



**CHIP'S**  
*Forever Daddy*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**SAMMI CEE**

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# **CHIP'S FOREVER DADDY**

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*Love On Tap: Pain & Healing Book  
Two*

**SAMMI CEE**

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# TAKODA UNIVERSE

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**Did you know the *Takoda Universe* includes three more series?**

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Seven years after the fourth book in the Takoda Outreach Series, come along as Archie—who's all grown up—and his waiter friends from The Tap Tavern get their HEAs!!!

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***Love On Tap 2: Pain & Healing***

Do you remember Archie's brother PJ? How about PJ's best friend Joel. They start this series out with a fun novella of best friends to lovers.

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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*Fun Fact: The first time I mentioned Ollie, his name was supposed to be a placeholder until I thought of a name for my strong, silent doorman. Why Ollie? Because that's my favorite character in Macy Blake's universe. LOL. When I realized what I'd done, I told her, and we both had a good laugh. So if you don't know her Ollie, you're missing out!*

*Grab Sweet Nothings and discover The Chosen One Universe!*

*Thank you, Macy!!! <3*



# *Chapter One*

## CHIP

Unbidden, the trembling started with the sound of the garage door activating and rumbling open. I curled farther into myself on my bed, trying to make myself smaller. I'd clicked off my bedside lamp at the same time my boyfriend's office closed, just to make sure the house was dark and silent before he arrived home. My chores for the day were all done, his dinner waiting on a plate in the microwave, so there was really no reason for him to seek me out.

It had been six days since he'd thrown me into my room, into my prison where I remained during his at-home hours. But I wanted to stay here, preferring it to his company. I didn't even mind the long list of tasks that he left me on the refrigerator each morning. Keeping busy helped distract me from my current situation. It helped with the loneliness.

The sound of rattling keys, the banging of a briefcase on the table, the pounding of polished shoes as he paced downstairs was all purposeful. Out in public, he appeared elegant and refined, moving as gracefully as a ballerina. Not here at home, though. Like everything else, what the public saw was nothing but a façade, a lie.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.* His heavy footsteps vibrated like a herd of elephants instead of a mere man as he thundered up the stairs. Therein laid the problem. Harry pictured himself as more, elevated himself higher than your average mortal. In his space, his domain, he saw himself as a God. My God. My deity.

I hunkered down, trying to sink into my mattress, as my door banged open with such force that it hit the wall. “What are you doing, boy?” Bile rose in my throat each time he called me that. I wasn’t his precious baby boy, but a slave that he used and abused at will. “Don’t think turning your light off and hiding under your covers matters. Daddy knows when you’re awake.” The sneer in his voice revealed his true distaste.

Squeezing my eyes tighter, I remained silent. As much as I could with scared, short pants escaping between my lips. Fear permeated the air with the scent of my sweat as my skin broke out in goosebumps. How had I ended up in this situation? Was my wish to be a boy so wrong? Maybe I’d been deceiving myself. I’d only ever had one true Daddy, and that was for a short, brief weekend. Just long enough to whet my appetite and confirm that a Daddy was the true desire of my heart. Harry had called himself Daddy when I met him, but he wasn’t. Not really. Harry was a predator.

“Chip, Chip, Chip. Whatever am I going to do with you? I don’t like dining alone.” He didn’t, but he didn’t like eating with me, either. He just wanted his food piping hot, straight out of the oven, and plated as he was ready to sit down at the table as soon as he got home from work.

He moved farther into the room. “Come now, Chip, don’t be such a baby. I’m talking to you. The polite thing to do is answer.” I heard the steel edge of anger in his voice, but I still didn’t—couldn’t—respond. What he’d done this time was so much worse than the past. This time, he’d left me broken with barely a will to live.

The sound of the light flicking on startled me, and I bit my lip to hold in my whimper. Yanking the covers off of me, he shoved me onto my back. Gripping my chin tightly, he turned my face this way and that. He tsked. “Well, I guess you did something right by continuing to hide up here. This face would ruin my appetite. How rude of you, boy.” He trailed one soft, long, elegant finger down my cheek, then dug into the corner of my lip, right where it had been split open. He stared with pleasure as tears leaked out of the corners of my eyes.

His good humor faded, replaced with the cold, dead expression I'd grown accustomed to when he was annoyed at me. "You'll have to talk to me again at some point, boy."

Not for much longer. Not if I could help it. Somehow, someway, I planned to get out of here.

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## Ollie

THE PARTY CELEBRATING JULIAN'S FIRST SHOWING OF HIS artwork displayed last night at *The Tap Tavern* swung on in full effect around me. Christian's living room was full of people associated with the Takoda Outreach Center, a batch of waiters who'd found their Daddies and moved on to do other things, plus current employees like Julian, Luca, and our newest waiter, Indie. Most of the boys had congregated on one side of Christian's living space while the Daddies mingled on the other, keeping one eye on them. Julian and Joel, best friends who'd recently taken the dive into coupledness, moved through the crowd, introducing those who hadn't met before. For someone like me, who generally only saw most of these people when they congregated at the tavern, it was nice seeing all of them healthy and happy.

Cameron, the general manager at *The Tap*, held Indie, his boy and one of our waiters, close. They were the newest couple at the tavern, and I couldn't be happier that my bossman had found his perfect match. Like everyone else, I busted Cameron's chops about taking so long to admit that he was a Daddy, but it wouldn't have mattered if he'd owned up to it in the past. Whether he'd known it or not, he'd been waiting for Indie.

Omar and his man approached the huddle I'd been standing in, and the minute he opened his mouth, shit got serious. "Nigel's friend, Chip, is having some issues with his Daddy. It seems like he's alienated him from other people, and now Nigel can't get a hold of him. They usually talk every day."

My hackles went up. “How long has it been?”

“Six days,” Nigel said. “And trust me, he’d call me if he could. He knows I worry about him. I’ve offered to come get him a few times, but I think he’s scared that he’ll be an imposition.”

The thing was, in the few years since Omar flew to Oklahoma and brought Nigel home with him, I’d observed the young man enough that I believed him implicitly. If he thought there was a reason to be concerned, there was. He had a solid head on his shoulders and wasn’t prone to over-reactions.

“So what are you going to do?” Christian asked Omar.

“Drive upstate and get him.”

My gaze went from the large black man with his shoulders squared and one arm wrapped protectively around his boyfriend’s waist to Nigel, with his expression hardened with determination. Omar’s boy had been through some things in his own life, overcame it all, and grown into a good man. Someone I respected. “I’m coming with you,” I stated matter-of-factly.

Christian blew out a breath, then mumbled something about us needing bail money.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I demanded.

Christian smirked. “You know exactly what I’m saying. We’ve been friends way too long for you to try acting innocent to me.”

Omar chuckled, shaking his head. “Christian’s not wrong, but I’m happy for the assist.”

Nigel looked back and forth between us. “Why do I feel like I’m missing something?”

“Let’s just say there’s a reason I’ve worked as the head bouncer at *The Tap* since the day Christian opened.”

Nigel tilted his head, which was adorable for the six-foot biracial man. “Well, what is it?”

“I really don’t take no shit.”

Omar met my gaze, and we nodded at each other in silent agreement. We'd do whatever needed to be done for Nigel's friend, Chip. Even if it required bail money.

After making plans to pick Omar and Nigel up in the morning, my mind wandered off. I didn't even know Chip, but if it was up to me, I would already be in my SUV and on my way to get him. I took my job of protector at *The Tap* seriously, and that included anyone else in my life or their friends. Few things pissed me off as much as abuse. There was never a reason to lay hands on another human being, a reason to make someone else feel small, or an excuse to be a piece of shit. I'd spent my life ensuring that anyone in my orbit didn't have to be mistreated. No one warranted abuse.

All life had worth, and assholes who treated anyone like *less-than* deserved whatever I dished out. I'd seen the devastating consequences of emotional manipulation and physical abuse. If there was a way for me to keep someone safe and make sure they felt protected, then it was my duty, my life's mission, to do so.

## *Chapter Two*

## OLLIE

The passenger side door of my Navigator whipped open, and Nigel leaned in with a look of awe. “This is your vehicle, Ollie?”

Turning my head, I grinned in amusement. Except for my mom and the men who’d known me awhile, no one ever expected to find me driving a luxury vehicle. With my standard bouncer uniform of slacks with a button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up over my forearms or jeans with *The Tap Tavern* t-shirt, I was perceived as a pretty simple guy.

Nigel shook his head. “This is the last thing I expected you to be driving.” He stepped back, and I heard the grumbly voice of my friend, Omar. Then the back door opened, and the words of the two men became clearer. “No, Daddy. I want to ride up front and grill Ollie. I might never get this opportunity again.”

“No, little bear, I want you to ride in the back. It’s only six-forty-five AM, and you need to get some more sleep before we go to Chip’s. He’s going to need you.”

“Sleep. Pfft. Have you looked at this SUV? Daddy, this thing is luxury. I want to chat with Ollie,” he whined.

“You can quiz him after you catch a little more shuteye.”

“But—”

“Crawl in the backseat, boy.” Nigel’s frustrated huff made Omar chuckle affectionately. “You’ll have plenty of time to twenty-question him later.”



“Whatever.” The normally confident and assured young man sounded like he was on the verge of stomping his foot, much like Hayden, his normal running buddy would. Hayden had been known for his bratty behavior before he became the most spoiled boy I knew. As Nigel slid in, the light from the dome revealed what must be his special ops attire. I was used to him in skirts, dresses, or tight-fitting pants with cute little crop tops, so this outfit of black sweats, a black long-sleeve t-shirt, and a black durag on his head, surprised me. Omar leaned in and buckled Nigel’s seatbelt, then smacked a kiss to his lips and closed the door.

Eyeing him in the backseat, I asked, “What are you wearing?”

He grinned smugly, but Omar answered, “Apparently, he’s dressed for a stealth mission.” The amusement in Omar’s voice was clear.

Masking my own smile, I said, “Good enough for me. This is your rescue mission, after-all.”

Nigel’s face fell at the mention of his friend. “I hope he’s okay.”

Omar and I exchanged a wary glance. Omar reassured his partner the best he could while I put the car in gear and backed out of the driveway.

Omar and I both knew the chances were high that something less than pleasant had happened to Chip if he’d cut off all contact out of nowhere. A rescue mission probably wouldn’t end up being far from the truth.

Despite Nigel’s insistence that he wasn’t tired, he fell asleep in the backseat fifteen minutes after hitting the highway. Omar craned his neck and checked over his shoulder, then turned to me. “Thanks for this, Ollie.”

“You know I’m always here to help, especially in a situation like this.”

Omar growled with frustration. “I knew as soon as Chip started dating this guy that we should’ve gone and gotten him.”

It didn't surprise me that Omar had suspected something if this guy wasn't on the up and up. He was as wise and protective of the people he cared about as I was. "So give me the details that I missed last night."

Omar chuckled softly. "I was pretty sure you didn't catch most of what I said."

It was true. At the first mention of abuse, I saw red and had to center myself. I kept my gaze fixed firmly on the road. There were fewer cars on the road this early in the morning since we were just ahead of the beginning of rush hour traffic, but that didn't mean accidents couldn't happen. There were still animals living in the wooded areas off the side of the highway and drivers who were too tired to be behind the wheel.

"We met Chip four years ago at the Daddy-boy weekend where I met Nigel. That first night when I walked in, I found Nigel at a table full of young men who were all a little awkward and super intimidated by the Daddies in the room. My boy had taken them all under his wing and brought them together so they were at least enjoying themselves. Long story short, by the next morning, the only duckling who hadn't found someone to keep them company was Chip. There was no way that Nigel was leaving him all on his own, so we took him with us on a bus tour of New York City. It was there, talking to Nigel, that Chip got so lost in conversation and having fun that he loosened up enough, and one of the still unattached Daddies moved in and got to know him."

"So this is the guy he's living with now? This Daddy?" I asked sharply. All of my closest friends were Daddies, so I knew what healthy Daddy-boy relationships were supposed to look like. This so-called Daddy wasn't worth the title if Chip needed rescuing from him.

"No. I wish Bosley had been ready for a commitment back then. I would have loved to have seen Chip end up with him." Omar sighed loudly. "As it was, I think only getting a small taste of the protection and nurturing of a Daddy for a shy boy like him might have been detrimental."

Now I was really curious. Shouldn't it have been better for him to have an idea for what he wanted in a Daddy?  
"Explain."

"Like I said, Chip was extremely shy and nervous. He wasn't getting a lot of support from his family about being gay, so he'd only confided in a couple of friends that he was a boy looking for a Daddy. They convinced him to go to the weekend in NYC, and it changed everything for him."

Omar must've sensed my aggravation because he held up his hand. "Don't get me wrong, Bolsey doted on him, and he had a wonderful time, but Bosley was clear from the start that he was only looking for a boy for the weekend. I think it hurt Chip that Bosley didn't change his mind, especially witnessing Nigel and my *happily-ever-after* firsthand. He became more... intent on finding his special someone...no matter what."

"And let me guess. He latched onto the first sonuvabitch who volunteered."

"Basically," Nigel said sleepily from behind me as he sat up, rubbing his eyes. "He definitely put himself out there more for a couple of years, hoping he'd find a Daddy. I think he was about to give up when he met Harry, the chiropractor."

"How long have they been together?"

Nigel stretched. "Two years, but Harry only convinced him to move in around fifteen months ago."

"And where did they meet?"

"When Chip went in to interview to be his office manager. Chip's super shy, but he enjoys administration. Dr. Harry, the douche canoe, hired him on the spot about eight months before he started pursuing him. By then, he'd increasingly been doing more and more little things for Chip, making him feel special."

I snorted. "Sounds like Christian with Levi."

*The Tap's* owner, while one of my closest friends, had moved slow as molasses when it came to landing his boy. He'd been so scared of taking advantage or losing him as an employee that he'd run around like a lovesick fool, doing everything he could to take care of Levi without acknowledging that he was

doing anything out of character. Christian was a top-notch guy who'd give anyone the shirt off his back, but there wasn't a person who saw him mooning over Levi that didn't notice how much further he went for his young bartender.

Nigel hummed. "You'd think so. I wish it had been as sweet as their love story, but from the beginning, I told Omar that it seemed sketchy."

"Especially how he all of a sudden slipped being a Daddy into conversation a month after he overheard Chip complaining on a video call to Nigel that he just wanted to find a Daddy who treated him as well as I did my little bear," Omar said.

"Yep, there was that, but it was more than that. He seemed too perfect. The first few months, I thought maybe Chip was too blinded by their new relationship to notice, but that didn't change. He had no bad habits. I love Omar, but come on. He's only human, so of course he does little things that are annoying or whatever."

Omar gasped dramatically. "Little bear. You offend me."

In the rearview mirror, I saw Nigel roll his eyes. "Please. Just this morning, I had to screw the cap back on the toothpaste and put it away. I don't understand why you leave it out on the counter like that, but after all this time, I know it's not likely to change."

My friend in the passenger seat chuckled. "Nope. Probably not."

"And that's what I mean," Nigel continued. "That isn't a major thing, and it's not like it's a deal breaker. As far as I'm concerned, I have the very best Daddy in the whole world for me, but we all have little things that we do. Or most of us do anyway, except Chip swore that Harry only got better every day. The shine never left, and the man only got sparklier."

Omar growled deep in his chest. "Even when Nigel first started fretting about it, I thought maybe that sweet boy was still excited about finally finding someone. I grew concerned when he started spending less and less time with his other friends. Then, as soon as he moved in with the good doctor,

Harry replaced him unexpectedly at his office and told him he didn't need to work. Then he closed Chip's bank account and only doled out money as he saw fit."

I saw red. I'd seen this type of abuse before. First hand. I was more glad than ever that I'd come.

"Yeah." Nigel leaned his head completely between us, talking faster as his agitation grew. "And once he started sounding lonely, I suggested Omar and I go up and have dinner with them. I'd only met him on *FaceTime* during the very beginning of their relationship. Chip made countless lame reasons why that wasn't a good idea. Before they were together, we went up at least once a month to have dinner with him and hang out. Doesn't that sound sketchy?"

"It certainly does," I agreed.

"Then I noticed that we only ever talked when his asshole boyfriend was at work. That's when I made sure every call happened on video. I needed to see him with my own two eyes, you know? And now he's not answering the phone. Something's not right." Nigel flopped back into his seat.

I didn't disagree. We all grew quiet again as jazz played softly in the background. I enjoyed all types of music, but Omar had always favored jazz, and I needed his mind clear for this wellness check. Chip didn't know me, so there'd be no reason for him to trust me. Plus, Nigel was his boy, and if we discovered that something truly nefarious had been going on, Omar would need to be in the right headspace to deal with two emotional boys.

Nigel had checked Dr. Harry's hours, and Omar had me swing past his office to verify that he had patients in the parking lot before we headed to the house. "Are you sure this is the right address?" I asked, staring at the brown modern monstrosity of a house. It was at least two stories, but there were so many sharp triangular edges for the roof that there were possibly three. And so many windows. Why did people in large homes never have window coverings?

"Uh, yeah. I sent him a housewarming gift when he moved in, and I've sent him a few other things for his birthday and

Christmas. He always unwraps while we're on a video call, so he's definitely receiving them here."

Omar, who'd made a successful living out of renovating homes and flipping houses, shook his head. "Well, this is something. It says a lot about a man to need all of that"—he flipped a hand toward the larger home—"to prove his worth."

"Are you sure it's just the two of them living there?" I asked.

"As far as I know. Harry already owned it when Chip moved in."

I shook my head. "I'd hate to clean this place." And I had a pretty strong feeling I knew who did. My hands tightened on the steering wheel. Hopefully, Dr. Harry really was at work or Christian might need that bail money.

"Can we knock now, Daddy?" Nigel asked, already poised to spring out of the car once Omar gave the word.

"Let's do it. If there's any problems—"

"I know," Nigel interrupted. "Come back to the car and wait for you."

It didn't surprise me that Omar had already set guidelines for this little adventure, and it made me breathe easier. If we did encounter Dr. Harry for some reason, things could get out of hand if Omar felt like Nigel was in danger in any way. Omar and I followed Nigel from the driveway up the path through the front yard. While he ran up and rang the doorbell, Omar stopped halfway up the porch steps, and I stayed down at the bottom.

When no one answered the door after a couple of minutes, Nigel pushed the little white button repeatedly while knocking and calling out his friend's name. Omar glanced back at me with concern. He'd have a very upset boy on his hands if we didn't find Chip.

Finally, the door crept open just enough for one blue eye to appear on the other side. "Nigel?"

"Chip. Oh, thank God." The relief in his voice was tangible.

"What...what are you doing here?"

“I came to check on you. I’ve been so worried.”

Slowly, the door swung open farther, and I got my first real look at Chip as Nigel gasped. He couldn’t have been much more than five-five or five-six, but he was thin to the point of being gaunt. As nicely dressed as he was in black slacks and a short-sleeved white button-up, he looked more like the hired help than an owner of the home. All of that was irrelevant, though. Nigel’s gut-fear had been spot on. Chip’s lip was split in the corner, a red goose egg protruded from his temple, and his cheek was a startling red, green, and purple. This boy had been given one hell of a beatdown.

## *Chapter Three*



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## CHIP

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I couldn't believe Nigel was here on my front porch. My gaze jumped from him to his Daddy, Omar, who I'd met the same night when I first met Nigel. Omar was the best kind of Daddy. I'd been so happy for my friend that after one weekend that they'd made a real go of it. Nigel now had his own lucrative online clothing store and a home with a man who called him little bear. What would it be like to be so adored?

Next, my gaze went to the other man standing at the bottom of the steps, a scowl on his otherwise attractive face. His muscles bulged under his tight t-shirt, and I gulped. That was a man who could do someone real damage.

Quickly, I focused back on Nigel and his concerned expression. This is why I hadn't video-chatted with him. Lifting my hands. I covered the kaleidoscope of colors on my face, mumbling, "I know I look hideous."

"I don't care what you look like. Chip, be honest. Did Harry do this to you?" His voice shook with fury, and I knew it wasn't at me, but on my behalf. It was such a welcome change.

I hadn't wanted to burden Nigel and Omar with my stupidity. But they were here now, and there was no way to hide it. Relief swept through my body. Whether I wanted it or not, they'd help me, and I needed it if I wanted out of this nightmare. A sob broke free as I nodded my head.

Nigel's large hands pulled me gently into his chest. "Oh, honey, why didn't you call me? We would have come and picked you up immediately."

I let him cuddle me close for just a moment, soaking up the comfort and warmth of my best friend. What did that say about me that Nigel was really my only friend? He was the only person who didn't allow me to push him away with all the restrictions I had once I started dating Harry. He'd been a little easier to hide the brunt of Harry's limitations on my time and where I was allowed to go or not go since he didn't live here. "It shouldn't be your problem that I got myself into this mess."

Nigel's expression softened. "You're my friend. One of my closest friends. You have to know I would do anything for you."

"That goes for me too, kid," Omar said softly. Nigel's larger-than-life Daddy stepped up behind him and smiled sadly at me. "We can't leave you here like this. I'd never be able to forgive myself if I left you in this situation."

Lifting my arms up awkwardly at my sides, I looked from one to the other. "But I have nowhere to go."

"That's where you're wrong." Nigel glanced over his shoulder at Omar. "Right, Daddy?"

"Absolutely." Omar tipped his head toward the hall behind me. "Go get your stuff, Chip. We're taking you home with us."

Hope boomed inside my chest. Did they mean it? Would they really take me back to Takoda with them? The minute I saw them on my steps, there hadn't been a doubt in my mind that they wouldn't let me stay, but I had no money and nowhere to go. "Are...are you sure?"

The dark-haired man with the thick beard who'd been standing silently took a step up onto the top of the porch. "Oh yeah, they're definitely serious. There's no way any of us are leaving you in this situation. Why don't you go grab whatever you need?" I was surprised by the gentle rumble of his voice in

contrast to his sheer size. It didn't make him any less intimidating, though.

My gaze shot back to Nigel. "Really? I don't want to be in the way."

Nigel reached out and grabbed my shoulders, and shook me gently. "Chip, you are my friend, and I love you. Whatever you're thinking right now is wrong. There's no way for you to be in the way or an inconvenience. If I had thought you'd come, I'd have moved you to Takoda with me and Omar years ago."

Omar snorted. "He's not kidding. He was disappointed every time you turned him down when he offered for us to come get you."

As embarrassed as I was to have to be rescued like some damsel in distress by Omar and Nigel, and this other man I didn't know, I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. I couldn't think of anything I wanted more than to get out of Harry's house and away from this town. From everything Nigel had told me, Takoda sounded like a wonderful place to live. Honestly, I didn't have any other options unless I wanted to end up in the hospital next. I'd take a hard pass on that.

"Okay...uh, okay, if you're sure." I turned and made my way deeper into the house. "It won't take me long to pack a few clothes into a bag. All of my other stuff is in the garage." I stopped and spun around. "But we have to bring everything through the house. Harry will get an alert if we open the garage door. At least, that's what he told me before he sold my car."

The guy behind Omar growled low in his chest, and I stumbled backward.

Nigel flicked a glance over his shoulder at the big man, then reached for my hand and intertwined our fingers together. "Don't mind him. He's not growling at you." Nigel smiled reassuringly. "He's upset with Harry."

"Oh, okay." Why would he be upset about Harry alarming his garage? Isn't that something homeowners did to protect their

stuff? He didn't even know me, so his obvious anger was confusing.

"I'm sorry, Chip. I didn't mean to scare you," the bearded man said softly. "I'm Ollie, by the way."

Glancing at the large man from beneath my lashes, I bowed my head at him quickly. Then I felt silly for bowing to him. Why was I always such a dork? Sure, the guy was attractive, smoking hot, actually, but what would he want with an idiotic boy stupid enough to get his face beat in? Wait. What? I needed to get away from one catastrophic relationship before I let myself get fooled into another one. I spun around and pulled Nigel toward the stairs. "Let's start in my room. That'll be quick."

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## Ollie

THE NERVOUS LITTLE GUY PAUSED AT THE DOORWAY AT THE top of the stairs. After taking a deep breath, he turned the knob and pushed the door open. As he stepped inside, Nigel glanced back at Omar with tear-filled eyes. My blood boiled. Whatever was inside that room was going to piss me off more than I already was. I followed Omar into a room with a sheet-covered twin mattress on a frame with a pillow and blanket. Next to the bed was a nightstand big enough to hold the small lamp on top. A set of drawers small enough for a baby's nursery sat on the opposite wall. Otherwise, the room was barren. Well, that answered the question of whether he shared a room with his so-called Daddy or not.

Chip stood nervously wringing his hands together, staring at an imaginary hole in the floor. "I better go back downstairs and grab a garbage bag. I forgot I didn't have anything to pack my stuff into up here."

"Why don't I go grab that for you?" I asked, needing a moment to myself. To say Chip was a nervous little guy was

an understatement. He was very obviously intimidated by me, and I didn't want him to outright fear me, which he would if I didn't get control of my temper.

He darted me another quick glance, then nodded at the floor. "Down inside the kitchen pantry, there's a hanging rack on the door. There's garbage bags on the bottom shelf."

"Got it." I spun around and moved swiftly back down the stairs before he registered the tick in my jaw. He was sending me for a garbage bag! For fuck's sake, how had this boy been living for the last fifteen months? What was his life like before that he thought this was okay?

As expected, the house was opulent, and everything looked too expensive to touch. I made a pass through the living room on my way to the kitchen, and there wasn't a piece of furniture that would hold my bulk comfortably. It might have been beautiful, but it was also cold and sterile. Shaking my head, I hurried with my task so I could get back upstairs. The sooner we rescued Chip from this house, the better.

Walking back into his room, I held out the garbage bag toward him. He didn't look at me as he took it, lifting it from where it hung from my fingertips to avoid any kind of contact between us. I hated that I scared him so badly, but I didn't think it was the appropriate time or place to let him in on why I was the safest person he'd ever meet. Putting my old man in the hospital wasn't exactly a ringing endorsement for how gentle I was at heart.

Chip shoved the clothes from his dresser into the bag and knotted it. "Okay, I'm ready."

Nigel opened the closet door and pointed at all of the clothes hanging in there. "Aren't you going to take any of this?"

Chip shook his head frantically. "No. I don't want anything that Harry bought me. Those are all the clothes he expects me to wear." He held up the bag. "These are mine. He only let me keep these for deep cleaning or sleeping in, but I paid for these."

The force behind his *I paid for these* was the first trickle of pride I'd heard from him. He'd been living in fear, but that bastard hadn't killed his spirit yet. Without thought, I grinned. Nigel frowned at me, but Omar winked. He'd heard it, too. Thankfully, Chip still wasn't looking at me or he might have thought I was making fun of him, and that was the furthest thing from my mind. He might be a timid, frightened man now, but there was a spunky personality buried under the trauma. It reassured me that he'd be okay. Not that it was any of my business, but still.

We followed Chip down into the three-car garage. On the farthest side was a fancy blue sports car, the middle was empty, but where a third car would've fit, there was a small stack of boxes. "My car used to be right here, but when Harry sold it, this is where he stuck all of my stuff. I'd had some of it upstairs in my man cave closet before that became my room, and some of it is the stuff he took out of the room." He shrugged helplessly. "We don't have to take all of it, but if I can—"

"We'll take it all," I said, cutting him off.

"We most certainly will," Omar agreed, walking around Chip to pick up a box.

Nigel, who'd worked in a feed store in Oklahoma before meeting Omar, easily lifted the next box onto his shoulder. "Dude, what's in here? A pile of bricks?"

Under the many shades of abuse on Chip's face, he pinkened with embarrassment. "It's books. Four of those boxes are actually, so we really don't have to bring it all. I know they're heavy, and I can replace them."

Nigel waved him off. "Ollie's got plenty of room in that fancy ride of his. It'll only take a couple of trips between the three of us. You bring your bag, and let's start loading up."

Chip hesitated, but Nigel clasped his shoulder and steered him back toward the door. "Don't even bother complaining. Omar knows your books are your babies, like my sewing stuff is mine. He's not going to let you leave anything behind." Chip leaned into his friend and nodded.

It actually took a few trips to remove all of his things, which Omar and I were happy for. We were surprised Harry hadn't actually gotten rid of Chip's stuff, but there'd probably been some sort of ulterior motive, like letting him have some of his books back if he pleased Harry. Of course, he would've taken them away again. Or maybe he'd just been too lazy to dispose of it all. Whatever it was, at least Chip wasn't leaving with only the clothes on his back.

"All set? Is there anything else you need?" Nigel asked Chip.

Chip glanced around the house, shrinking into himself as the full weight of what we were doing hit him. "Are you sure about me going with you? I don't want to be a bother, and—"

His voice became muffled when Nigel jerked him into his chest, holding him tightly and rubbing his back. "I'm so happy you're coming to Takoda with us. I hope you love it there and never want to leave. It'll be amazing to have you so close. Plus, I'm looking forward to making you a whole wardrobe."

They swayed by the front door until the quiet sobs of Chip crying died down. He pulled back and held up a finger. "Wait one minute." He ran down the hall and disappeared.

## *Chapter Four*



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## OLLIE

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“*W* here did he go?” Nigel asked, bemused.

Omar reached out his hand and held the back of his neck. “Maybe he forgot something. Don’t worry, little bear. We’re getting him out of here, so it’ll all be fine.”

I wasn’t so sure that it was going to be quite that easy. A couple of things were bothering me, and they’d both have to be addressed sooner than later. Chip reappeared a minute later in a pair of jean shorts and a graphic tee. “I wore these while I cut the grass yesterday, so they were in the dryer. I want to leave here in my own clothes.”

Nigel snickered. “Good for you.” Chip grinned back, and it was like a sucker punch. The slight hitch to the side of his mouth from the split lip didn’t hide how freaking adorable he was when he smiled. I wanted to tell jokes, stand on my head, or anything else it would take to keep that wide, happy grin on his face. Which startled me. I wasn’t like Christian or one of his Daddy friends. I protected the boys, our patrons at *The Tap*, or anyone who really needed it, but I rarely took an interest beyond bodyguard. What was my problem today? Why this young man?

Hating to be the one to bring down the moment, I cleared my throat. Nigel and Omar looked toward me, and Chip angled his body more in my direction, but he kept his gaze locked on the floor. It sucked that I had to say this. “I’m sorry, Chip. If your uh, boyfriend”—the word tasted sour on my tongue—“took away your car, there’s a chance he also has a tracker on your phone so he knows where you are.”

Chip shoved his hand into his pocket and took out the device, staring at it like its very existence offended him. “Oh. Uh, I guess I can leave it here.”

Omar held out his hand. “May I?” Chip handed it over. “Are there any phone numbers you need, any pictures you want to transfer to Nigel for safekeeping, or anything else you want in here?”

He shook his head. “Harry went through my pictures and deleted any that weren’t of the two of us.” He shrugged. “I’m not in contact with anyone else, anyway. They won’t even miss me if they never hear from me again.”

Omar shot me a quick glance. This young man was going to need some serious therapy and a whole lot of positive reinforcement. He was lucky that he’d met Nigel and Omar. They’d make sure the broken boy got everything he needed. Omar dropped the phone on the hardwood floor and stomped his steel-toed boot down, resulting in a satisfying crunch. So tracking Chip by his phone was no longer an issue. *Bye-bye, Harry.*

The crestfallen expression on Chip’s face broke my heart, though. He might have said there was nothing on his phone that he needed, and maybe Nigel was the only one he conversed with, but it had been his. And that mattered.

“Are you okay?” I asked softly.

He tucked his chin into his chest and mumbled, “Yeah, I’m okay. It feels better knowing he can’t follow me.”

Omar’s jaw tightened, and Nigel’s face contorted, stuck somewhere between pissed off and heartbroken. I nodded at the two men, and by silent agreement, Nigel propelled Chip out of the house and to my vehicle.

Once we were on the road, Nigel moved as far into the middle of the seat as his belt would allow and threw an arm over Chip’s shoulders. “I’m so sorry I didn’t come sooner.”

“You didn’t know,” the young man whispered.

“Has he been hurting you this whole time?” Nigel asked.

Icy blue orbs barely showed through his long eyelashes as he peeked up toward the front seat and met my gaze in the rearview mirror. Scared that he wouldn't open up to Nigel if he thought Omar and I were paying attention, I immediately dropped my gaze and flipped on the radio to give them an illusion of privacy. Omar gave a subtle nod of his head.

After a moment, Chip said, "Not at first. I mean, you know how awesome he was while we were dating."

It took a minute for Nigel to respond. "I have to admit, even in the beginning, I was a little concerned. It didn't seem like he wanted you spending time with your friends."

Chip huffed. "It's not like that was too hard since I only had a few to speak of, anyway."

Looking back, I think you're probably right. It didn't seem like that to me at the time because he always had a reason—whether a dinner party or a meeting with friends—that he wanted me with him. Considering my other relationships were acquaintances at best, it didn't take much for them to quit reaching out once I continuously broke plans. Except for you."

"Except for me," Nigel agreed. "But it was different with me since our plans involved video calls instead of actually getting together."

"And I made sure that it was always when I knew Harry would be at work. Don't get me wrong, he knew we talked since he checked my phone every night when he got home. But at the beginning of our relationship, I'd raved so much about you and Omar and what a great Daddy he was. I think he knew if he drove a wedge between us that you guys would check on me. And you did."

A quick peek showed Nigel kissing the top of Chip's head. "Hell yeah, we did."

Nigel cuddled his friend for a long time, letting him soak in the comfort that Chip obviously desperately needed. I was surprised to hear Chip say, "Is there anything else you want to know?"

“It can wait. We’ll have plenty of time to talk about this after we get you home and settled.”

With a voice thick with tears, Chip responded, “It’s actually kind of nice to get this off my chest. I’ve been so alone with it. I-I’d like to tell you, but I’m not sure where to start.”

Omar and I side-eyed each other, and I knew we were on the same page. If it wasn’t so important to get Chip away, we’d be paying the slimeball doctor a visit to teach him a lesson.

“How long have you been sleeping in your own bedroom?” Nigel asked.

Chip blew out a long breath. “Since not long after I moved in. At first, he told me that it was my own private man cave. I got so excited because it felt like what Omar gave you with your sewing room. It was lovely in the beginning. There was nice artwork on the walls and bookshelves, and he helped me put all of my books away immediately. There was a reading chair with a floor lamp next to it and a tiny table for my tea or water because he said he knew I loved to read. The only other furniture in there was a comfy couch. No bed or anything that would imply that I’d be expected to live in there.”

Rage boiled on the inside. That son of a bitch had probably planned this from the beginning.

“Eventually, it changed. The first time I disappointed him, he went in and pulled the artwork off of the walls.” Chip sniffed. “The next time I upset him, the rocking chair disappeared. It went on like that until the room was stripped bare except for the couch. Then one night I didn’t feel good and asked if we could leave early from a dinner party at one of his friend’s homes. The hostess heard me and sympathized, so he had no choice but to bring me home. That’s the first time he...”

He trailed off, and I swallowed down the growl. All of Omar’s sounds of anger as we moved Chip out had seemed to soothe him, but he didn’t know me, and I wasn’t a small guy. If I didn’t keep a handle on my anger, he’d be as scared of me as he was of Harry, and I never wanted anyone to view me that way. Especially him.

“Anyway, he went in and pulled the cushions off the couch and threw them on the floor. He tossed a blanket and my pillow on it, and told me to sleep there and think about what I’d done.”

“What *you* had done?” Nigel asked.

By his tone, I knew he realized, like I did, that Chip was telling us about the first night Dr. Harry put his hands on him. Omar’s large body vibrated with anger in the seat next to me, and it felt like the steering wheel would crack under the pressure of my hands. As we drove on, Chip shared more, from the couch eventually being replaced by the bed to Harry taking him out less and less. His voice faded into nothing as he eventually fell asleep against Nigel’s chest.

I waited until we heard the soft sounds of sleep before I asked, “Where should we take him?”

“Our house, of course. Can we set up the room next to ours for him, Daddy? I think he’ll need me to stay close.”

Before Omar answered, I said, “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?” Nigel asked, clearly baffled.

“Because, little bear,” Omar said. “Harry knows all about us. He knows what town we live in, and chances are, he took note of our address when you shipped stuff to Chip. If he’s pissed Chip is gone—”

“Which he will be,” I inserted.

Omar nodded. “He will, and that means the best way to keep him off the radar is to take him somewhere else.”

Without hesitation, I said, “He can stay with me.”

## *Chapter Five*

## CHIP

I woke up disoriented at first. Jerking my cheek off of the muscular pec I'd been sleeping against, I turned to find Nigel's gently smiling face.

"We're here."

Tearing my gaze off my friend, I looked out the window and discovered we were in the parking lot of an apartment complex. "I thought you lived in a house."

Unless Nigel and Omar had moved, I'd seen pictures of the rental they'd moved into when Nigel first moved from Oklahoma. Later, when they'd decided to keep it, Nigel had given me a video tour of the inside and outside of their home. This definitely was not that.

"Yeah, we're actually at Ollie's place."

Omar turned in his seat with a serious expression on his face. "We'd like you to come inside so that we can all talk. Ollie pointed out something important after you'd already fallen asleep."

The day had been such a whirlwind. Last night, I'd been determined to find a way out of my situation with Harry, only to have Nigel show up on my doorstep this morning ready to whisk me away. I didn't know why we'd come to this mountain of a man's house, but I trusted them to lead me and keep me safe. "Okay."

We all exited the vehicle, and Nigel rounded the corner of the SUV and pulled me into his side. "We'll do whatever makes

you the most comfortable,” he whispered. “Don’t be scared to speak your mind.”

I bit back a snort. When was the last time I spoke up for myself? I’d never been very outspoken at it as it was, but the last time I’d tried, Harry’s response to my request resulted in a sharp jab to my gut. I’d never made that mistake again.

Ollie’s apartment was on the second floor of a really nice complex. Unlike the apartments I’d lived in before I moved in with Harry, the landscaping surrounding the buildings was gorgeous, with bushes and colorful flowers lining the building. There was no trash spilling out of trash cans onto the sidewalk, nor were there sketchy people hanging out in doorways. This place had to be pricey. Which made sense, considering what he drove. I didn’t know anything about cars, but there was no way his SUV was cheap. Hell, it was more comfortable than the twin mattress I’d been sleeping on.

Ollie opened the door and then stood back and let us pass him to walk into the apartment. As I carefully passed by him, making sure not to brush against him, his sheer size overwhelmed me. Darting forward, I took a look at the place he called home. It was an open-concept living room and kitchen, but it was freaking huge, much like its occupant. Ollie gestured toward the dark gray sectional. “Have a seat, and I’ll get us all a bottle of water.”

“You don’t have anything a little stronger than that, buddy? It’s been a hell of a day.”

Ollie chuckled. “You know I don’t drink, old man.”

Omar flopped down on the huge couch, leaned back with his arms resting along the back of the couch, and crossed his ankles. “That’s true. I’m used to spending time at Christian’s place. Since he taught Levi to be such a crazy good mixologist, he keeps their home bar well-stocked.”

Instead of getting offended at Omar’s words, the large man snorted. “His boy has him so whipped. I don’t think there’s anything he wouldn’t do for Levi.”



After hearing Ollie mention boys and Daddies several times, and considering he'd come to get me with Omar and Nigel, I wondered if Ollie was a Daddy, too. From everything I'd seen so far, he'd make a good one. Not that I needed one right now—or maybe ever again—but I was curious since Nigel seemed to have ended up surrounded by Daddies and their boys since moving to Takoda.

Nigel collapsed onto the couch next to his Daddy, and then he grabbed my wrist and pulled me down next to him. Holy hell, the couch was as comfortable as it looked. Harry had sworn that to have nice furniture, it couldn't be comfortable. It was no surprise that he'd picked what he'd considered classy over something that was actually made to sit in. As Nigel cuddled into Omar's side, it hit me that at no point, even before things got bad, had Harry ever snuggled me like that. The signs had been there all along, and I'd missed them.

Ollie cleared his throat, and my face flamed. Not that I'd been picturing cuddling with him, but he was easy on the eyes—okay, he was drop-dead gorgeous—and the only other person in the room. Unless Omar made a habit of having friends who were assholes, which I knew he didn't, I'd bet Ollie made the perfect boyfriend. Glancing around as surreptitiously as possible, I looked for signs of Ollie having someone else in his life.

Omar's voice drew me from my perusal. "Chip, I don't want you to feel any pressure, but we do need to talk about Ollie's suggestion."

Omar and Nigel wore expressions of concern, but Ollie's face remained a blank mask that I couldn't read. Did he think they shouldn't have brought me to Takoda with them? Did he think they should've left me somewhere else? All of a sudden, my own anxiety spiked. Just because we'd destroyed my phone and left it, didn't mean that Harry wouldn't know where to find me. He knew damn well that he'd successfully cut me off from everyone else in my life.

Thinking about it, I didn't think cutting off relationships with my family was the worst thing to do. They made me feel small—irrelevant. My being gay wasn't the first strike against me

with them. I'd always been small and shy around new people. My family was the exact opposite. All the men were tall and brawny. Not as big as Ollie or anything, but still thick. They were also a loud, gregarious bunch. No one in my family had ever met a stranger.

Dreading it, but knowing I needed the answer, I asked, "Is there a problem? Do you want to take me back?"

Ollie's jaw ticked, but my attention was drawn by Nigel, who launched straight up and glared at me. "Do you really think I'd ever let you go back to a situation like that? Even if I didn't have a place to take you, I'd find somewhere."

"And that's where I come in," the mountain man murmured.

I flashed him a quick glance before looking back at my friend. "What does he mean?"

Omar leaned forward and said, "It means that we're all pretty sure that Harry would know where to find you if we took you to our house. Knowing our names, it wouldn't take anything but a quick internet search. I don't want you to have to be on guard and worried all the time. Ollie has offered to let you stay here."

"But don't worry, we'll stay with you," Nigel said.

Ollie nodded. "I'm happy to put you all up until we're sure that...person won't come looking for you. I think it's the safest option."

Guilt curdled my stomach. This was why I'd never called Nigel. My bad decision was disrupting his whole life. Along with his boyfriend and this man who didn't even know me. Why would they do that? "Would you really be willing to leave your own home just to stay with me?"

"Of course," Nigel said seriously. "Chip, if I'd had any clue what was going on, we'd have come to get you a long time ago. I'll do whatever it takes to keep you safe and comfortable."

"I second that," Omar said.

“But does he have enough rooms for all of us here?” I asked Nigel. It felt a little disrespectful not to speak directly to Ollie, but honestly, he made me nervous. I wasn’t sure if it would help if he was more talkative because, no matter what, he was a big guy with some very thick arms and hands the size of my face. I believed he wanted to help me and wouldn’t hurt me, but I’d seen the way his jaw ticked as we’d gathered my stuff for me to escape Harry’s. This man had the potential to be dangerous.

Despite my rudeness, Ollie spoke up anyway. “I do. My office has a pullout couch for when I have guests.”

Omar barked out a laugh. “Brother, when in the hell do you have overnight guests?”

Ollie shrugged and rolled his eyes. “Okay, I have a very comfortable pullout couch for whenever my mother stays the night.”

“Awww,” Nigel said. “Where does she live?”

“Little bear, stay on track. I know you’re dying of curiosity about Ollie, but now isn’t the time to get his life story.”

Nigel winced. “Sorry, Chip. Go ahead, Ollie.”

Ollie chuckled, and it was deep and growly, sending tingles down my spine. “Someone else can take the master bedroom, and I’ll sleep out here on the couch.”

“Chip can have the master,” Nigel said.

“Oh no. You and Omar should take it. We don’t even have to pull out the bed in the office. I can sleep out here on the couch if that’s okay. I don’t take up a lot of room, and I don’t want to be a bother.” I peeked up at Ollie from under my lashes to gauge his response.

He shook his head. “Absolutely not. My mama would kill me if she ever heard I let a guest stay on the couch out here. I’ll pull out the bed in the office and set it all up with sheets and blankets for you.”

I had no idea what to do. There was no way I wanted to go back to Harry’s. I had no money, no job, and no one to lean on.

But was it fair to put all of these men out like this on my behalf? Nigel had already proven to be a better friend than anyone else I'd ever known, and I wasn't sure how I would ever repay him.

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## Ollie

NOW THAT WE WERE SITTING IN MY HOME AND COULD RELAX, I took a good look at Chip. He was a tiny little thing with sandy brown hair and big blue doe eyes. They weren't as clouded with fear now, but they'd no doubt be haunted for a while. It wouldn't be easy for him to have to deal with the aftermath of what he'd gone through living in that house, and it made my heart ache for him. A complicated series of emotions passed over his face before he scooted away from Nigel and turned, pulling one leg up onto the couch facing his friend. "Why did you come to my house? It's not like I live around the corner."

Nigel gaped at him. "Are you serious? Chip, we talk every single day. Not hearing from you at all had me so worried."

"But why? Do you know how many people Harry told me to stop talking to or stay away from, and none of them drove over."

"Is that what you were trying to do? Cut me out of your life?" Nigel sounded hurt.

Chip's head reared back. "No, not at all. I would've reached out as soon as I could." What he really meant was as soon as Nigel wouldn't have seen his bruises. Omar frowned at me.

"Why didn't you reach out to me?"

Chip's hand fluttered up to his face where he touched the corner of his mouth. "I knew you would find it suspicious if I sent you a text, and I didn't want to video call with..." He trailed off as he used his finger to circle his face.

Nigel's question didn't surprise me, but I'd already known the answer. He didn't want lectures or to worry Nigel, but at the same time, he hadn't expected more than that. Chip's confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth, had all been beaten down so low that he legitimately hadn't even considered asking for help as a real option. He might've thought Nigel would worry about him, but he didn't know the men of action he'd befriended.

My estimation of Nigel went up even further. If everyone had friends like this, people who'd check in on those they supposedly loved, who didn't just say they gave a shit but showed it, the world would be a better place.

With a little bit of a daddy leaking through his voice, Omar asked, "How long has this been going on?"

Chip closed his eyes and blew out a slow breath. "He's never hit me in the face before."

That sure as fuck didn't answer Omar's question, but it told us all we needed to know. I felt my anger build again. How could anyone hurt this adorable man? A part of me wanted to just pick him up and put them in my pocket and protect him from the world. That wouldn't help his mind, though. There was a possibility I'd be the last one he'd turn to. Omar and Nigel had shared how shy he'd been when they first met him, too, and that was before what he'd just been through. At least he'd already known Omar, who wasn't much smaller than me in height or bulk, but they'd had a prior friendship. After what he'd been through, it wouldn't surprise me if he was apprehensive about men in general. Lord knows, my mom had been.

Nigel reached out and placed his hands on Chip's knee. "That doesn't tell us how long he's been hurting you."

Chip blinked furiously, fighting the tears that I'd been expecting for a while. "Longer than I want to say."

Smacking my hands down on the arms of my recliner, I pushed to my feet. "Why don't I go make up the beds for later? Then, if anyone wants to take a nap or anything, they can." We'd need to have lunch sooner rather than later, but I

didn't want Chip to feel trapped in a room with the rest of us. He needed a place to go and be. For now, he needed space to speak with Nigel in private.

Following my lead, Omar leaned over and kissed Nigel's cheek before he stood, as well. "Why don't I give you a hand with that?"

The two of us left the friends in the living room and headed toward my office. "Are you sure about this, Ollie? I have another rental that's available right now. I could have one of my guys go over and get it ready for the three of us to sleep there by tonight."

"No, I'd feel better if you all stayed here."

"All of us or Chip?"

I looked over at Omar and considered my words carefully. He'd known me for a long time, not as long as my best friend, Christian, but long enough. He knew my story, and he knew the hell that my mom had escaped. Instead of pulling out the bed and getting it set up like I'd planned, I sat down in my office chair. "Honestly, I'm not ready to let Chip out of my sight. It makes no sense since I don't know him, but there's a vulnerability about him that reminds me so much of my mom."

Omar took a seat on the couch and nodded. "I sensed that by how angry you got back at the house. The more we saw and he told us, the darker the storm clouds on your face."

Planting my elbows on my knees, I hung my head. "Omar, that's the same type shit my dad used to do to my mom. Even avoiding hitting her in the face. Long before I ever knew there was physical abuse, I watched him torment her with his psychological abuse."

Most days, I didn't think about my childhood at all. Mom was in a good place, a better headspace. My old man had managed to get himself shanked in prison. If I spent too much time thinking about him, my thoughts went to an extremely dark place where I wished I'd been the one to give him the killing jab.

“Man, if I’d known this was going to hit you so hard, I wouldn’t have let you come.”

As if he could’ve stopped me once I heard what he was up to. The sardonic tilt to his lips suggested he was well aware of that fact. “How would you have ever known? How many people have I protected through the years? My job is watching over the employees and customers at *The Tap*, making sure that they feel safe. I don’t know why this is hitting me like this. Maybe it was seeing his living conditions, maybe it was...hell, I don’t know.”

Omar snorted. “I do. I would have never thought about it, but Chip reminds me a lot of your mother.”

“Abused?” I asked, sort of offended that he’d minimized both of their experiences so much.

“Nah, man. He’s tiny like your mom. He’s shy and bashful until he knows you and feels comfortable. You haven’t seen it yet, but Chip will crack you up once he’s had a chance to get to know you. The boy giggles constantly just like your mom. And like your mother, he cracks himself up.”

It was hard for me to picture the broken boy in my living room laughing with the sort of freedom and joy that bubbled out of my mom. But she hadn’t always been that way, either, had she? There’d been a time when I was young when my dad was at work and my mother was light and carefree. We’d baked together and worked on crafts. The older I got, the more withdrawn she’d become. She’d always been the best mom she could be, but she’d lost her spark, suffering at his hands. Unfortunately, it took me way too many years to know that.

“I think I’d like to see that,” I answered, surprised by how true that was.

Omar studied my face, then nodded. “Then yeah, we’ll take you up on your offer and take it one day at a time. If you get sick of—” I held up a hand, and he snorted. “Alright, we’ll just take it one day at a time until we think it’s safe to take him to my house.”

I pictured the blue-eyed beauty on the couch and wondered if I'd ever think it was safe for him to leave where I could protect him and keep an eye on him at all times. Discomfort clawed at me, partly because I didn't know where these alpha-male, hyper-vigilant-type thoughts were coming from, but mostly, it was because I really hated the thought of him leaving.



## *Chapter Six*

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## CHIP

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To say that today has been weird would be an understatement. Ollie and Omar had disappeared down the hall for quite a while to make up the beds. In fact, they'd been gone so long that I'd fallen asleep again. Nigel was the best friend I could ask for. He'd stayed with me, and I woke up to his fingers carding through my hair, soothing me even in my sleep.

As I sat at the dining room table with my three rescuers, I wished that I had more of an appetite. The salmon and Brussels sprouts that Ollie had thrown together for dinner were absolutely delicious, but my stomach rolled each time I took a bite. As relieved as I was to be gone from Harry's, the full weight of my decision was starting to bear down on me. Where would I go from here? I had nothing but my Social Security card and birth certificate. No money. No car. And only enough knock-around clothes to last me a couple of weeks. Certainly nothing nice enough to wear on a job interview. What had I been thinking? How would I live?

Omar chuckled at something Nigel said, following it up with, "Whatever you say, little bear."

Not only was my life in turmoil, but leaving Harry the way I had, had also thrown Omar and Nigel's world into chaos. How long could I expect them to stay here? Most of all, this wasn't fair to Ollie, who didn't know me at all, and I'd still barely spoken a word to him. I'd always been this way, flustered and silent around attractive men. But this time was different. It wasn't that I was scared of Ollie exactly, but I didn't know

him. I'd thought I'd waited long enough before I moved in with Harry, that I'd known him enough to trust him, but look how that had turned out. It seemed that I hadn't known him at all.

As much as I knew that Ollie was capable of bringing the pain, there wasn't a part of me that thought he'd hurt me. Quite the contrary, I was pretty sure that he'd like nothing more than to go back and take Harry apart. But I still didn't know him, and he intimidated me with his sheer size. Moving a Brussels sprout around on my plate, hoping that it would appear like I was eating, I sifted through my emotions. Maybe it wasn't his rippling muscles that intimidated me as much as it was the silent strength that exuded from him. He hadn't spoken much today, but he didn't seem embarrassed by it, and Omar and Nigel didn't appear to find it strange. Whenever I didn't speak much, it was usually from nerves, and then I felt awkward and out of place. Whenever I'd attended social events with Harry, he'd told me it was a good thing I was cute because I wouldn't win awards as a conversationalist.

What would it be like to be that comfortable in your own skin? My own thoughts were making me dizzy, so I placed my fork down on the side of my plate and asked, "So how long do you think we need to stay here before I don't have to worry about Harry tracking me down?" They'd been right to say he'd find me at Omar's, but that didn't mean I wanted to inconvenience Ollie forever. How long did an asshat control freak search for his favorite chew toy when it disappeared?

"I was thinking about that," Nigel said. "What if we stayed here the next few days and through the weekend? His office is open on Mondays, correct?"

"Yeah."

Nigel shrugged. "So maybe we go back to my house during the week when we know he'll be at work, and then we can stay here on the weekends. Would that be okay with you, Ollie?"

From where I peeked at him under my lashes, I saw Ollie frown. He probably hated the thought of us coming back once

we left, and who could blame him?

“Do you have a rental that I could stay in, Omar? Maybe that would be enough, then you two could go back to your house, and I’ll find a job just as soon as”—I gestured up toward my face—“heals enough, and I can start paying you rent. It might take me a little while before I can pay you back for the time before I’m working, though.” I hated the thought of them having to take care of me, but there was no way I’d be able to go job hunting with my face like this.

The table was silent long enough for me to squirm. Gently, Omar said, “Speaking of your injuries, Nigel. Have you had your face looked at?”

I huffed. “No way. Harry would’ve never risked somebody he knew seeing me. I wasn’t even supposed to answer the door for delivery men until my face healed.”

Nigel groaned with annoyance.

Ollie stood up so quickly his chair scraped the hardwood floor. “I’m going to grab some more napkins.” He crossed the room and stood with his back to us, hands braced on the counter as he leaned into it.

“Should we ask Dylan to come by and check him out, Daddy?”

I shook my head vigorously. “That isn’t necessary. It already looks so much better,” I answered Nigel before Omar did, but my gaze was riveted to Ollie’s back. His shoulder blades clenched, and his back rippled with each inhale like he was struggling for breath. Plus, there was a stack of napkins in the middle of the table. Something was wrong.

“...I think,” Omer said.

Attempting to ignore Ollie, I focused back on the conversation at the table. “What? I’m sorry, I missed that.”

“I said, let’s monitor it for the next couple days, and if it doesn’t seem like you’re healing properly, then we’ll ask Dylan to come by.”

Nigel patted my thigh. “Don’t worry. Dylan’s an emergency room nurse, and he’s also part of my friend group.”

I thought back to all of our conversations and knew if Dylan was part of that group, then he was more than likely a boy. If they really wanted me to see someone, it made me feel a little better that it would be someone who Nigel knew well and trusted.

Nigel mouthed to Omar, “Is he okay?” As he pointed at Ollie’s back. I was so happy he asked because I was starting to really worry myself.

That thought almost made me snort. Who was I to be worried about anyone else with my predicament? Whatever was bothering him probably stemmed from the fact he’d offered for us—let’s face it, me—to stay here, and now he’d realized that none of us really knew what the expiration date on that invitation should be. Was he regretting it enough that he was searching for a delicate way to rescind the offer?

Omar waved him off, which I guessed meant that Nigel shouldn’t worry about Ollie. That would be easier to do if the big man came to sit back down. It would make me feel better, anyway.

Digging deep for courage, even though I still addressed Nigel instead of Ollie, I said, “I really don’t mind staying in one of Omar’s rentals. I lived by myself for years, so if you’re all worried that I’ll be nervous staying alone, don’t be.”

Ollie whipped around. “Oh no. I’m having enough trouble reconciling the idea of you guys going back to Omar’s house after the weekend, as it is. The last thing I need is for you to be staying somewhere alone. It’ll keep me up at night.”

We all stared at him in shocked silence at his outburst. His green eyes blazed with something I didn’t understand. He crossed his arms over his barrel chest, and I gulped. How was it that every time he moved, I noticed something different about his body? Good Lord, he might intimidate me, but I sure was glad he was on my side.

Ollie stepped back toward the table, stroking his beard with one hand. He was frustrated or aggravated, but I couldn't settle on which one. Maybe both. "Do you hate the idea of staying here that much?"

Why did he sound so hurt by the possibility that I wouldn't want to stay here? Omar and Nigel both looked at me, and I pointed back at my own small frame. "Are you talking to me?"

Ollie gave one sharp nod of his head. "Yes, I feel like you'd be the safest if you remained here, but I don't want you to be uncomfortable. Is there something I can do to help? I'd be willing to stay at Omar's house while the three of you stay here."

Nigel tilted his head, completely bemused. "Why would you leave your own home?"

Omar tapped the side of his plate with one long finger. "It's actually not a terrible idea. We're taking his bed, so he can go over and sleep in ours. When I ran home earlier, I threw our sheets in the hamper and put on a new set, so the bed is ready to go."

"Why did you change your sheets if you knew you were staying here?" I asked. I swear, this whole conversation got more confusing as it went.

Omar smirked. "My little bear likes fresh sheets, so I wanted to have the bed all made up and ready for whenever we go back home."

I covered my face with both hands. "This is terrible. I'm causing so much inconvenience. Ollie's sleeping on his couch —"

"Trust me, Chip. That's not a hardship. I crash there all the time. I purposefully made sure it was comfortable for a reason."

He had a point. My earlier nap was one of the best I'd had in months. I waved him off. "That doesn't matter. Omar and Nigel probably didn't expect their wellness check to lead to having to foster a grown-ass man. You don't even know me, and you're offering to leave your house after being kind

enough to let me stay here. This is why I didn't want you to see me, Nigel. I'm too much work."

"Chip—"

This time Ollie cut Omar off. "That's not true. I'm happy to help. Nigel told me how much he's been hoping that you'd move to Takoda. I know what you went through with Harry has you doubting yourself and everyone else, but trust me when I tell you, you're not in the way, nor are you in inconvenience, and we want you here."

"Oh." Could I be any more ineloquent? But the ferocity with which Ollie declared that I was wanted here made me feel more important than I had in a long time. The only person who'd ever truly made me feel like I mattered was Nigel. For one brief weekend, I had a Daddy who'd made me feel special, but not enough that he wanted anything more after our brief time was over. It felt...unusual, uncomfortable, and fan-fucking-tastic to feel this...important.

## *Chapter Seven*



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## OLLIE

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I'd taken the day off yesterday to go with Omar and Nigel, but today, it was back to the grind. Normally, that wasn't a hardship, but I felt agitated down to my soul leaving Chip, which made no sense. I'd literally met him yesterday, for fuck's sake. Planting my ass on my normal stool at the high top by the front door, I started taking a hard look at my schedule. It was time to give some of the bouncers more hours and possibly hire a couple more.

"Hey, Ollie, I heard you guys had to bring Nigel's friend home with you," Indie said as he crossed the dining room toward me.

I grunted in response, even though I knew his heart was in the right place. He'd had a rough go of it himself, so I knew he genuinely wanted to help if possible. The thing was, this wasn't my story to share.

"Ollie, you have to give me more than that."

I smirked. "I don't actually have to do anything. I don't answer to you," I teased and tweaked his nose, grinning.

"Maybe not, but I'm the one sleeping with our boss."

Cameron came up behind his boyfriend right then and smacked his butt. "Don't be trying to use me as leverage."

Indie pouted out his bottom lip. "You guys are no fun."

Cameron laughed. "It's work time. Who said it was supposed to be fun?" Then he fixed his gaze on me. "So?"

"Yes, we brought Nigel's friend, Chip, home with us."

Cameron frowned. “So it was a good thing you guys went and checked on him. *Damn*. I’d kinda hoped he’d gone on vacation and forgot to tell Nigel or something.”

“Me, too. In a case like that, you’d rather find out you made the trip for nothing, but that definitely wasn’t the case this time.”

“Does he need anything?” Indie asked.

“I think he’s squared away for now. If things change, I’ll be sure and let you know.”

Cameron’s eyes narrowed at the same time Indie’s widened. “Why would you know?”

Cameron hooked a thumb in his boyfriend’s direction. “What he said.”

*Well, crap.* I should’ve kept my mouth shut. Although, eventually Nigel would tell Toby’s little crew of boys that he and Omar were staying at my house with Chip, and the questions would come anyway. “They’re all staying with me right now.”

“Why?” Indie asked, his tone going from aggressively inquisitive to alarmed.

“You’ll have to wait until you hear from Nigel.”

“But—”

“Don’t you have work to do?” I interrupted, then focused on Cameron. “Both of you?” Hopefully he’d catch my hint and take his boyfriend somewhere that wasn’t here.

Cameron grabbed Indie’s hand right as Julian appeared behind them, waving his phone around. “Nigel just sent a message in the group text about his friend.”

Indie dug his phone out of his pocket and opened it up while Cameron watched from over his shoulder. “Oh, shit. That poor guy. That’s awesome you’re letting them stay with you, Ollie. I wasn’t joking around, if you guys need anything—”

“You know we’ve got your back,” Cameron finished for him.

“Do you know if he needs clothes?” Julian asked. “I can swing by the Takoda Thrift Store and pick some stuff up for him.”

Indie turned to Julian. “That’s a great idea. You should message Nigel back and get Chip’s sizes.” He glanced at me. “Unless he brought his with him. The way Nigel’s text makes it sound, you guys were on more of a rescue mission than anything, and you smuggled Chip out.”

I shook my head and shrugged. It wasn’t that I didn’t know Chip’s situation or what he might need, but I didn’t feel like it was my place to go into it. Chip was Nigel’s friend, and all I was doing was supplying a place for him to rest his head until he knew he was safe. Or at least that’s what I kept trying to tell myself. *What is it about him that has me so...desperate to keep an eye on him?*

After my rant in my kitchen last night, Omar quickly decided that they’d be staying with me at least until Sunday evening. He pointed out that he’d already brought over Nigel’s traveling sewing machine and the couple of projects he was working on. Everything else they needed for their businesses could be done from home on the computer for a couple of days. We’d all just needed to relax. It had been a long day for all of us, and even more so for Chip.

“Julian and Indie, I appreciate your big hearts so much, but seriously, get to work,” Cameron said, winking at them to take the edge off.

Indie stuck his tongue out at Cameron before popping up on his toes to smack a kiss to his cheek. “Okay, you’re right, Daddy. Ollie, please let us know later if you think of anything.”

Cameron placed his hands on his boy’s shoulders and turned him back so he was facing the other way. “Or you can text Nigel and ask him yourself. Now, both of you go.”

As soon as the two compassionate but overly-curious young men walked away, Cameron rounded on me. “Do you need something, big guy?”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I glared at him. “So you’re going to start on me now, bossman? Why in the world would I need anything?”

He leaned both elbows on to the table. “I have no idea, but since you were all up in my business when Indie and I were circling each other, turnabout is fair play.”

I arched an eyebrow. “All I’m doing is giving him a place to stay.”

“Well,” Cameron said, opening the text messages on his phone. “According to Nigel, and I quote, *I’ve never seen Ollie like this before. Mr. calm, cool, and collected almost lost his temper multiple times on behalf of Chip. It was sweet but kind of weird. You’d think they met before.*”

I huffed. “Give a guy your room, and you’d think he’d be kind of loyal. All these boys are a bunch of nuisances, I tell you.”

“And you”—Cameron pointed at me—“adore every one of them. So what gives? I’ve seen you throw some real assholes out of here, and you never lose your shit. What gives?”

“Nothing. It’s not so much him as it’s the situation itself,” I lied. Yeah, this kind of stuff pissed me off, and I’d always be down to help someone get away from an abuser, but it was unusual for me to not be able to hold it together.

Hoping to end this conversation for a while, I headed toward the bar to get a glass of water. Unfortunately, Cameron followed me. “I’m not saying it’s the same as when you were razzing me about liking Indie, but come on, Ollie. I’ve never heard of you dating anyone, and you’re the only one of us who never has any drama. Hell, I’m not even sure what you do when you’re not here.” He squeezed my bicep. “Or at the gym. But, really, you’re almost always here. For someone who gave me so much shit about working too much, you might as well move into one of the storage rooms.”

I sighed. “Bossman.”

He cringed. “Good grief, I wish you guys would stop calling me that. The rest of the staff will knock it off if you do.”

“Never going to happen,” I replied as the bartender, OZ, slid a glass of water across the bartop to me.

“Thank you, Oz.”

“No problem, but I have to agree with Cameron. I don’t even know what you guys are talking about, but you work too damn much.”

“Then you’ll both be happy to hear that I’m rearranging some of the shifts and giving a couple of the guys more hours so that I can leave in time to go home for dinner each night.”

“No shit?” Oz asked, clearly surprised. That made two of us.

“It was bound to happen someday. I’ve worked open to close practically seven days a week since Christian first opened. It’s time for me to let some of my guys shine.”

Cameron nodded slowly. “That’s good. I’ve been asking you to do that for a while, but the timing seems curious.”

I shrugged. “I need to be a good host.”

“A good host to who?” Oz asked.

Cameron glanced at him. “I’ll tell you later.”

I tapped the bar twice with the palm of my hand. “You can tell him now. I’m headed back up front so that I can work on those schedule changes.”

“You do that.”

I walked away, feeling Cameron’s eyes bore into the back of my head. What was the big deal? So what if I didn’t usually have people at my house? This was an emergency. And yeah, it was unusual for me to not be here all the time, but everyone had been telling me for years that I needed to take more time off. It shouldn’t be that big a deal.

But in my heart of hearts, I knew why they were all suspicious of my behavior. It was unlike me. Hell, even I didn’t understand this pull I had toward Chip, like only I should be there to keep him safe. Which was ridiculous. He didn’t know me, and he seemed a little more than shy around me. It bordered on fearful. Plus, he knew and trusted Omar, who was

a badass in his own right. Chip didn't need me. It didn't matter that I knew that rationally. I felt compelled to be wherever he was, and I always trusted my gut.

## *Chapter Eight*

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## CHIP

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Laying on the pullout couch, I glanced around Ollie's office. There were two silver filing cabinets with drawers that locked beside the door and bookcases on either side of the desk filled with binders on each shelf. As far as I knew, he hadn't been in here since I'd taken over the room, but the office felt more like an actual work space. Nigel had told me that Ollie was in charge of security at *The Tap Tavern*, but that didn't explain this room. Not that it was any of my business, but I was curious about him. A part of me wanted to ask Nigel if we were still planning on going back to their home tomorrow, but a bigger part of me wanted to stay here. I knew that wasn't fair to them, though. They needed to be able to return to life as normal.

The first night we stayed here, Nigel had sat in the office chair and spun around, trying to cheer me up. When that didn't work, he turned out the lights and kept me company until I fell asleep. I appreciated it, but the next night, when we all headed toward bed, I assured him that I was fine and sent him in to be with his Daddy. And for the most part, I was fine.

My time here so far had been surreal. Omar waited on Nigel and me hand and foot, and there was no expectation for me to do anything but eat and sleep. It was such a change from how it had been living with Harry. As badly as I felt about the disruption to everyone else's life, I couldn't regret having escaped.

"Hey, are you up?" Nigel called as he tapped the door.



Sitting up in bed, I pulled the sheet up so it covered my lap. “Come in.” I smiled sleepily at my friend. “Good morning.”

“Omar’s making French toast with strawberries and homemade whipped topping for breakfast, so I wanted to wake you up. How are you feeling?”

Wasn’t that a loaded question. “I’m feeling a little out of sorts.”

Nigel crawled up the bed and sat cross-legged in the middle. “That’s to be expected. This has been a big change for you.”

“It has. I can’t tell you guys enough how much I appreciate the help you’ve given me, but I feel like I’ve upended your lives too much.”

“Nah. We’d do anything to help you. Once we get back to my house, we can get you completely settled in. That’ll help, I think.”

My friend’s sincerity showed in his open gaze. It was amazing that one Daddy-boy meet-up weekend had been the beginning of our friendship. We’d seen each other many times since then when Omar and Nigel had come to visit me, but it felt like everything had been all *give* on their end while all I did was *receive*. Nigel had never shied away from doing the work to maintain our friendship. “I appreciate that. I really do.” Was I really about to say what I was thinking? Did I truly trust Ollie enough to be alone in this apartment with him? Yes, yes I did. As awesome as Omar was, it was Ollie who made me feel safe. “I think that you and Omar should go home today.”

“We haven’t discussed it with Ollie, but Omar and I talked this morning, and we agree. The weekend is over so that dickhead ex of yours will be at work tomorrow. If you don’t feel safe next weekend, we’ll come back here. I’m sure Ollie won’t mind.”

“No, you don’t understand. I think you two should go back home without me. I was so grateful to leave that, until you guys mentioned it, I hadn’t considered how easily Harry would be able to track me down if I went to your house. It’s only a few hours drive, and...” I shook my head. “It makes me

too nervous. I can't stomach the thought of him getting his hands on me again."

Nigel scowled. "We'll never let that happen."

Leaving forward, I rested my hand on his knee. "I know you'll do your best to keep me protected, but...do you think Ollie would mind if I stayed here for a little longer? If he does, maybe I could go stay in that vacant rental that Omar mentioned."

Nigel grasped the back of my neck and stared at me. "I don't think any of us like the idea of you being on your own."

I figured that's what he would say, and I was prepared for it. In the days that I'd been here, I hadn't said more than a handful of words directly to Ollie. He worked all day, but he came home at night and had dinner with us. A lot of the time, he and Omar cooked together in the kitchen while Nigel and I watched TV or just hung out. It had been nice, and I'd be lying if I didn't admit that the thought of staying here with Ollie alone intimidated me a little, but Nigel and Omar putting their lives on hold for me was more than I could bear.

"It would make me feel less guilty if you guys got back to your normal lives. If Ollie doesn't mind me staying for another week or two, then I should be able to start looking for a job. Maybe then you could help me hunt for an apartment?"

"Chip, I don't understand. Why would you want us to leave? Let me talk to my Daddy and see what he says, but I'm sure he'll think it's okay if you come home with us now."

And there was the clincher, the whole reason that I suggested they leave and I stay, as intimidating as the idea of staying here alone with Ollie was, the thought that maybe, just maybe, Harry might come looking for me. Terrified me.

Shaking my head, I said, "The thought of Harry finding me is terrifying, Nigel. I don't think I'd be able to sleep at your house. It's just...I can't. Maybe I'll feel differently in a month or so, but it's too soon. I don't think Harry will let me go easily. At the same time, I don't think he'll wait too long or try too hard to get me back. After all, he's a good-looking man

and a successful chiropractor. He won't have any trouble getting back out there and finding someone new. Maybe not someone as gullible as me, but still."

"Where's this coming from? Is seeing me and Omar together too much for you?"

"No. Not at all. In fact, you two are couple-goals for me. Watching the way Omar treats you gives me hope that someday I'll have a real relationship, a good relationship. I'm not sure if I'll ever look for a Daddy again."

"Don't say that. He wasn't a true Daddy."

I knew that inside, but I didn't trust myself to find the right man for the job. On the other hand, I didn't want to turn into a lonely cat-man because I let the wrong guy ruin the idea of a happily ever after for me forever. "Can we at least talk to Omar and Ollie about this?" He looked so disappointed, but I needed to at least partially not feel like a burden.

"Yeah, we can do that."

Nigel left the room so that I could have privacy to get dressed. It surprised me to find Ollie sitting at the table when I left my room. So far, he'd left before breakfast every morning. "Good morning, Chip."

Peeking up at him, I gave a little half-wave. *Nice, Chip. Like he'll want you staying in his house if you can't even be polite enough to talk to him.* He probably thought I was scared of him, but the truth was, I felt the safest when he was in the apartment.

It was as we were finishing our meal that Omar addressed the elephant in the room. "So my little bear informed us that you think we should leave and go back to our house, but you're okay to stay here with Ollie?"

Staring at my plate, I mumbled, "If that's okay."

"To tell the truth, I'd prefer you to stay here, but are you sure? You've only been here a few days, and you don't really know me yet, so I don't want you to be uncomfortable," Ollie said in his deep baritone. It was funny how much higher-pitched

Harry's voice had been, yet he'd been a growly monster. Ollie's, on the other hand, soothed me.

Cautiously, I lifted my gaze and met his for one brief second before staring at a spot right over his left shoulder. "I don't want it to be awkward for you, but I feel safe here. If it's too much, I'll..." I trailed off because I really wasn't sure what I'd do.

"No, I mean it. I'd feel better if you stayed."

"And it won't be for that long, right?" Nigel asked. "If we give it a month, it should be safe enough for Chip to come to our house, right, Daddy?"

Playing with the napkin in my lap, I said, "Hopefully I'll have a job by then, and no one will have to worry about me being underfoot. I'm sure I can find a room in a boarding house or something."

"I don't think that's necessary," Omar said. "City living isn't cheap, and we have plenty of room for you to stay at our house for as long as you want."

"I don't think you should rush out to find a job, Chip," Ollie added. "You've been through a lot. Take your time and find your footing."

That was a kind offer, considering he'd be stuck with me until I made some money or felt safe enough to go to Nigel's. They'd all been so good to me, coddling me and assuring me that it would all be okay. I wasn't sure, though. The longer I stayed, the more I woke up to my situation. Not only did I not have money or transportation, but I had no phone or computer. My face looked and felt better every day, but it was nice hiding in the apartment right now. I'd worked as an online administrative assistant before, which would be something I could do right away, but again, no computer. Ollie had a desktop in his office, but I hadn't worked up the courage to ask him if I could use it yet.

Nigel had his phone and his laptop, both of which he'd let me use without hesitation, but if I mentioned the lack of either one of my own now, he'd either not want to leave or he'd want to

take me with him. I was petrified that if they didn't go home sooner than later, Nigel's desire to take care of me would affect his relationship with Omar. I couldn't—wouldn't—be the reason their relationship went sideways.

"There's no reason everything has to be decided today," Nigel said reassuringly.

Omar settled back in his chair and smiled. "No, no, there's not."

"So you two are leaving then?" Ollie confirmed.

"Yeah, I think we'll go home after dinner tonight. But, Chip, if you want us to come back at any point, all you have to do is call," Omar said.

"That reminds me." Ollie stood up and went over to the side table by the couch. "I bought you a phone." He placed it on the kitchen table in front of me.

Jerking my head back, I eyed the mobile device like it was a snake, ready to strike me. "What? Why?"

Ollie shrugged. "You're going to need one since I don't have a landline. I picked it up yesterday, but I wanted to charge it for you."

Nigel beamed. "Perfect timing. Now we'll be able to video chat."

"Hmm, since I'm the one who killed your other one, I should've replaced it. I'm sorry about that, Chip. I didn't think."

Ollie smirked at Omar. "If you hadn't crunched it, I would've, so now we both played our part." Ollie turned to me. "I took the liberty of entering Omar's, Nigel's, my number, and the main line at *The Tap* where I work. And, of course, there's always nine-one-one if there's an emergency."

Warmth filled me as I stared at my new phone. He'd bought me a phone, charged it, and taken the time to make sure I had the phone numbers of the only people I knew in Takoda. Who did things like that for someone they didn't know? Who took a

day off of work and drove over two hours just to do a wellness check on their friend's boyfriend's friend? Only Ollie.

I nodded. *Say thank you. Say thank you. Say thank you.* What was wrong with me? Why did I always get so damn nervous?

Having my back, as usual, Nigel said, "That was awesome of you, Ollie. Thank you so much."

"It was no problem. I have to get to work, so I'll set out another set of sheets for the master bedroom for you, Chip."

"What? No, I don't mind staying in your office. Unless you need it? I can stay out here on the couch, if you'd prefer." Sure, now I found my voice, and I sounded like a babbling dumbass.

He held up his hand. "You're fine, but the master bedroom has a lock on the door and an ensuite bathroom. I thought you might feel more comfortable having complete privacy. Plus, my bedroom is bigger than the office. When I get home from work tonight, I'll unload all of your boxes and stack them in the walk-in closet. Then you'll have access to all your books and personal items."

Omar studied Ollie for a moment, then nodded, looking smug. "That sounds perfect. We'll make sure he's all set up before we leave, and I'll throw our sheets and towels in the wash."

Nigel frowned. "I can help, too, Daddy. You haven't let me do anything all week."

"Because I wanted you to be able to devote all your time to Chip, little bear. Don't worry, when we get home, we'll go back to our normal division of chores." He winked.

Rolling his eyes at him, Nigel spun back to me. "Are you sure about all of this? It's totally what you want, right?"

It felt like the room itself held its breath waiting for my answer. Was I nervous? Yes. A little scared even? Yep. But was I positive this was the right decision. "Absolutely."

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OLLIE HAD ONLY WORKED ONE NIGHT SHIFT SINCE I'D BEEN here, so I wasn't sure what time he'd be home. From what I'd been told, he was the head bouncer at *The Tap Tavern*, where they all hung out frequently. Nigel had explained that Omar and Ollie had met years ago through a common friend who owned the tavern. Nigel couldn't wait to take me up there for a boy's night. I hated to disappoint him, but I didn't think I'd be up for anything like that anytime soon.

Now that Nigel and Omar had left, the reality of the situation hit me like a sledgehammer. Had it really been my idea for them to leave me alone with Ollie? What had I been thinking? I blew out a breath. I knew I was safe here with him, and I didn't know why I felt so strongly about that, but I did.

Omar had been in and out of the apartment all week, but Nigel had been here with me all the time. Except for the once, Ollie had worked during the days, but he'd been home with us at night. It was going to be hard to get used to the silence when I was here alone. On the flip side, I wasn't sure if I'd feel better being here alone with Ollie.

I wandered into his bedroom. Nigel had visited me in the office so far, so this was the first time I was getting a real look at Ollie's most personal space. Like everything else in the apartment, the furniture was big and sturdy. If the couch was anything to go by, I knew the mattress was going to be comfortable, as well. Hanging over his bed was a stunning charcoal drawing of a dragon. The detail of the sketch was amazing, so much so that it looked like the dragon was staring into my soul, ready to fly right off the paper and land in front of me.

"It's a beautiful piece, isn't it?"

I jumped, throwing my hand up and grasping my chest. "Holy shit. You scared me." How the hell did this mountain of a man move so silently? That thought sent my thoughts back to Harry, who'd been at least four inches shorter than Ollie and didn't have even half his bulk. How had he managed to always sound like a herd of elephants with all of his stomping?

Ollie grimaced. “Sorry about that. Since the apartment is silent, I figured you heard me come in. The last thing I wanted to do was startle you.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I guess I was lost in thought.” I fixed my gaze back on the dragon.

“That isn’t going to bother you, is it? I know he’s a little ferocious.”

“I think he’s magnificent,” I whispered. If anything, sleeping under this magical beast would make me feel guarded and protected in my sleep.

“One of the waiters from the tavern actually drew him for an art class when he was in college.”

“Wow. That’s impressive.”

We stood next to each other in silence, gazing at the charcoal drawing. Ollie cleared his throat. “I guess I should let you go to bed. Do you need anything?”

“I don’t think so. Thank you.” Finally I’d gotten those precious two words out of my mouth. Why’d it been so hard to speak with him before, but it felt easier all of a sudden? If anything, I’d think that standing in his bedroom with him would make me more tongue-tied.

“Alright. Good night, Chip. If you need me, I’ll be out on the couch.”

“You’re not going to take the pullout in your office?”

He barked out a laugh. “That’s about the only piece of furniture not built for me. My mom likes it, though. I hope you weren’t too uncomfortable.”

“No, not at all. But...thank you for giving up your room for me.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

Oddly enough, I believed him.



## *Chapter Nine*

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## OLLIE

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Early morning had always been my favorite time of the day. As a teenager, I'd gone out and found a job at fourteen. There were two reasons for that. One, I'd hoped that I could somehow help my mom financially so that she could leave my father. Two, I just couldn't stand being home with my old man. But even then, especially then, I'd loved the silence at the beginning of a new day. My dad had never been one to get up a second before he needed to leave for work, and so it had been the most peaceful time in our house. Not surprisingly, I heard the front door open.

"Hello?" My mom's sweet voice called. It cracked me up that she always called my name before opening the door all the way. My mother's unending hope that one day she'd come over and find that I had company made me feel bad since I'd never pursued a relationship for fear of being like my dad. Well, I guess today was her lucky day. Maybe not quite the way she was hoping, but I did have someone in my bed.

I bit back a smile. Maybe I'd have a little fun with this. "Shh, Mom." I pointed down the hall toward the bedroom.

Her eyes widened, and she hitched her thumb back toward the front door. "Should I leave?" she whispered.

I laughed. I couldn't play her like this. There was way too much hope on her face. "No, you're fine." I waved her in.

As she crossed the room toward me, I stood up from the couch and held out my arms. My sweet little mom flew right into my embrace, and I curled around her. Omar was right when he

said that Chip reminded him of my mother. It wasn't just the abuse that they survived, but their tiny frames and their sweet spirits. I kissed my mother's head as I pulled away. "Nice to see you, Mom."

She smacked playfully at my chest. "Where have you been? I haven't heard from you in days." Her eyes darted toward the hall. "Did you meet someone?"

"You wish," I teased. "I don't want to say too much since it's not my story to share, but a friend of Nigel's is staying with me right now."

Mom frowned instantly. "Are they okay?"

Oh yeah, my mother was going to attach herself to Chip the minute she met him. As a survivor of domestic abuse, my mom attended a group meeting every week and had accumulated her own little group of survivors. She'd become their mother hen.

"I think he will be. We only picked him up and brought him to Takoda on Thursday."

"Gotcha. He's been here ever since?" Mom made her way to the kitchen where I had a full pot of coffee ready for her. I hadn't called her in days to ask if she wanted to go to breakfast, so I'd known she'd show up this morning. We were close, and we spent as many mornings together as possible before I left for work. Like me, she was up before the sun to greet the day. I followed her and took a seat at the dining room table. "Do you want me to make something for breakfast, Mom?"

She shook her head and then finished doctoring her coffee before joining me. "I'll make something when your company gets up. Will you be staying home all day?"

"No, I think I make him nervous, so I'm going to head on in to work like normal. Nigel told Chip he'd bring him lunch today, and I think he plans on staying through dinner."

"Chip? Is that the young man's name?"

"Yeah."

“How old is he?”

“He’s young, probably mid to late twenties.”

She tilted her head. “Why didn’t he just stay with Omar and Nigel?”

“We’re pretty sure the only place his ex might look for him is at their house. I don’t know, Mom, I just didn’t feel good about him going over there when there was no chance of his ex finding him here.”

She patted my hand where it lay on the table. “Of course you didn’t, honey. That’s the protector in you.” Her gaze dropped to her coffee, and we both got lost in our thoughts for a minute. Our lives had been hell, and sometimes, the darkness of the past overshadowed the light of the present. Mom didn’t struggle like she did years ago. Between her weekly group and her still seeing her therapist monthly, she’d fought through so many of the demons that had followed her from our father’s house.

“I think it would be good if Chip spoke to someone.”

Mom nodded. “Good. Do you want me to discuss that with him? I’d be happy to guide him.”

“Why don’t we play that by ear? I’m not sure he’ll be up before I leave—”

Mom’s sharp look cut me off. “Or I’ll wait until he’s awake to leave so I can introduce you to him.”

She nodded. “That’s better. No one wants to walk into a kitchen that’s not their own to find some strange woman they’ve never met before.”

And there she was, my mom. The darkness of the past never laid her down for too long before the spunky lady she’d always been meant to be resurfaced. I couldn’t wait for her to meet Chip. She’d want to stick him in her pocket like I had. I chuckled. If I wasn’t careful, she’d pack up his meager belongings and beg him to stay at her house.

“What has you so amused this morning?” she asked before she took a sip of her coffee.

“Nothing.” She glared at me, making me laugh harder. “I was just thinking how you’re going to try to win him over so you can whisk him away. It’ll probably work, too.”

“Well, I am the easiest to get along with.”

I snorted. “That may be true, Mom, but I was thinking more along the lines of he could use a little coddling, and I think I scare him a little, so you might be just the solution.”

“Why on Earth would he be scared of you? And why is he staying here then?”

I’d asked myself that same question throughout the day yesterday. “I have a feeling that as much as my size scares him, it also makes him feel safe.”

“I understand that better than anybody. Whoever thought my little guy would grow up to be such a strapping man?”

The smile shared was filled with sadness. I’d gotten my height from my father, although it hadn’t hit me until I was seventeen. I’d already been actively bulking up at the gym by then, so I went from being a thin, short kid who got picked on to the person that put all the bullies in their place. Even now, I still hit the gym as much as possible. It was one of the reasons I’d chosen this apartment complex. They had a great facility for when I wanted to get a quick workout in.

My bedroom door opened, and there was a shuffle of feet coming down the hall. Mom’s hazel eyes lit up with excitement. She loved meeting new people.

“Chip,” I called out so he wouldn’t be taken unaware. “Come meet my mom.”

He crept into the room with his gaze darting everywhere without resting on me for more than a second. Jesus, I worried that he’d make himself sick staying here. Was he that fearful of me? Or was this just the nerves Omar had warned me about? Mom jumped up from the table and started toward him with outstretched hands. “It’s so nice to meet you, Chip. I’m Miriam.”

“Good morning, Miriam. It’s nice to meet you, as well,” he said shyly.

“Ollie’s about to get ready to leave for work, so I thought maybe I’d stay and make the two of us breakfast so we can get to know each other better. Is that alright with you?”

“I don’t want to be a bother,” he mumbled.

Poor guy. I wished so badly I could hug all of that fear and anxiety out of him. Pushing my chair back from the table before my thoughts got any stranger, I snorted. “Trust me, it would bother her more if you don’t let her feed you.”

“Okay, if you’re sure.”

I left them to it and ran back to my office to throw on some gym clothes and pack up an outfit for work. I didn’t have to be at work for a couple of hours, but my own mother had made it clear that I was not needed for this conversation. As I headed back to tell them goodbye and leave, I stopped, hearing the most adorable sound. Was Chip giggling with my mom? I’d kept waiting for it to happen when he and Nigel were together, but the most he’d been able to get out of him was a smile. Damn, that musical sound. I wanted to lean against the wall and soak it in, but he was having fun, and I didn’t want him to catch me acting like a creeper. Somehow, someway, I’d make sure that there was a whole lot more laughter in his future.

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## Chip

A RATTLING SOUND CAME FROM DOWN THE HALL WHERE THE bedroom was. A couple minutes later, Ollie appeared in the doorway. “Heavens, Ollie. What’s making all that racket?”

He reached down and held up a gold pocket watch, dangling off a chain that was looped through his belt. “Oh,” she said on a sigh. “Your granddaddy’s pocket watch. You haven’t worn that in years.”

His gaze darted to me and away, then he shrugged. “I know, but it felt right to put it on today.”

I searched his face, wondering if he'd put it on so that I'd hear him coming. Surely not. Why would he go out of his way like that just because I was so jumpy?

"That's nice. It's good to see it again." She smiled wistfully.

He planted his hands on his hips and narrowed his eyes at us. "And what had you two in here giggling so hard?"

"I was just telling Chip about the day we signed you up for the gym for the first time when you were thirteen."

Picturing a little Ollie running into the glass door when one of the older teenagers spoke to him was hilariously funny. Miriam said the boy had been in nothing but a pair of running shorts with beads of sweat running down his chest. Apparently, that had been all it took for little Ollie to get distracted. The fact that it paved the path for his coming out made it precious.

A flush worked its way up his face from the edge of his beard. "Mom." The whine in his voice had me covering my mouth with both hands as I snorted. At that moment, he sounded like the young teenager his mom had been describing. Only bigger and growlier.

"I'm sure you want to get going, Ollie. Don't let us hold you up. We're going to sit and have a nice visit."

"Make sure that visit doesn't include telling any more stories about me."

She shot me an amused glance. "We just have to see where the conversation leads, dear." She stood up from the chair and walked toward him with outstretched arms. Ollie truly looked like a giant next to his petite mother.

He leaned down and hugged her tight, kissed her cheek, and then backed away. "Chip, if you need me, my number is programmed into your phone. Nigel should be here around noon."

I nodded. "Yeah, he texted me already this morning to let me know he'd see me soon. That's actually what woke me up."

He scowled. “You should probably put your phone on vibrate so that you get uninterrupted sleep.”

His mom rolled her eyes. “For heaven’s sake, Ollie, he’s a grown man. I’m sure he can manage his own phone.”

Cracking me up further, he stuck his tongue out at her. “Okay, then I guess I’m off.” He made it halfway across the room before he hesitated. “Are you sure you don’t need anything else, Chip?” There’s plenty of bottled waters, and Omar and I stocked up—”

“Ollie, get out of here. If we need anything, I’ll run out. I plan to hang out until Chip gets tired of me or Nigel shows up. He’ll be fine. Now leave so that we can gossip already.”

The big man huffed, proving that no matter how old or strong you were, a man could always be put in check by his mama. He saluted her, nodded at me, and then left.

His mom poured herself more coffee and asked, “Would you like another cup, Chip?”

“No, thank you. One cup is enough. I don’t want to get shaky.”

“That’s so smart. Unfortunately, I might have a slight addiction to the deliciousness.” Watching her add a splash of two creamers, Hershey’s and caramel macchiato, a little sugar, and a drop of milk, I had to agree with her. Since she’d fixed my cup the same way, I knew how good it was. “Are you ready for breakfast, dear, or would you want to wait a little longer?”

“If you’re hungry, I can eat now.”

“But are *you* hungry?” she asked.

It was amazing how fast she’d gotten past my defenses. I knew Ollie thought it was just him, but truly, people, in general, usually made me nervous. Something about Miriam put me at ease. More so than I’d ever been with any woman. I’d grown up in a conservative home, and my mom and aunts, who’d never been the warmest people to begin with, had been appalled when I told them I was gay. My mother had gone into her room for two days, and her screams as she pleaded with God to fix me were the most I heard her voice until the day I



moved. But Miriam was different, and I didn't feel like I had to lie to appease her. She hadn't tip-toed past my defenses, but she'd kicked the door down with her charming sweetness.

"Not really."

She smiled. "Good. Then let me finish this while we chat, and then I'll whip us up something tasty."

"Sounds good."

"I hate to bring this up on an empty stomach, but in my experience, sometimes that's best." She stared pointedly at my face.

I fought the urge to reach up and cover the bruising, which was fading, but it was only going from colorful purples and blues to close to a greenish yellow. "Ollie didn't tell you?"

"No, honey. I raised him better than that. But don't worry, I wasn't going to ask what happened to you, but instead tell you a little of my story. The first six months after I left my husband, I was a nervous wreck all the time. Part of that was my fears about Ollie and his court case."

My gaze jumped to hers. "What?"

She sipped her drink, then set it down in front of her and cupped her hands around her mug like she needed its warmth. "The only reason I finally got away from my ex-husband is because my son beat the shit out of him when he came home to visit one day and found my face like..." She gestured toward mine. "It was so awful, Chip."

Her voice was thick with tears, and I felt the moisture accumulating in my eyes. I was really shocked at how well I'd been doing. After the first twenty-four hours of Nigel's loving care, the tears had all but dried up. I wasn't even having trouble sleeping at night. After the last several months of crying almost every night or waking up from a nightmare, only to realize that the true horror was my life, and then crying myself back to sleep, it had been refreshing to just be. But did that make sense after everything I've been through?

"Are you okay?" I asked with concern. How in the world could someone hurt this beautiful soul?

“Yes, honey. I’m right as rain these days. Thanks to my son. You can trust him, Chip. I know it’s scary when you’ve been at the hands of an abuser. You don’t feel like you can trust your own instincts anymore.”

“Yes. God yes. That’s exactly it. I know I need to start taking steps to get out of Ollie’s hair, but every time I think about it, I get so confused. I’m so unsure of what to do next or how to do it. I feel like the men who’ve helped me have already done enough, but...”

“But it’s so much harder to do it on your own than to ask for help. If it helps, I lived with my son for eighteen months after he pulled me from my hell.”

“But you’re his mom. I’m sure he wanted you with him. He just met me. It doesn’t seem fair to burden him with my crap.”

She stretched out her hand toward me, so I met her halfway. “Trust me, honey. You’re not a burden to Ollie, Nigel, or his sexy Daddy, either.”

“Miriam!”

“What? That man’s young enough to be my son. Hell, he’s the same age as my son, but I’m not dead. That is one fine black man.”

“You’re not wrong.” I didn’t think Nigel would mind me saying so since he reminded me all the time. “He’s kind, too.”

“And generous. All of Ollie’s friends are. Take my word for it, Chip. Don’t try to rush out of here because you’re embarrassed or you’re worried about being a burden. Not everyone is as lucky as us, so you have to hold on tightly and let yourself heal. Get your feet under you. And if you’re taking advantage, don’t worry, I’ll let you know because now that I found you, I’m keeping you.”

And just like that, I had a new friend.

## *Chapter Ten*

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## CHIP

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*I*t was still a little nerve-racking living alone with Ollie, not that I'd ever tell Nigel that. My friend would insist that he come to stay again or that I go to his and Omar's home. The reality was, I wanted to stay here. Yes, the large older man who'd moved so silently through the house had jangled my nerves a little bit when I first moved in, but he'd been considerate enough to wear that pocket watch with its clinking chain anytime he came into a common area, always alerting me to presence. Plus, I got a little more comfortable every day because he made me feel safe, and that was something I'd been so desperately needing.

There was something about Ollie's quiet intensity, the way he always seemed to be on alert, that eased the fear that I felt like I'd been living with my whole life. Even before Harry. Harry, who might still come looking for me; hell, he might even find me, but I dared him to try getting through the mountain of a man who'd taken me in. Harry was nothing more than a bully who picked on someone smaller and weaker than him, and Ollie didn't fit either criteria. Ollie, who'd never manipulate anyone the way my ex had me.

Presenting himself as a kind and compassionate boss, Harry had ended up privy to so many aspects of my life. I'd spent a lot of time in my last days with him reflecting on it, and I suspected that Harry had hired me with plans to make me his. He'd learned I didn't have a good relationship with my parents and had convinced me to separate from them as a caring boss, long before we dated. While eliminating their toxicity from life had been best for me in many ways, he hadn't done it for

me. As was proven when he kept me so busy that it was hard to make plans with the few friends I had. It all should have been a warning sign, but he'd acted so besotted by me, and I'd never really had that.

The one weekend I'd spent with Bosley had been incredible, a confirmation that a Daddy was everything I'd ever wanted. But he traveled for work, and he'd told me he wouldn't be a good Daddy for a boy like me. It was in Ollie's home that I was finally starting to understand what he meant. I'd thought it would be fine living with someone who traveled all the time. As long as they came back. Bosley had doted on my every need that weekend, and the sex had been incredible. He'd been a patient and considerate lover. Living here, I figured out that I really needed more than that. I needed to feel safe and secure. For me, being the center of someone's world meant them checking on me, keeping a protective eye on me, and making sure I was okay physically. I was barely more than a stranger to Ollie, but he did those things, and it meant everything. I'd never want less than that from a partner.

"What are you thinking about?" Nigel asked as he handed me a plate to put in the dishwasher.

The four of us had dined together, which was becoming the norm since Omar and Nigel had moved home. We'd finally convinced Omar that if he or Ollie cooked, then they had to let us do the dishes. If Nigel and I cooked, then they'd do dishes. It was working out nicely because, by the time we'd eaten, I needed a step back from the confusing thoughts and the way my body reacted to Ollie.

"You know, just how different life is right now."

Nigel stopped rinsing the bowl in his hand and gave me his full attention. "I bet. It must be weird staying at someone's house you barely even know."

"Yeah, I guess. But Ollie's so easy to live with. He leaves in the morning, pretty much as soon as I get up. Sometimes, he stays and has breakfast with me and Miriam, but most of the time, he's out of here pretty quickly."

Nigel rolled his eyes. “It’s a standing joke that no one thought Ollie ever left *The Tap*. He’s pretty much always worked open to close.”

That wasn’t the first time that had been mentioned, but I didn’t think that was why Ollie left so quickly in the morning. I thought it had more to do with leaving me and his mother so that we could talk. She’d become a friend, a mentor, and a motherly figure in a very short amount of time. The woman dripped kindness, compassion, and love. Ollie was a lucky man to have her. But after the stories of what she’d suffered at her ex-husband’s hands and what Ollie had done about it, she’d been blessed with a terrific son.

“Nigel, do you think my parents would have been better to me if I’d been a better son?”

Nigel huffed, dropped the silverware he’d been holding into the sink, and turned off the water. He picked up a towel and dried his hands, then rested his palms on my shoulders. “Chip, listen to me. There’s nothing wrong with you. Do you think I would’ve gone out of my way to remain in contact and forged a friendship with you after that weekend we met if you were some mean-spirited or terrible person? No. Unfortunately, you ended up with a bunch of assholes in your life. My mom’s always said that she can’t understand how a mother can turn their back on their child, no matter what. It’s like, part of the deal, right? People fall in and out of love, and romantic relationships end all the time, but your child should be part of your heartbeat.”

I thought back to my final separation with my family. As long as I’d maintained the status quo and didn’t in any way mention my homosexuality, they’d at least tolerated me. The only thing Harry had ever said right was that I deserved more than that. I should only go where I’m celebrated. In his case, I guess I was supposed to feel honored that he allowed me to cook, clean, and do his laundry.

“But even the friends I had back home let me go so easily. I think there has to be something wrong with me. I’m so frightened that moving to Takoda, you’re going to decide I’m more trouble than I’m worth, too.”

Nigel pulled me away from the sink and to the table, pushing me into a seat and sitting down next to me, clutching my hands in both of his. “Chip, listen to me. Through the years, you told me more than once that our video calls were the only time you felt like you could truly open up and be yourself. I know it’s been harder for you to make friends since you’re shy and need more time to feel comfortable with people. That doesn’t mean anything’s wrong with you. The people who haven’t stayed around or fought to get closer to you are the ones who are missing out.”

“Maybe. I’m scared I’m never going to make a friend besides you, and I’ll end up being too needy.”

Omar’s burst of laughter startled me, and I turned my head, seeing him and Ollie watching us from the living room. Omar was kicked back on the couch while Ollie sat in his recliner. Omar waved a hand over at us. “Sorry, I wasn’t trying to eavesdrop, but you boys are right there.”

Since we were in an open concept, it would have been hard for him not to overhear us. “That’s okay,” I said, feeling a little foolish about my confession.

“Daddy, that’s not nice that you laughed. What’s your problem?” Nigel scowled at the big Black man who he usually thought walked on water.

Omar shook his head, still chuckling. “He’s worried he won’t make friends, and I’m more concerned that once we unleash Toby’s crew on him, he’ll want to run away as far and as fast as he can.”

“Don’t listen to him. They’re not that bad,” Nigel reassured me.

Ollie, who’d been staring at me with that quiet intensity, stroked his beard, which made me swallow hard. What was it about that gesture that got my motor running? “They’re not bad, Chip. But you’ll be smothered with affection. Toby’s crew doesn’t know any other way.”

Nigel barked out a laugh. “Toby doesn’t know another way.”

Nigel had told me so many things about his friend group over the years, and I'd hoped to meet them. *One day.* Right now, I kind of dreaded it. Nigel had described them as so welcoming and friendly, so it felt like the ultimate test. If they didn't end up liking me or wanting me around, what would that mean for my friendship with Nigel? What would that really mean about me?

Nigel picked his phone up off the table and swiped his screen a couple of times before turning it so that I could see it. "Read this."

**Hayden:** *Nigel, it's not fair. He's been here, like, forever.*

**Nigel:** *I know, and I promise, when he's ready, we'll all get together.*

**Hayden:** *We can't bond properly if I don't meet him.*

**Nigel:** *I don't know how people ever thought you were really cold and heartless. You're such a sap.*

**Hayden:** *No I'm not. Take that back. It's only because you've talked about him for so long.*

**Nigel:** *Sure.*

**Hayden:** *I'm done with you.*

**Nigel:** *LMAO. If I'd known it was that easy to get rid of you, I'd have called you out for your tender heart a long time ago.*

**Hayden:** *Ugh. I hate you. I'm telling my Daddy.*

**Nigel:** *He'll agree.*

**Hayden:** *Ew. He did. I hate you both.*

**Hayden:** *And I still want to meet Chip ASAP. I remember what it's like to not have...well, you know. He's new to town, and he'll need friends.*

"See?" Nigel asked.

Hayden wanted to meet me that bad? Be my friend? What was in the water in this town? First, Ollie wanted to protect me like it was his job. Miriam had adopted me within minutes of meeting me, and now this. I really didn't understand how I'd



gone from practically being held captive by a narcissist jerk and the only person who cared being hundreds of miles away to this. I'd always known Nigel had hit the motherload with Omar, but I hadn't really expected all this kindness to extend to me, too.

"The only reason you haven't been bombarded yet is because I wanted to give you time to settle in."

"Thank you. I'm really not ready to meet anyone else yet." Gesturing back at the bruises on my face, I said, "Maybe once I don't look like...this." By then, I'd have been away from Harry a little longer, and maybe I'd feel a little more confident. Maybe.

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## Ollie

I'D ALWAYS LOVED MY JOB. IT HAD NEVER BEEN A HARDSHIP to be here for everyone else since these were my people. Besides, I'd never intended to seek out that HEA that everyone else seemed to desire. That fear that I'd end up like my father was too strong. Now, here I was at my favorite place, watching over the staff and our customers, the thing I'd enjoyed doing most in life, and all my thoughts were on Chip. How was he doing? Was my mom still there? Had Nigel gotten there yet? Was he lonely? Was he scared? And the biggest question—was Harry looking for him?

The idea of that abuser sniffing around, looking for my...

No, not my anything. But for Chip, Harry made me see red. There was no way I'd ever let him get near that young man again.

"Hi, Ollie," Indie said as he sidled up to me at the bar where I was waiting for my glass of water.

"What are you up to?"

He flapped his hand up to his chest, patting his eyes innocently. “What makes you think I’m up to something?”

As Oz set a glass of water in front of me, he said, “Probably because you look like you just snuck a cookie out of the cookie jar. You’re not all that sly, Indie.”

Indie shook his finger at Oz. “You better be careful. I’m sleeping with your boss, afterall.”

Oz chuckled and walked away.

“You better be careful with that. You’ll end up with a disgruntled employee who really thinks you whine to Cameron to get your way.”

He waved that away. “Not a chance. I make friends with everyone.”

That was true. There was something so engaging about Indie, even more so now that he’d settled into his new normal— dating Cameron, hanging out with Luca and Julian, and slowly integrating with the rest of Toby’s crew. Chip, sitting at the kitchen table, so confused by the fact that Nigel’s friends might really want to meet him and befriend him, flashed through my mind. “Let me ask you a question.”

“Shoot. I happen to have a question for you, too.”

“I suspected you wanted something. So how’s it been going for you with Toby’s crew?”

Indie tilted his head. “Okay, that’s not what I was expecting, but good. It took me a minute to get used to Toby. He’s so—”

“Happy?” I suggested.

“Energetic, kinda like a puppy is more what I was thinking.”

Julian walked up and set his notepad on the counter. “You must be talking about Toby.”

Indie snickered. “How did you know? He should come with a warning label.”

Luca appeared on the other side of Julian, and I bit back a laugh. This little trio reminded me so much of Toby’s original crew, back before they’d all found their forever partners and

moved on from serving tables at *The Tap*. I'd never been able to figure out how any of them got any work done with how they all seemed to congregate in one place every chance they got, and yet they did. They'd been crowd favorites, and these three seemed to be the next generation.

"That's why I never told Toby I was a boy," Lucas said.

The other two gaped, but I winked at him. I'd known Luca for years, and since I'd worked the door, I'd seen the gentleman who used to pick him up from work on a semi-regular basis. He hadn't been around for a while, but I'd heard him call Luca boy more than once when he'd opened the car door for him.

"I didn't know you were a boy. Did you know?" he asked Julian.

Julian shook his head no.

Luca smirked. "No one did. I already had a Daddy when I started working here, so I wasn't looking for one. Then, eventually, I wasn't sure how to bring it up." He shrugged. "I don't know, with college, working all the time, and whatever, it just never came up."

"I'm impressed you managed to keep anything to yourself around here," I said.

Luca frowned. "That's it? You're not mad I never said anything? Or upset that I kept it to myself?"

"Why would I be upset?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"I don't know. Everyone around here tells all their business to each other, so now it feels like I lied to you guys by omission."

"Your personal life is your business unless you decide to share," Julian said, reassuring him. "Look at me, if people were going to get offended or pissed off at anyone holding stuff back, it would've happened when I came clean about my artwork."

I smiled at him. "No one was ever irritated with you, just proud."

He dipped his head. "I know, and isn't that something?"

“We’ll gossip about you with you later.” Indie, pointed at Luca. “But, Ollie, why did you ask me about Toby’s crew?”

Stroking my beard, I wondered how much to reveal. Luca had been around for years, but he’d always come in and done his job and left. He was always polite and efficient, but I’d always had the feeling that his life outside of here was his priority and took all his time. Since these three had grown closer, though, they’d not only bonded with each other, but they seemed to go out of their way to pull me into their conversations and make me a part of what was going on in their lives. I’d come to really enjoy their company. I’d always been friendly with all the employees, and it had been an honor and a privilege guarding their backs and making sure they were safe, but this trio was different. They sought me out more as a friend than just their protector. I knew they were trustworthy. “I don’t know. I guess I’m just worried about Chip.”

“Oh, that was the question I had for you. Why don’t you invite us over? I want to get to know him and help him feel welcome since he’s new to town.”

Julian and Luca looked at Indie like he’d grown a second head. “Ollie doesn’t have anyone at his house,” Julian said.

I frowned with confusion. It wasn’t like I didn’t have people over because I was opposed to it. Up until recently, I’d just always been here all the time so there was no sense in it.

“True,” Indie said. “But he goes home for dinner a lot more than he used to, and I want to meet Chip.”

Suspiciously, I asked, “Why?”

Julian raised a hand. “We were talking about him at my house last night, and we thought it might be more comfortable for him to just spend time with a few of us at a time.”

Indie nodded. “We figured Nigel would probably take Hayden around to meet him sooner than later, but since we’re kind of your people, and we’re literally the newest members of Toby’s crew, we thought maybe you’d introduce us.”

Luca smirked. “I’m not part of anything.”

Indie flipped him an unimpressed scowl. “We’ll see how long that lasts. Anyway, it’s a little intimidating since they’ve all known each other so long. They’re friendly, and they explain all their inside jokes, so I’ve never felt left out or anything, but Nigel said that Chip’s shy, so—”

“So we thought it might be nice if he hung out with us,” Julian said.

Flitting my gaze between the three of them, I finally settled on Luca. “Truth?” I asked, raising a brow. “This isn’t about meeting him first and besting Hayden or Toby. I know you boys are getting a little competitive about who brings who into the fold.”

Luca nodded. “No, we’re being serious. It can be a lot with too many people. And the bigger group might decide the best thing to do is find Chip a new and better Daddy. It might be nice for a few of us to know what he wants and have his back. I know that’s one of the reasons I never admitted to being a boy once I was single again.”

“You were worried if Toby found out, he’d put up one of his wanted Daddy signs for you, huh?” Julian asked knowingly.

“One hundred percent. It was fun watching them advertise for a Daddy in the back on the community board in the hall, but I’m not sure that’s for me.”

“That makes sense,” I said. “But just know, they always had a triple layer of protection. They knew they had Cameron, but Christian was keeping an eye on it, too. And then there was me.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “No one was getting through me to any of them if I didn’t think they were on the up and up.”

Indie raked his gaze up and down my body. He was such a goofball.

Cameron walked up, glaring at his boyfriend. “Why are you eyeing Ollie like a snack?”

“Well, obviously, because he is one.” Indie moved over and leaned into Cameron’s side. “But don’t worry, Daddy, you’re the only one for me.”

“He was actually just admiring all of Ollie’s delicious muscles,” Julian said, throwing his friend under the bus.

“I’m telling Joel,” Cameron said.

Luca huffed. “Not like that. We’re talking about how Ollie always has our back and keeps us all safe.”

Cameron smiled. “That’s definitely true. Carry on.”

Indy batted his eyelashes at his boyfriend. “Convince Ollie to let us go to his house and meet Chip.”

I held up both hands. “Sorry, guys. He’s not ready for that. When he’s up for company, I’ll consider it. But for now, I don’t want anyone coming around giving him ideas about finding a new Daddy or any other nonsense. He’s fine with me.”

“Um.” Julian blinked. “Why do you sound so mad?”

“I’m not mad. I’m just looking out for Chip the same way I would for any of you, and the last thing he needs is signs going up or someone trying to introduce him to an eligible Daddy. It’s just...no.” I stomped off, forgetting my water but too pissed to go back for it.

“What just happened?” I heard Cameron ask as I retreated.

What *was* my problem? I wanted Chip to make friends, and I wanted him to feel comfortable in Takoda. Why had the mention of the wanted signs that Toby used to find himself and his friends Daddies thrown me so badly? It wasn’t any of my business if Chip decided to get right back on the horse. But... did I want it to be my business? *Shit*. How was this boy getting so far under my skin? If he hadn’t just said last night that he wasn’t ready to meet Hayden, I’d go right back and invite Indie, Julian, and Luca over tonight, if only to prove to myself that my feelings for Chip weren’t any different than anyone else who’d needed my help. Maybe if I kept saying it over and over to myself, I’d believe it.

## *Chapter Eleven*

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## OLLIE

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Christian, my best friend in the whole world, strode from the bar area of *The Tap* towards where I sat at the front door. As he got closer, we both reached out a hand to shake. “Hey, man. How have you been?” I asked.

He yanked me off my stool and pulled me in for a quick hug with one firm smack on the back. “From what I hear, I should be asking you that.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “Well, I’ve had a houseguest for over two weeks, which I know you’re well aware of. I’m surprised this is the first time I’m seeing you.”

He pulled out the chair across from mine and leaned his elbows on the table between us. “I was giving you an opportunity to come and hash this out with me on your own.”

Narrowing my eyes, I crossed my arms over my chest. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t posture at me, old friend. I know you too well for that shit. What’s going on with Nigel’s friend staying at your house? You’re not talking, and no one else has met him yet.”

“Have you talked to Omar?” Christian nodded his head. “Then I don’t understand the question. You know Chip was in an abusive situation, and he needed help. He’s safe at my apartment, and he’s been spending a lot of time with my mother.”

Christian’s face softened. “How’s Miriam doing?”



Blowing out a breath, I forced myself to relax and dropped my arms to my sides. This man adored my mother, and she felt the same about him. He was as close to a brother as I'd ever get, so I didn't need to be so defensive. "She's in heaven right now. She and Chip have breakfast together every morning and spend hours talking about all the things. I really think this new friendship has been good for both of them."

"And Cameron says you've been coming in a little later in the morning, as well?"

I shrugged one shoulder. "I think he was pretty intimidated by me at first. Let's face it, I'm not a small guy, but he is. Spending time with him and my mother has helped him loosen up around me quite a bit. Hell, he even speaks full sentences to me now, even if no one else is around."

"And how often is that?"

"I don't know. Nigel's over for dinner every single night, and Chip tends to go into his room not too long after they leave."

"And his room is where?"

"I gave him my room." I felt myself growing agitated at the twenty questions.

"Ollie, what are you thinking right now?"

"I told you, he needed help, and I—"

He held up a hand, stopping me. "You know he's a boy, right?"

For fuck's sake, what was with all the questions? "Of course I do."

"And you don't see the problem here?"

"Christian, if you have something to say, spit it out," I growled.

He huffed out a breath. "Why are you letting a man, a boy who wants a Daddy, stay with you? Come on, Ollie. You know better than that. You're a handsome man, and you're a protector. He's going to attach to you. Does he even know you're not a Daddy?"

"Why would you assume that he'd think I am one?"

“Oh, I don’t know because you showed up at his house with Omar. A Daddy. For the most part, all of Omar’s friends are, what? Daddies. Because Nigel, who’s Chip’s friend and touch point in Takoda, is a boy. And who are all of his friends? Oh, I know, boys. Why wouldn’t he assume that you’re a Daddy?”

Pretending like there was something interesting going on in the middle of the dining room, I turned away from him and stared intently at absolutely nothing. I understood his concern, and he’d always been the protector of every boy he’d ever met. A part of me wanted to be offended that he’d think I’d do anything to hurt Chip. But then again, he hadn’t met him yet. We were all taking things at his pace. So far, he hadn’t shown any interest in leaving the apartment. I figured the more comfortable he got with me, the closer he’d be to facing the world.

“Are you ignoring me?” Christian asked, annoyance slipping into his tone.

“No, I’m not. I’m just not ready to say what I’m thinking.”

He waited me out for several minutes, and then he barked out a laugh. “Holy shit, you like him.”

“What’s not to like? You’ll see once you finally meet him. He’s adorable and a total sweetheart when he opens up.”

“No, no, no.” He wagged his finger at me. “You like him, like him. After all these years, someone’s finally turned your head.”

“I didn’t say that.” Feel it? Yes, but I hadn’t uttered it to a soul yet. My mom had probably noticed that I was interested in him, but she’d been kind enough to let me process it on my own.

“So you’re not considering being his Daddy, then?” Christian asked.

I growled low in my throat. I didn’t say that, either.

“Wow. Okay. I’d hoped that you’d let go of some of the control you have over your emotions, but I didn’t expect you to ever end up with a boy.”

I hadn't expected to end up with anyone. "I don't know why not. I've been surrounded by them for the last twenty years."

He snorted. "I guess that's true."

I really couldn't talk to my mom about Chip. She'd already adopted him for her own. I'd considered speaking to Omar, but it felt like a conflict of interest for him with Nigel and Chip being so close, and I didn't want to put him in an awkward position. At the end of the day, I knew I'd been avoiding Christian, and I knew why. This was so new to me, and I wasn't used to being uncomfortable in my own skin.

"Christian, man, I don't know. There's something so precious about him. And even after all he's been through, he's still so loving. It doesn't hurt that he also reminds me of Archie and Indie."

Christian quirked a brow at me. "What exactly about those two do you find similar?"

"The way they walk around with their heart on their sleeve, both of them so desperate for love before they found their Daddies. That's my Chip."

"Your Chip, huh?" he teased.

"I hope so. Someday. I'm not planning to rush him or anything, especially while he's living under my roof. He also desperately wants to get on his own two feet, and I want to respect that."

"You know, Ollie. Do you know what Levi admitted to me one time?"

"With your boy, I can only imagine."

Christian smiled fondly. "Isn't that the truth? But seriously, one night after we'd been together for about six months, he told me that even though he would've never admitted it out loud, in the darkness of night, when he was alone in his room, he longed for a white knight to show up and rescue him."

"So what are you saying? Should I ignore all the things he's been saying he wants to do without help?"

“Not at all, but I *am* saying that sometimes a good Daddy has to read between the lines. Make sure Chip knows that you don’t need him to have his shit all the way together for you to want him. I dare say, the more you can baby him, the happier you’ll be. There’s ways to be there for him while letting him stand on his own without taking away his pride or his dignity. The question you have to ask yourself is, do you know him well enough to figure out what the balance will be for him?”

We chatted for a while longer about his boyfriend and his family, then he made a lap around the tavern, greeting customers, and checking in with the employees. I spent the entirety of the lunch shift playing his words through my mind and thinking about all the things I’d heard Chip say he wanted to figure out on his own compared to what I knew he needed.

Indie, Luca, and Julian hightailed it to my table as soon as their tables slowed down. “Hey, Ollie. It looked pretty intense over here,” Julian said. “Is everything okay?”

“Or is there something you want to tell us?” Indie asked, wagging his eyebrows.

Luca shook his head, exasperated. “Ignore them, Ollie. We all know that you’re falling for your roommate. It’s as obvious as the nose on your face.”

Indie elbowed Luca in the side playfully. “You’re no fun.”

Luca lifted his hands up at his sides and shrugged. “Sorry, but I can’t torture a man who’s been there for all of us multiple times. If anything, I think it’s our job to be here for him now.”

Amused, I asked, “In what way?”

Julian gave me a crooked smile. “Come on, Ollie. You know about as much about relationships as I did before Joel and I finally got together, and you’re almost twice as old as me.”

“Thanks for that reminder,” I said dryly.

Indie half-covered his mouth and whispered just loud enough for me to hear, “Ollie’s a virgin?”

Luca groaned. “Indie. Dude. Don’t tell Julian’s business.”

“What? Julian talked about it the other day while we rolled silverware. It’s not like it’s news what his virginal status was before Joel.”

“Maybe not for you.” Luca pointed at me. “Except Ollie might not have known.”

Julian waved them both off. “Ollie knows.”

“Ollie? How many secrets are you holding?” Indie asked.

I sniffed. “More than you can imagine. And for the record, I’m not a virgin.”

“Well, you can bet that all those people who confided in you, want you to be happy,” Luca said seriously.

“I agree,” Julian said. “Which means, if you need help getting your man, you let us know, and we have your back.”

“I appreciate it, but if there’s anything to handle, I think I’ve got it.”

Indie pouted. “Well, you’re no fun. I was hoping we’d finally get an invite to your house.”

They turned to go back to work, but then a thought occurred to me. “There might be one thing. When’s the next time you’re all available during the day?”

## *Chapter Twelve*

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## CHIP

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After two full weeks, I'd settled into somewhat of a routine. Miriam came over in the mornings, we had breakfast together, and she stayed for a couple of hours. It was a nice way to start the day, and I began to open up to her more about what I'd experienced living with Harry.

Talking to her helped so much, though, that I was considering attending the group sessions she went to weekly for survivors of domestic abuse. She also mentioned her therapist several times, but as of right now, I still had no money, so that wasn't on the table.

The most amazing aspect of living in Takoda was the amount of time I spent with Nigel. He generally came over for lunch or sometimes right after, and then he stayed through dinner. Most nights, Omar joined us, as well, but sometimes, he went and spent time with his friends, who were all Daddies, apparently. Nigel had mentioned that enough times that I was starting to suspect that at least one or two of them must be single. It made me feel guilty that Nigel wasn't spending time with his friends, but I planned on addressing that.

Today was different, though. Nigel had an order to finish up for his online store, and since he'd been here so much and only sewing part-time, he needed to spend the rest of today working. "Are you sure you'll be okay?" he asked over our video call.

Would I? I'd been so lonely living with Harry. After his mask came off, we'd spent more of our relationship avoiding each other than we'd ever spent talking. He'd bossed me around

and criticized me, but there hadn't been any kindness or the friendly banter like I had with Miriam and Nigel. Or even what I had with Ollie, who treated me respectfully and asked my opinions about all sorts of topics.

A smile crept on my face. "I'll be fine. I haven't spent a lot of time reading lately, and I can't think of anything I'd rather do on a rainy afternoon than curl up with the pages of a good book and get lost in it."

Nigel sighed. "I'd be tempted to call bullshit, but I know exactly what you mean. That's how I feel when I'm in my sewing room. Every scrap of material is unique in some way. I enjoy spending time manipulating the fabric and turning it into something beautiful."

"I've been wanting to speak with you about this anyway, Nigel. I know you have other friends, and I appreciate how much time you've given up for me, but you have a life to live. Don't feel like you have to cater to me all the time."

He pursed his purple-lined lips. It matched the lace top and head scarf he had on perfectly. "Chip, believe me when I tell you it's not a sacrifice. I mean it when I say I wished you'd have moved here four years ago when I did. It's been awesome spending so much time with you. I'll hang out with my friends again soon, but I'm hoping one day you'll be ready to meet them."

He'd assured me several times that I'd be welcome amongst his friends. Omar had seconded that, and even Ollie had weighed in and told me what a great bunch of guys Nigel had in his life. "Maybe. No, I mean definitely at some point."

He fist-pumped the air. "Cool. Don't forget, they were a crew before I moved here, too. There was a time when I was the new boy, and just this summer, we've added a couple more to the group. You'll be welcome. They're the greatest bunch of guys."

Looking at the part of the screen that showed my reflection, I was pleased to see that I was close to being able to walk out the door without worrying if someone would stare at me or ask me if I'd been in a fight. It wouldn't be too much longer



before I felt confident enough to meet his friends. “All right, I’ll come out and meet everybody sooner than later if you promise to stop spending every afternoon and evening here.”

“Chip, that’s not fair,” Nigel whined.

I laughed. “That’s the deal. Take it or leave it.”

We chatted a little longer before he hung up to get to work. I, on the other hand, grabbed the Agatha Christie novel Miriam had brought me and curled up on the couch. The sound of the rain pitter-pattering against the window panes of the balcony door was the perfect soundtrack for a relaxing afternoon. It had been years since I’d been this peaceful.

I owed this all to Ollie. If it wasn’t for him, I’d either be scared out of my mind and hiding it while I stayed at Nigel’s, or I’d have had to inconvenience them further by begging them to stay at one of Omar’s rentals. Ollie and I still didn’t interact a whole lot, but it was getting easier in the mornings with his mom with us and in the evenings with Omar and Nigel here. They’d all provided a buffer while I eased my way toward not being so tongue-tied around him.

I must have nodded off because the sound of the front door opening startled me. Glancing at the clock on the wall, I was surprised to see it was only four o’clock in the afternoon. Ollie generally didn’t come in until at least six-thirty. “Hey, were you sleeping?” he asked.

Rubbing my eyes, I yawned. “Not purposefully.”

He halted in the middle of the room and shuffled his feet.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, apprehension slamming into me. Ollie always strolled around, completely comfortable in his skin. This was different.

He reached his hand up and stroked his beard, a telltale sign that he had something to say. *Ha!* When did I start noticing Ollie’s quirks? Who was I trying to fool? Even when they’d come to get me, half-traumatized and scared, I’d paid attention to his every move.

“So I have an idea for tonight,” he said.

Warning bells went off. “Okay?”

“I thought that maybe we could go to *Best Buy* and look for a laptop for you to use for work.”

I started shaking my head immediately. “If I need one, you told me I could use the computer in your office anytime I want. Between that and my phone, I’ve been job hunting. I don’t need something of my own. Really, I can’t afford it.” What was he thinking?

“Yeah, I know, but I’ve heard you mention to Nigel more than once that you’d be interested in finding another online administrative job. For that, you need something of your own.”

“Eventually. Right now, I only need to find a job and earn some money. I’m not picky or anything. I’ll work anywhere I can earn a paycheck.”

“I get that, but”—he crossed his arms over his chest, a move that signified he wasn’t taking no for an answer—“I know where you live, and you can pay me back whenever. Wouldn’t you make more money if you found a job in your field?”

He had me there. I didn’t know how much longer I’d be here, and so far, everything nearby that I was qualified for was minimum wage. I needed to be able to walk or use public transportation because I had no intention of allowing any of them to drive me everywhere. “There’s plenty of work out there.”

“There is. But why not do something you love? And to do that, you need a computer, which is something I can afford to buy you.”

“You mean loan me the money for, right?”

He shrugged, staring down at the floor. “However you want to do it is fine with me. I’d be happy to gift it to you, but—”

I held up my hand and shook my head again. There was no way I was letting him give me anything else, especially not an electronic as expensive as a computer. He’d already gone above and beyond letting me stay here, and I owed him money for the cell phone he’d purchased for me on top of that. Not

that he knew that yet. I didn't want to argue with him, so I'd give him money once I had it. Who knew when I'd actually move out, too. Anytime Nigel or Omar mentioned that it was probably safe for me to move into their house, Ollie insisted we wait a little longer, which seemed to amuse Omar.

"Come on, Chip. Let me help you. We'll go to *Best Buy*, and then we can pick up food from a drive-through or order a pizza on the way home. It'll be fun."

I'd like to say it was courage, but really, it was frustration from not understanding that made me blurt, "Why are you helping me? Why is it so important to you that I'm okay? Don't think I haven't noticed that you've started buying all of my favorite snacks or that you put money next to my wallet." His eyes widened like he didn't know what I was talking about. "Don't try to pretend it was Omar or Nigel or your mom. I already asked all three."

Ollie clutched the back of his neck with both hands and stared at me. "I'm not going to apologize for that. You should have options, and you should be able to afford something silly like a candy bar if you want one."

I grinned. "Does that mean you plan on letting me out of the house alone?"

"Negative. I really think you should have someone with you at all times for a while. In fact, why don't you come with me now? You have to be going a little stir-crazy. Let me take you out to find what you need."

I weighed my options carefully. As much as I didn't want to borrow money from him, it really would be easier if I had the option to work from home. Or from here.

"Would it make it easier to accept if Omar and Nigel take you instead of me?"

"Ollie, this doesn't have anything to do with not wanting to go shopping with you. It's one hundred percent about the money." I'd actually love to go out and do something, anything, with him, if it didn't involve me having to rely on him.

He crossed his arms over his chest and peered down at me. “I’m going to tell you something that not very many people know. It might convince you to at least borrow the money from me.”

Rearranging on the couch, I pulled one of the throw pillows onto my lap and hugged it to my belly. “You can try, but I can’t imagine you’ll say anything that will change my mind.”

“Challenge accepted.” He sat down in his recliner and leaned back. “What would you say if I told you that I’m probably the wealthiest person you know?”

I blinked. That was the last thing I expected him to say. I’d been positive that he was going to tell me something about what he and his mom had experienced during his childhood. I was pretty sure that he already knew his mom had opened up to me, but this... “What?”

He smirked. “The pocket watch I wear was from my grandfather on my mother’s side. That wasn’t the only thing he left me, just the only thing I’m willing to show off. He only had me and mom, so he left a decent chunk of change to the same women’s shelter that I donate to each year, and then he left me the rest.”

“Then why do you work as a bouncer at *The Tap*?”

He shrugged his wide shoulders up around his ears, then let them fall. “I get bored.”

“What?” I asked again, dumbfounded.

He smiled. “It’s true. I don’t like to sit around and do nothing, and I always loved working with Christian. As a matter of fact, I loaned Christian a little seed money when he first expanded. You can also ask Omar.”

“About what?”

“Same thing. When he was ready to expand his business, I loaned him a little money. These are things they wouldn’t tell you unless I approved it. I’m the one who requested that we keep it all on the down low. It’s never been anyone’s business what I do or don’t have.”

“Your grandfather left you that much?”

“Well, I invested wisely, and I have a great financial advisor who keeps making me more. I’ve also been super careful. Except for buying my mom the house she lives in and treating myself whenever I purchase a new vehicle, I’m a simple guy.”

My embarrassing snort-huff escaped my mouth before I contained it. “Ollie, that was the last thing I expected you to say.”

“I know. Anyone who hasn’t known our family from back before we got away from my dad, or meets my mom now, has no idea that I actually grew up a little rich boy.”

“No way. But your mom said you got a job at fourteen to start saving money.” Money he’d intended to use to help her leave his father. How cute was that? The sense of responsibility ran strong in this one.

He frowned and scowled. “That has nothing to do with us not having it and everything to do with the fact my dad was a stingy ass hole. He didn’t put my mom’s name on any of his accounts. She had one credit card she was allowed to use for food shopping and other basics, but it had a limited balance.”

“No way. Poor Miriam.”

“I wish I’d been able to give her money sooner, but my grandfather left in his will, not to give me access until I was twenty-three-years old. I think he wanted to make sure that my father never had an opportunity to get his hands on it. My mom was his only child.”

“Did your mom get upset?”

“Nope. After my father went to jail, she admitted that she helped her dad set it all up. They both knew I’d take care of her.”

“Oh, that’s good. I was worried that he’d been another man in her life who’d let her down.”

“No, their relationship was complicated, as you can imagine, with him despising her husband. My father must’ve really thought they’d inherit because he didn’t start laying hands on

Mom until after my grandfather passed away. He'd always been mean as a snake, but he'd kept it to mental and emotional manipulation up to that point."

"Son of a bitch," I muttered.

"That's what I'm saying," he said. "So, given this information, will you please do me the honor of purchasing a laptop for you? You can keep the receipt, and we'll buy a journal to record payments or whatever makes you feel more comfortable. I just want you to have everything you need."

"I'll entertain it since I do think I'm finally ready to get out of the house."

Ollie threw back his hat and laughed. "I should have just asked you if you wanted to get out for a little while and drove you straight to the store."

I wrinkled my nose at him. "That wouldn't have gone over well. The only reason I'm even considering it is because of the story you just told me. I'm pretty sure you wouldn't have been saying all of that in the middle of a busy store."

"No, you've got me there."

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OLLIE PULLED INTO THE PARKING LOT AND SHUT OFF THE engine. "Wait there." He hopped out of his truck, came around the front to my side, and opened my door.

"I didn't realize when you guys picked me up that this thing was so high off the ground."

He gripped my forearms, giving me a hand down. "That's because you were so out of it. Otherwise, you'd have noticed that Nigel pretty much threw you into the back seat."

"That sounds about right. My friend's a decent guy, like that."

He smiled down at me. "That he is."

As we walked toward the strip mall that the *Best Buy* was located in, I swiveled around, taking it all in. This was my first

real look at anything in this town.

“I bet it feels good to be out in the fresh air,” Ollie said.

“It does, but I go out on the balcony for a little while every day when I’m alone. I like to hear the birds singing and feel the sun on my face.”

“Maybe tomorrow night we can go to the park for a walk.”

“Really?”

“Sure, why not? I still think you should be careful, but I don’t see any harm in you getting out a little if you’re up to it.”

“I definitely am. That would be great.”

Right before the doors, I remembered the light bruising left on my face and raised one hand to my cheek self-consciously. “Maybe I should’ve put on a little of that concealer Nigel left me.”

Grabbing my chin gently in his large hand, Ollie tipped my head back and studied me. My skin burned under his touch, and I squirmed under his scrutiny. “You look good to me.”

“Are you sure?”

“I promise.” He winked before letting me go and sweeping an arm towards the entrance. “Let’s do this.”

The interior of the store wasn’t nearly as busy as the parking lot had suggested. I guessed people were shopping at the stores surrounding this one. Because of that, someone approached us right away and asked what we were looking for.

Before Ollie could say anything, I asked, “Where’s the section that has the returned computers?”

The young lady helping us grinned and gestured toward the back of the store. “If you’d like to follow me, I can help you figure out what’s what.”

“Chip, we don’t need returned items,” he grumbled.

“That’s a waste of money. Even if I had a bundle of cash to spend on anything I wanted, I’d still take advantage of the markdown. It’s not like they put them back if there’s anything

wrong with them. What didn't work for someone else may work well for me."

He didn't argue, but he picked up every box in the three carts of returned merchandise they had up for sale and asked the poor girl a million questions. She was a good sport, answering every one of them with patience. In the end, I picked out the exact same laptop that I had before Harry took it away from me.

"Are you sure this is the one you want?"

"Yep. I know exactly how to use it, so there won't be a learning curve, which means I can actually hop on to *Upwork* and post my availability."

Ollie gently bumped my arm as we walked toward the checkout. "Smart and industrious."

His complement made me preen inside. Ollie and I never talked about what I'd been through, but sometimes Nigel and I did where Ollie and Omar were in hearing distance. Plus, from what Miriam had told me, I knew he had a pretty good idea from watching his parents, what I'd suffered through. Even still, I didn't think he understood how much a compliment like that stroked my bruised ego. Harry used to criticize my every move and suggestion so that made me feel like a million bucks.

"After we checked out, Ollie took the bag from the cashier. "I'll carry it out to the truck for you."

Holding out my hand, I said, "That's fine, but I'd like the receipt, please."

Ollie snickered. "You're not going to let me get away with just gifting this to you, are you?"

"Nope, you promised that you'd let me pay you back. I want the receipt, and I want to stop at a store where we can buy a notebook to record everything."

The smile he shot me looked fond, which was...nice. "Alright, Chip. You're the boss."



After a quick stop at a local pharmacy to grab a small ledger, Ollie asked, “So what would you like for dinner?”

After feeling so bold for a while tonight, the thought of choosing dinner filled me with anxiety. What if I got it wrong? What if I chose something he didn’t like to eat? We’d had such a lovely time, and I didn’t want to ruin that.

“Chip, hey.” Ollie reached over and tapped a finger on my hand. “Are you okay?”

“I-I-I’m not sure what to eat. I know you like everything or at least you seem to, but I don’t know what restaurants are around here, and I don’t know the prices. I-I don’t want to pick wrong,” I said, feeling overwhelmed.

“Hey, it’s okay. No pressure. How about I think of something for us?”

I blew out a breath. “Sure, okay. That would be good. Thank you.”

“First, tell me, would you like to eat out or do you want to grab something and take it home?”

Instead of answering him, I turned my head and looked out the window. I didn’t want to make any decisions. I just couldn’t.

He didn’t push me, but asked, “What if we go pick up sub sandwiches and go to the park tonight instead of waiting for tomorrow?”

“Really?” I asked, turning back toward him.

“Absolutely. The chill of fall hasn’t quite kicked in, so we should enjoy the beautiful weather while we can.”

“Okay, Ollie. Thanks. That actually sounds really nice.”

The scenery out the window passed in a blur as a fine coat of tears covered my eyes. I wasn’t going to sob or anything, but it felt so damn nice to be heard without speaking. To be understood without judgment. Ollie didn’t get frustrated or angry, but he stopped and adjusted to my needs like it was the most natural thing in the world. This gentle giant was soothing the wounds on the inside, the ones no one saw, with all of his kindness.

“Do you mind if I make another quick stop before we drive over to the *SubStation*?”

“Whatever is fine with me. It’s just nice to be out.”

“I bet.” He pulled into a parking lot in front of a *Kohl’s* department store. “Do you mind waiting in the truck? I’ll lock you in.”

“Sure.” Having a minute alone to compose myself would be good.

“Alright. I’ll be quick.” He jumped out, and his legs ate up the distance to the door quickly, leaving me shaking my head. He must’ve really shortened his stride to walk next to me through the store.

My phone chirped, so I pulled it out of my pocket. My heart rate spiked seeing a text message from a number I didn’t know. The only thing that made me feel a little better was that it wasn’t a New York area code. Opening it cautiously, like I expected it to bite me, it took me a minute to understand what I was seeing.

**Unknown Number:** *Hello, Chip. My name is Hayden. I’m sure you’ve heard all about me from Nigel since we’re his two best friends, and he’s told me all about you. Since he hasn’t brought me to meet you yet, I demanded that he at least put us in a text group so that we could start getting to know each other*

**Nigel:** *Sorry, Chip. He was driving me bonkers, and I’m trying to work.*

**Unknown Number:** *Yep, that’s me. A pain in the ass. Although I’d rather have a pain in my ass, if you know what I mean. ((winky face))*

**Nigel:** *Behave.*

It had been so long since I’d been part of a group text thread that I didn’t even know what to say. And who said things like that to someone they’ve never met? Nigel had told me all about Hayden, and he’d warned me that he could be a little insensitive and irreverent, so at least this was just funny-ish.

**Unknown Number:** *Go ahead and save my contact information.*

**Nigel:** *Believe it or not, this group will be tame. Wait until Toby demands we put you in the Toby's crew group.*

**Hayden:** *Yeah, sometimes I have to turn that one off. Apparently, I have way more sexy times than some of them. I keep telling my Daddy he should talk to their Daddies and tell them to get with the program. Those boys are way too chatty to be getting sexed up on any type of consistent basis.*

**Nigel:** *Hayden!*

*((Hayden changed the name of this group to The Three Musketeers))*

Good Lord, what had Nigel gotten me into?

## *Chapter Thirteen*

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## OLLIE

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*R*eturning to the car, I found a completely bewildered Chip. “What’s wrong? Is everything okay?”

He held up his phone. “I don’t know what’s happening right now.”

Dread filled me that Harry had somehow found Chip’s phone number. It had happened with my mom a couple of times before my dad had finally landed himself a nice jail stay. I held out my hand. Without thought, he handed it over, and I looked down at the screen. Hayden and Nigel. Once I saw the few messages Hayden had sent, I chuckled. “Oh, this is it. They’re going to all be over you now.”

“What does that even mean?” His voice rose with each word.

I waived the phone. “This is only the beginning. Although, it’s nice that Hayden’s taking it easy on you. This is pretty tame. Wait until you get put into Toby’s crew. Which I’d expect to happen very, very soon.”

“Do you think so?”

“Oh, there’s no doubt about it. It’s going to make Toby nuts that Hayden got your number and put you in a group message first.” As I went to hand him his phone, another message came in.

**Hayden:** *So since we’re going to be the Three Musketeers, you have to give me the deets. What’s it like living with that mountain of sexiness? Holy shit, I’d climb that man like a tree if I didn’t love my Daddy so much.*

*Jesus*. I fumbled the phone trying to figure out whether I should delete the comment or let Chip deal with it. There was no pretending that I hadn't read it, though.

With furrowed brows, putting the cutest little indentation right in the center of his forehead, Chip reached out and snatched his phone back. "What's wrong?" Then he looked down at the screen. I knew the moment he read the comment because his whole face turned bright red.

Not wanting him to feel self-conscious, I tapped his hand with my finger. "Don't worry, he's pretty much the worst of them. Well, sometimes Toby can be a little outrageous, but for the most part, the rest of the boys are sweethearts."

Chip shoved his phone under his thigh and stared straight ahead out the windshield. "So what did you go into *Kohl's* for?" he asked, like his phone wasn't dinging like crazy.

I pointed back where I'd put the bag in the back seat next to his computer. "I went in to get us a picnic blanket. Why sit on the park benches on the path when we can spread out on the grass? There's a spot on this little hill that's perfect."

"That sounds really nice." Chip's voice came out soft and breathy.

I was in trouble now. I didn't know if it was Hayden's comment or what, but this new quality to Chip's voice had my dick taking attention. *Dammit*. This was the last thing I needed. With Omar and Nigel not around tonight, I'd been hoping to use it as an opportunity to ease Chip into being more comfortable with just the two of us. It was working out far better than I'd expected.

"So is this substation close by? Is that the actual name?"

Pleased that he was still talking, despite Hayden's bonehead comment, I said, "It's actually *Mickey's Substation*, and it's it's on the corner across the street from the park we're going to. They make the best sandwiches in town, and they have three sizes, so you can pick what you want. I generally get the largest and have them cut it in half so that I can make it into two meals."

“That sounds like a good idea. I made Nigel promise me that he’d stop coming over every day. I know he needs to work, not just for the orders he gets in, but he’s told me so many times how much he loves his sewing room. It feels selfish to keep him from it.”

“I hear you, but don’t ever doubt that he’s been happy spending all this time with you. The only thing is, and I know it pisses him off, but I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to stay at their house yet.” Nor was I sure I could handle it. The need for Chip to sleep under my roof, where I knew he was safe, had reached epic proportions.

“I really appreciate that you put your foot down about that. He probably would’ve been able to talk me into going over there, and I’d have ended up sleepless with panic attacks.”

“Well, it wouldn’t have been all that bad. If they’d insisted on you going there, then they would’ve been putting me up for a while, too.”

He watched me out of the corners of his eyes. “Are you serious?”

Reaching over, I tapped the top of his hand with my finger. “Absolutely.”

“Would you mind if we parked in the street and walked over to the *Substation* and back?”

“That sounds fine. I’m enjoying stretching my muscles.”

His cheeks were still rosy, and I wondered if he was thinking about what Hayden said. I wasn’t unaware that men and women found me attractive. And contrary to popular belief, I wasn’t a monk. I just didn’t do repeats or relationships. Until recently, I’d been so scared that I’d inherited some ugly trait from my father. One I wouldn’t be aware of until I had a partner. I’d spent years believing that and keeping my heart walled off. The more time I spent with Chip, the more I realized how unfounded that fear was. I wasn’t saying I was in love with Chip, but I sure as hell knew that if he was mine, I’d never hurt him physically, and I’d do everything in my power to protect him.

Running around the front of the truck again, I opened Chip's door. This time, he didn't hesitate to reach toward me. Instead of merely helping him down this time, I wrapped my hands around his waist, lifted him out, and set him on his feet. "Oh my," he breathed out under his breath.

It made me feel like Superman to put that tone in his voice. Reaching into the backseat, I pulled the blanket out of the bag and tucked it under my arm. Once the SUV was closed up, I held out my arm. Chip hesitated for a moment before slipping his hand into the crook of my arm.

We crossed the street to *Mickey's*, and the blanket nearly fell when I stretched out my arm to open the door for him. Chip snickered and held out his other hand. "Why don't you let me hold that?"

I handed it to him. "Thank you." Then I opened the door.

He glanced back over his shoulder as he passed me and grinned. "*Thank you.*"

I already knew I wanted the Italian sub, but I waited with Chip while he perused the menu before I gave the kid at the counter our order. After his near meltdown when I asked what he wanted for dinner, I'd been a little nervous that he'd worry about what to put on his roll, but I shouldn't have. I almost teased him when he asked for extra onions on his turkey and cheese that he didn't need to try and protect himself from me with onion breath since I'd be getting onion, too, but we weren't there yet, and maybe we never would be. I had an important question to ask him tonight, so this wasn't the time to give him a hard time.

Once I'd paid for our subs and drinks, I slung the bag around my wrist and held out my other arm for Chip. This time, he slipped his arm right through and linked elbows with me. The rosy tinge appeared back on his cheeks, and it was lovely. Making our way across the street, I directed him up to the top of the small hill. Thankfully, the only other people were couples doing the same thing as us. I handed Chip our food, took the blanket, and spread it out on the ground.



He took off his shoes at the edge and sat down in the middle of the blanket. Following his lead, I sat on the edge and removed my boots, then slid over to sit next to him. I'd grabbed extra napkins, so I made little placemats for our feast, and then we dug in. Soaking in the peacefulness of the evening and enjoying our meal, it was everything I'd hoped it would be. When we were done, Chip leaned back on his hands and took a deep breath. He looked relaxed and truly content for the first time, and I could give him that.

"Are you still hungry?" I asked.

"No way. That was probably the best sub sandwich I've ever had, though."

I gently knocked my elbow to his. "Told ya."

"So I have another question for you," I finally said.

"Oh geez, what are you going to try and buy me now?"

I huffed. "Don't worry. I know better than to push you too far. I remember how it was for my mom. She accepted some help, but there was a point where she needed to be able to stand on her own two feet, as well. I realize how important that is."

"Thank you, Ollie."

"You're welcome. However, in a way, what I have to ask you will still kind of require you—" I cut off at the sound of Chip's giggle.

"I knew it was something. Go ahead. I'm ready."

"Well, in about a week or so, I imagine that Omar and Nigel will be revisiting the idea of you moving in with them. I wanted to know if you'd consider staying with me instead?"

He sat up, pulled his legs up to his chest, and wrapped his arms around his shins, resting his cheek on his knees and studying the sky behind me. "I'm going to be honest. I hate the idea of going there. I'm sure there's no real threat of Harry coming to find me, and they have the extra space for me, and you don't. I don't want you to have to keep sleeping on your couch in your own place, but..."

“Chip, honestly, I’m prone to falling asleep in my recliner or on the couch just as often as I make it to my bed. I’ve been known to work unreasonably long hours at *The Tap*, so when I get home, I’m exhausted and pass out wherever I sit. You taking my room isn’t an inconvenience or a burden.”

His gaze shifted to meet mine, and there was a question in those blue orbs. “You’ve only worked eight-hour shifts as long as I’ve been here.”

I tapped the top of his hand with my finger again, as I said, “Let’s just say I had an epiphany somewhere between New York and New Jersey. I think it’s time for me to slow down and spend a little more time at home and nurturing my relationships—friendships and otherwise.”

He fought a smile, but there was no missing the way the corner of his lips tipped up at my words. I knew he’d caught what I was throwing down. It definitely wasn’t time to voice any of it, but I wanted him to know how important it was to me that I be his safe place.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

## CHIP

*M*y evening with Ollie had been utter perfection, better than any date I'd ever had. Not that we were on a date, but it sure felt romantic enough to be one. "Would you like dessert?" he asked. "I can run down to the little yogurt shop next to *Mikey's* and get us something."

"Mint chocolate chip, please." He tapped the top of my hand again, and I bit back a smile. I didn't know why this new habit had emerged, but I liked it. Unlike Harry, whose hands had been silky smooth like a baby's skin, Ollie's fingers were rough. Not scratchy, but like he wasn't scared to work. He jumped up, incredibly agile for a man of his size, and swept his gaze around the park.

"Ollie, it's fine. I'll wait right here for you to come back.

He smiled down at me. "I'll be quick."

I watched his long, thick legs and round ass until he'd crossed the street and moved out of sight. How was I lucky enough to be here with him? Even if it was only as friends, he'd made me feel truly special today.

"Chip," sing-songed a voice that I'd prayed to never hear again in my ear.

Tensing, I leaned forward as far as I was able before craning my neck around to see if Harry was truly here or if it was my imagination.

*No. Shit.* He was here, crouched behind me. He sneered at me. "You've been a bad boy, haven't you? Causing Daddy so much trouble." Then he stood up and came around, yanking

me up by the forearms. “Let’s go before that bearded neanderthal returns.”

Trembling, I took a hasty step backward. “N-n-no, I’m not going with you. It’s over, Harry. I have people here who care about me, and they won’t let you take me.” I stumbled back more, searching frantically for Ollie.

Harry stepped in close, towering above me. He wasn’t near the size or volume of Ollie, but that didn’t change the fact that he was bigger and stronger than me. “Don’t make a scene,” he hissed between his teeth. “You will come with me back home where you belong.” Then he gripped my arm, squeezing tightly as he hauled me toward the opposite end of the park.

“CHIP. CHIP.” *TAP. TAP. TAP.* “CHIP, HONEY, WAKE UP. IT’S only a dream. Chip, please. Wake up.” A new voice, my favorite deep baritone, broke through the terror of Harry dragging me away from Ollie, away from my new life here into Takoda. *Holy shit.* None of it had happened. It was a nightmare.

*Tap. Tap. Tap.* “Chip, come on, honey, wake up.”

“I-I’m awake,” I called back, voice shaking.

“Are you okay? Can you let me in?”

“It’s open.” The doorknob rattled, and then Ollie’s head appeared around the side of the door. “I didn’t know the door was unlocked, or I would’ve come in.”

Of course, he didn’t try it. He’d given me this room so that I’d have a lock, and he’d honored my privacy. “I’ve never once locked it. I trust you, Ollie.”

The grin he gave me was strained, worry hovering in his eyes. “Can I come in?”

I wanted to tell him I was fine and he could go back to bed, but I’d be lying. The nightmare had freaked me out. Tonight hadn’t actually gone anything like that at all. Ollie had left me on the blanket in the park and gone to get us the yogurt, but it had been fine. A family had strolled by, following their little

boy as he chased the ball that he kept accidentally kicking ahead of himself with his own two feet. His joyous laughter as he tried to get it had only enhanced the magic of the evening.

“Is it okay if I turn on this lamp?” Ollie asked, standing by the bedside table. My thoughts once again went to Harry, and the last night I’d stayed at his house. The sound of the lamp clicking on and startling me when he came in to further humiliate me. So different from this man who’d made himself my protector.

“That’s fine.” With the light on, I got my first glimpse of a half-naked Ollie. He’d been so careful to always be fully clothed since I’d been there that I’d never even seen him in pajama pants and a t-shirt. But here he stood with his taut chest on display, fuzzy with thick, dark brown hair. He was spectacular.

“You’re trembling,” he whispered.

Was I? I’d been so distracted by him that I hadn’t even noticed. And sweet baby Jesus. He was only wearing black knit boxer briefs. They clung to his upper thighs in the best possible way and cupped his bulge deliciously. I gulped.

“Chip, are you alright?”

I shook my head. I wasn’t okay. I was all turned around and spinning out. Today had been such a lovely day to be ruined with such a hellish nightmare. But seeing Ollie like this almost made it worth it. Maybe.

“I don’t know. I think I’m freaking out.”

He sat down on the side of the bed, his hip next to my chest, and reached out, pushing my hair back off my forehead.

“You’re sweating. How about I go get you a glass of water?”

I reached up and grabbed his hand before he could stand up.

“No, please, don’t leave me alone.”

“Okay, okay. I won’t. Is there anything I can do for you besides just stay here with you? I feel so helpless.”

“Would you sit with me until I fall back to sleep?”

He stroked his finger down my cheek, causing a tremor that had nothing to do with my scary dream. “Of course I will.”

I shut my eyes and tried steadying my breathing. It was hard when the image I saw on my eyelids was Harry’s mean, smirking face. The view in the real world was better, so I blinked my eyelids open.

“What’s wrong? Are you afraid to go back to sleep?”

“A little bit,” I admitted, only half-honestly. He looked at the other side of his king-size bed. “Would it be all right if I went around and sat next to you on the mattress? I’ll stay on top of the sheets.”

In response, I scooted over to the middle of the bed. Ollie smiled gently and plumped one of the pillows up against the headboard before he sat down with his legs splayed out in front of him. Since I was laying with my head at an angle, I took my time, drinking every bit of flesh from his thighs down to his feet. Was it weird that I even found his toes attractive? Maybe, but I didn’t care. I knew what really drew me in about Ollie was his kind nature. He might look like a fearsome protector, and he was, but he was also a gentle giant. A big ol’ marshmallow wrapped up in a drool-worthy package.

“Would it help if I turn the light back out?” he asked.

“I’d rather you not.” As much as I enjoyed staring at his body, it was the threat of Harry returning to haunt my dreams that made me want the lights on. It would probably be days before I’d be able to sleep in the dark again.

“That’s fine. Would you like to...” He hesitated, but then he opened his arms.

Wasting no time, I scooted right into his embrace. I rested my head on his furry chest, and he wrapped me up safe and sound. This was exactly what I needed right now. “Thank you,” I whispered to him.

“It’s my pleasure, chocolate Chip.” He tapped his finger where it rested against my side.

I snorted. “Chocolate Chip?”

His voice was threaded with humor when he replied, “Mint chocolate chip is too much of a mouthful, I think.”

I almost giggled, thinking how much I’d like to give him a mouthful, but this moment was too precious to me. Just like Omar called Nigel his little bear, Ollie had given me a nickname. Chocolate Chip. Not that it meant the same thing, but for right now, wrapped in his arms, a boy could dream.

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TAPPING ON THE DOOR WOKE ME AGAIN, AND I FLASHED BACK to the middle of the night. Ollie lay on his side behind me, but on top of the covers. That was a shame. I wouldn’t have been upset feeling the press of his dick against my ass. Especially if he had morning wood.

“Chip, I just wanted you to know I’m here, honey. Ollie must be at the gym because I don’t see him anywhere,” Miriam called through the door.

Ollie huffed out a soft laugh, close enough to my ear that I felt his breath brush over me. “Are you awake, chocolate Chip?” he whispered.

“Yeah,” I said back, just as low so his mom wouldn’t hear me.

“My mom’s a smart one, so I’m not sure we’ll be able to convince her that I wasn’t in your room. Is it okay if I share that you had a bad dream? Or should I let her assume whatever she wants? I’m gonna warn you now, if we do that, she’s going to drive us bonkers with questions. You’re like her favorite person.”

“I’m okay with whatever you want to say.” Please, please, please want to tell her that you were sleeping with me. Please imply that you want to be more than my friend. Please. Please. Please.

“Hmm. Maybe we should tease her a little bit. What do you think?”

I rolled carefully onto my back, and Ollie loosened his arms just enough to let me move. “I think you’re being a little mean



since you're her favorite person, and she just wants you to be happy. She's talked to me about that a little, you know? She's worried that her marriage to your father has turned you off of relationships forever."

Ollie leaned up on an elbow and pushed my hair behind my ear, trailing his fingertips softly down the lobe as he pulled away. "There was a time that might have been true, but things are changing." He grinned, and I smiled shyly back at him.

"I'm going to sneak back into the office and get ready. I'll see you at the table for breakfast."

"Okay." He leaned in and kissed my forehead, then graced me with one more special smile before he rolled out of bed and strode to the door. As he quietly opened it, he winked at me, then slipped through.

By the time my erection went down and I threw on some clothes, Ollie was already sitting at the table with his mother. As I came into the room, she beamed at me. "Well, good morning, sleepyhead. What were you up to last night that you slept in so late?" She wagged her eyebrows.

Ollie smacked his hand over his face. "Mother, really?" he groaned.

She giggled. "Sorry, it's just not every day, or ever, that I come over and find someone in your bed."

"Technically, I've been sleeping in his bed for a while now," I teased.

She stuck out her tongue at me. "Don't be fresh, Chip."

Ollie stood up and moved around the table, pulling out my chair for me. "Why don't you have a seat, and I'll go make your coffee, chocolate Chip."

Miriam's eyes widened. Once his back was to us, she mouthed, "Chocolate Chip?"

I shrugged my shoulders, ridiculously pleased that Ollie didn't seem to regret sleeping in the same bed as me or the silly nickname. Sure, nothing had happened, but something had definitely changed.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

## CHIP

I settled back in the very comfortable seat of Ollie's SUV and breathed deeply, trying to center myself. Ollie and I hadn't shared a bed since my nightmare, but we both slept with our doors open in case I needed him. He also continued coming home around four o'clock, which was nice. We'd discovered that we both had a love for home improvement shows. Me, caring more about interior decorating while he was into restoration and construction.

True to his word, Nigel hadn't been back over, either. He planned to have dinner at Ollie's place in a few days, and this time, he'd be bringing Hayden with him. I couldn't wait. As weird as it had seemed when Hayden first created the group and messaged me out of nowhere, it had proven to be a great thing. I'd gotten a chance to really know him. Yeah, he was snarky and highly inappropriate, and his Daddy spoiled him rotten, but underneath, he was a really great person. He had a kindness and empathy that he tried really hard to hide behind a mask, but with Nigel continually putting him in his place, his true thoughts came out.

"Are you sure it's okay for me to sit with you all day?" I asked Ollie nervously.

"I am. But if you don't want to go, chocolate Chip, you don't have to. I just thought it might be a nice change for you."

"I would kind of like to go. It would be nice to put faces with the names of the people you and Nigel talk about."

He smiled. “I bet. I thought it might be good for you to get out of the house today, as well. And it’s a great day for it since my mom can’t come over.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Of course I’m a little nervous. That’s understandable since I’m meeting the people who are important to the only people I know in Takoda. It has to happen at some point.” Now, if I didn’t puke on my shoes in the process, I’d be in great shape.

Ollie chuckled. “I promise you, it won’t be as hard as you’re picturing. I know for a fact that Luca, Indie, and Julian plan to have lunch at *The Tap* today, so you won’t be stuck at the door with me the whole time, and it’ll be a nice small group for you to get acclimated to.”

“It’s weird. I’d kind of assumed that Hayden would be the first person I met.”

Ollie snorted. “I’m sure he thought so, too. Maybe send him a selfie from inside. If he’s home and available, he’ll come up and keep you company.”

He pulled into a parking lot, and Ollie reached over, tapping the top of my hand with his finger. “We’re here. Are you ready for this?”

I turned my head toward him and smiled. “You’ll be with me, right?”

“Nowhere else I’d rather be. I’m going to put you right up at the high table where me and my guys camp out for our shift.”

I swallowed. “Okay, I can do this.”

He smiled encouragingly. “You can. You’re about to start meeting the found family you never even knew you needed.”

I waited as he rounded the truck and came around to my side. We’d run to the grocery store and a couple of other errands, enough for me to know that he enjoyed this part. Doing all the little things that made me feel taken care of seemed to come naturally to him. Ollie opened the door, and I held my arms out like a small child. “I’m ready.”

He lit up. This time, he leaned all the way in and wrapped his arms around my waist, rubbing his beard against my cheek as he lifted me out and set me on the ground.

Someone whistled, and Ollie muttered, “Nosy ass.”

A man with rainbow-dyed hair and a smirk stood at the door. “Well, if I’d known it had progressed that far, we’d have demanded you bring Chip up here sooner.”

Ollie growled, so I waved awkwardly to get the other man’s attention. “If I’m not mistaken, you must be Indie.”

He beamed at me, and the kind of grungy style took on a whole new flavor with the brightness of his smile. This guy was gorgeous. He came toward me with his hand outstretched. “That’s me. It’s nice to finally meet you, Chip.” Instead of letting me go, he pulled me with him back into the building. “We’re going to be great friends.”

“Don’t let him corrupt you, chocolate Chip.”

Indie halted and spun to me. “Chocolate Chip?” he whispered, sounding like a corked bottle ready to explode.

Feeling silly, I nodded and glanced at Ollie, who looked completely smug. What was happening?

As it turned out, they’d had a waiter call out, and Indie picked up a lunch shift. Around the same time he finished, a lumbering redhead named Julian and a sandy-haired guy named Luca showed up. Both came straight to the table where I’d been with Ollie, and Indie bounded up, untied the apron around his lap waist, and shoved it toward Ollie.

“Welp, it’s time for our lunch date. Come on, Chip. We’ll see you later, Ollie.” Indie dragged me away before I could do anything but shoot Ollie a startled—slightly panicked—glance. He winked at me, and something in me settled. It didn’t matter that I was having lunch with a group of guys I’d never met for the first time because Ollie was here, and I knew he wouldn’t let me out of his sight.

As soon as we sat down, the redhead held out his hand. “Hi, Chip. I’m Julian.”

The guy next to him raised his hand. "I'm Luca."

"It's nice to meet you both."

Indie leaned in like he had a secret to share. "You guys are never going to believe this. Ollie calls him chocolate Chip."

Julian's eyes widened. "Dude, you have to send that to Toby's crew. That's gold."

Indie snickered. "I wanted to tell you guys first."

Luca smiled softly. "You couldn't have caught a better one, Chip."

Nervously, I fluttered my hands. "I haven't caught anyone." No matter how much I wish I'd had. Ollie definitely seemed more flirty than he'd been originally, but that could just be because we were finally communicating. And there was still the whole Daddy issue. I'd still been too nervous to outright ask if he was one, but Nigel and Hayden had never said he was, and I'd been careful not to really share how much our friendship had evolved. I was scared that Nigel would go into protective mode and try to make me move out.

"You might not know it yet, but you definitely have," Indie said.

Julian nodded. "I have to agree with them on this one."

"Of course you do. We're right." My heart raced. These guys had no idea how much I hoped they were.

Luca rolled his eyes. "Ignore these two. How are you settling in?"

"Everything's been really great. It's nice living so close to Nigel, and Ollie couldn't be a better host." Suddenly, the vision of the dragon hanging above Ollie's bed floated through my mind. "Wait. Julian. Are you the Julian who made the kick-ass dragon?"

Julian's face went the color of his hair, and he nodded bashfully. "That would be me."

Indie clasped his shoulder, grinning with pride. "Our Julian's off to a hell of a start with his career as an artist."

“He’ll be leaving us behind before you know it,” Lucas said.

“Stop. I’m not going anywhere. You guys know that.”

Finally, something I knew about. “Yeah, Ollie told me how you’re still working here to support yourself and donating all the money from your sketches to...”

“The Takoda Outreach Center,” Julian said. He then proceeded to tell me all about the outreach and why it was important to him.

“Wow, that’s amazing. You have an incredible story.”

“And now he has an incredible Daddy, too,” Indy said.

Cameron, Indie’s boyfriend and the general manager for *The Tap*, who I’d met earlier, came toward us carrying a tray with our lunch order. “Here you go.”

Indie blinked up at him flirtatiously. “Well, that’s what I call service, Daddy.”

Luca pretended to gag, and Indie threw a wadded-up napkin across the table at him.

Cameron smiled at me. “Are you scared yet?”

“No, I think this is incredible. Nigel talked about everyone so much, and I was low-key intimidated about meeting any of you, but he said you were all great, and he was right.”

Indie wiggled in his chair. “And you know the best part?”

“No.”

“I got to meet you before Toby or Hayden.” He fist-pumped the air.

Cameron frowned at him. “Indie, be a sweet little peacock and stop tormenting Toby.”

He sniffed. “He’s a menace.”

Julian snorted. “You’re just pissed because now that you actually know him, you love him as much as the rest of us do.”

Indie scowled playfully. “He’s not wrong. The guy is just too lovable, and it’s annoying. How can anyone not like him?” He turned to me. “Wait until you meet him, Chip. He might scare

you to death at first, but once you get past all his freaking energy and exuberance, he's probably one of the nicest people I've ever met. You should have Ollie bring you to the next Daddy-boy dinner." He pointed at Luca. "You're coming, too."

Luca shook his head. "No way. I'm not going to be the only one there without a Daddy. I'll end up nauseous from the lovefest."

Julian leaned toward Luca. "I think I agree with Indie on this one."

And off they went on a tangent. Cameron rolled his eyes for my benefit, then kissed his boyfriend's cheek and wandered off. Indie barely paused his begging Luca to go with them to one of those nights Nigel had told me so much about. I was glad they were distracted so they didn't notice that I hadn't agreed to come, either. It sounded like so much fun, and I'd love to go, but I'd never suggest it to Ollie, and he hadn't brought it up to me. Nor did I expect him to. Yes, something was different between us, but I still wasn't sure what it was, and I definitely didn't have the confidence to ask. Maybe one day. A boy could dream, anyway.

I was drawn back into the conversation when a different masculine voice said, "How are you boys doing this afternoon? And you, as well, Luca? Who's your friend?"

Julian and Indie smiled at the newcomer, but Luca sniffed disdainfully. Which surprised me. So far, he'd been the picture of politeness.

"We're good, Harrison. This is Chip." I ducked my head and kinda waved. "And how are you?"

Luca leaned over toward me and stage whispered, "I don't suppose your ex's name was actually Harrison, and he went by Harry for short? Because that would fit what every man I've known by that name."

Indie gasped. "Luca."

Luca sat back up straight and shrugged. "I'm just calling it like I see it."



Harrison smirked at him. “Too bad you’re not a boy. I’m sure a good Daddy would help you with your manners.”

“What would you know about a good Daddy?” Luca shot back. “And whoever said I wasn’t a boy?”

Harrison’s smirk became smug. “Uh, finally. So that’s your problem with me? Are you sad I’ve never shown an interest in you? I can assure you, if I’d known you were interested, I’m sure we could’ve had a nice night together.”

*Wow.* That was a little gross. If he walked around saying crap like that, no wonder Luca wasn’t fond of him.

“Puh-leeease. Men like you give Daddies a bad name.”

For the first time, this man—Harrison—in his stylish suit and expensive haircut looked less sure of himself. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’ve been listening to the crap that comes out of your mouth for years. I know you’re one of Christian’s friends, but you’re the only one of them who treats boys like their toys, like you’re allowed to pick them up and play with them and then discard them.”

Harrison’s head reared back. “I tell every woman or man I go out with exactly what the deal is beforehand. I’ve never misled anyone.”

Luca shook his head. “And how many of them fell for you anyway? I bet you don’t think about that while you’re wining and dining them for a night.” Luca pulled his phone out of his pocket and very pointedly stared at the screen.

Harrison frowned. “Well, I’m here for a business lunch, so I thought I’d stop by and say hi. You boys enjoy yourselves.”

Julian mouthed, “I’m sorry,” to Harrison. He waved Julian off and gave the rest of us a genuine smile before shooting one last confused glance at Luca and walking away.

The minute he was gone, Indie said, “Luca, I can’t believe you were so rude to one of Christian’s friends.”

Luca hooked his thumb in my direction. “I had to protect the new guy. You know Harrison doesn’t take being a Daddy

seriously. I didn't want him getting any ideas about our sweet Chip. He's had enough problems with men whose names start with Harr."

Julian shook his head. "Luca, come on. Harrison isn't that bad."

"And I promise, I really don't need anyone protecting me," I said, more because I felt like I needed to than because of any kind of offense. It was sort of nice having someone I'd just met looking out for me. I was sure some of that was because of Nigel, or maybe Ollie, but either way, it felt really, really good.

Luca stared across the tavern in the direction Harrison had gone. "Every boy needs protection from a Daddy like him."

Before awkwardness could set in, Julian sent Luca one last worried look, then said, "So Chip, Ollie said you're an administrative assistant?"

Grabbing the opportunity to talk about anything that had nothing to do with men who might or might not be good Daddies, or a Daddy at all, in Ollie's case, I launched into an explanation of what I was searching for and what I'd done in the past. I spent several hours with the three men, and by the time we left, I was more sure than ever that I still wanted a Daddy, and that these men, these amazing boys, were well on their way to being my friends.

## *Chapter Sixteen*

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## OLLIE

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Chip was quiet on the way home from The Tap, and I was pretty sure I knew why. Thankfully, after hearing Indie's suggestion that Chip go to the next Daddy-boy night with me, Cameron had given me a heads up. It wasn't a bad idea if he wanted to go, but first he and I needed to have a conversation so he knew exactly where I stood. And to make sure I where he stood, as well. I suspected that he was as drawn to me as I was to him, but I'd been a little hesitant to bring it up so far.

As soon as we reached the apartment, I ran around and opened his door. Instead of the cute little move from this morning where Chip held his arms up and let me clutch him around the waist, he merely reached out a hand for me to help him down. Fuck that. Stepping into the doorway, I leaned all the way in and wrapped my arms around him, pulling him toward me, then stepped back with him still in my grip. Chip squirmed and looked at me. "Ollie, what are you doing?"

"What does it look like? I'm carrying you inside."

An embarrassed little giggle slipped between Chip's lips. "I don't need you to carry me."

"What if I want to?"

His eyes widened and he bit his bottom lip. "I guess if you want to?" he said like a question.

"Oh yeah, I do." With one little bounce, I had him in my arms bridal style, and I strode toward the front door. His gaze flitted around, checking to see if anyone was watching us. I, personally, didn't care.

After letting us into the house, I set him gently on the couch, then crossed to my recliner and sat down. “I think we should talk.”

He peeked out from under his eyelashes. “About what?”

“About what’s going on between us.” I paused. “Well, I guess first I should make sure that you think something is going on between us.”

“Do you?” he asked immediately.

“I hope so.”

“Oh that would be nice,” he whispered, staring at his lap.

“Are you ready for another relationship? I understand if you need some time before—”

“No. No, I don’t need any time. I might have still been living in Harry’s house, but it wasn’t like I was still emotionally attached to him or like there was any real relationship. I was nothing more than a glorified servant to him.”

I wasn’t sure how to tactfully broach the next topic, but I felt like it needed to be discussed. “So, you two were sleeping in separate rooms...” I trailed off.

He snorted. “If you’re asking me if we were having sex, the answer is no. I’m not sure if he doesn’t have much of a sex drive or if he wasn’t actually attracted to me. In the beginning, I thought he was just being a gentleman. The reality is, even after we started having sex, it was pretty robotic, like he just needed to get off.”

Figured. What an asshat. “So I guess you wouldn’t have considered staying for the sex?” I teased, trying to lighten it up.

Chip giggled. “No, and even if it had been worth talking about, it wouldn’t have been after the first time he hit me.”

I huffed. “Fair enough.”

“But...”

“Go ahead, Chip. We both have to be honest here. I want you to know you have my permission to ask me absolutely

anything, so be brave.”

He took a deep breath and blew it out. “Are you even a Daddy?”

I was so proud of him for asking what he wanted to know, I had to fight the compulsion to go over and lay a kiss on his lips. “Chip, I have to be honest with you, not only have I never been a Daddy before, but I’ve never been in a relationship.”

His eyes widened. It was unusual, I guessed, for someone to reach their forties without ever having some form of entanglement, but I’d been careful. I never wanted to hurt someone else, and I’d never wanted to put anyone at risk. I’d never be able to forgive myself.

“And you want to try it with me? Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. The day I met you, something changed for me. I didn’t realize right away what it was. I’ve always been protective of anyone who needed protection, but with you...” I shook my head.

“I felt it with you, too, he admitted softly. “It was so confusing because I felt like I should be scared of you, and you gave me butterflies in my stomach, but at the same time, I’d never felt safer in my life than when I was in a room with you. And being the center of your intense focus made me want to run and hide or sprint for your lap.”

I patted my thighs, and his cheeks went rosy.

“But, Ollie, I’ve been thinking about it a lot, and I’m not even sure I want a Daddy again after everything. You don’t have to try to be something you’re not for me. I’d be happy just being with you.”

I gripped the edges of my recliner to get a grip on my anger. Chip had been subjected to enough negativity in his life, and since it wasn’t directed at him, there was no reason to let it boil over. Truthfully, I needed to stop letting it fester at all. “You don’t want a Daddy or you’re worried about being with someone else who calls themselves a Daddy but they aren’t? I think the distinction matters.”

His gaze dropped to the floor. “How was I so stupid?”

Deciding that I'd kept enough distance for now, I moved to the couch and sat next to him. "He hunted for someone who was vulnerable then and exploited that, Chip. That's what predators do. You can't blame yourself." Putting a finger under his chin, I tipped it up so that he would see my sincerity. "I know that's easier said than done, so don't feel like you have to hide it from me when you're feeling insecure or doubting yourself. I'll repeat it as many times as you need to hear it, and I know it's something my mom still works through, even after all this time."

"I know you're right but it's hard."

"It probably will be for a while, and it may haunt you forever, but my mom, me, Nigel, we'll all be here for you whenever you need to talk."

"Thank you," He whispered.

"Now tell me the truth, if you'd met me, thinking I was a Daddy, would you still be saying that you aren't sure that you want to be a boy?"

"I'd been thinking that randomly for a while. I have to admit, when I sit and text with Hayden and Nigel or today when I was sitting with Indie, Julian, and Luca, I really wished I had a Daddy of my own. A real one this time. Not someone who only wanted a boy for the weekend, or someone who wanted to take advantage of me."

"Chip, I can't imagine anything better than being your daddy. It would be such an honor to take care of you."

Hey glanced up at me. "Do you think that's bad? Do you think I'm weak that I want someone to take care of me?"

Tapping his hand, I smiled when I saw his lips twitch. I knew he liked that, and quite frankly, I did too. "I don't think there's anything weak about you. And trust me, I've been surrounded with this dynamic for half of my life, and I've never had a problem with it. Even though I haven't been in a relationship, it doesn't mean I haven't observed many of them and drawn my own conclusions."

"What does that mean?"

It means that I think the individuals in each relationship need to do what works best for them. And I think a Daddy-boy relationship would work best for us. I want to take care of you, chocolate Chip. I want to protect you and pamper you and make sure you have everything you need. I want to take you everywhere you want to go, watch TV curled up on the couch with you, cook for you, and make all of your dreams come true.”

His eyes swam with tears as he blinked up at me. “No one’s ever truly wanted to do that, not even my parents.”

“Then they were fools. You’re so precious, chocolate Chip.” Reaching up, I pushed his hair behind his ear and trailed my finger on his cheek, catching the tears that had trickled down. “So beautiful.”

He reached up and grabbed my wrist. “I want that, Daddy. I want to be your boy.”

After weeks of confusion, then knowing how I wanted to be moved forward, but not being sure how long to wait, I finally had the green light to do something I’d been craving. “Can I kiss you chocolate Chip?”

“Anything, Daddy. You can do anything.”

As I leaned down to catch his lips with mine, I promised myself that I’d do anything in my power to make sure he never regretted giving me this privilege.



## *Chapter Seventeen*

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**CHIP**  
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“*I* told you that you should have let me come over,” Nigel said, shaking his head at me on the screen.

He was right, but I’d thought it would take me longer to get ready for my date with Ollie tonight, and I wanted to have time to center my nerves. Turned out, I’d been ready in record time, and I didn’t know what to do with myself sitting here alone. Even with the closeness Ollie and I had already shared, and the fact we’d been living in this apartment together for weeks, going on an official date for the first time felt like a really big deal. I sighed.

“I know just the thing to distract you,” he said. “Hold on. The screen went wonky for a second before it showed that he was connecting someone else into our call. “Hey Nigel, what’s up?” Then the guy’s eyes widened. “Holy shit, you must be Chip.”

Wishing Nigel had warned me what we were doing, I attempted to smile back, but it looked more like a cringe. I’d really been excited to meet Hayden in person after so many texting marathons, but I’d expected it to be in person and with a heads up. Or this next weekend, like we’d originally planned.

Nigel busted up laughing. “See, I knew that would work. Bet you’re not worried about your date now.”

“What date?” Hayden asked.

“Chip has himself a new Daddy,” Nigel sing-songed.

Hayden gasped. “No way. Who? Tell me. Tell me. Tell me.”

Eyes glittering with amusement, Nigel said, “Go ahead, Chip. This is your news. Tell him.”

My friend had been so pumped for me when I texted him this morning that I thought for sure he’d run over and see me, so I’d immediately reminded him that Miriam was there making breakfast. Not that she would have minded his company at all, but I’d kind of wanted to be alone with her after Ollie gave her the news that we were making a go at a relationship. As I’d been texting with Nigel, I’d heard her happy squeal coming from the living area, and she’d shoved her son out of the house as quickly as possible so she could help me process through all my feelings. She really was the best.

“Tell me. Tell me. Tell me. Please tell me it’s Ollie.” I felt the blush rising up my cheeks, and I cursed my pale skin. “Oh. My. Gawd! It is Ollie. Good for you. I’ve been waiting to see someone take that big man down for years. Please tell me you already waved that pole, climbed that tree, conquered the mountain.”

Nigel had so many friends, so it was easy to forget who was who and how they knew each other. So I’d forgotten that Waylon—Hayden’s man—was one of Ollie’s friends, like Chrisitan, Omar, and that guy Harrison I’d met at The Tap. He’d told me that he was the closest to Christian, more like brothers than friends, but Christian’s Daddy friends had adopted him when they met Christian.

“Are you broken?” Hayden asked.

“Be nice, Hayden. I told you he’s shy, and this is all new.”

“Well, if you and Ollie would quit hiding him away, then maybe the rest of us would get a chance to get to know him.”

Hayden was partly right, but mostly that had been all me. Since the first time Hayden had messaged me, he and Nigel both kept that group chat active with running commentary. They’d been including me in conversations and explaining things I didn’t understand about people I didn’t know. Or didn’t know yet, according to them. So, yes, I’d never officially met Hayden in person, and I guessed I really wasn’t

now either, but I'd gotten to know him via text, so I needed to shrug off my discomfort. "Sorry. I know I'm awkward."

Hayden shook his head. "No, I was just giving you a hard time, hoping you'd loosen up. Believe me, I'm the last person you need to be uncomfortable around. I put my foot in my mouth all the time."

"Yeah, wait until you see him with everyone else," Nigel said. "Hayden has no filter, so one of us is constantly lecturing him or knocking the back of his head."

"I resemble that statement." Hayden smirked.

"And I know you met a few of the boys yesterday." Hayden glared at Nigel. "Which is totally unacceptable of you, Nigel since I should've met him first."

The conversation went on like that from there, with Hayden and Nigel going back and forth busting each other's chops. It was highly entertaining and exactly what I'd needed to stop being so nervous about tonight.

"When will Ollie be home?" I glanced up at the clock and saw that I had about ten minutes.

"I should probably go. Hayden, it was really nice to sort of meet you."

"I can't wait until we hang out. Oh, and we have a Daddy-boy get-together coming up. Make Ollie bring you to Samuel and Toby's."

My face heated and excitement bubbled in my belly. "That's the plan."

"Yay!"

Nigel snickered. "This should be good. I can't wait. You'll never be lonely again."

"Isn't that the truth?" Hayden rolled his eyes.

I hung up with them and tried to figure out what to do with myself. Should I be sitting here on the couch waiting? Should I go into the bedroom and wait there? Good grief, how was I still so awkward with Ollie?

Settling on waiting in the bedroom, my pulse sped up when I heard the front door and then the clickety clack of the chain Ollie's pocket watch hung on. It still warmed my heart that he'd done that for me. Something so kind and unexpected. He came to the door of the bedroom and smiled. "Hey, chocolate Chip, you ready?"

Nodding shyly, I said, "Whenever you are."

Ollie reappeared dressed in a dark green button down, pulling out the green in his hazel eyes, and a nice pair of black slacks that hugged every muscle in his thighs, and I practically drooled. Now that I knew we were doing this, my body instantly reacted to the softness in his eyes as he gazed at me. He held out a hand to help me off the couch where I'd moved to wait for him. "Are you ready, my little chocolate Chip?"

"Yes, Daddy." I peeked up at him from under my eyelashes, pleased to see the smile spread across his face. He might not have been a Daddy before, but there was no hesitancy or disdain at the honorific. Just pleasure. My heart sang as he escorted me to his vehicle, opened the door, and helped me up. Leaning in, he gently pressed his lips to mine, then whispered against them, "I missed you today."

"I missed you, too," I whispered, clinging to the front of his shirt.

He backed up and shut the door and strode to his side, getting in and turning to me. "I thought I'd take you to my favorite diner. How does that sound?"

"Perfect." That warm fuzzy feeling rushed through me. I knew it was too fast to fall in love, but there was something so sexy about this man and the fact he'd obviously paid attention to every word I said. Nigel and I had gone on and on to Omar one night about how much we loved diner food. Omar cracked up since we'd both had plenty of experience with fine dining—him with Omar and me with Harry—but we liked the assorted menu and huge portions.

Ever the gentleman, Ollie helped me out of the car when we reached our destination, sliding his arm around my waist and guiding me into the restaurant and to the table our waitress led

us to. He didn't shy away from me for a second, and the only two guys who made a face as we passed their table were treated to a scowl from my Daddy that had them looking away quickly.

"What would you like, chocolate Chip?"

"Don't tease me, but I'm going to have chocolate chip pancakes and eggs."

He shot me a fond look. "Then I'll go with a cheese burger and fries. What would you like to drink?"

"Can I have a chocolate milkshake, Daddy?"

It wasn't that I wanted to test Ollie necessarily, but Harry was still in the forefront of my mind. He'd never have been caught in a diner, but as his office manager, I'd run out and picked up diner food and taken it back to the office plenty of times. But Mr. High and Mighty liked to go to the fanciest places and be seen for dinner. Not that he'd continued taking me once he truly had me. But he also never allowed me to order anything but fish or salads. He'd always gone on and on about how I needed to watch my weight. As a small guy by nature, eating that way had left me feeling thin and gaunt. Ollie didn't seem to mind one way or the other, but would the sweet drink on top of the carby goodness for dinner be too much for him?

Ollie stroked his beard. "That's a fantastic idea. They make the best Oreo milkshakes here. I think I'll get one of those for myself." Internally, I cheered. I didn't even know why I'd asked.

"What did you get up to today?"

"I met Hayden.

"I didn't know that Nigel came over. I thought you decided to have a chill day alone."

The sweet man sounded so worried that I hadn't gotten what I wanted to today, so I rushed to assure him. "Nigel and I were on a video call, and he added Hayden in. He's really nice."

Ollie snorted. "Are you sure you met our Hayden? I like the kid, but I'm not sure nice is the word I would've gone for."

“Yeah, they told me about his reputation before Waylan, but he was great with me. He thinks it’s pretty awesome that we’re dating.”

“I think it’s pretty awesome myself.” Ollie winked and reached out and tapped my hand.

“Me too.”

“I haven’t wanted to ask you too much about your time with Harry. Between Nigel and the long conversations you and mom have, I didn’t want you to feel like he had to be every topic. The topic of every conversation you have, but I’m here if you need to vent or anything. I don’t expect transitioning from one relationship to another will be completely smooth for you.

Lying on my lower lip. I thought about it then confessed, one of the reasons I ordered the chocolate milk shake was to see if you’d get mad.

About what?

Harry was always watching my weight for me, and I guess...”

Ollie reached over and covered my hand with his palm. The rough texture of his skin completely grounded me. “You never have to worry about anything like that.” Tonight is a special night, so we’re out for a date, and you should have whatever you want.”

Hoping he could see the apology in my eyes. I turned my hand over in his and laced our fingers. “I do know that, Ollie, or I never would’ve stayed.”

“I thought so.”

He raised our hands and kissed the back of my hand. How did I get this lucky?

## *Chapter Eighteen*



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## CHIP

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“So how was it?” Miriam asked as she drove me home. “You don’t have to give me details, but I’m just curious if you liked Dr. Davis as much as I do. Not that we have to use the same therapist.”

“No, he was great. Thank you so much for the recommendation. I really think talking everything out with him, starting with my childhood, will really help me in the long run.”

“I think so, too, Chip. I’m so proud of you.”

I grinned to myself as I looked out the window. She wasn’t proud I went to see the therapist because I’d been going to group with her for a while now. She was proud of me because I’d allowed Ollie to pay for it. Someday I hoped to have good insurance, but for right now, I was still taking single projects online. It was enough for now.

“You’re staying for dinner, right?” I asked.

“I think I will.” She giggled. Since we’ve successfully chased my son out from having breakfast with us, I’m starting to miss the big guy.”

He hadn’t admitted as much to me, but I had a feeling that Ollie felt the same way. I appreciated him loaning me his mother the way he had, but he really needed to start staying in the morning and hanging out with us more. Their relationship was important to both of them, and the bond he had with his mother was one of the things that I adored about him.

“So, my son informed me that finding you a new car isn’t the only thing you two have on the agenda.”

“I don’t know why he’s so adamant we buy a house. I like the apartment just fine.”

She reached over and patted my leg. “I think he wants you to love where you live, dear. It’s important to him that he creates a nice life for you. All you have to do to make him happy is let him do that.”

“I know. I’ve definitely figured that out.”

“Besides, it’s about time he started spending some of that money on himself. It’ll be good to see you guys in a home with a yard. I can picture it now, you sitting outside reading while Ollie mows the lawn.”

“Me too. Although, I’d like to plant flowers out front and start a little garden in the back.”

“Oh, Chip. You have a green thumb? You never told me that.”

Holding my thumb and pointer finger a smidge apart, I said, “Slightly., But I’d like to learn more.”

She beamed. “I think that would be lovely dear.”

We were walking toward the apartment, chatting about what I planned to make for dinner when I heard my name in a voice I’d hoped to never hear again. “Chip. I’ve found you.”

Before I turned around and confronted Harry, I held my phone up to my face and unlocked it. As I turned, I sent Ollie a series of characters. Whatever my fingers landed on, then hit send. Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Miriam holding her phone down at her side and doing the same thing just the way her son had taught us.

Harry sauntered towards me, all elegance and grace, with a friendly smile directed at Miriam. “Hello, I don’t believe we’ve met.” He held out his hand to her.

She glanced down at it with disdain, then looked him dead in the eye. “I know who you are, Harry, and you don’t belong here. You need to go.”

His expression immediately morphed. “I don’t think I will. I’ve been here a couple of days, so I know what that Neanderthal you’re living with drives, Chip, and he’s at work. You will be leaving with me.”

Miriam stepped between us, and I wanted to hug the stuffing out of her. Neither of us were planning for me to go anywhere, but she was giving Ollie time. Since he was only ten minutes away, I wasn’t too worried about our odds.

“How did you find me, Harry?”

Ticking his fingers, he said, “First, I found the address for that friend of yours from here. Once I found his house, it was only a matter of waiting for him to make his way over here to see you. I wasn’t sure that you actually lived here since the place is so nice, but I had a hunch, so I waited. Sure enough, you strolled out of there yesterday clutching on to that guy like you needed him to breathe. Where is your pride, Chip? Your boy tendencies are shameful.”

Miriam raised herself up to her full 5 foot 2 inches and pointed at him. “Watch what you say about my son.”

“I’m sure your son can handle being called a Neanderthal, lady.”

She shook with anger. “I’m talking about Chip.” Seeing Harry again, having him this close, was terrifying, but Miriam made me feel loved and wanted, so...fuck him.

He threw his head back and laughed. “Wow, Chip. You have these people snowed, don’t you?”

Miriam planted her hands on her hips. “If you think he’s not worth anything, then what are you doing here?”

The vein in his neck popped out, and I knew Harry was about to lose his shit. Right now, keeping Miriam safe was the most important thing. As long as Harry didn’t get me in the car, I could handle anything he threw at me. Switching places with her, and tucking her behind me, I said, “Seriously, Harry what are you doing here? You make more than enough money to hire a housecleaner or a cook. There is literally nothing else I can do for you.”

“Maybe he should consider joining a gym,” that deep gravelly voice that I’d grown to love said. Ollie moved swiftly toward us, putting both his mother and I behind his back. “That’s what you’re missing, right, Harry? A punching bag.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, friend, but Chip is my boy. I never gave him permission to leave.”

“Son, I don’t believe it works that way,” a silver fox said as he sauntered up from the side. I was pretty sure that was Christian, but I hadn’t met him yet.

“What do you think, Omar?”

Omar came in from the other direction, with a toothpick sticking out of his mouth. I’d never seen him do that before, nor had I ever seen him move with such a swagger, but it had the desired effect on Harry. He looked between the three of them, and I wondered if he was going to piss himself.

Going for bravado, Harry puffed out his chest like a rooster. “You had to bring your friends?”

Ollie crossed his arms across his chest, and I watched the muscles ripple. Harry’s gaze tracked the same thing, but the idiot didn’t back down. “So what? You must be a gym rat. That doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

“And neither does Chip,” Ollie growled. “I suggest you take your ass on back home, and say the fuck out of Takoda.”

Grabbing everyone’s attention, Miriam clutched her son’s arm. “Ollie, tonight is not a good one for jail. You promised me dinner.”

He patted her hand where it rested on his arm. “I know, Mom.”

“I mean, last time you went to jail for beating the shit out of your father, it was such a hassle. All those legal fees. I mean, you can afford it, but what a waste of time.”

The sound of sirens came from down the street. Christian chuckled. “You might want to get out of here, Doc, before the boys in blue decide to give you a ride.”

Chewing around his toothpick. Omar asked, “How did you find Chip, anyway?”

“He followed Nigel from your house,” Miriam said. “He said he followed him around until he figured out where Chip lives.”

I thought we’d dodged the bullet, and that there wouldn’t be any bloodshed today, but no sooner than Miriam finished speaking, Omar had cocked his hand back.

Christian and Ollie yelled, both moving swiftly to catch their friend before he punched Harry in the nose. Unfortunately—or fortunately—depending on how you looked at it, they were too late. The crunch of something breaking, drops of blood flying, and Harry wailed in pain.

“Wait until the police get here,” Harry panted, holding his nose and bending over at the waist.

Omar stepped back, moving his toothpick to the other side of his mouth. “No problem there. My lawyer will have me out in no time.”

“On the other hand,” Christian said. “The police might be interested in why you’re in town.”

Still sputtering and moaning, Harry yelled, “He has no restraining order on me. I’ve done nothing wrong.”

Christian crossed his arms over his chest, standing beside Ollie. Omar moved to his other side, and they were like a brick wall between Harry and Miriam and me. “No, that might be true, but we sure do have pictures to get one.”

“Plus,” Ollie added, hooking his thumb toward Christian. “This one right here is one of the most respected business owners in this town. I’m not sure you want to take us on.”

The police SUV pulled into the parking lot, and Harry shot a few glances between my man and his friends and the police vehicle. Finally, fear for his reputation won out. “

Whatever. You can have him. I didn’t love him anyway.”

“Well that’s good,” I said, raising my voice over the sirens. “Because I love my

Daddy, my forever Daddy, and you don't have nothing on him."

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## CONNECT WITH SAMMI

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USA Today Best Selling Author Sammi Cee was raised in a family of readers. Summer vacations consisted of a good book while sitting lakeside from as far back as she could remember. After growing up and having her own children, her appreciation of how the written word could transport you on an adventure, bring you to tears, or give you hope, took on a whole new meaning.

These days Sammi is watching her children develop into fine young ladies while doing the things she enjoys most: drinking coffee, eating chocolate, and writing her own stories.

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