimes I annoyed people without even realizing it. A lot of people at The Hearth thought I was extremely annoying and avoided me, and that broke my heart. But Daddy always told me to ignore them, that I had way more people who loved me than people who didn't like me. It was just hard sometimes, especially when the mean thoughts in my head started screaming things like *you're not enough*, *people just tolerate you*, *you're going to end up alone*. Luckily, I always had Daddy to remind me those thoughts weren't true. Sometimes I let them get too loud, and he'd even correct me to remind me that he never lied to me, that I was being a bad boy for believing the mean thoughts instead of him.

But I realized I was losing myself in my thoughts. I snapped back to reality because, to my surprise, they were talking about Dominic.

"You guys know who was asking about Max?" Esteban said, with a conspiratorial look, and Max went redder than a bell pepper and hid his face behind his hands.

"Don't say it," Max complained.

"Safeword?" Esteban asked. In the community, if we'd already negotiated that playful protesting was part of the interaction, a safeword gave us a completely unambiguous way to say *stop for real*. It kept things clear, which was exactly what safewords were for.

Max shook his head, still embarrassed. So he didn't actually want Esteban to stop teasing him.

Esteban smiled like he'd just won a competition.

"Dominic asked for my number, and we talked a lot. Mostly about this one right here," he continued.

"I can't believe someone that good-looking would be interested in me," Max said.

"Well, believe it," Daddy said. "And this habit of putting yourself down for no reason tends to get naughty little boys in trouble. So you'd better be careful with that. Isn't that right, JJ?"

I nodded.

"I wouldn't risk it if I were you," I added.

Max laughed, and I tensed up a little, because since he was new to the scene, it was hard to know how far we could go with him about that kind of talk. It was hard with anyone, honestly, but even harder with newcomers, because we didn't yet know how confident they were about speaking up when something stopped feeling good or using their safeword when they needed it. It was always our responsibility as people with more experience, sub or not, to check that newcomers were genuinely comfortable. A lot of the time newcomers thought they had no limits and got themselves into all kinds of dangerous situations — I was one of those myself once. It took me a long time to learn that pretending everything's fine when it's not is the worst thing you can do, because it breaks your partner's trust in you and hurts both of you. I hoped Max would figure that out too.

"Dominic is a great Dom, very responsible. I can vouch for that. He'd never cross your limits or do anything horrible like ignore your safeword — which, unfortunately, we know can happen when someone ends up with the wrong person," Daddy said.

Max nodded, and he couldn't stop smiling. He was so cute.

"It feels like I'm dreaming, that someone like him is interested in me," he said again, and again went the color of a tomato. "I know you guys said I'm not supposed to say that. But what if I really mean it?"

"You can say it. You can do whatever you want," I said, and before Daddy could say anything — "you'll just have to deal with the consequences."

They laughed.

"And what would the consequences be for putting myself down?" Max asked. He seemed to be loosening up more, which was great — none of us wanted him to stop. "A spanking?" he asked.

I laughed and shook my head.

"You'll learn soon enough that, at least around us, spankings tend to be more fun than actual punishment. If you're actually really bad, you probably won't get something fun — you'll get something really boring, like saying positive affirmations about yourself out loud several times a day, or writing the same sentence over and over until it sinks in."

Max looked shocked at that. Esteban, on the other hand, laughed out loud.

"He trained you well," he said to Daddy, who shook his head.

"He only knows the theory. In practice, he keeps doing it over and over."

We all laughed.

Our drinks arrived shortly after. The waitress set them around the table and asked if we wanted to order any food. I got the ham and cheese croissant. Daddy ordered a grilled cheese sandwich. Esteban and Rick decided to split a sandwich.

"Be right back," she said, and again I noticed her staring at my collar again. I decided to say something to Daddy.

"Do you think she's part of the community? She keeps staring at my collar," I asked.

Esteban laughed.

"Who knows. Maybe she just thinks it's cool. I noticed she was staring at Rick's too," he said. She had, in fact, been staring at his as well.

"Can I ask her?" I asked Daddy. He seemed to think it over for a second.

"What do you think?" he asked Esteban.

"If your boy doesn't mind, I don't see any harm in it. Worst case she asks what it is, and we just say it's a fashion thing," Esteban said. We laughed.

When she came back carrying more things, she kept staring again. She set my croissant down in front of me, and I waved her closer. She looked confused.

"I want to whisper something in your ear," I said.

She seemed comfortable with the idea — probably because it was pretty clear I wasn't trying to flirt with her and I was sitting there with Daddy beside me. I leaned in and asked:

"Are you looking at my collar because you want to say something to me?"

She pulled back, looking shocked at the question, but let out a loud laugh, glanced around the table, and said:

"Could we maybe swap numbers, and I'll ask you over text?"

I nodded, and asked, cheeky, right in front of everyone:

"Can I, *Daddy*?"

Daddy also seemed to find it very funny that I'd done that. The girl looked even more shocked, like that had been the confirmation of her entire night.

"Sure," Daddy said. I handed her my phone, she typed in her number, and I saw her name was Bella.

"Text me, I've got some questions to ask you," she said, and walked off, but then seemed to remember something and came back. "Can I get anyone anything else?" she added quickly.

We all shook our heads.

"Bella, we're good for now," Daddy said, as always, speaking for the whole group.

My croissant was delicious. I texted Bella a "hi" and she didn't reply because she was working, but I filed that away for later.

We kept talking about other things too — complained about our jobs, obviously, and I told everyone about Mikey having to work overtime even though he was a manager at his branch, because his coworkers always dumped extra work on him, and he was so tired of it. "It's so unfair," I said, upset. I hated that my brother suffered without it being his choice. "I really want him to find another job or just quit for good and stay home. It's so exhausting for him, right, Daddy?" I asked.

Daddy nodded, thoughtful too.

"He has to keep up a mask for hours a day, and people always take advantage of him. I try to talk to him about changing it, but it's hard."

I found out Rick worked as a salesperson at a store and Max worked online. He only said that much, and I looked at Daddy, wondering if I was understanding him right.

"You mean you have OnlyFans?" I asked, and the whole table kind of stared at me.

I was always blurting out things I probably shouldn't — my autism probably had something to do with how little time there sometimes was between a thought appearing in my brain and it coming out of my mouth. Max went even redder but nodded.

"Dude, that's so cool," I said. "If I wasn't a teacher, I'd totally want to start a page. I mean, if Daddy let me," I added, glancing at him.

Daddy laughed and kissed me on the mouth.

"I'm a bit of an exhibitionist. The more people watching my delicious boy, the better," he said. "And it's even better knowing they can look, but I'm the only one who gets to own him."

"I could never be like that," Esteban said. "I go insane with jealousy if anyone even tries to get close to Rick."

"I love that you do that," Rick said.

They kissed.

"You guys think it'll be a problem with Dominic if I have an OnlyFans?" Max asked.

"Kiddo, that's your first lesson in kink: don't let anyone change you into someone you don't want to be," Daddy said. He really was so wise. "If Dominic doesn't like it, that just means the two of you aren't compatible, and that's normal. It happens. It doesn't mean you have to stop. It means you need someone who accepts who you are and what you choose to do."

Max's eyes filled with tears. "I'm not really used to having relationships where people accept me, and I end up with some really bad guys because of it."

"Don't worry, we'll look out for you," I said, proud. "Right, Daddy?"

He nodded.

"And the more you come to The Hearth, the more you'll get used to what a healthy community can look like," Daddy explained. "We take safety seriously there, and people who repeatedly violate boundaries or put others at risk don't get to stay."

And that was true, and it was exactly why The Hearth was the only place I felt completely comfortable staying at. Every other club I'd ever visited had been kind of a horror show.

Max smiled. "Thanks, everyone. I don't even know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything, little guy," Daddy said. "And by the way, if you don't want me calling you that, tell me — that's your right too. Another thing to remember: always talk. Communicate as much as you can about everything. That's the most important thing."

He nodded. "I'm going to try really hard to be a good, responsible member of The Hearth, like you guys."

"You're so cute," I told him. If he were one of my brothers, I'd definitely be squeezing his cheeks right now, probably getting smacked for it if it were Sawyer, and getting cute little giggles if it were Mikey.

When we finished, Daddy paid for our part of the bill, and we said our goodbyes.

"So I'll see you guys next Saturday," Max said, and I got stupidly excited. We exchanged phone numbers so we wouldn't lose touch again.

And now I was sure I'd made a new friend.

CHAPTER 17. JJ

Saturday came, and I was really excited, as always — and this time I wasn't even trying that hard not to show it. We'd just finished getting ready to go. Mikey was wearing his baby onesie because it was pajama night for the littles. I was wearing blue pajama shorts and a plain white T-shirt. Sawyer was in regular clothes because, according to him, he wasn't a baby and wasn't participating in pajama night.

"I'm just going to be playing video games with my friends," he said.

Daddy gave him a look, like he was saying Sawyer hadn't actually been given permission to decide that for himself, but he didn't say anything. We always obeyed anyway, and if Daddy told him no, he'd respect it. He was way more obedient than me — just not more than Mikey.

Daddy was, as always, in a button-down and jeans. He looked really handsome.

"All right, if everyone's ready, let's go," he said.

And we headed to the car.

"You think Max is actually going to show?" I asked him. "What if he forgot? I mean, I texted him and he said he's coming, but I'm scared he's going to bail at the last minute."

"He'll be there, sweetheart, I'm sure," Daddy said, with that endless patience of his.

We got to The Hearth early. It was only eight at night, but we never stayed until closing at four in the morning — all of us got way too sleepy, even me, though I'd never admit that. So we needed to get there early to make the most of it. The place was already fuller than it used to be, though

not as packed as it had been during the open house. We'd gained a bunch of new members since then.

When I walked in, I got a little nervous because I didn't spot Max right away. I didn't know why it mattered so much to me that he'd shown up, but I thought it might be a pride thing — I'd been his host the first time, and if he hadn't had a good time, part of me would always wonder if that had been my fault. The Hearth mattered so much to me and my family, so I always wanted everyone to like it and feel good there.

Around the room I saw the usual crowd. Gustav was rushing around as always. Henry was, unbelievably, flirting with some new guy. Jeffrey was there, along with Elizabeth and Lucy, Sawyer's friends, and two other girls I was friends with too, Fiona and Cibebe. I also spotted Carlos and Breno, two guys I knew and didn't really like because they were always talking trash about me, but I never went near them. Daddy had directly ordered me not to cause any drama with them — and honestly, if they messed with me, I'd probably get really upset and have trouble following that order.

Dominic wasn't there yet, and I looked at Daddy. Just from looking at me, he already knew.

"They'll be here, baby," he said.

I pouted. He gave a little laugh and kissed the top of my head. "Why don't you go play some video games with Sawyer for a bit?"

"Ugh, no, I don't want to babysit my brother," Sawyer complained.

But Daddy raised an eyebrow at him. "So you're not playing, then."

"Sorry, Daddy," he said, resigned, realizing that hadn't been great behavior at all.

"Good. Now go do what I told you."

I went with Sawyer to where his friends already were, in front of the video game setup in the corner of the club. That corner always felt more like somebody's living room than part of a club. His friend Larissa was already there, controller in hand, going up against John.

"Hey, JJ," she said. I smiled at her. We didn't talk much, but she'd never been mean to me.

"Right off the bat Daddy said I have to babysit him," Sawyer said, grumbling.

"He didn't say that," I said, pouting.

Sawyer broke into a grin. "I'm just messing with you. It's fine, you can hang with us."

I sat down in the recliner next to the couch. I'd taken a few naps in it before when it got late and my energy started dipping.

"The coffee shop girl texted me back," I said, checking my phone, which I'd originally pulled out to see if Max had said anything else.

"Coffee shop girl?" Sawyer asked, glancing at the screen while picking his character. They were playing some first-person shooter. I didn't find those very fun, but Sawyer loved video games in general and seemed perfectly happy.

I told him about Bella.

"We've been texting back and forth. She kept staring at my collar because she's actually a professional Domme," I told him.

"Whoa," Larissa said.

"Did you invite her to come here?" John asked. "I bet she'd like it here."

Sawyer, on the other hand, made a face. "You did that without asking Daddy?" he asked.

My stomach dropped. He was using that older-brother voice that meant I'd gotten myself into trouble without realizing it.

"What's the problem?" I said. "She's just a friend."

"That's not the point, dummy," he said, and this time he even paused the game. He was looking straight at me. "What if she wants to come here just to scout clients? You know that's not allowed."

It was true — nobody was allowed to use The Hearth to promote their work or solicit clients. And that was exactly how it should be. We went there to make real friends and real connections, not to be advertised to.

"You didn't think of that, did you?" he kept going, and I got defensive, and without even realizing it I was pouting.

"She's not like that," I said.

"You don't even really know her. You've been talking to her for a week."

"Stop being annoying," I said, realizing I sounded like a baby but unable to help it. At The Hearth I felt completely free to just be myself, and sometimes I couldn't even pull myself out of little space when I needed to.

"I'm being serious. Go tell Daddy right now," Sawyer said.

I got up, sulking, and didn't say anything else. He was being an idiot. I got away from him before he could ruin my whole night. I wasn't going to say anything to Daddy for now — I'd ask Mikey what he thought. But Mikey also went really little whenever we came here, sometimes even nearly nonverbal, so I knew there was no point trying to ask him at that moment. I'd have to wait until he shifted back into his adult headspace, probably before heading to work or something like that. Bella had said she wasn't going to be able to make it that night anyway, so I decided to think it over later and figure out whether inviting her had actually been a good idea.

And on top of everything, right at that moment I forgot about all my problems because I saw Max, Esteban, and Rex — this time fully in his pup gear, crawling properly on all fours beside Esteban — walking in. I wondered how Rex managed that. My knees would hate it. We were too old to crawl around like that.

I bounced my way over to them. "You actually came!" I said.

Max laughed, already way more relaxed around me. "I told you I was coming," he said.

"It's just, people say things all the time that they don't mean, and then I end up believing them and getting hurt over it."

Max's expression softened a little, but he didn't call me out on how dramatic that sounded.

Max looked stunning, and it seemed like he'd made an extra effort to look even better than usual. He had on fishnets and tiny leather shorts, silver this time, and no shirt at all. It was funny, someone that shy having zero problem showing off his body — he was wearing only a neon pink harness across his chest. His body was more toned and defined than I'd expected. He was a snack, and I couldn't lie: if Daddy ever let it happen and Max wanted to, we could totally do a scene together sometime. I wouldn't say no.

Esteban was also decked out head to toe in leather, including a leather hat of his own.

"Why are you dressed like that, buddy?" Esteban had the nerve to ask me.

"It's pajama night," I said, worried Max would feel embarrassed for not being in pajamas on pajama night.

Max looked around the club and noticed that most of the members — at least most of the littles — were, in fact, wearing some variation of pajamas. I could see on his face that he wanted to panic, so I said quickly:

"It's totally fine. You can wear whatever you want, no problem."

He took a deep breath, like he was deciding to listen to me. "Okay. I'm not going to freak out," he said, sounding more confident.

"That's my boy," Esteban said, patting his back. "And besides, Rex isn't in pajamas either."

"Well, of course not, sir," I said to Esteban, using the honorific we usually used there unless someone asked us not to or a sub just didn't feel like it. "He's a dog. Dogs don't wear pajamas."

They both laughed loudly, which was exactly what I was going for.

I could see Max scanning the room too, and once again I felt that instinct to protect him — I didn't want him realizing Dominic wasn't there yet and immediately worrying about it. So I said quickly: "Let's go see where Daddy's sitting."

They nodded and didn't say anything about Dominic.

We went over to Daddy's table. He wasn't at his usual one, but at a smaller table where part of his regular crowd was sitting — Jeffrey, Elizabeth, and this time another Dom who just went by Lion. I wasn't sure of his real name. Some people preferred to keep their identities more private, not letting their real lives bleed too much into what they did on Saturday nights. Lion had long hair and always wore sunglasses — maybe still trying to preserve his anonymity, though I had no idea how he could stand wearing them inside a closed club.

Daddy stood up to greet them when he spotted us.

"Let's push the tables together," he said, and pulled the table beside them over with ease, even though it was heavy oak, joining it with theirs so everyone could sit together.

That was when Max finally worked up the nerve to ask about Dominic.

"Is he going to..." Max started quietly, his eyes sweeping the room again, too subtly for it to actually be subtle. "I mean, does he usually come on

Saturday nights, or—"

The question died halfway through, like he'd lost his nerve partway through it, and he took too quick a sip of his soda, looking anywhere but at me.

I was about to answer when I felt someone put a hand on my shoulder. At the same time, a second hand landed on Max's shoulder, since he was sitting right beside me.

We both turned at the same time, almost in sync, to see who it was.

It was Dominic in the flesh, smiling — which wasn't like him at all.

"Were you two asking about me?" he said.

I thought Max might actually die. He went red, his mouth fell open like he couldn't close it even if he wanted to, and he started stammering.

But Dominic said:

"It's okay, cutie. I've been told I'm hard to forget," he said, and winked at Max like saying that was completely casual, like it was nothing at all. "You're Max."

"I am," Max managed, his voice coming out threadbare.

"I've heard a lot about you," Dominic said, glancing quickly at me before turning his eyes back to Max. "Everyone seems to think I ought to get to know you."

I smiled, proud, and didn't deny a single word of it.

"You don't mind?" Max asked, and he looked genuinely worried about the possibility.

"Not at all," Dominic said, with that calm of his that always seemed to weigh every word before letting it go. "I thought it was sweet. It's not every day people care enough to root for someone like that."

Max went speechless again, and I could practically see his little heart pounding through his clothes.

"Would you two like to sit with us?" Daddy asked, gesturing to the now-joined tables. "There's plenty of room now."

Dominic looked at Max, waiting. "I'd love that," Max said, still a little breathless.

We all settled in around the big table — me between Esteban and Rex, Max next to Dominic, which seemed to have happened all on its own,

without anyone having to arrange a thing. That left me secretly proud of myself even though I hadn't actually done anything this time. Daddy glanced at me sideways, with that expression that meant he knew exactly what was going through my head, but he didn't say anything.

"So," Dominic said, turning to Max with his full attention, like no one else at the table existed, "Esteban told me you're into photography."

"Yeah, kind of," Max said, still blushing. "I have a page where I post photos. Nothing too serious."

"I wouldn't say that," Esteban cut in. "He's really good. You should see what he does with natural light."

Max blushed again, but this time he seemed to like the compliment.

"I'd love to see it sometime," Dominic said, just like that, no obvious ulterior motive in his voice at all, but in a way that made Max go even redder and smile behind his cup, trying to hide it.

I traded a look with Rex, who was next to me, and I felt that spark light up in my chest again. Things were going well. Actually, maybe a little too well, and a part of me — the part Daddy was always telling me to listen to more — whispered quietly that maybe it'd be better to let things happen slowly, at their own pace, without me needing to push anything.

But that part of me almost never won, and I was already thinking about when the next perfect opportunity would be to give things one more little nudge.

The conversation kept flowing with an ease I hadn't expected. Esteban told an embarrassing story about the first time he'd taken Rex to a formal event and completely forgotten Rex was wearing his collar under his tie, and everyone laughed, including Max, who was gradually losing all that rigidity in his shoulders.

Daddy ordered another round of drinks — soda for me, sparkling water for Max.

"How did you meet Esteban?" Dominic asked Max, curious.

"College," Max said. "He was my roommate freshman year. He's the one who kind of... helped me figure all this out." He made a vague gesture that took in the whole table, The Hearth, Rex's collar, everything. "I didn't even know there was a name for what I felt until he showed me."

"That's really wonderful," Dominic said, and there was a sincerity there that didn't feel forced at all. "Having someone like that around makes all the difference."

"It does," Max agreed, glancing over at Esteban with obvious fondness.

Mikey was going to love hearing all the details later — he always liked analyzing every little piece of a story like he was putting together a puzzle. Sawyer would probably roll his eyes and say I was being nosy again, but I knew deep down he was rooting for Dominic too, even while pretending the whole thing was a bad idea.

"JJ," Daddy called. I looked at him. "You're being very quiet," he said.

"I'm just observing," I said, with the most innocent look I could manage.

"Mm-hm," he said, not buying it for a second but letting it go.

The night kept going like that, Dominic and Max talking more and more easily with each other, Esteban and Rex trading satisfied glances every now and then like they were watching the same movie I was. At some point Gustav rushed by our table, stopped for half a second, glanced at Dominic and Max sitting so close together, raised his eyebrows at me in a gesture of pure conspiratorial understanding, and kept moving before anyone could ask what that meant.

I almost laughed out loud. Even Gustav was noticing.

When it was finally time to head out, Dominic stood up first and, with a gentleness I hadn't expected from him, asked:

"Can I walk you to your car?"

Max blushed again but nodded, and the two of them left together slowly, still talking. Esteban let out a satisfied sigh the second they were out of sight.

"Well," I said, "I think tonight's mission was a success."

"What mission?" Daddy asked, raising an eyebrow at me.

"No mission," I said quickly. "Just a normal night between friends."

Daddy didn't believe a single word of it, but he just shook his head, amused, and asked for the check.

The drive home was peaceful, the car warm and quiet, with just the radio playing something low that I wasn't even paying attention to. Mikey was already snoring. Sawyer was playing something on his phone. I had that

good kind of tired and I sat there watching the streetlights slide past the window, thinking about everything that had happened.

When we got home, Daddy pulled the Jeep into the garage and turned off the engine. Inside, he went to the kitchen to make hot chocolate, and I flopped down on the couch between my brothers, shoving Sawyer with my shoulder just because.

"Stop pushing me," he complained, but without any real irritation, and made more room for me anyway.

Mikey curled up on my other side, holding Teresa, and turned the TV back on, looking for some cartoon we'd already seen a million times but never got tired of.

Daddy came back with four mugs on a tray, handed one to each of us, and sat down between me and Mikey, which made me shift closer to Sawyer to give him room. The fireplace still had warm embers glowing, the cartoon played quietly on the TV, and the hot chocolate warmed my hands. Mikey was already almost asleep again before the episode even ended, and Sawyer pretended to be watching the TV while actually dozing off too. I just sat there, all cozy, thinking about Max and Dominic and how tomorrow was probably going to be a good day too, before finally letting my own eyes close.

CHAPTER 18. MIKEY

I was so tired. More than tired — more than I'd ever been in my entire life. I was working around sixty hours a week, and even though part of me kept insisting I should be able to handle it, I couldn't. I was exhausted in a way that wasn't even funny. I knew if it were JJ, he'd probably crack a joke and keep going. I could only look at the dark circles under my eyes in the mirror, my beard poorly trimmed — something I would never let happen under normal circumstances. My whole body ached. My eyes too. And when the alarm went off in the morning, I had absolutely no desire to move, but I had to go — my team depended on me as their manager, and I couldn't miss work even if I wanted to.

I knew my family was worried about me. JJ kept looking at me with half-closed eyes, like he was assessing whether I was about to keel over at any second. He wasn't even cracking jokes around me. And Daddy kept his brow furrowed whenever he looked at me, like he didn't approve of any of this — which made me even sadder, because I knew he didn't approve, but I didn't want to be doing this either. I just didn't feel like I had a choice, and he knew that.

They'd asked me to take a day off, since I'd been working nonstop for twelve days straight, and I'd finally managed to get things calm enough to carve out a Tuesday off. I knew it wasn't an ideal day, since it meant my brothers would be at work, but at least I'd get to rest. I was really happy about that.

Daddy let me sleep in, but I woke up at eight in the morning anyway. Apparently because my body had decided that was as late as it was capable of sleeping. I woke up with a start, my head aching — probably leftover tension from the other days. And to make it worse, I wasn't feeling little

right away, which put me in a bad mood immediately. That was supposed to be my day with Daddy. I wanted to be with him and get treated like a baby, but it seemed like adult Mikey was winning out. Baby wasn't showing up. I wondered if it was because I hadn't had time for a scene lately — I'd been working even on Sundays to finish reports for the week. Going that long without any contact with my little side made it harder to let it come out. I started feeling upset about it, but I tried not to pressure myself, because I knew the more I tried to force it, the worse it got.

Daddy was waiting for me at the table with breakfast already made.

"Morning, sweetheart," he said.

"Morning, Daddy," I said.

And just from that, he already knew I probably wasn't in my baby headspace — so he kept talking to me normally, without using that special voice he used when I was little, without words like "champ" and "buddy" that he liked using in those moments.

"So, what do you want to do today?" he asked.

I shrugged. Yeah. No baby Mikey today. That bummed me out a little, because I really wanted to just play with my toys, wear a diaper, and have my pacifier.

"I can't believe I'm not able to get into little space," I told him, eating the quiche he'd made.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. You're probably just too stressed from everything lately. It'll come naturally," he said.

And to make it worse, I didn't even feel like crying, which usually happened if he talked to me in that soothing voice. I kept eating my breakfast, upset, but I realized that if I stayed in that grumpy mood, I was never going to relax enough to drop into little space at all — which was a safe place for me, somewhere I felt happy and far away from all my adult responsibilities. The more I pressured myself, the farther away it felt.

He seemed to notice, because he always noticed everything.

"How about we go out today? What do you think?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Sounds like a good idea. Where do you want to go?" I asked.

"How about that Butterfly Garden? You've been asking to go for a while now."

"Oh my gosh, I'd love that," I said.

"Then go get ready," he said.

I got excited. I finished breakfast, washed the dishes — I always tried to do little things for Daddy. It made me really satisfied — and went to my room. On days when I was feeling small, I'd definitely want to wear one of my dresses, but this time I put on one of my adult outfits — a plaid flannel shirt, my brown leather jacket, and jeans. There was that late-October chill in the air, but it was my favorite kind of weather — cold enough that we could keep the fireplace going every day. And of course, the fireplace at The Hearth was always going too. On top of that, Halloween was coming up, and it was one of my favorite times of year — when everything got spooky but also really cute, and we could get candy and dress up. The Hearth always had events for it.

Daddy got ready too and we headed to the car. Since he'd noticed I wasn't in little space, we talked about normal stuff instead of him treating me like a baby. He put on Linkin Park on the radio — he was the one who'd taught me to like rock; before that I only listened to pop. We talked about the band's new lead singer, who I thought was really good, and I sang along. The song was beautiful.

We got to the Butterfly Garden, and I noticed it was all decked out for Halloween, and a sign at the entrance said: *Come pick your own pumpkin at our pumpkin patch.*

"Hey, that's actually really cool," I said. "I bet JJ would love that. Should we pick one out for him?"

"Of course, sweetheart," Daddy said.

We went in, paid for our tickets, and headed to the room where the butterflies were kept — it was like a giant glass greenhouse, full of plants that didn't care about the cold outside, and butterflies flying everywhere in different colors, sizes, and shapes.

"This is so amazing," I said, watching the butterflies fly around near Daddy.

One of them landed on my arm — it had big orange-and-red wings with little dark spots. I showed it to him and let out a loud laugh. He smiled at

me the way that always made me melt, like I was the most important person in his whole world. Suddenly I felt myself relaxing, and I felt baby getting comfortable enough to want to come out. When I noticed that, I let out a sigh of relief and another giggle and grabbed the sleeve of his shirt.

"Daddy," I said, my voice coming out higher than before. "Can we go see more butterflies over there?" I felt my voice go softer and more excited, the way it always did when I was little. He noticed right away.

"Let's go, champ," he said, in that special way he called me when I was in baby mode.

That made me feel even happier.

We spent ages there, watching butterflies fly around — tiny blue ones, big white ones, fuzzy moths, butterflies nearly the size of my face, and tiny little yellow ones that fluttered together around the flowers. The flowers themselves came in every shape and color, all of them gorgeous.

When we were done, we headed out through a little gift shop, and I saw they were selling chrysalises that would eventually become butterflies.

"Can we get one, Daddy?" I asked.

He laughed, but said: "Better not, baby, or we'll end up with a new pet, and I don't think Bola would like that."

I laughed, picturing our cat dealing with our new butterfly pet.

"Fair point."

"But why don't you get one of these?" He pointed at a moth plushie, which had a really fuzzy, soft body, two little green wings, and tiny black eyes. It was the most precious thing I'd ever seen.

"Really? I can?" I asked, excited.

"Of course you can, sweetheart," he said, and kissed my forehead. "Pick whichever one you want. Daddy will buy it for you."

I couldn't even believe it. I was the luckiest baby in the whole world — I told myself that while I picked out a moth that seemed to be staring right at me. The plushie was big enough for me to hug against my chest, and it made me so happy. He bought it, and I walked out hugging it.

We saw the pumpkin patch, which was amazing and stretched out as far as I could see, with a pine forest rising behind it. I wondered if they also grew Christmas trees back there — it would make total sense. There were

tiny pumpkins, medium ones, and giant ones, and I pointed at an enormous one.

"Daddy, can this one be mine?" I asked. "No, this one's going to be Sawyer's" — I decided that myself. "JJ can have a medium one, since he's the middle brother, and mine's going to be really tiny, like me," I said.

He laughed.

"Okay, sweetheart. And which one's going to be mine? Why don't you pick one out for me?" he asked.

I looked around for the biggest pumpkin I could find, examining the texture of the skin, the color, the size.

"No, not that one," I kept saying every time I didn't find the perfect one.

Then I came across a pumpkin so big it was wider than both my thighs together — and I wasn't even that short. JJ was shorter than me.

"This one, Daddy," I told him. He laughed and nodded.

It was quite a job carrying the pumpkins, since we hadn't grabbed a wheelbarrow, and Daddy had to carry the giant one and then go back for Sawyer's. I carried mine and JJ's — I thought I could have managed one more too, but Daddy shook his head and said:

"Leave it to me, sweetheart."

We grabbed the pumpkins and headed to the car. I was so happy, and I'd relaxed enough to finally let my little self come all the way out — my baby self.

CHAPTER 19. MIKEY

We got back home and I was so grateful, and I wanted to show that to Daddy.

"Can I do something for you, Daddy?" I asked, once we were already inside.

"Like what, sweetheart?" he said.

"I want to serve you."

He gave me one of those wolf smiles. "Sounds good. Let's go to our room," he said.

The bedroom was exactly the way I liked it. Soft and warm. Daddy had pulled the curtains earlier that morning, and the afternoon light came in. I followed him inside and my whole body felt loose-limbed and bright-eyed. Adult Mikey had softened somewhere between the moth plushie and the giant pumpkin, and what was left at the front of my mind was baby — the version of myself that didn't have to pretend I was fine.

Daddy sat on the edge of the bed, his weight making the mattress dip under him. He was still in his jeans and the shirt he'd worn to the garden, rolled up at the sleeves. His arms were thick and solid and I wanted to crawl into his lap before he even invited me.

He didn't invite me right away, though. He looked at me, and his eyes were warm and exactly the kind of warm that made my stomach do that little flip it always did.

"So, sweetheart," he said. "Were you a good boy today?"

My face split into a giggle immediately. I couldn't help it.

"I was very good," I announced without a beat of hesitation. "I was so good, Daddy. I picked out all the pumpkins and I didn't even complain

when you said no to the chrysalis and I held the moth really carefully the whole time and I..."

He held my gaze, the corner of his mouth twitching.

"Very sure of yourself, aren't you, baby?"

I giggled harder.

"I was good."

"You were," he agreed, and the warmth in his eyes sharpened into something that made me squirm. "A very good boy. Which means Daddy gets to decide what kind of reward such a good boy deserves."

Oh.

My cheeks went pink. I could feel the heat spreading across my face, and the giggle stayed right there with it because I knew exactly what kind of mood that look meant. This wasn't correction. I hadn't done anything wrong. Daddy was playing with me.

Daddy patted his thigh once.

I didn't need to be asked twice. I was still giggling, but there was a new squirm in my posture now, a wriggle that started in my shoulders and worked its way down to my toes. I draped myself over his lap like it was the most natural thing in the world, which it was. His thigh was solid under my stomach, the denim rough against my skin where my shirt had ridden up. I tucked my arms under my chest and let my weight settle against him, and the bed creaked a little under us, and Daddy's hand came to rest on the small of my back.

"Such a proud little thing," he said, and his voice had that fond edge to it, the one that meant he found me funny. "So certain you deserve a reward."

His hand moved from my back to the waistband of my jeans, and he tugged them down slowly, along with my underwear, until the cool air hit my bare skin and I shivered. At least I had been very good and was wearing my white briefs, the kind Daddy expected us to wear when we weren't in cartoon underwear or diapers.

The first smack landed and it was soft, just a warm press of his palm against my skin. The second one came a beat later, in the same rhythm, and then the third, and then he settled into it. His broad hand landed across my ass in a steady pattern, each stroke firm enough to leave a warm sting but

never tipping over into real pain. This wasn't a punishment. This was Daddy's hand on my skin, and the rhythm of it, and the way each smack sent a little pulse of warmth through me that built and built until I was squirming against his thigh, not trying to get away but trying to get closer.

Between strokes, his voice came low and warm above me.

"You've been locked all day, haven't you, baby?"

I pressed my face into the duvet and nodded, the fabric soft against my cheek.

"Such a good little boy. Wearing your cage so well for Daddy."

My fingers curled into the duvet. The cage was something we'd talked about — something I'd asked for, actually, because the ache of being locked and unable to touch myself did something to my head that made little space deeper, more complete. I only took it off for hygiene and checks, or when Daddy wanted to play with my little cock.

"That's my good boy," he said, and his palm landed again, a little harder this time, and I wriggled and made a sound that was definitely not a laugh anymore. The flush was spreading across my skin now, a warm pink that I could feel even without seeing it. Daddy's hand was warm too, the heat building under his palm with each stroke until my whole body felt like it was glowing. My thighs trembled against his leg. My fingers gripped the duvet.

And through it all, the praise kept coming. Steady as the spanking. What a good boy. Daddy's perfect little one. So well-behaved. Each word landed like another touch, and I pressed my face harder into the bedding and let myself dissolve into it completely, the giggles and the sting and the warmth and the words all layering together.

His hand stopped. Rested on the warm curve of my ass, his fingers spread wide, and the weight of it was almost as good as the spanking had been. I lay there breathing, my chest rising and falling against his thigh.

Daddy's hand moved, stroking once, gently, over the heated skin.

"There's my boy," he said. "Ready for what comes next?"

Daddy's hands slid under me and lifted me like I weighed nothing, which to him I probably didn't. One moment I was draped over his lap, my face pressed into the duvet, and the next I was cradled against his chest, his

arms solid around my ribs, and then I was on my back against the pillows with the whole wide bed underneath me and Daddy above me.

Everything slowed down. That was what Daddy did — he took time and stretched it out, like he had all of it in the world and none of it was in a hurry to get anywhere. He moved over me. His hands were warm as they pushed my shirt up my stomach and then off over my head. I lay there pliant, my skin still warm from the spanking, my whole body loose and buzzing.

He reached for the drawer in the nightstand and came back with the plug, the vibrating one, silicone and not too big but big enough that I always felt the stretch. He held it up where I could see it.

"This one, baby?"

I nodded eagerly.

"Yes, Daddy, please."

He reached for the lube, and then his fingers were between my legs, warm and slick, taking their time before he eased the plug into me. The stretch made my breath catch and my thighs tense.

"There you go, baby," Daddy murmured. "That's it. You're taking it so well for me."

His palm pressed flat against the base of the plug, holding it in place, and the stretch settled through me — slow and deep, enough to make my toes curl against the sheets. It was the good kind of fullness, the kind that told me Daddy was right there, that I was exactly where I was supposed to be. My breath came out shaky and I let it, didn't try to hide it.

"Such a good boy," Daddy said, and his thumb traced a slow circle around the base of the plug, not pushing it deeper, just keeping it there, letting me feel it. "Look at you. Taking all of it so nicely."

The stretch was still there, warm and insistent, and every time I shifted even a little bit I felt it again, a reminder of what was inside me. Daddy kept his hand steady there, and the other hand came up to stroke my hair back from my forehead, his fingers gentle against my scalp.

"Daddy's proud of you, sweetheart," he said. "You're doing so good. Ready?"

I nodded again, my fingers already curling into the sheets.

He turned it on.

The sound I made was high and startled. The vibration hit me all at once, a hum that traveled up through my core, and my whole body jerked under it. The plug was fullness and vibration layered together, and my thighs started trembling immediately, a fine shake that I couldn't control, and Daddy's hand smoothed down my leg like he was calming a nervous animal.

"There you go," he said, warm. "There's my good boy."

The cage stayed locked. He didn't touch it. Didn't offer to remove it. His hand stayed on my hip, on my thigh, and the ache of it — the constant, low throb of being locked and unable to touch — built and built until it was all I could think about, a pressure that had nowhere to go except through the vibration.

"Such a good boy," he said. "Staying locked for Daddy. So well-behaved. Daddy's perfect little one. Taking everything I give you."

The vibration hummed steadily against me until my thighs were shaking so hard I couldn't hold them still, and my hands gripped his forearms, and the sounds I was making had become just breath and whimpers.

I came like that — locked, full, vibrating, with Daddy above me, his toy inside me and his voice all around me. Locked orgasms were different, but they felt so good too. I was trembling everywhere, my fingers digging into his arms, and the cage didn't change anything about the intensity; if anything, it concentrated it, turned the orgasm into something that had nowhere to go except through my whole body at once.

Daddy held me through it. I had to press my face into his shoulder and breathe him in. He switched the plug off and gave me time to settle. His weight stayed close, his breath hot against my neck, his hand still on my hip, and I was oversensitive and trembling and completely, utterly gone.

"There's my baby," he said. "There's my perfect boy."

After a little while, the plug came out gently. He worked the silicone free and the absence of it left me feeling empty and light. He set it aside and reached for the baby wipes he kept in the drawer, and then his hands were on me again, cleaning me up. I lay there pliant. Heavy-lidded.

He tossed the wipe and reached for the diaper next. We kept a stack of them in the bottom drawer — the good ones, thick and soft and white, with

tapes that made that particular crinkling sound when they fastened. He unfolded one and slid it under me, his hands lifting my hips with effortless strength, and the material settled against my skin.

The tabs came next. He pulled the front up between my legs and smoothed it flat against my stomach. He pressed each one down firmly, making sure it held, and then his hand rested on my belly for a moment, and he leaned down and pressed a kiss to my forehead.

The paci came next. He didn't say anything. Just pressed it to my lips, and I opened my mouth and took it without looking, the familiar shape settling against my tongue.

I curled into him then. My body turned toward his of its own accord, my face pressing into his chest, and he held me there, and he made that low sound, almost a hum, and I sank into it.

He scooped me up. One arm under my knees, the other behind my back, and I was in the air and then against his chest, my face tucked into the curve of his neck, and he carried me out of the bedroom and down the hall like I weighed nothing. My arms looped around his neck. The paci stayed in.

The living room was exactly the way I loved it. The stone fireplace was going, the flames low and amber behind the grate, throwing warm light across the deep sofas and the soft blankets piled at one end. The overhead lights were off, just the lamps on, and the room felt like something out of a storybook, cozy and dim and safe. The coffee table in front of the fireplace had been cleared, and on it, waiting, were my dolls.

Daddy had set them out. I hadn't asked him to. He'd done it while I was getting ready that morning, or maybe while I was sleeping in. Teresa, and the astronaut doll JJ had given me for my birthday, and the fox in the little sweater, and the moth plushie from today sitting proudly at the end of the row.

He settled onto the sofa with me still in his arms, and then he arranged me against his side, one big arm around my shoulders. I reached for Teresa with both hands because she was my favorite, had been since Daddy gave her to me two Christmases ago, and I pulled her into my lap and started talking to her without taking the paci out, a mumble.

He didn't say anything. Just let me talk. I curled into him with Teresa clutched against my chest and the fire crackling in the grate and the diaper

soft between my legs, and for the first time in weeks, I felt the mask slide off completely. Just baby. Just the version of myself that didn't have to be anything for anyone. Daddy's arm tightened around me. He pressed a kiss to the top of my head.

"There's my boy," he said. "There's my perfect baby."

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CHAPTER 20. JJ

I'd just spent a long time on the phone with Max. We'd done a video call, and he told me all about how he and Dominic had been talking every day, about what they liked and didn't like, their fantasies and their limits, and—

"He even said he had no problem with me having an OnlyFans when I told him about it! I was sick with nerves, thinking that might be the end of everything right there," he said. "But it wasn't," he added, closing his eyes in that dreamy way of his, hugging a plush cupcake.

I was in my room too, listening to him be lovesick and getting way too invested in every single detail like we were a couple of teenagers gossiping about crushes.

When we hung up, I went down to the kitchen, where Daddy was making lunch and telling Sawyer the latest NBA scores.

"How are the Heat doing?" I asked, butting into the conversation.

Sawyer gave me that impatient look he loved giving me, the one that always made me want to smack him.

"Good afternoon to you too, JJ," he said. I took a breath and rolled my eyes.

"I just asked how my team's doing. I'm not doing anything wrong. Daddy, he's picking on me. I'm putting a frog in his room. He's gonna see," I said.

Daddy's brow furrowed.

"I don't want to hear about any fighting, you two. Or you'll both be having a nice long talk with my belt," he said.

The second I heard that, a wave of want ran through me, but I ignored it — had to keep up the act. I made a point of putting on a whole little show,

rolling my eyes and dropping heavily into my chair.

"Understood, JJ?" Daddy asked.

"Understood, Sir," I grumbled.

"Good. And Sawyer, no need to talk to your brother like that. Answer him when he asks about his team."

I lit up hearing that and stuck my tongue out at Sawyer. He made a face but wasn't going to keep the fight going.

"They're bad, as usual. That what you wanted to hear? The Heat suck," Sawyer said.

Daddy gave him a look again, and right about then Mikey wandered in, wearing nothing but a diaper, a pacifier in the corner of his mouth, and carrying the new moth plushie he'd gotten from Daddy. I felt a little jealous of that moth and wanted it for myself, but when I'd tried to grab it before, Mikey had shrieked, and Daddy had gotten onto me about it. I was already skating close to the edge — couldn't keep pushing it, or I might actually earn myself a real punishment, like getting grounded and banned from The Hearth for a week, which would be a disaster since Max and I had already made plans to go that coming weekend. And I was still talking to my friend Bella, even though what Sawyer had said about that whole thing kept nagging at me. But I knew Sawyer would change his mind once he saw there was no problem with it at all.

Thinking about that reminded me of my plan — I needed to fill Mikey in on everything. So I asked him: "How babyish are you feeling today?"

He was sucking on his pacifier, but he answered me — a miracle.

"You wanna play with me?" he asked.

I was glad he wasn't nonverbal, so we could actually talk. I nodded and looked at Daddy, waiting for approval. He smiled.

"Perfect. That's exactly how I want my boys. Playing and being friends. Sawyer, you're joining in too. You need some time with your brothers and a break from your video games."

Sawyer opened his mouth to grumble, but Daddy gave him a look, and Sawyer always folded with just one look from Daddy. This time was no different.

"Yes, Sir," he said.

"Good," Daddy said.

After lunch, all three of us gathered in my room. I'd invited Mikey to come check out my toy-car collection, which really was left over from my childhood — I'd kept those cars my whole life, even through the years when people tried to make me stop playing with them during my teens and early adulthood, telling me it was weird and that I was already grown and shouldn't play with that stuff anymore. Thankfully, finding the kink community had taught me that none of that was true. You could enjoy whatever made you happy as long as you weren't hurting anyone or forcing them to participate. So now I played with my cars whenever I wanted, and they were spread across the floor along with my Hot Wheels car wash track.

Mikey sat down in front of it and started putting the track together. I smiled. Sawyer was lowering himself onto the floor, still a little grumpy, and pulled out his phone — but I said:

"Daddy said you're supposed to play with us. I'm telling him you're on your phone."

He grumbled, rolled his eyes, but gave in, coming all the way down to the floor and sitting beside us, sticking the phone in his pocket.

"I have something to tell you guys," I said quietly.

Daddy probably wasn't going to love hearing this conversation. Better if we kept our voices down — I just didn't tell them that part, or Sawyer would definitely rat me out.

"What are you talking about, JJ?" Sawyer asked.

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"You know Max and Dominic?" The two of them got a lot more interested in the conversation right away. "I want to help Max get a scene. He told me on the call that he really wants to do one with Dominic, but he's scared he'll chicken out before he even manages to put his name down for

anything. He told me that if there's a volunteer sign-up at Halloween and he freezes, I have permission to put his name down for him."

Sawyer's eyes narrowed immediately.

"He actually said that? Specifically?"

"Yes," I said. "Specifically. I'm not just volunteering him for kinky stuff without asking."

"Okay," Sawyer said, relaxing slightly. "And Dominic?"

"I'm not signing Dominic up for anything," I said. "I'm not suicidal. I want to talk to Gustav, tell him Max gave me permission to put his name down if he panics, and then Gustav can ask Dominic separately if he's interested. If Dominic says no, that's it."

Mikey had been quietly connecting pieces of the track, but now he looked up.

"JJ, are you sure Max actually wants you helping this much? Maybe he wants to work up the courage himself."

"Yes," I said. "We literally talked about it today. He said he wants help, he just doesn't want me to embarrass him in front of Dominic."

"That sounds difficult for you," Sawyer said. I gave him a dirty look.

"Ha-ha."

Mikey giggled around his pacifier.

"You remember your first time being little in public?" I asked him. "That was scary, wasn't it?"

He nodded.

"That's all I mean. Sometimes you know what you want and you still need someone to give you a tiny push. Max already told me where I'm allowed to push. I'm not going outside that."

Sawyer's eyebrows were still drawn together, but this time it seemed more like he was thinking than disapproving.

"If that's exactly what he consented to, I can help," he said. "But you don't improvise. If Max changes his mind, you stop. And Gustav asks Dominic himself."

"Obviously."

Sawyer stared at me.

"JJ."

"Yes, okay. I promise."

Mikey nodded too.

"I'll help if Max really wants it."

I brightened.

"Awesome! I'll text Gustav and ask him what the Halloween sign-up is going to look like, and we'll figure it out from there," I said happily, and went back to playing with the car wash track.

Daddy came by about thirty minutes later and opened the door slowly. We were still playing — even Sawyer had his back against the foot of the bed, phone nowhere in sight, just talking with us.

"Pistachio popsicles are the best. Yes!" I was arguing.

"You have terrible taste, JJ," Sawyer said.

"It's my favorite," I said, but I wasn't really paying attention to him. I was busy soaping up my Hot Wheels car in the car wash.

"Are you all playing nicely together?" Daddy asked, and he looked like he was witnessing a small miracle.

We all looked up at him and nodded.

"I'll have to give you all a reward, then," he said.

CHAPTER 21. JJ

Daddy didn't just decide what the reward was without asking us. First he made all three of us wash up and use the bathroom, then called us into his bedroom and asked if we wanted some time together. All three of us said yes immediately. Mikey had changed out of his diaper into white briefs and one of Daddy's soft T-shirts, his cage still underneath. Sawyer had put on sweatpants, and I was still in my pajama shorts and T-shirt until Daddy told me to take the shirt off.

The reward turned into this: the four of us on Daddy's bed, the lamplight turned low, the room warm. I'd ended up tucked against Sawyer's side, my hand flat on his chest, feeling the steady thump of his heart under my palm. Mikey was curled on Daddy's other side, chin propped on his hand, his green eyes sparkling.

And Daddy — Daddy had his hand wrapped around Sawyer's cock like it was something he'd been planning to do all afternoon, which he probably had.

Sawyer's broad shoulders pressed back into the mattress. His jaw was tight, the muscle in his cheek working, and he made this low sound — one he'd clearly tried to swallow back, the kind that came from somewhere deep in his chest and got halfway out before he caught it. I felt it vibrate through my hand.

"Oh my God," I whispered, my voice already running ahead of my brain. "He's trying so hard not to make noise. Look at him, Daddy. He's so cute."

Sawyer cut me a look. The look would have been threatening if his breath hadn't already been uneven, if his chest hadn't been rising and falling a little too fast under my palm. As it was, the look landed about as hard as a marshmallow.

"JJ," he said, his voice trying to sound stern and absolutely failing. "Shut. Up."

"I'm just observing," I said, and I wasn't even trying to sound innocent, because I wasn't. I was thrilled. Watching my brothers come undone was one of my favorite things in the whole world.

Daddy didn't rush. That was the thing about Daddy — he never rushed anything. His hand moved on Sawyer with an unhurried rhythm, his grip firm and steady. He was reading every reaction: the tightness in Sawyer's jaw, the way his breath caught on the inhale, the small twitch of his hips. Every time Sawyer's breathing hitched, Daddy adjusted slightly, giving him exactly enough and never losing track of him.

It was beautiful. I said that out loud too.

"God, that's so beautiful," I whispered, and Sawyer made a noise that was half groan, half exasperation.

"JJ, I swear to God—"

Daddy changed his rhythm, and whatever Sawyer had been about to say dissolved into a low, rough sound he didn't even try to hold back this time. His hand fisted in the sheets beside him, knuckles going white.

"There you go," Daddy murmured, his voice low and warm in the quiet room. "That's it, baby. Let me hear you."

Sawyer's hips lifted off the mattress. Just once, a short movement into Daddy's hand, and then his whole body went tense — shoulders, thighs, jaw — before he came with a rough exhale that sounded like it had been pulled out of him against his will. His hand clenched in the sheets, his chest heaved under my palm, and Daddy held him through every second of it, his other hand coming up to cup Sawyer's jaw.

"Good boy," Daddy said, right against Sawyer's temple.

I couldn't help myself. I never could.

"Your face," I said, my voice dropping to a theatrical whisper. "Sawyer, your face was — holy shit. You looked like you were trying to solve a quadratic equation while getting a surprise prostate exam."

I felt the rumble of his groan. "JJ, I will end you."

"No you won't," I chirped, patting his chest. "You're all gooey and post-orgasmic. Your threat capacity is currently at, like, a two."

"Shut up," Sawyer said, but there was no heat in it. His breath was still coming hard, his chest rising and falling under my hand, and when he opened his eyes and looked at me, the irritation was already dissolving into something warmer and more tired.

I pressed a kiss to his jaw. He didn't pull away. He never did. "Love you," I whispered.

He exhaled, long and slow, and his hand came up to ruffle my hair.

"Love you too, you little menace."

Across the bed, Mikey was still watching with his green eyes, his composure doing a terrible job of hiding the flush that had spread across his cheekbones. He'd been pressing closer to Daddy's side by degrees, his body curving toward the warmth without seeming to notice he was doing it.

I caught his eye and grinned. He didn't grin back, but the corner of his mouth twitched, and that was enough.

Daddy's hand was still on Sawyer, gentle now, soothing him through the aftershocks.

I settled back against Sawyer's side, my hand still on his chest, and watched Daddy's face. He was looking at Sawyer with that soft expression he got.

That was the thing about Daddy. He held all of us, all the time, in exactly the ways we needed to be held. Even when we were being absolute disasters — which, let's be honest, was most of the time — he held us. I pressed my face into Sawyer's shoulder and breathed him in, and for a minute, I didn't say anything at all.

Daddy's eyes found mine, and everything in the room narrowed to a point.

Just like that. One second I was pressed against Sawyer's shoulder, and the next I was very aware of Daddy looking at me. My mouth went dry. My bottom lip found its way between my teeth, and I bit down without meaning to, and I couldn't look away from his face.

He knew. Of course he knew. He always knew.

"Want your turn, baby?" he asked quietly, holding out his hand.

"Yes, Daddy, please."

I went. My body moved before my brain had time to catch up, sliding across the sheets toward him, and Daddy's hands settled on my hips, turning me and pressing me back against the pillows. The mattress dipped under his weight as he moved over me, and my hands — my stupid, fluttery hands — went to his shoulders and then away, to the sheets, to my own chest, anywhere and nowhere, because I couldn't decide whether to hold on or let go. The indecision made me want to laugh except I couldn't breathe enough to laugh.

Daddy's mouth found my stomach. His beard scraped warm against my skin, and I made an embarrassingly high sound, immediately thinking of Sawyer listening to me — and my hips twitched up off the mattress before I could stop them. Daddy's hand came down on my hip, firm and heavy, holding me steady.

"Stay," he said, and the word went through me like a current.

His mouth moved lower. Every press of his lips against my skin felt like he was taking his time because he had all the time in the world.

Across the bed, I was vaguely aware of Mikey and Sawyer. They'd shifted, Mikey leaning against Sawyer's side now, Sawyer's arm loose around his shoulders, both of them watching, perfectly happy to enjoy the show. There was something proprietary in it, something warm and smug, and under any other circumstances I would have made a comment about it, would have teased them for staring, would have—

Daddy's mouth closed around me, and every thought in my head dissolved at once into a moan, a laugh, my hips jerking against Daddy's hand hard enough that I felt the mattress shift under us. Daddy held me steady, his grip unwavering, and whatever part of my brain was still capable of forming complete sentences shut down entirely.

What came out instead was:

"Daddy — oh — Daddy—"

Single syllables. I gripped his hair and I didn't know whether I was trying to pull him closer or simply hold on, and it didn't matter because Daddy wasn't going anywhere. He varied his pace, taking his time, and every change sent another wave through me that left me gasping.

Somewhere across the bed, Sawyer made a sound. A quiet, smug, satisfied sound, like he'd been waiting for exactly this — for my running

commentary to collapse into nothing but Daddy's name and broken gasps. I heard Mikey murmur something — "Be nice" — and Sawyer's response, low and amused:

"I am being nice."

I didn't care. I couldn't have cared less. The world had narrowed to Daddy, his hand on my hip, the heat building low in my stomach, and the helpless feeling of being completely at someone else's mercy and loving every second of it.

When it hit me, it hit hard. My back arched off the mattress, both hands fisting in Daddy's hair, and I came, my whole body tensing and then shuddering while Daddy held me through it, his hand firm on my hip. When it was over, I went completely limp — boneless, breathless, a long shaky exhale leaving me in pieces on the sheets.

Daddy moved away gently, then pressed a kiss against my hip. I stared at the ceiling and tried to remember how breathing worked.

"I think I'm dead," I said, and my voice came out wrecked, hoarse in a way that made Sawyer snort quietly from across the bed.

"You're fine, my dramatic baby," Daddy said, his thumb stroking a slow circle on my hipbone.

"I'm not sure," I said, and I meant it. My body felt like it had been taken apart and put back together wrong, every nerve ending still humming, my chest rising and falling too fast. "I really think I might be dead. This is the afterlife. It's very warm. There's a bed."

Daddy laughed.

"You're very much alive, baby," he said, and his hand came up to brush my hair back from my forehead, his fingers gentle against my scalp. "Very much here."

I closed my eyes and let his hand stay there. My breathing was starting to slow, my heartbeat settling back into something that resembled normal.

For a minute, I didn't say anything. I didn't move. I just lay there and let myself be quiet, which for me was basically a miracle.

By the time my brain started working again, Mikey had been waiting for approximately seven centuries, and he was doing a truly heroic job of pretending he hadn't.

He was pressed against Sawyer's side, his green eyes fixed on Daddy, trying very hard not to look desperate and failing spectacularly. The flush had spread from his cheekbones down his neck, disappearing under the collar of Daddy's T-shirt.

Daddy looked at him.

"Mikey, princess. You still want your turn?"

Mikey moved immediately, like his body had been waiting for permission and the second it came every pretense dropped.

"Yes, Daddy, please."

He crossed the bed, and Daddy's hands were already reaching for him, turning him and arranging him face-down on the mattress, very gentle.

Daddy ran a hand down his back first, then hooked his fingers into the waistband of Mikey's briefs and looked at him.

"These off, sweetheart?"

"Yes, Daddy."

He slid them down and off, leaving Mikey's chastity cage in place. Daddy's hand settled over the cage for a moment, warm and possessive, and he murmured something against the back of Mikey's neck that I couldn't quite hear.

But I saw Mikey's shoulders drop. I saw the tension leave his body all at once.

"Good boy," Daddy said. "Keeping it on for me. That's my perfect baby."

Mikey made another sound, muffled against the pillow, and his fingers curled into the sheets.

I propped myself up on one elbow, my energy coming back in slow waves, and watched. Sawyer had shifted too — he was sitting with his back against the headboard now, one hand resting on my ankle. Both of us quiet. Both of us watching.

Daddy reached for the lube. His fingers were slick when he began preparing Mikey, nice and slow, his free hand spread warm across the small of Mikey's back, holding him steady. Mikey's face was turned to the side, pressed into the pillow, and every time Daddy moved, Mikey's whole body responded — a shiver, a twitch, a muffled sound.

I couldn't help myself. I never could.

"Look at him," I whispered to Sawyer, my voice already climbing back toward its normal register. "He's making those little delicious noises. The ones he thinks nobody can hear."

Sawyer's thumb stopped its circle on my ankle. I felt his attention sharpen beside me.

"He does that thing with his fingers," Sawyer said, low and dry. "Where they curl into the sheets like he's trying to hold on to the mattress for dear life."

"Every single time," I agreed, nodding sagely. "Like the bed might float away if he doesn't grip hard enough."

Mikey made a indignant sound, muffled by the pillow, and his shoulders hunched up toward his ears. Daddy's hand pressed flat against his back, keeping him settled, and he never lost that slow rhythm.

"Don't listen to them, baby," Daddy murmured against the back of Mikey's neck. "They're just jealous."

"Jealous?" I gasped, pressing a hand to my chest in theatrical offense. "I'm not jealous. I'm an observer. There's a difference."

"There's really not," Sawyer said.

"Okay, but look — look at his face right now." I pointed, even though Mikey's face was half-buried in the pillow. "He's doing that thing where he tries to look like he's not enjoying it and his whole body is, like, betraying him."

"His ears are red," Sawyer observed, deeply entertained. "Both of them. Bright red."

"Like little stoplights," I whispered.

"Like someone painted them."

"Like he stuck his head in a pot of boiling water and only his ears got burned."

Mikey turned his face just enough to glare at us over his shoulder, his green eyes bright and furious and completely ruined. His mouth was open, his lower lip caught between his teeth, and the flush had spread all the way down to his collarbones.

"Be nice," he managed, his voice thin and breathless.

"We are being nice," I said, all innocence. "We're being so nice. We're being supportive brothers."

"We're being cheerleaders," Sawyer added.

"Exactly. Go, Mikey, go." I pumped a fist in the air, and Sawyer's hand came down on my thigh.

Daddy's hand didn't stop, but his voice changed.

"Enough."

One word. Quiet. And it landed like a brick.

Sawyer's hand went still on my thigh. My mouth was already open — I'd been about to say something else, something brilliant, I'm sure, something that would have made the whole situation even funnier — and the words died on my tongue.

Daddy's eyes found mine over Mikey's shoulder. He was still taking care of Mikey, never losing focus, but the look in his eyes was the one that meant business, the one that meant he wasn't asking.

"Both of you," he said, his voice low and even. "One more word, and you're both in the corner. Facing the wall. Not watching."

The corner. The corner meant no Mikey, no Daddy, no show, no warmth, no nothing. Just the wall and your own thoughts and the sound of your brothers having fun without you. My stomach dropped at the thought of it.

I pressed my lips together. Hard. Sawyer's hand tightened on my thigh — not in a warning, more like a *don't you dare* — and I felt him go still beside me, the way he always did when Daddy used that tone.

Daddy held my gaze for one more second. Long enough to make sure I'd heard him. Long enough to make sure I understood that he meant it, that his voice wasn't negotiable, that he could be soft with Mikey and firm with us at the exact same time without either one interfering with the other.

Then he turned his attention fully back to Mikey, and his voice dropped into that register — the one that was just for Mikey, just for the baby — and he murmured something against the back of Mikey's neck that I couldn't hear. Mikey's whole body melted into the mattress.

I didn't say a word. Sawyer didn't say a word. We sat there in the warm quiet, Sawyer's hand on my thigh, my elbow propped on the pillow, and we watched.

And it was — God, it was beautiful. Daddy took his time with Mikey, slow and patient, his free hand stroking up and down his spine in long, soothing passes. Mikey's face was turned to the side, his green eyes half-closed, his mouth open around sounds he wasn't trying to hide anymore. The flush had spread down to his shoulders, and his fingers were curled tight in the sheets, and every new touch sent a shiver running through him from his shoulders to his toes.

Daddy always took things slowly with Mikey. Mikey needed patience, needed time to settle into sensation instead of being rushed toward it, and Daddy gave him that without ever needing to be reminded.

"There you go," Daddy murmured, his voice low and warm. "That's it, baby. You're taking it so well."

Mikey's composure was in tatters. His body had surrendered entirely, his back arching under Daddy's hand, his thighs trembling against the sheets.

Daddy leaned close to his ear. "You want Daddy inside you, sweetheart?"

"Yes," Mikey breathed. Then, more clearly, "Yes, Daddy."

Daddy moved carefully, giving Mikey time to adjust. Mikey's breath went ragged — one sharp, broken inhale, then another — and his fingers curled into the sheets.

"Breathe, sweetheart," Daddy said softly against the back of Mikey's neck. "I've got you."

Mikey breathed. A shaky exhale, and then another, until his body softened again beneath Daddy.

Daddy kept everything slow and measured. One hand stayed on Mikey's hip, the other spread across his lower back, and every movement seemed calculated around Mikey's breathing instead of the other way around. Mikey's locked cock strained against the cage, and I could see the pressure building in the way his body tensed and relaxed, in the way his sounds got higher and less controlled, little muffled whimpers he couldn't hold back anymore.

I reached over. Without thinking about it, my hand found Mikey's where it was gripping the sheet, and I squeezed. His fingers closed around mine immediately, tight enough to hurt, and he didn't let go.

Daddy's pace stayed steady, and Mikey was coming apart under it — his body working toward something it couldn't reach the usual way, the pressure with nowhere to go except through him. His thighs were shaking. His back was arched, his face still pressed into the pillow, and the sounds coming from him had lost any semblance of control — high, broken, desperate.

When it hit him, it went through his whole body like a current. His hand clenched around mine hard enough to hurt, and he made a broken, ragged sound into the pillow. Daddy held him through every second of it, going still and curving his body over Mikey's, one hand steady on his hip, his breath warm against the back of Mikey's neck.

The shudder lasted. And lasted. Mikey's body trembled beneath Daddy, his fingers locked around mine, and when it finally started to ease, the tension leaving him in slow waves, Daddy stayed close and still until Mikey went soft beneath him.

Sawyer's voice behind me was quiet and utterly sincere.

"He did so well."

Daddy nodded against Mikey's shoulder. "He did."

Daddy waited until Mikey's breathing had steadied before moving again. Mikey made a tiny sound, but didn't pull away, and Daddy checked him immediately.

"Still good, sweetheart?"

Mikey nodded against the pillow.

"Green."

Only then did Daddy move again, slowly, until his own control finally broke. His shoulders went tight, the muscles in his back flexing under his shirt, his hand on Mikey's hip gripping harder.

"Oh," I breathed, because I couldn't help it, because I wasn't supposed to talk but that wasn't really a word, that was a reaction, and Daddy didn't correct me.

Daddy came with a low, rough sound, his body curving protectively over Mikey's. Mikey made a small, overwhelmed sound into the pillow. His fingers tightened around mine, and I squeezed back.

Then Daddy's weight settled. His forehead dropped to the back of Mikey's neck, and he stayed there breathing hard, one hand still on Mikey's hip, steady and warm.

I lay back against the pillows and watched my brother's breathing even out, watched Daddy's hand stroke slow circles on Mikey's hip, and thought about how damn lucky all of us were.

So stupidly, overwhelmingly lucky.

Aftercare happened.

Daddy moved between us with the same attention he gave everything. Warm damp cloths first — he cleaned me up gently, his hand cupping my jaw while he worked, then checked on Sawyer and took care of Mikey. Soft blankets followed, pulled from the stack he kept in the closet, and he tucked them around us one by one like he was building a nest and we were the eggs.

My blanket was green. He always gave me the green one. He knew.

His hand came to my hair, fingers working through the blond strands, my head tipping toward his palm.

"There's my baby," he murmured, and I made a sound that was mostly contentment and partly purr.

Sawyer got something different. Daddy's hand settled on the back of his neck — a firm, solid grip that wasn't quite possessive and wasn't quite comforting. That hand on the back of his neck did something to Sawyer that nothing else quite could. It grounded him, reminded him he was held, and I watched the last tension leave his body in real time.

Mikey got held. Daddy gathered him up like he weighed nothing and tucked him against his chest, one big arm around Mikey's shoulders, the other hand cradling the back of his head. Mikey's face pressed into Daddy's shirt, and I could hear his breathing. I watched them from my nest of green fabric and felt really happy and calm.

CHAPTER 22. JJ

And then I remembered the pumpkins.

The pumpkins were downstairs. Four of them, lined up against the wall like they were waiting for us — tiny for Mikey, medium for me, big for Sawyer, enormous for Daddy. Mikey had picked them all out at the Butterfly Garden, and Daddy had hauled most of them home.

"We should carve the pumpkins," I said. "Please, Daddy, can we carve them?"

Sawyer groaned. Mikey lifted his head from Daddy's chest, his green eyes sharpening with immediate interest. Daddy laughed.

"Now?" Sawyer said, sounding exactly like a man who had been comfortable for approximately thirty seconds ago and was now being asked to move.

"Right now," I said, already trying to throw my blanket off and scramble to my feet. My legs were still a little shaky, which I chose to ignore completely. "It's the perfect time. We're all here, we're all..." I gestured vaguely at the three of us, in various states of undress and blanket-wrapped dishevelment. "...you know. Cozy. But we could be cozy and creative."

Daddy caught the edge of my blanket before I could fully escape.

"Absolutely not yet."

I stopped. "What?"

"Water first. Clothes second. Pumpkin carving third."

"But—"

"JJ."

"Fine."

He made all three of us drink a glass of water before he let us leave the room. Then we got dressed properly. I put my blue pajama shorts and white T-shirt back on and added a hoodie because Daddy reminded me we would eventually be going outside. Mikey changed back into his baby onesie. Sawyer pulled on sweatpants and a T-shirt. Daddy, naturally, looked as put together as if none of the previous hour had happened at all.

Then we migrated to the kitchen.

The kitchen was warm. Daddy put on some low lo-fi music that filled the space while the four pumpkins came out. Mine, Mikey's, and Sawyer's went on the kitchen table. Daddy's enormous one stayed on the counter because there wasn't enough room for all four without someone eventually knocking one onto the floor, and Daddy correctly identified me as the most likely culprit.

I picked up the medium pumpkin — my pumpkin — and turned it in my hands.

"Mine is going to be the most creative. I'm thinking something avant-garde. Maybe asymmetrical. Very modern."

Mikey had already found a marker and was examining his tiny pumpkin with the precision of a surgeon.

"Mine will be the cutest," he said.

Sawyer said nothing. He picked up another marker and stared at his big pumpkin.

"All right," Daddy said. "Here's how this is going to work."

He opened a drawer and pulled out one of the real kitchen knives, holding it up where all three of us could see it.

"The lids and the guts are my job."

I opened my mouth — because of course I did — and Daddy's eyes found mine before I could get a single word out.

"JJ," he said, his voice still warm and easy, but with that edge underneath it that meant he wasn't negotiating. "None of you are using the kitchen knives. I'm cutting the tops and scooping them out. After that, you can use the pumpkin-carving tools from the kit."

Sawyer made a sound that was almost a laugh. Mikey looked relieved.

"But Daddy—"

"The last time you helped scoop a pumpkin, you got pumpkin guts on the ceiling."

I went silent. Sawyer laughed outright.

"We still don't know how," he said.

"It was an accident."

"Obviously." Daddy's mouth twitched. "You three are going to sit there and draw your designs. I'll handle the messy part. Then you can carve them with the proper tools. That's the deal."

I pouted. I pouted hard, because it was worth a try, and also because pouting was free and sometimes worked on Daddy if I did it cute enough. He looked at me, the corner of his mouth twitching, and I knew he was fighting a smile. I also knew he wasn't going to budge, and that was probably for the best because, again, ceiling.

"Fine," I said, with all the grace of a toddler who'd been told he couldn't have a third cookie. "But I'm going to be very creative with my design to make up for it."

"I'd expect nothing less," Daddy said, and he reached for his enormous pumpkin — the one Mikey had picked out for him — and moved it farther onto the counter where he had room to work.

I realized with a little thrill that he was going to carve one too. Daddy didn't always participate in the crafts. Sometimes he just watched, the way he watched everything, with that amused attention. But when he did participate, he went all in.

"All right," he said. "Draw."

We drew. Mikey was already sketching on his tiny pumpkin. His tongue was between his teeth. His green eyes were narrowed to slits.

I grabbed a marker of my own and attacked my pumpkin with considerably less precision. I drew a face — asymmetrical, just like I'd promised, one eye bigger than the other, a lopsided grin that took up half the pumpkin's surface. It was, I decided immediately, a masterpiece.

Sawyer was the last to pick up a marker. He held it for a second, turning it in his fingers, and then drew two circles for eyes, a clean triangle for a nose, and a straight line for a mouth. He set the marker down like the job was complete.

"That's it?" I said.

"That's it," Sawyer said.

"That's the most boring pumpkin face I've ever seen in my entire life."

"It's classic," Sawyer said.

"I hate it," I said.

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"It's efficient."

I opened my mouth to argue, and Daddy's voice came from the counter, low and amused.

"JJ, let Sawyer draw it however he wants."

I closed my mouth.

Daddy worked through the pumpkins one at a time. He cut the tops off with clean movements, keeping the real knife on his side of the counter and well away from us. Then he scooped the insides into a big bowl. The seeds went into a separate one — he always saved them and roasted them later with salt and paprika, and they were some of the best things I'd ever eaten. I told him that every single year.

He did mine first because I was bouncing in my seat and making impatient noises. When he handed it back to me, hollowed out and clean, I pressed a kiss to his cheek.

"Thank you, Daddy. You're the best Daddy in the whole world."

He cupped my jaw with one hand.

"I know, baby."

I laughed so hard I almost dropped the pumpkin.

Mikey's came next. Daddy handled the tiny pumpkin with the same care he handled everything Mikey-related — gently, like it was something

precious. He scooped it clean and set it back in front of Mikey with both hands.

"Thank you, Daddy," Mikey said in that soft voice.

Daddy kissed the top of his head.

Sawyer's was next, and Daddy did it without ceremony because Sawyer didn't need ceremony. He just handed the pumpkin over when it was ready, and Sawyer took it with a nod.

Then Daddy did his own.

He cut the top off his enormous pumpkin — the one Mikey had picked, the one absurdly big compared with the others — and started scooping. I watched his forearms flex with the effort and made a sound that was absolutely not appropriate for a family pumpkin-carving activity.

Sawyer kicked me under the table.

"What?" I said. "I'm appreciating."

"Appreciate quietly."

Daddy didn't look up, but I saw his shoulders shake with laughter.

Once all the real knives were washed and put away, Daddy brought out the pumpkin-carving kit. The little serrated saws were much less impressive than the kitchen knife, which was probably exactly why he trusted us with them.

The carving started.

We all did things differently. Mikey worked slowly and carefully. I went fast and had to be reminded twice that I wasn't racing anybody. Sawyer was precise and boring.

Daddy carved a classic jack-o'-lantern into his enormous pumpkin, and somehow even that looked annoyingly professional.

"That's so good," I said, and I meant it completely, no teasing, no performance. "Daddy, that's really good."

He looked up at me, his eyes warm.

"Thank you, baby."

Then he went back to carving. When they were all done, we lined them up on the kitchen table and counter. They looked amazing.

"They're perfect," I said.

"They really are," Mikey agreed, giggling excitedly.

Daddy cleaned up all the carving tools before we did anything else, because apparently living with us had taught him never to leave unattended blades within reach even for thirty seconds.

Then he produced four little battery-powered tea lights. We carried the pumpkins outside one by one. Daddy made us put shoes on first because frost had already started settling over the front steps and the wood was slick.

The front yard was dark and quiet. The pine trees stood black against the sky, and the streetlights made pools of orange light on the road. The air was cold enough that my breath came out in clouds, and even with my hoodie on, the cold felt sharp against my face.

Daddy switched on the little lights one at a time and set them inside the pumpkins. The carved faces glowed. We lined them along the front steps. Four pumpkins in a row, each one different, each one ours. I took a picture of them, then forced everyone closer together so I could take a selfie of us in front of our pumpkins.

I stood on the porch with my arms wrapped around myself and looked at them.

"Happy Halloween," I said to all of them.

"Happy Halloween, baby," Daddy said.

We stood there for a while, watching the faces glow. Eventually Mikey started shivering, and Daddy immediately herded us back inside. The kitchen was still warm.

Daddy poured himself a bourbon now that every knife and carving tool was safely put away. Mikey made hot chocolate for the three of us, and we sat around the kitchen table with our drinks while Daddy spread the pumpkin seeds onto a tray.

A little while later, the smell of salt, paprika, and roasted pumpkin seeds started filling the house.

CHAPTER 23. JJ

The Big Day had finally arrived, and I could barely believe it. It was Halloween — one of those glorious years when the thirty-first landed on a Friday. Everyone had their costumes on. I was dressed as a pirate, which wasn't exactly the most creative costume in the world, but it was what we had for the day. Mikey was dressed as a baby, which barely even qualified as a costume for him, given the context, and Sawyer was Robin from Batman.

Daddy wasn't dressed as anything, and I told him so.

"That's not fair. That's so boring," I said.

"I'm dressed as a disciplinarian. Want to see, JJ?" he asked.

And then I saw that he was carrying the cane, which meant we'd probably better behave if we didn't want to end up with sore backsides.

"No thanks," I said quickly, giving him my best smile.

"Good," he said.

Behaving ourselves was definitely not on the agenda, though. Our plans were to be absolutely terrible that night — especially what I had in mind for Max. And the best news was that Bella had agreed to come check out the club. The plan was for her to meet Max, and if he liked her and agreed after they negotiated, she'd start him off with something light. Max had already told me I could give him the push he needed if he got scared, and we'd talked about the possibility of me arranging a surprise second Dom if he was comfortable with it. He just didn't know that I had Dominic in mind. Gustav had agreed to talk to Dominic separately if Max gave us the green light. Nobody was getting thrown into anything without being asked. I was meddling, not committing crimes.

I was so excited that night that I was practically vibrating in place, and thankfully Daddy figured it was just the Halloween excitement — no other hidden plan.

In the car, Mikey spent the whole ride clutching a little bag of pumpkin-shaped gummies he'd gotten at work — or claimed he'd gotten, because I seriously doubted the bank handed out Halloween candy to employees — and Sawyer kept asking annoying questions about my pirate costume.

"Why didn't you go as a little devil? It'd suit you better," he teased.

"Leave me alone, Sawyer," I said.

We got to The Hearth, and it was gorgeous, the way it always was for special events — decorated from top to bottom, a real spectacle. Fake spiderwebs covered the ceiling beams, real and plastic pumpkins were mixed together across the tables, and someone had swapped the usual amber lighting for stronger orange lights that gave everything a cozy horror-movie feel. I found myself wondering if Gustav had done all that himself or gotten some help — usually it was the former. That guy was insane and definitely a masochist, which wasn't surprising given the context.

I walked in and was immediately surprised, because Bella was already there — we'd only actually met that one time at the coffee shop, but we'd been texting nonstop since. Gustav had screened her beforehand and cleared her to come as my guest, and she'd already promised she understood that The Hearth wasn't somewhere she could advertise her professional services or look for clients. And she looked gorgeous — she'd been gorgeous since the first day I saw her, but now she was stunning in her Domme outfit. She wore fishnets, tiny leather shorts, and a leather corset too, which left her breasts on display. She'd done her eye makeup in black, which made her natural brown eyes pop, and her hair looked different from how it had at the coffee shop — loose now, falling almost to her waist, shiny and silky.

I went straight up to her.

"Wow, you look gorgeous," I said, and we hugged.

"Thanks for the invite," she said, smiling. "I'm really excited to finally see this place. I've heard about The Hearth forever, but I never managed to get in before."

"I'm excited you're here too," I said, and it was completely true.

"And you said you might have someone interested in doing a scene tonight?" she asked, adjusting one of her elbow-length leather gloves.

I nodded.

"He's my friend. It'll be his first time actually doing one, so I want you to be really careful with him."

"Obviously," she said. "I've worked with plenty of first-timers. But I'll negotiate with him myself before anything happens. I need to hear his limits from him, agree on a safeword, talk about what he wants tonight, what he doesn't want, and make sure he actually wants to scene with me."

"Yeah," I said. "Of course."

"And if he changes his mind halfway through, that's the end of it."

"Obviously."

She smiled at me.

"Good. Then introduce us when he gets here."

I felt that little thrill of satisfaction seeing the pieces fall into place almost exactly the way I'd pictured them.

But before we got started, I went around the place saying hi to my friends. Henry was there along with Lucy and a Black woman with braids I didn't know, who seemed to be a Domme.

"Hi, guys," I said.

"This is Naomi," Henry introduced her. "Domme, first time here too. See, JJ? Everyone's bringing new people tonight. You're not the only one making friends."

"I never said I was the only one," I said, a little offended.

I didn't want to tell them what I was planning — I wanted the identity of the surprise to stay a surprise.

We gathered at our usual table and started chatting. Henry was dressed as a vampire, and that also wasn't creative at all. Lucy was dressed as a cat — a black bodysuit, little ears, and whiskers drawn on her cheeks with eyeliner.

"I heard there's gonna be candy for the littles," Mikey told me, excited.

For the first time in a long while, he'd followed me over and come to stand near where my friends were — usually he stuck close to Daddy.

Maybe he was a little nervous because he knew about my plans for that night.

"Candy, Lucy?" Henry asked.

"Always," she answered very seriously, like it was a ridiculous question to even ask.

I found it funny, but I couldn't really focus on it — my head only had one thing in it.

"JJ," Sawyer said quietly, coming closer to me while the others talked. "We need to talk about this again."

"About what?" I asked, pretending not to know.

"You know what about. Bella. Max. All of it."

"We already talked about this. You agreed to help."

"I agreed to help if Max had actually consented," he said, eyes narrowing. "Does he know exactly what's happening tonight?"

"He knows I might help him get into a scene if he chickens out, because he specifically told me I could. And we talked about the possibility of a surprise second Dom joining or taking over if he was comfortable with that. He said he liked the idea."

"And Bella?"

"He hasn't agreed to Bella yet because he hasn't even met her," I admitted. "She's going to talk to him herself."

"Then it's not decided yet."

"I know."

"JJ."

"I know," I repeated, more defensively than I meant to. "If he doesn't like her, there's no scene. If he doesn't want a surprise anymore, Dominic doesn't get involved. Gustav is going to talk to Dominic separately anyway. I'm not throwing Max onto a piece of furniture and yelling surprise."

Sawyer stared at me for another second.

"Don't talk him into saying yes just because you want this to work."

That one irritated me, mostly because it landed a little too close to something I knew I was capable of doing without meaning to.

"I'm helping him."

"I know you are," Sawyer said, and his voice softened. "Just make sure you're helping him do what *he* wants, not what you want for him."

I didn't answer that.

He didn't say anything else either, but the words left a weird knot in my stomach that I couldn't completely ignore.

Thankfully Dominic had already arrived — otherwise I would've been even more nervous, worrying he might not show. He was near Daddy and Jeffrey, chatting and scanning the room, an easy smile on his face, which I hoped meant he was in a good mood and open to doing a scene if Gustav approached him later. He was dressed low-key, almost costume-free — just a black shirt and leather vest, which honestly already looked like a costume of something scary, given the reputation he had among the littles.

I went over to him quickly, just to investigate.

"Dominic! Happy Halloween," I said, cheerful.

"JJ," he said, with that polite nod that was practically a whole greeting coming from him. "Happy Halloween."

"You in the mood to do anything tonight? A scene, I mean."

He looked at me for a second with that measured expression I already knew well.

"Maybe. Depends who's available."

"Cool," I said, trying to sound completely casual, which probably didn't work at all, because Jeffrey chuckled next to him.

"What are you up to, JJ?" Jeffrey asked, amused. He was dressed as Frankenstein's monster, complete with green makeup, which was pretty funny.

"Nothing!" I said too fast and walked off before anyone could ask more questions.

That was enough information for me anyway. I wasn't going to recruit Dominic myself. I'd promised Sawyer Gustav would handle that part if Max gave us the green light.

Max didn't take long to arrive, to my delight. He looked the most gorgeous I'd ever seen him — full makeup done, and I couldn't quite tell if he was wearing some kind of costume or just a pretty, sexy outfit. He wore

a pink corset and tight pants that made his legs and hips look even better, and he seemed genuinely excited, smiling at us as soon as he saw us.

"Hey, guys," he said, coming closer, and we all greeted each other with hugs, the way we always did.

"You look so gorgeous," I told him. He blushed, because he was such a cutie.

"Thanks, buddy," he said. "You too."

"I'm dressed as Jack Sparrow. So I hope so, because he's very hot."

Everyone laughed.

"Where's Esteban?" I asked, looking around.

"He and Rick went to a vanilla family party tonight," Max said. "They promised to show up later. I was a little nervous coming alone, but..." He shrugged, with a small smile. "It's not as scary as it used to be."

That filled me with an enormous amount of pride. A few weeks ago, Max hadn't wanted to come back without Esteban or Rick. Now he'd walked through the doors alone.

"Max," I said, "do you actually want to do a scene tonight?"

I saw his smile dim a little. And this time I noticed.

"I don't know," he admitted. "I'm anxious."

"Nerves are okay," I said, forcing myself not to immediately tell him everything would be fine. Sawyer's voice was still in my head. "But you don't have to do anything just because we talked about it before. You can say no tonight."

His shoulders loosened slightly.

"I do want to," he said. "I think. I'm just scared."

"Okay. That's different." I put a hand on his shoulder. "I have a friend here tonight. Bella. She's a Domme, and she's really sweet. She's also a professional, but she knows The Hearth's rules, so she's here socially, not looking for clients. I told her you might be interested in a scene, but I didn't tell her your limits or decide anything for you. She wants to meet you and talk everything through herself."

His eyes went a little wide.

"A scene? Just like that, out of nowhere?"

"No. Not just like that," I said quickly. "You'd meet her first. Talk to her. Negotiate everything. If you don't like her, you don't do it. If you like her but don't feel ready, you don't do it. If you want to do something really small and stop after five minutes, that's fine too."

He bit his lip, thinking.

"And remember when we talked about me maybe arranging a surprise second Dom?" I asked. "That's still only if you want it. You wouldn't know who beforehand, but you'd know somebody else might be invited to join or take over, and Bella would check with you again before that happened. You can also say you don't want that anymore."

His blush deepened.

"No," he said quickly. Then his eyes widened. "I mean, no, I don't want to cancel that part. I still like that idea."

I smiled despite myself.

"Okay."

"But I'd want her to ask me again before it happened."

"Absolutely."

"And whoever it is would already know my limits?"

"Yes. Bella and Gustav would make sure of that. And he'd have to agree separately too. Nobody's getting ambushed."

Max took a slow breath.

"I guess... okay. If you think she's good."

I almost jumped on that answer. But *I guess* wasn't exactly the enthusiastic permission Sawyer had been drilling into my skull for weeks.

"Don't say yes because I think she's good," I told him. "Meet her first."

Max looked surprised.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and opened our conversation, scrolling until I found the message I'd saved specifically because I knew he'd eventually convince himself he was ridiculous for wanting any of this.

"Remember this?" I asked. "I'm not showing you this because it means you have to do anything tonight. You don't. I just don't want you backing out only because you're scared people will think you're desperate or that you'll do something wrong."

I showed him the screen.

i really wish i had the guts to ask for a scene someday, you know? like, for real, not just watching everyone else. but i'm scared of seeming desperate or doing it wrong in front of everyone

He looked at the screen for a second, and I watched recognition cross his face, followed by a light blush creeping up his cheeks.

"Oh. Yeah, I did send that," he said, a little embarrassed, but with a shy smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"You did," I said, putting my phone away. "And wanting it doesn't mean you have to do it tonight. But being nervous doesn't mean you have to run away from it either."

He looked across the room. I followed his eyes and realized he'd found Bella. She caught us looking and smiled, but she didn't come over. She just lifted one hand in a little wave and let Max look at her without putting any pressure on him.

Max took a deep breath, and I watched the decision settle into his shoulders.

"Okay," he said, firmer this time. "I want to meet her. And if we talk and it feels right, I want to do the scene."

My entire body wanted to start vibrating again. I restrained myself heroically. "And the surprise?" I asked.

His cheeks went pink again.

"Still yes. As long as she checks with me first."

"Deal."

He looked at Bella one more time. Then back at me.

"Okay," he said, smiling now. "Let's do this."

CHAPTER 24. SAWYER

I watched JJ's perfect plan unravel right in front of me, and the worst part was that he'd told me about it beforehand.

Not every detail. Not enough for me to know exactly what he was planning. But enough that I'd already warned him. Enough that I'd made him promise Max had actually consented, that nobody was going to be surprised with anything they hadn't agreed to, that Dominic would be asked separately.

And somehow I'd still spent the whole night with this knot in my stomach. Maybe because if there was one thing JJ wasn't good at, it was going slow.

The Hearth had that dark, electric Halloween atmosphere that night, everyone in costume, the orange lighting stronger than usual and throwing strange shadows across the walls covered in fake webs. The music had a darker undertone than the

usual pop, something heavy and instrumental that gave the whole place an almost horror-movie feel, and the sweet chemical smell of the fog machine mixed with pumpkin and cinnamon from somewhere near the food tables. Battery candles flickered across the heavy oak tables, making the whole club look warm and eerie at the same time.

It was beautiful, but there was a different energy in the air too. More people than usual. More faces I didn't recognize. The Halloween event had brought out some of the newer members from the open house, and that alone kept me slightly on edge, the feeling sitting low in my stomach without me knowing exactly what to do with it.

JJ was across the room with Bella.

I was standing beside Daddy because they hadn't brought the video-game setup out for Halloween. The main room was packed with scheduled scenes and events instead — candy for the littles, costume contests, whatever the hell "punishment hour" was supposed to become later. Jeffrey was nearby, along with Elizabeth, Cris — Gustav's Daddy — and a few other regulars.

I watched JJ talking to Bella with that typical enthusiasm of his, hands moving almost as fast as his mouth. Bella listened with her head tilted, smiling sometimes, but she didn't look swept up in his energy. Every so often she stopped him, said something, and waited until he answered before letting him continue.

That made me feel a little better. Then Max joined them.

The three of them stood together for a long time.

Long enough that I realized Bella really was negotiating with him, exactly like JJ had promised. She wasn't rushing. She showed Max something in her hand — a blindfold, I thought — and he touched it, then shook his head at something she asked. Bella nodded immediately and put it aside. She showed him a flogger next. Max touched the falls between his fingers while she talked.

JJ barely said anything. That surprised me more than anything. He stood beside them practically vibrating, but he let Bella and Max handle the conversation themselves. At one point Bella gestured toward one of the private rooms. Then toward the little stage in the center of the main space.

Max hesitated. I saw it from across the room. He looked at the stage, then at JJ. JJ smiled at him. Not pushing, exactly. Just excited. Max looked back at Bella. Then he nodded toward the stage.

My stomach tightened.

Maybe I was being unfair. Max was an adult. Bella had talked to him herself. He'd apparently chosen the stage. Gustav had screened Bella before she'd ever been allowed through the door, and she had more professional experience than half the people in that room.

Maybe everything really was fine. Still. I looked at Daddy. He was watching too.

"You worried?" he asked quietly.

"A little."

"About Bella?"

I shook my head. "Max."

Daddy watched the three of them for another moment.

"Keep watching," he said. I nodded.

Bella took Max onto the stage a few minutes later. Nobody dragged him. Nobody pulled him along. He walked beside her himself, still nervous but smiling

when JJ gave him an encouraging little fist pump from the edge of the crowd.

I almost laughed at that. Of course JJ had to make himself part of it somehow.

There was a sturdy wooden chair positioned in the center of the stage. Max sat when Bella gestured to it, and she crouched in front of him before doing anything else. I couldn't hear the words over the music, but I saw her speaking directly to him, saw Max answer.

She held up rope. He nodded. She touched one wrist. Waited. Another nod. Only then did she begin. That should have made me relax. Instead, the knot in my stomach stayed exactly where it was.

Bella tied his wrists to the chair arms loosely enough that I could see space between the rope and his skin, checking each one before moving to his ankles. She never stopped talking to him. Max kept answering.

Once she was done, she leaned close to say something to him. Max smiled. Then Bella stepped back and picked up the microphone.

"Happy Halloween, everyone," she said, her voice carrying easily through the room. A few people

nearby cheered. Max went red. Bella laughed. "Don't worry, sweetheart. They're looking because you're pretty."

That got another little cheer, and Max ducked his head. I saw JJ almost explode with happiness. He looked like his entire stupid plan was coming together exactly the way he'd dreamed it would.

Bella set the microphone aside. She picked up the flogger Max had handled before and moved behind him. The first few strikes were barely anything. Light. Across his thighs, then higher.

She checked in. "Color?"

"Green," Max answered.

I heard him even from where I stood. My shoulders loosened slightly. Fine. He was nervous. That didn't mean he wasn't enjoying himself. Bella continued, still light. Max's breathing changed. He started smiling again, then laughing when she dragged the soft ends of the flogger across his stomach instead of striking him.

JJ caught my eye from across the room and gave me the most obnoxious *see?* expression I'd ever witnessed in my life. I rolled my eyes at him. Maybe he'd been right.

For about thirty seconds.

Then Bella put the flogger down and walked around the chair. She crouched in front of Max again. I saw her ask something. Max nodded. She reached into the little case beside the chair and took out a black blindfold.

My stomach tightened again. She showed it to him first. Max looked at it for a long second. Then at the crowd. Then at JJ. JJ nodded at him before he seemed to catch himself. It was tiny. Probably unconscious. Just one eager little nod. *You can do it.* Max looked back at Bella. Then nodded too. Bella tied the blindfold over his eyes.

And everything changed. Not dramatically. If he'd started screaming, everyone would have noticed. Instead, Max simply went still. Bella touched his shoulder. He flinched. She said something to him, too low for me to hear. His mouth moved. I couldn't tell what he answered. Bella waited. Then touched him again, this time running her fingers gently down his arm. Max's shoulders climbed toward his ears.

I straightened. Beside me, Daddy did too. Bella must have noticed something, because she stopped.

She crouched in front of him again.

"Max?" I could hear his name this time. His chest was moving too quickly. Bella touched his knee. "Color for me."

Nothing. My stomach dropped. She didn't touch him again. "Max, sweetheart. I need a color." He swallowed. His mouth opened. Nothing came out. Bella reached up immediately and pulled the blindfold off.

The orange light hit his face. His eyes were huge. Too wide. There were already tears gathering along the bottom of them, and he looked around the room like he didn't understand how he'd gotten there.

Bella went completely still. "Scene's over," she said. Not loud.

And that was the second I was already moving.

"Daddy."

He was moving too. So was Dominic. I'd known Gustav had spoken to Dominic earlier. I didn't know what they'd agreed to, only that Dominic had apparently been willing to be the surprise second Dom if Max still wanted him when the time came. That didn't matter anymore. The scene was over. Dominic reached the stage half a step before Daddy

did. Bella was already loosening the rope around one of Max's wrists.

"Max," Dominic said. Max's eyes found him. And something in his face broke. Relief. Dominic stopped immediately instead of coming any closer.

"It's me," he said. "Can I come up there?"

Max nodded. Dominic stepped onto the stage. Bella got the second wrist free.

"I'm sorry," Max whispered, his voice cracking. Bella's head snapped up.

"No. Absolutely not."

Max started crying. Real crying. His shoulders shook once, then again, and he pressed both newly freed hands over his face.

"I thought I could do it."

"You didn't do anything wrong," Bella said.

Dominic crouched in front of him, leaving space between them. "Can I touch you?"

Max lowered his hands. Then nodded. Dominic put one hand against his knee. That was it. Max immediately grabbed his wrist with both hands.

Behind them, Daddy was already helping Bella with the knots around Max's ankles. I looked across

the room. JJ was standing frozen. The grin was gone. Completely. Mikey was beside him, one hand wrapped around JJ's arm. JJ looked at Max crying. Then at Bella. Then at Dominic. Then at me. And I watched understanding hit him. His whole face changed. He'd thought this was going to be the perfect moment. Max having his first scene. Dominic appearing. Some big romantic reveal that JJ could claim credit for until the end of time.

Instead, Max was sitting on a stage crying because the thing he'd wanted in theory had become too much once he was actually there. And JJ knew he'd helped put him there.

Daddy got the last rope free. Bella sat back on her heels. "I'm sorry," Max said again.

"Stop apologizing," she told him. Her voice was gentle but firm. "You gave me green until you couldn't. Then your body told me before your mouth could. That's why I was watching you."

Max wiped at his face. "I froze."

"That happens."

Dominic's hand was still under both of Max's. "Do you want to get off the stage?" he asked.

Max nodded immediately.

"Can I carry you, or do you want to walk?"

Max looked at him. "Carry me."

Dominic stood and lifted him carefully.

Max curled into him almost at once, face disappearing into the side of Dominic's neck, arms wrapping around his shoulders. That was what JJ had wanted. Dominic holding Max. Except there was nothing triumphant about it now. No romance-novel moment. No audience applause.

Just someone scared being carried somewhere quieter. Daddy turned toward JJ. He didn't need to raise his voice. He lifted one hand and crooked two fingers.

Come here.

JJ came immediately. So did Mikey. I followed because there was no chance in hell I was staying behind. Bella came too, but Daddy stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

"You did exactly what you were supposed to do," he told her. She looked miserable anyway.

"I should've caught it sooner."

"You caught it when his responses changed."

"I knew he was nervous."

"Nervous isn't the same as withdrawn consent."

She nodded slowly. Daddy squeezed her shoulder once. "Give him some space. We'll talk later."

She looked over toward the hallway Dominic had carried Max into. "Tell him I'm sorry he got scared."

"I will."

Then Daddy looked at the three of us. "You. With me." JJ's face went white.

Gustav met us near the hallway. One look at Daddy's face and he didn't ask questions.

"I've got an empty room," he said. Of course he did. Gustav always somehow had exactly what people needed before they asked for it.

He led us to one of the private scene rooms off the quieter hallway and opened the door. The room was simple — a double bed, a couch, a few pieces of equipment stored neatly along one wall, a TV switched off in the corner, and a small attached bathroom.

Daddy waited until all three of us were inside. Then he closed the door. Nobody sat down. JJ looked like he wanted to disappear. Mikey had gone quiet enough that I knew he was slipping deeper into little

space from the stress, twisting his fingers together in front of his stomach. Daddy crossed his arms.

"What happened?"

JJ swallowed.

"I don't know."

Daddy's expression hardened. "Try again."

"I thought—" JJ stopped. His voice broke immediately. He looked down at the floor. "I thought he wanted it."

"He did want a scene," Daddy said. "That isn't the question."

JJ's eyes started filling. Daddy continued. "What did you arrange?"

JJ dragged in a breath. "Bella. The stage. I knew he wanted to try something public eventually, and he said yes when she asked him. And the surprise Dom thing. He told me I could arrange that if she checked with him again before it happened."

Daddy nodded once. "Anything else?"

JJ shook his head. "No random people. I swear. Bella was the only one touching him. Dominic was supposed to be the surprise, but Gustav was asking him separately. I did what Sawyer told me."

My stomach twisted. Because he had. Technically. That was almost worse. Daddy's eyes moved to me for half a second, then back to JJ.

"Did you?"

JJ looked confused. "I—yes?"

"Did you help Max make his own decision tonight?"

JJ's mouth opened. Nothing came out. Daddy waited.

"You knew he was nervous," he said.

JJ nodded.

"You knew this was his first scene."

Another nod.

"You knew he'd never even come to The Hearth alone until tonight."

JJ's eyes were spilling now. "Yes."

"And when Bella gave him the choice between a private room and that stage, what did you do?"

JJ froze. I knew exactly what Daddy meant. The nod. That tiny, eager little nod I'd seen from across the room. JJ knew too. His face crumpled. "I just wanted him to know he could do it."

"I know."

"I didn't tell him he had to."

"I know."

"I wouldn't do that," he said, now crying.

"I know, baby." Daddy's voice softened on the last word, but he didn't let JJ escape what he was saying. "Pressure doesn't always look like an order." Daddy stepped closer. "You were excited. Max knew you were excited. You've spent weeks telling him how perfect this would be, how much fun he'd have, how much you wanted him and Dominic to work out. Tonight, when he hesitated, he looked at you."

"I didn't mean to."

"I know."

That made JJ cry harder. "I didn't mean to make him do anything."

Daddy reached up and took JJ's wrist gently, pulling his hand away from his mouth.

"Look at me," Daddy said. JJ did. Barely. "You did not force Max into that scene." JJ's breath hitched. I felt pretty sorry for him. "He negotiated with Bella. She gave him choices. He said yes. He used his words. Those things matter." JJ stared at him through wet lashes. "But so does everything around the yes," Daddy continued. "Especially with someone

inexperienced. Especially when someone wants badly to make the people they care about happy."

JJ's shoulders shook. "I should've seen it that he might have felt pressured and unable to say no."

"Yes." Daddy didn't soften that one. "You normally do," Daddy said. "That's what's bothering me most. You are usually the first person in the room to notice when Max is overwhelmed. You noticed at the open house before any of us did." JJ nodded miserably. "But tonight you wanted your plan to work so badly that you kept interpreting every nervous reaction as something he needed help pushing through."

A tear dropped off JJ's chin. "I fucked up."

"Yes."

Mikey started crying too. Quietly. Of course he did. JJ looked over immediately. "No, Mikey."

Mikey's face scrunched. "I knew about the plan."

"You didn't know this was going to happen."

"I knew you wanted to help him," he said.

"That's not doing anything wrong."

Daddy looked at Mikey. "JJ's right. You did nothing wrong tonight, sweetheart." Mikey's

shoulders dropped slightly. Then Daddy looked at me. My stomach sank.

"And you."

I swallowed. "I should've stopped it," I said, ready for the scolding.

"No." The answer came so quickly that I actually looked up. Daddy uncrossed his arms. "Sawyer, you are not responsible for stopping every decision your brothers make."

"But—"

"No," he said it in that tone. I closed my mouth. "You raised your concerns with JJ before the scene. You made him clarify Max's consent. You watched. And when you saw Max stop responding, what did you do?"

"I called you. But it still feels like I should've done more."

Daddy came closer to me. His hand settled on the back of my neck. The tension in my shoulders cracked almost instantly. "You're his brother, Soy." I swallowed. "Not his keeper. I am responsible for him, not you."

That hit harder than I wanted it to. "I know."

His fingers tightened slightly against the back of my neck. "Your responsibility is to speak when something feels wrong. You did. Your responsibility is not to predict every possible mistake JJ might make and prevent it before it happens."

From beside me, JJ sniffed. "Good luck with that anyway." I looked at him. He was still crying. Still managed to be a little shit. Daddy looked like he was fighting the smallest smile. Then he turned serious again.

"JJ." Daddy's tone could make anybody freeze. JJ straightened. "You are done with scenes and activities tonight."

His face fell. He didn't argue. "Okay, Daddy."

"You will stay with me. No organizing anything. No matchmaking. No 'helping' anybody into anything. You can talk to your friends. You can have candy. You can watch. But tonight you're keeping your hands off everyone else's decisions."

JJ nodded. "Yes, Daddy."

"I'm not deciding anything else while we're all upset."

JJ wiped his face.

"Am I grounded from The Hearth?"

"Not tonight."

JJ's mouth trembled. Daddy reached up and wiped beneath one of his eyes with his thumb. "We're going to talk about consequences tomorrow, after we've spoken to Max and everyone has slept."

"I'm sorry."

"I know you are."

That almost made him fall apart again. Daddy pulled JJ against his chest. JJ went immediately, pressing his face into Daddy's shirt, shoulders shaking. Daddy held him. No contradiction. JJ had screwed up but Daddy was still going to hold him.

After a few seconds, JJ's voice came muffled from against his chest.

"Please don't ban Bella."

Daddy's hand stopped briefly on his back. "I'm not banning Bella."

JJ pulled back enough to look at him. "It's not her fault," JJ said.

"I agree."

Relief crossed his face. "She negotiated with Max. She stopped when he stopped responding. She did what she was supposed to do."

There was a knock at the door. Daddy stepped away from us and opened it. Gustav stood outside. "Dominic's with Max in the sensory room," he said. "Bella's sitting outside. Max asked for some space from everyone else."

Daddy nodded. "Thank you."

Gustav's eyes flicked toward JJ. JJ immediately looked like he wanted to crawl into the carpet. But Gustav didn't look angry. Just concerned. "He asked me to tell you he's okay," Gustav said. "Overwhelmed. Embarrassed. But okay."

JJ's eyes filled again. "Is he mad at me?"

Gustav hesitated. That was answer enough to make JJ's face collapse. "He's not furious," Gustav said carefully. "He said he knows you were trying to help."

"But?"

"He also said he felt like everyone was so excited for him that he didn't want to disappoint anybody."

JJ shut his eyes. There it was. Exactly what Daddy had said. Gustav continued. "He wants some time before he talks about it."

"Okay," JJ whispered.

Daddy put his hand between JJ's shoulder blades.
"That's what we're going to give him."

Gustav nodded.

"And Dominic?" Daddy asked.

"Fine. Protective. Annoyed with himself for not noticing sooner."

"Of course he is."

That almost made me laugh, because apparently everyone in this building had independently decided Max's panic was personally their fault.

Gustav left. Daddy looked at us. "Mikey, you can go back to the main room and play if you want. Sawyer, same. Neither of you is in trouble."

Mikey looked horrified by the suggestion. "No."

Daddy raised an eyebrow. Mikey immediately moved closer to JJ and wrapped both arms around his waist. JJ made a broken little sound and hugged him back.

"I'm staying," Mikey said into his chest. I sighed.

"Yeah. Me too."

JJ looked at me. His eyes were red and swollen.
"You don't have to."

"I know." I shoved his shoulder lightly. "I'm still staying."

His mouth twitched. Daddy watched the three of us. Something in his face softened. "All right."

We went back to the main room together. The Halloween party had kept going while we were gone. It felt strange that the whole world hadn't stopped just because ours had gone sideways for half an hour.

Daddy sat at one of the tables and JJ took the chair directly beside him without being told. Mikey took the one on JJ's other side. I sat across from them. Nobody said much. JJ watched the room but didn't insert himself into anything. That might have been the biggest sign in the world that he understood how badly he'd misjudged things.

After a while, Bella came over. She stopped a few feet from the table. "Can I sit?"

Daddy nodded toward the empty chair. She sat across from JJ. JJ immediately started crying again.

"I'm sorry."

Bella's expression softened. "Hey."

"I screwed everything up."

"You got overexcited, like a little puppy."

"I pressured him."

"A little," she said. JJ flinched. Bella didn't rescue him from it. "But I should've noticed that too," she continued. "He told me yes. He picked the stage. He gave me green. But I could've asked more questions about why he was choosing the bigger option for his first time."

JJ wiped his face. "Are you mad at me?"

"No."

"Really?!"

"Really. But next time you decide to play matchmaker, maybe don't also try to direct the entire movie," she said.

I snorted. JJ gave me a wounded look. Bella smiled slightly. Then she looked at Daddy.

"He froze when the blindfold went on. Before that, he was nervous but responsive. I don't think anybody could've known for sure that would be the trigger."

Daddy nodded. "Sometimes you only learn a limit by reaching it."

"Exactly."

JJ still looked miserable. "So this wasn't all because of me?"

Bella considered that. "It wasn't all because of you. But you made it harder for him to admit he wanted something smaller because you were so excited."

He nodded. "I get it." And for once, I thought maybe he actually did.

Bella reached across the table, offering her hand palm-up between them. JJ looked at Daddy first. Daddy nodded. JJ took her hand.

"He's okay," she said.

JJ breathed. "I know."

"No. I mean it. He's shaken up. He might decide he never wants a public scene again. Or he might want one six months from now with completely different rules. Either answer is okay."

JJ nodded again. Safety didn't mean nothing bad or unexpected ever happened. This was part of kink, actually: RACK, risk aware consensual kink.

Across the room, the door to the quieter hallway opened. Dominic came out first. Max was beside him. Walking on his own. Their hands weren't touching, but they were close enough that Dominic's arm nearly brushed his with every step. JJ saw them. His whole body tensed, but he stayed exactly where he was.

Max looked across the room. His eyes found JJ. JJ gave him a tiny smile. Max watched him for a second. Then he gave a small smile back. JJ looked less miserable, and that was enough.

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CHAPTER 25. MIKEY

I couldn't stop thinking about Max crying.

Even after Daddy told us he was okay. Even after Max came back out of the quieter hallway with Dominic beside him and gave JJ that tiny smile from across the room. Even after the Halloween party picked itself back up around us like nothing had happened.

I was still so sad. The whole room was buzzing with that party atmosphere, orange lights flickering, music playing, people laughing and moving between tables in costumes, but everything felt wrong to me now, like Halloween had suddenly turned into something sad.

JJ was sitting directly beside Daddy, exactly where Daddy had told him to stay. He wasn't allowed to participate in any scenes or activities for the rest of the night, and he wasn't allowed to organize, arrange, matchmake, help, or interfere with anybody else's decisions. He'd been quiet ever since we came back out of the private room, which was so unlike JJ that it made the knot in my stomach worse.

Sawyer was sitting across from us. Daddy had already told both of us that we weren't in trouble, but Sawyer had decided to stay anyway. I hadn't even really decided anything. I was just standing there beside Daddy's chair, staring down at my hands, my eyes stinging every time I remembered Max's face on that stage.

Daddy noticed, because he always noticed. He turned toward me and held out one hand.

"Come here, sweetheart."

I went immediately. He pulled me between his knees first and looked up at me.

"You're very little right now, aren't you?"

I nodded.

"Do you want words, or do you want quiet?"

That almost made me cry all over again.

"Quiet," I whispered. Daddy reached into the bag he'd brought with our things and pulled out my paci-gag. It looked almost like a ball gag, except there was a pacifier instead of a ball, with soft straps that buckled behind my head. I liked it when I was really little because once Daddy fastened it, I didn't have to decide whether I should talk. I could just stop.

"You want this one?" I nodded quickly. "You want Daddy to buckle it?" Another nod. "Good boy."

He pressed the pacifier gently against my lips. I opened my mouth and took it, and he fastened the strap behind my head, checking the fit with his fingers before kissing my forehead.

"Lap." I climbed onto him. Daddy wrapped one big arm around my back and settled me against his chest. "You stay right here with me until you tell me you want something different. You don't need to talk to anybody. You don't need to fix anything. You don't need to take care of anybody. Understand?"

I nodded against his shirt.

"Good."

That was exactly what I needed. I curled against him and let the familiar weight of his arm hold me together. His shirt smelled like him, and his body was warm underneath me, and gradually the rest of the room started feeling farther away.

Daddy went back to talking quietly with Elizabeth and Jeffrey. Sawyer stayed nearby. JJ barely spoke at all. Every once in a while Daddy's hand moved slowly over my back, or his arm tightened around me for a second.

I knew he was still thinking about Max too.

After a while, Daddy looked down at me. I must have tensed again without realizing it. His fingers touched my cheek.

"You still thinking it's somehow your fault?"

My eyes filled immediately. I looked down. Daddy tipped my chin back up.

"No."

I blinked at him.

"JJ made a mistake tonight," he said quietly. "We talked about it. He's going to have consequences for it after we've all slept and everyone's calmer. But you didn't do anything wrong." I tried to look toward JJ. Daddy gently turned my face back. "Eyes on me, baby."

I obeyed.

"You knew your brother wanted to help his friend. You didn't know every detail. You didn't pressure Max. You didn't arrange the scene. And when things went wrong, you cared about him."

My throat hurt around the pacifier. Daddy's thumb moved across my cheek. "You don't have to punish yourself for something you didn't do." I sniffled. His eyes warmed. "That's my job anyway, remember?"

A tiny laugh came out around the pacifier. "There he is," Daddy murmured. I leaned forward and pressed my forehead against his. "You're my good boy, Mikey. Being sad because somebody got scared doesn't make you guilty. It means you care about him."

The knot in my chest loosened a little. Daddy tapped a finger against the pacifier. "Want this off?" I shook my head hard. He chuckled. "Then you can stay right here as long as you want." I curled back into him. He's the best Daddy in the whole world.

Sometimes I still had those thoughts that I didn't deserve how much he cared for me, that maybe I was too spoiled or too needy or too small. But I knew better than to let myself sit in those thoughts for long. Daddy had spent too much time teaching all of us that needing care wasn't the same thing as being a burden.

A little while later, I saw Max and Dominic walking toward us. Max's eyes were still a little red, but he looked much better. Not glowing, exactly. Not like nothing had happened. Just calmer. Dominic walked close beside him without touching him, like he was making sure Max knew he was there without crowding him. I instinctively hid my face against Daddy's neck.

"Mikey?" Max said. I peeked out. He smiled. Daddy's hand rubbed my back. Max came closer. "You don't have to hide from me. I got overwhelmed," he said. "I thought I could handle more than I actually could, and then when the blindfold went on, I froze."

Daddy nodded. "That wasn't you failing."

"I know that now," Max said. Dominic gave him a look. Max smiled faintly.

"I'm working on helping him," Dominic said. Daddy's mouth twitched.

"Good."

"I wish I'd been able to say my safeword," Max continued, "but Bella noticed anyway. She stopped. Everybody stopped."

"That's what they're supposed to do," Daddy said. "Words matter, but they're not the only thing people watch in a scene."

Max nodded. "I still want to get better at speaking up sooner."

"That's a good goal," Daddy said. "Just don't turn freezing into something you blame yourself for."

"I won't."

Dominic cleared his throat lightly. There was something different about him. Not completely different. He was still Dominic — calm, controlled, looking like he could terrify half the room just by raising one eyebrow. But he looked almost... happy.

JJ apparently noticed too, because for the first time in ages, he sat up straighter.

"What?" he asked suspiciously. Dominic looked at Max. Max immediately went pink. JJ pulled my face farther out of Daddy's neck. "What?" JJ repeated, louder.

Daddy gave him a look. JJ lowered his voice. "What?"

Max started smiling. "Dominic asked me on a date."

JJ froze. I froze. Sawyer looked up. Dominic's mouth curved into the smallest smile.

"And he said yes," Dominic said.

JJ made a strangled sound. "OH MY GOD—"

"Inside voice." Daddy said. JJ physically clapped both hands over his mouth. His whole body was vibrating. Max laughed.

"We talked for a long time," he said. "We're not doing anything official. We're not starting a dynamic tonight. We're just going to go on a date and take things slowly."

Dominic nodded. "Very slowly."

"And Dominic said he'll stay with me tonight if I want him to."

"I will," Dominic said. Max looked at him.

"I want him to."

The fondness in Dominic's expression made my chest feel warm. JJ looked like he was about to explode again. Max stopped in front of him. "We're okay, JJ."

JJ's mouth trembled. "I'm sorry, Max."

"It's okay. I know. We're okay," Max smiled. JJ smiled too. Daddy stroked JJ's hair once.

"Good boy."

JJ closed his eyes for just a second and leaned into the touch. Everything was okay.

A little later, Daddy looked down at me again.

"You ready to have that off yet?"

I thought about it. Then nodded. Daddy carefully unbuckled the paci-gag and pulled it free. My jaw felt a little strange after being quiet for so long, and I licked my lips. Daddy kissed my forehead.

"Better?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Because I heard they're about to start trick-or-treating."

My eyes widened. "Really? Can I go?"

"You can."

I actually felt myself light up. Max was sitting there next to Dominic. "What about Max?"

Max laughed. "I'm absolutely going."

"What about JJ and Sawyer?" I asked. JJ looked hopeful despite clearly trying not to. Daddy considered him.

"JJ is still sitting out the organized activities tonight." JJ's shoulders slumped. "But," Daddy continued, "there's nothing stopping his brother from bringing him back some candy."

JJ's head snapped up. "Really?"

"I'll get you a whole bag, bro!" I exclaimed. JJ's expression softened immediately. Then I looked at Sawyer. "You too."

Sawyer frowned. "I'm not being punished, but I'm not trick-or-treating. I'm twelve, not five."

"Okay, but I'm still bringing you a bag! You like candy!" I said, excited. I climbed out of Daddy's lap and immediately went for the little pumpkin bags stacked near the entrance.

I grabbed three. One for me. One for JJ. One for Sawyer whether he liked it or not. Max joined me with a little bag decorated with a black cat, and we headed toward the main room hand in hand.

A line of Littles was already forming. Lucy was still in her kitten costume, bouncing from foot to foot with excitement. Henry was dressed as a vampire and talking animatedly to someone I didn't know. A bunch of other Littles and Middles were gathering too, costumes everywhere, bags ready.

Gustav was at the front organizing everything with a clipboard in his hand, which was already funny by itself, but even funnier because he was dressed as a mummy, strips of white fabric wrapped around his body. Even on Halloween, Gustav apparently couldn't stop managing things.

"All right, everybody!" he announced. "We're going table to table. Each table has someone handing out candy. Be polite, say trick or treat, don't steal from the bowls, and if I catch anybody going through the line twice, I'm telling your Doms."

A chorus of offended noises went up. Gustav smiled. The line started moving. The first table was Elizabeth's. Lucy was already hovering around her even though she was supposed to be trick-or-treating with the rest of us. Elizabeth had a huge bowl full of colorful gummies.

"Trick or treat!" Max and I said together. Elizabeth laughed and dropped a handful into each of our bags.

"You two look adorable."

"Thank you!" I said. Her eyes went to the extra bags hanging from my wrist.

"Planning ahead?"

"They're for my brothers."

"Of course they are."

She added a couple extra gummies to each one. I giggled and thanked her.

The next table was Jeffrey's. He'd gone as Frankenstein's monster, complete with green makeup that was already starting to melt slightly from the heat in the room. He had bat-shaped chocolates.

"Where's JJ?" he asked while dropping candy into our bags.

"With Daddy."

Jeffrey paused.

"That serious?"

I nodded. He didn't laugh. He just added another chocolate to JJ's bag. "Tell him happy Halloween."

"I will."

We kept moving.

Cris, Gustav's Daddy, was dressed as a warlock and had pumpkin-shaped cookies he'd made himself, still slightly warm. Naomi, the new Domme I'd seen earlier, had skull-shaped lollipops. Someone else had tiny bags of candy corn.

Even Rex was there in full pup gear beside Esteban, helping hand out candy. When Max and I reached their table, Rex barked twice at us. Max laughed.

"Trick or treat, puppy."

Rex shoved his nose toward the bowl. Esteban sighed.

"He thinks that means he gets to choose how much candy you receive."

Rex barked.

"One handful."

Another bark.

"One."

Rex dramatically dropped his head. Max and I both started laughing. Esteban gave us our candy while Rex watched like he'd suffered a terrible injustice. The sadness I'd been carrying started fading by degrees.

"Are you having fun?" Max asked while we waited for the next table.

"So much."

And it was true.

"Me too," he said, looking down at his bag, which was already getting pretty full. "I've never done this before."

"What?"

"Trick-or-treating like this."

I stared at him, my mouth dropping. "Never?"

He shook his head. "When I was actually a kid, my parents wouldn't let me go out asking for candy. They thought it was dangerous."

That made my heart hurt. "That's so sad."

He shrugged. "It was normal to me."

"Well, now you're doing it. And you've got a whole bunch of people looking out for you."

Max smiled, actually happy. "Yeah!"

I bumped my shoulder against his. "And Dominic."

His smile got bigger. "Yeah. Him too."

We kept going table to table. One had sugar-free candy for anyone who needed it. Another had little wrapped caramel apples. A few people were handing out tiny Halloween toys along with candy — plastic spiders, little bouncing eyeballs, glow-in-the-dark skeletons. Even Bella was handing candy, and I was happy that she got included.

By the time we finished the whole loop, all four bags were full. I felt weirdly proud looking at them.

"Should we take those back?" Max asked.

"Yes!" I exclaimed. We headed toward Daddy's table. JJ was still sitting beside him. He looked up when he saw us coming. Then he saw the bags. He tried very hard to look uninterested. He failed.

"This one's yours, big bro," I said, proud of myself, and I held the pumpkin bag out. JJ stared at it. His face changed. The guarded expression disappeared, and underneath it was that soft look he got whenever something hit him harder than he'd expected.

"You actually got some for me?"

"Of course."

He took the bag carefully.

"Even after everything?"

I looked at him like that was the dumbest question I'd ever heard.

"You're my brother."

That was it. His eyes immediately filled.

"Oh my God," Sawyer muttered. "Don't start crying again."

JJ flipped him off without looking away from me. Daddy made a warning sound. JJ lowered the finger.

"Sorry."

I giggled. JJ looked back down at the candy. "Thanks, Mikey." His voice was quiet. "Really."

"You're welcome."

Then I held Sawyer's bag out toward him. He stared at it. He took the bag.

"Thanks."

I grinned. "Knew you wanted one!"

"Don't get smug."

Max stepped closer to JJ. JJ immediately looked guilty again.

"Max—"

"I know," Max said, laughing. JJ stopped. "I know you didn't mean to hurt me. We're okay."

Everything was okay again. We had friends and candy. Halloween wasn't ruined after all.

CHAPTER 26. SULLIVAN

The morning was quiet the way it always was after something loud. Through the bedroom window, the four carved pumpkins sat on the front step in a line, already starting to soften at the edges after Halloween, their little battery lights switched off.

I stood at the foot of the bed and waited. Three bedrooms, three boys who knew we still had something to talk about.

"Boys." My voice carried. Not loud. Didn't need to be. "Master bedroom. Now."

I heard the shuffle. The creak of floorboards, the soft padding of bare feet. They'd been expecting this.

They filed in one by one. JJ first, his blond hair sleep-mussed and his blue eyes already wide, his bottom lip pushing out into a pout he probably didn't even know he was making. He was in a ratty T-shirt

and white briefs. Behind him came Mikey, smaller, quieter, green eyes nervous even though I'd already told him the night before that he wasn't in trouble. He'd slept in a T-shirt and briefs, his arms folded loosely over his chest. Last came Sawyer, broad-shouldered and serious, his brown eyes fixed on me with that look he got whenever he was preparing himself to take responsibility for something whether it belonged to him or not.

They stopped in front of me.

"Sit," I said. Mikey immediately climbed onto the edge of the bed. Sawyer sat beside him.

JJ started to follow.

"Not you, baby."

He froze. His eyes flicked toward his brothers. Then back to me.

"Kneel."

His expression changed. He knelt on the hardwood in front of me. Mikey's brow furrowed. Sawyer looked like he wanted to say something, but he stayed quiet. I let the silence settle.

"What happened yesterday was serious," I said. "And we're going to finish talking about it now."

JJ looked down. I turned toward Mikey first.

"You are not being punished. You did nothing wrong. You knew JJ wanted to help Max. You did not know how the night would unfold, you did not pressure Max, and when everything went wrong, you cared about him."

Mikey nodded slowly.

"I know you still feel bad," I continued. "Feeling bad because somebody you care about got scared is not the same as being guilty."

"Okay, Daddy," he said, always obedient.

"Good boy."

Then I looked at Sawyer. "You aren't being punished either."

"I should've—"

"No. We already discussed this."

"I know." Sawyer swallowed. "I still feel like I should've caught it earlier."

"That's a feeling. Not a responsibility."

His gaze dropped. "You do not have to prevent every mistake JJ makes in order to be a good big brother."

From the floor, JJ muttered:

"That sounds impossible anyway."

Sawyer's mouth twitched. I looked down. JJ immediately straightened.

"Sorry."

"Mm-hm."

Then I turned my attention fully to him. JJ's eyes dropped again.

"You."

His shoulders hunched. I put two fingers under his chin. "Look at me." He did. Barely. "I am not disappointed in *you*. Only at the choice you made. Those are not the same thing. I'm not scolding you anymore. You apologized. Max is well. But there is going to be a consequence. I want you to feel this was serious and feel that you are forgiven afterwards. Are you okay with that?"

"Yes, Daddy," he said, trembling.

I got up. I looked at Mikey and Sawyer.

"You two can stay if you want. Or you can leave."

Neither moved. Of course they didn't. JJ glanced toward them. Sawyer leaned back against the headboard.

I sat on the bed and patted my thigh.

"Come here, baby," I told JJ. He stood and came over with considerably less drama than usual. He laid himself across my lap. I rested my hand on the small of his back. I rubbed his back once.

Then I began.

I kept the spanking hard, nothing like the playful impact he usually tried to provoke out of me. Didn't tease him. Didn't let him turn it into a performance either. It was only my palm against his butt, which was getting warmer and warmer, pink, and then red, and then crimson. He started struggling, but I saw him making effort to be in place. His breathing got shakier as the warmth built. The first tears came quietly, more from emotion than pain, and I slowed instead of escalating.

That was enough. I rested my hand against his back.

"Tell me what you're learning."

He swallowed.

"That helping isn't deciding for somebody."

"Good." I rubbed slow circles between his shoulder blades. Then, I kept going until I saw he was visibly struggling. I gave him a few final measured swats, then stopped. No belt. No escalating until he broke.

No making him prove anything. Just enough for the ritual his mind needed.

I kept my hand resting against him until his breathing started evening out again.

"It's done. The spanking is done. You understand?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"You're forgiven."

That broke him. JJ covered his face with one hand and started crying properly. I gathered him up before he could apologize for that too. He curled against my chest, all long limbs and damp cheeks and messy blond hair. I held him. Mikey immediately crawled closer. Sawyer followed more slowly, but he came too. Mikey wrapped his arms around JJ from one side. Sawyer put a hand on the back of JJ's neck from the other.

JJ laughed once through the tears. "You're crushing me."

Nobody moved. Good. I kissed the top of his head.

"That's because you're dramatic," Sawyer said, that forever banter going on between them.

"I'm emotionally fragile," JJ said.

"You're annoying," Sawyer answered. JJ turned enough to glare at him.

"I was having a moment."

"You've been having a moment since 1998."

JJ gasped. Mikey giggled. I laughed too. But then I looked at all three of them. I had one more thing to say.

"One more thing."

They quieted.

"What happened yesterday does not become family ammunition," I said, serious. Sawyer nodded immediately. JJ blinked. "No jokes about Max freezing. No throwing this mistake back in JJ's face during an argument next month. No making Sawyer responsible for failing to predict it. No Mikey deciding he somehow caused it through association."

"Okay, Daddy," they said, although JJ mumbled, Mikey said it enthusiastically, and Sawyer said 'yes, sir' instead.

"Good."

I squeezed JJ's bum once more before letting him go.

"Go shower. Then breakfast."

JJ stood gingerly. His pout returned. A little theatrical this time. That was better too.

"And Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"Can we have Halloween candy with breakfast, pretty please with sugar on top?"

"No."

He looked devastated.

"Why are you like this?"

Sawyer laughed. I pointed at the door.

"Go."

They went. All three together. JJ complaining. Sawyer calling him ridiculous. Mikey telling them both he thought there were still pumpkin cookies downstairs. I listened until their voices disappeared into the hall. Then I looked out the window where Bola slept, at four pumpkins sitting side by side on the front step.

Still there. A little battered. A little softer than the day before. Still grinning.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roan Solano writes MM romance about rough men, complicated boys, unconventional relationships, and the soft places they build for one another.

His stories lean into caretaking, kink, found family, hurt/comfort, and men discovering that being loved can be every bit as terrifying—and every bit as necessary—as anything else they’ve survived.

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