

found by daddy

Easton's
LOST
OTTER



DELLA CAIN
KAYTEA KAT



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Easton's Lost Otter

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Traveling is the worst. I love being in my own house, in my own room, with my own things, and snuggling under my favorite blanket with my otter stuffie, Charlie. When my boss asks me to go to a week-long conference in Las Vegas, it is crystal clear that the options I have are to go or be denied the promotion I've been working so hard for. I choose to go. It's Vegas. How bad can it be?

Awful. Absolutely awful.

The only bright side is the hot rep from the next booth who spends the week flirting with me. He gives off completely daddy vibes, but when I introduce him to my stuffie, I realize my mistake. He isn't a daddy. He's just a nice guy looking for someone to make a connection with—a connection I gladly give him in the form of the hottest night of my life—a night that can never and will never be repeated.

My plane's barely on the ground when I get the text telling me our hotel was filled with bedbugs. I head straight to the laundromat to disinfect it all, leaving a few hours later with fresh clothes, ready to climb into bed and just be.

There's one problem; Charlie is missing. Suck.

Easton's Lost Otter is a sweet age play romance featuring a little who loses his most specialest stuffie in the whole wide world, the daddy who finds it, the laundromat attendant who shares a little more than he probably should, snuggles, cuddles, stuffies, footie jams, a memorable day at Chained, some old friends, true love, and a guaranteed happy ever after. If you like your romances on the Hallmark side but a bit

*kinkier, check out Easton's Lost Otter by USA Today
Bestselling author Della Cain and her bestie and frequent
partner in crime, Kaytea Kat.*

Also by Della Cain

[Collared by Love series](#)

A Puppy for His Little

A Master for His Puppy

A Family for His Daddy

[Collared Ever After series](#)

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Lollipops and Leashes

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Easton's Lost Otter
Found by Daddy Series Book 5

By

USA Today Bestselling Author Della Cain

And

Kaytea Kat

Chapter One

Easton

I plopped my carry-on on the bed, my social battery officially used up for the week. The problem was that my week had just begun. I hadn't even made it to the actual event yet, only my hotel room. But between airports and airplanes I'd had my fill of people for the day.

Never would I understand why my boss picked me for this gig. There were so many other people in my section who were significantly better suited for this. For whatever reason, they had decided this event was my calling, and here I was in a stuffy hotel room without my favorite blanket, pillow, and cup. It sucked.

Unzipping my bag, I felt around for Charlie, my favorite stuffie. I could make it a week without my pillow or my sippy, but I wasn't sure I could handle a full night without Charlie the otter. He gave me comfort in a way nothing else could, even when I was big.

"Charlie, I want to go home." I hugged him close and fell to the bed with a *whump*.

I needed to be at check-in in a few hours and I planned to get there exactly on time. Until then, I was going to snuggle Charlie and try and get some sleep. It took a couple of minutes to find my sweats and a tee from my suitcase and to climb into bed and less than ten minutes to fall sound asleep. I really needed it, especially if I was supposed to spend the rest of the night setting up my booth and being social.

My alarm woke me with enough time for a quick shower and change. I hated shoving Charlie back into my carry-on, but I was going to be moving a lot of swag and such for my booth, and I didn't want to risk losing him in that chaos. I'd bring him the rest of the week—inside my bag, of course. I might not believe there was an age limit on stuffies, but enough of society did that there was no way I could pull off “professional businessman” with him by my side.

Heck, I hadn't even been able to pull off “sweet boyfriend” with him. Molly left me so fast, saying she needed a real man, one who'd grown up and didn't need his blankie and stuffie. And really, I didn't blame her. At the time, I hadn't realized I was little or even what that might look like. I just had those two comfort items and no way to explain the whys as well as I could've.

But that was years ago now, and since then, I'd had a mommy and a couple of daddies. None of them turned into full-on relationships, the kind I longed for. Not that I would change a thing. They had all been an important part of my journey of self-awareness and just because we weren't each other's always and forever, that didn't mean our season together wasn't to be cherished.

Once Charlie was tucked away, I headed to the event. Checking in took forever, the lines out the door. Part of the problem was half the people were there to look around thinking they could get a head start on things. When they finally got to check-in, they either feigned puzzlement or were completely confused or in one case very pissed. It was far from ideal.

At least when I got to my booth, the boxes the company had shipped ahead were all there and accounted for. At first, they suggested I bring everything with me to avoid the added fees. Either they had never been to an event like this and had zero clues as to how much crap you really needed, or they had never flown. When I reminded them the cost of a third bag or overweight fees and that there would be multiple, they agreed with my plan.

And it wasn't like I worked in their main NYC headquarters. I was a remote worker. Where did they expect me to store everything in the first place?

"Hey," a cute guy setting up the next booth said.

"Hey," I replied back before realizing he was talking to someone else. I was such a winner at this peopling thing. If this was the way the week was going to go, I was screwed.

I immediately pretended I hadn't said a thing and was simply rearranging boxes as I crossed my fingers I wasn't going to die of embarrassment. Pretended rearranging turning into unpacking and setting up. It didn't take as long as I feared it would and, when all was said and done, the booth looked pretty sharp. It helped that the signage and tables had been professionally done before my arrival, but my contribution wasn't too bad.

After shoving the empty boxes under the table, in case I needed to ship any of the materials back, along with the still-full ones, I was ready to go. No one would steal what I had there and, if they did, they did. It wasn't like I was going to sit around all night to make sure the eyeglass wipes with our company logo and our coffee mugs were not taken by randos.

“See you tomorrow.”

I turned around to see the hottie from earlier and gave him a half wave. “See you.”

At least this time I didn't feel the need to be swallowed up by the earth after our encounter. There was something sweet about him, something in his eyes. If we were at Chained, the club I frequented, I'd have risked going over and seeing if he wanted to play or get a drink or something. But that was my safe place. I didn't need to worry about what I like being looked at with disgust.

And that was me getting ahead of things, just like I always did. This was a convention and, based on the company whose booth he was manning, the guy lived in Chicago, which was not even a pretend commute from where I lived. At best we could have a fun night out, my kink not needing to be a part of any interaction we had.

If only he didn't look like such a delicious daddy—again me projecting. I needed to find someone to play with soon, even if only for a playdate at Chained. Obviously I needed it if my brain kept trying to make this guy a potential daddy for me.

I went back to my room, grabbing a kids' meal on my way there. The stupid restaurant had a ten-and-under rule for them, though, forcing me to get an adult meal, too. Las Vegas was a different world than the one I lived in, for sure.

At least my meal came with a pocket-sized race car.

Belly full, I climbed into bed with Charlie and my new car to watch cartoons on my laptop. On days like these, I truly

needed some little time, but this would have to do.

I had looked up the local clubs when I found out I was coming. Turned out that the problem with coming to a city known for its smexy attractions was that day passes were out-of-this-world expensive for the couple of places with the potential to be a good fit. No trip to the club for me.

I stayed up way too late, unable to unwind even with my favorite cartoon dogs to the rescue. But eventually, sleep came, only to have me yanked from it far too soon by my alarm.

“Charlie, it’s going to be a rough day. I’m bringing you with me.” I hugged him and then got out of bed and ready for the day.

In theory, the center had breakfast for us, but when I got there, all that was left was a half a pot of decaf and a whole lot of crumbs. People were either starving, or they had taken some snacks for later. Standing behind a table trying to sell my company’s hot new program that was going to make their lives easier and their profits soar, on an empty stomach and without even the pretense of caffeine was going to be a challenge.

I was back in the booth a solid fifteen minutes before the doors opened. I could do this. I had no choice.

“Hey.” It was the hottie from next door. “What do you drink in your coffee?”

“Umm milk, why?”

“Because I got ‘Tia’s’ coffee”—he tapped the sticker on the side—“and it has milk in it. I drink mine black, one sugar.” He held the cup out for me. “Want it?”

“Actually, more than anything.” I crossed over to him and grabbed Tia’s drink. I felt bad the barista gave him her morning jolt instead of his own, but I couldn’t be sad that it was now mine, especially not when it was handed to me by...I didn’t even know his name.

Why can't I people like a normal person?

Chapter Two

Jared

Our firm spent months preparing for the Las Vegas show each year. Although we participated in other events, this one was the largest and, at a week, the longest. But the exposure we received for our new products made it worth the time and cost.

The crowds were cheerful, overall, enjoying picking up the little freebies at many tables and piling them into the canvas bags given out at the door for all ticket holders. Since the event got so much press, people who just wanted to look and not buy had been coming as well, meaning, there was a bit of sorting to be sure those who were actually my potential customers got my attention. I understood the appeal. Unlike most events that were very specific, this one encompassed a broad spectrum of business solutions and even dipped a little into the home-show genre. The first year there had been doubters, but it had a magic I'd never seen elsewhere.

And it drew those from all walks of life.

People watching, something I always enjoyed, was even better here than at Venice Beach in California, a spot I always headed for when in the area. At this event, there were people in business suits, jeans, shorts, and a surprisingly large goth contingent in full makeup and piercings. Tattoos were also on display, but those had become so commonplace, I saw them on everyone who had enough skin visible for them to show.

This year, however, I had been focused on a man in the next booth. Not that it was unusual to chat up the neighbors. When spending an entire week on the convention floor, the people on either side of me became very familiar faces, and when there were breaks in the flow of visitors, to get to know one another fairly well for strangers who might never see one another again. Occasionally, the connection stuck and I'd end up following and being followed on social media. At least for a time. And for the past couple of years, I'd had the same neighbor to the left, a guy who was also an inveterate people watcher, so I'd looked forward to sharing observations with Roy again.

So when I arrived to find a different business in that spot, I was a little bummed until I saw the person setting up the booth. I didn't usually flirt with people at a business event, but this guy pressed all my buttons. He was good-looking, for sure. But that wasn't it. The building was filled with people who met that criterion. It was a particular quality, a sweetness about everything he did that made him a pleasure to be near.

When I greeted him, he offered me a smile and a wave before returning to organizing his booth. I enjoyed watching him go about it, setting everything up just so.

But the next morning, when the doors opened, a certain tension showed in his movements, a stiffness of shoulders when he turned his head, and and flexing of his fingers with his hands at his sides.

Not everyone thrived on the type of atmosphere such a big convention/show created. I liked it for the most part, but even I

had moments of feeling overwhelmed at the peak hours on the weekend.

But we weren't there yet. The enthusiastic early arrivals were only a small number compared to what we'd be facing in a few days. If my neighbor was going to survive a whole week, and presumably his job might be at risk if he did not, he might need a little help.

With that in mind, I befriended him, glad to have gotten the wrong coffee when he accepted it from me with another of those smiles. Easton was all the things I'd picked up on and more. Sweet, kind, friendly with people who stopped by even when I could tell from his body language, he'd be happier sitting back quietly instead.

As the days went by, we chatted whenever we had lighter traffic, and I did my best to help Easton to be at ease. Sometimes just having a friend nearby could do that, and the more he relaxed, the more I wanted to get to know him better.

I had meetings with existing and potential customers every evening, meaning, I couldn't follow my instinct to invite him out to dinner, and I hoped he was doing okay on his own. His company had booked him into a different hotel than mine, and I hadn't heard the greatest things about it. But when I asked how it was, he said fine, kind of basic but okay. And that he was also "fine" alone there in the evenings, catching up on emails and watching a little TV before going to bed early.

"You sure? If you like, I'm taking a customer out for steaks tonight and you're welcome to come along."

He flushed, the color rising past his eyebrows. "Oh no, I couldn't. It's your business..."

I laughed. “Not this guy. He’s been a client so long, he’s more like family, and I’m sure he’d be glad to have someone new to talk to.”

“Thank you, that’s very nice of you,” he mumbled, “but I have a lot to do this evening.”

And he wasn’t comfortable with the idea. “Some other time, then.”

“For sure. Maybe the last night of the show after cleanup? Just you and I. We can grab a bite and rehash the event. Talk about our successes and not-so-successes.” I really did want to see more of him, but I wasn’t sure how much of his reticence was due to being shy and how much was just wanting this to be a casual professional connection and that was it.

“I wanted to show you something.” He reached under the counter and brought out an adorable stuffed otter. “He goes everywhere with me.”

“Lucky charm?” I’d thought it might be more, but I didn’t want to overstep. This was the first time he’d come up with anything personal, even our conversation almost all about the conference and those who attended as well as how we were doing with our booths.

“Uh, sure.” He tucked the otter away again and shrugged. “I’ll meet you for dinner, but my treat. You’ve been really nice to me.”

“No, I asked you, so it should be my treat. You can buy next time.” If there was one.

It was the weekend, and so we were busy after that and didn't have much more time to talk, but I couldn't get that otter out of my mind. He'd been so uneasy at the start of the week, but I hoped that having someone to talk to had helped. Certainly, he seemed more confident. And when the doors closed and I had everything taken down and ready to be picked up and shipped to the home office, I approached him. "Ready to go eat?"

"What?" He looked up from a box he was taping closed. "Oh, yes, almost. I just want to make sure this is secure." Stepping back, he set the tape down on the empty table. "That's it! I leave early in the morning, but we do need to eat, and I still want to thank you for all your help. It was my first time at anything like this, and I was a little nervous."

"No thanks needed. It was fun having you as a neighbor. Do you like tacos? Sushi? Diner food?"

"Anything. I could eat a unicorn."

I blinked at him. "Horn and all?"

"I skipped lunch." He said it in such an even tone, I didn't get the joke until I saw the sparkle in his eye.

"Then we'd better hurry if we're going to give you time to digest that horn."

We were both chuckling as we exited the building, and I suggested the restaurant in my hotel. It was not fancy—and neither of us was dressed for fancy—but the food was good, and I'd come with the client who was a good friend and just ended up wanting something casual.

“I’ll follow you over,” he said. “Mine isn’t too far away and I don’t want to leave my car here.”

“Sounds good.” I gave him the information and fifteen minutes later, we were in the lobby of my hotel. I had someone picking up the rental car later that night, planning to take an airport shuttle in the morning, so unlike Easton who’d left his various items that were not being shipped in the trunk of his car, my arms were laden with mine.

“Are you taking all that into the restaurant?”

“No, I thought I’d run it upstairs,” I said. “If you don’t mind waiting, I’ll be right back down.”

“Let me help,” he insisted.

I should have said no. Probably. Because I’d spent far more time ogling his sweet face and body that wouldn’t quit than I liked to admit. But he’d shown no interest in me beyond casual conversation, so I had not wanted to invite him up to my room.

Chapter Three

Easton

There were lots of things people could say about my dating life. I'm too picky or in one case, I wasn't picky enough. I didn't recognize who was and wasn't interested in me and had been on more than my share of dates I didn't realize were dates. I preferred quiet evenings over "fun" ones. All of which were true. But one thing no one ever said about me was that I jumped into bed quickly.

To the contrary, I was molasses when it came to sex. Kiss me on the first date? Probably not. And it wasn't a moral stand or anything weird like that. I just didn't generally want to right away, my nerves over spending time with someone new taking over.

That all changed after we didn't go to dinner. From now on, I was Easton, the one-night-stand king. Fine, not a king, but I had one and I refused to feel bad about it. It was a great time and consensual.

We walked into his hotel to have dinner, and I offered to help him take his things to the room. I hadn't even meant to ask; it sort of slipped out. It "slipped out" because it was all I could think of since he asked me to have dinner with him after the show ended.

I rode the elevator up with him, heart beating so hard in my chest, I was fairly certain he could hear it. And then, when the doors slid open, I gathered all my courage and said, "I didn't want to just help you bring your things up."

“Really?” He led the way into the hallway and paused to look at me. “Did you want to come inside and maybe stay a while? With me?”

“I mean, if I’m reading this right and you don’t mind me being a...guy.” I could barely look at his face, and my cheeks began to burn.

“Oh, I’m hella gay, if that is what you mean.” He leaned in close and whispered in my ear, “And I can’t wait to get you naked.”

I nearly melted into a pile of goo right then and there. He didn’t let me, instead taking my hand and kissing it. “I’m this way.”

My heart amped up even further, thumping a thousand beats per minute. I waited for regret or nerves to settle in, but none did. I wanted this...wanted him. And sure, it sucked that tonight would be all that we had. While neither of us talked about long-distance relationships, they weren’t on the table. It was one thing to be with someone and try to make it work while you were separated. It was quite another to start out that way.

No. I needed to accept one night, and that was that.

“This is me.” We stood outside the room and he dropped my hand to fish out his room key.

And once the door opened and we were inside, his mouth was on mine, my back against the door, his body pressed against me, both of our cocks pushed together and hard as a rock.

The man could kiss! His mouth explored mine as his hands did the same to my body. I wasn't sure what my name was when we broke away to catch our breath. He was so beautiful, and the way he looked at me, like I was something to be treasured, had me wondering what it would be like to live in Chicago. And then when I didn't think I could want him more, he spoke and multiplied that desire exponentially.

"Tell me what you like and how far you want to go." He took a step back and, while I hated losing his touch, that simple act told me so much about him.

He might not be a daddy, at least not the kind I had been longing for, his thinking Charlie was a lucky charm shouted that, but he was a caregiver by nature. Asking for consent when it had been so easy to avoid the conversation altogether, that was some serious green-flag behavior there.

"I like...it depends on what you are asking about." I took in a deep breath. "I like kissing...in all places by both parties, and I prefer bottom, but am versatile with the right person and...that would be you." *Note to self: learn how not to be so cringe when you flirt.*

"If you were mine, this conversation would be a whole lot longer." He cupped my cheek and led me closer, sealing his lips with mine as I reached him.

Kissing led to clothing removal led to hands exploring and then his mouth moving farther and farther south, my body writhing under him. I didn't hold back, not when his breath hit my cock for the first time, not when his tongue circled my tip, and not when he somehow managed to deep throat me in one swift motion. How I held back my orgasm as long as I did,

which still came far sooner than I had wanted, was beyond me. His mouth was magic.

“My turn.” I ran a finger down his chest after I managed to recover. “Would you like that—like my lips wrapped around your hard cock?”

“Yes.” There was a slight squeak at the end of his word, and the heady feeling of knowing I did that had me more than determined than ever to make this blow job the best he ever had.

I licked, sucked, kissed, and even added a tiny bit of teeth as I bobbed up and down on his length, swallowing as he reached the back of my throat. Each and every little moan and sigh and gasp only bolstered my confidence as I worked his cock with my mouth. And when my hard work was rewarded with him shooting down my throat, I was on cloud nine and barely able to stay awake.

Lying with Jared for a few minutes while I recovered had been the plan. The plan failed, and I woke up at three in the morning feeling around for Charlie before it hit me where I was and why I was there. Charlie was with my things in the rental car trunk. I slid out of bed as quietly as I could and put on my clothes, stopping long enough to leave a note to let him know that I had to leave and had had a great time.

It felt shitty walking out the way I did, but I didn't see how waking him up to do the same thing would've been any better. At least now, he got to have some sleep. I did consider staying, but, now that I was awake, Charlie's absence would prevent me from sleeping again. Last time had been a fluke or

an orgasmic delight or something. It was not the norm. Not even close.

I arrived back in my room with enough time for the equivalent of a nap before needing to head to the airport.

My travel went well, the flight on time, the people nice, and turbulence nonexistent. All that good faded when I took my phone off of airplane mode. I had a message, the kind zero people ever want to get from the company. And it wasn't even getting fired—that might've been better.

“My fucking hotel had bedbugs,” I grumbled, the person next to me pushing to the far side of their seat as we waited for the signal to disembark.

I doubted they would be on me, in my clothes, but their reaction only solidified that I needed to not bring anything from this trip into my house until it was good and clean. I hadn't felt itchy at all, but the internet said it could take days for bites to appear, and I wasn't going to risk it.

At least I hadn't carried anything but naked me into Jared's bed.

My cab took me directly to the first Laundromat I could find. Not the way I wanted to spend my first afternoon back but a thousand times better than bringing the nasty buggers home.

I filled the washers, added the overpriced vending machine soap and my quarters because apparently not all machines used cards. I approached the attendant who was cleaning out a lint trap some inconsiderate customer had left

unemptied. “I was wondering what stores were within walking distance.”

He looked up at me and damn it all, his eyes reminded me of Jared. Exactly what I didn’t need. I already was longing to be back with him, and that was very much not a thing that would be happening. “Marve’s is on the corner. It has some of everything. But beyond that, it’s a hike.” Gods, he even sounded like a younger Jared.

“Thanks. I’ll be back in a few.”

I walked to the store and got disinfectant spray, a tote, and garbage bags. I sprayed the crap out of the suitcase and bag and shoved the computer and such in the tote bag then waited for my laundry to be done. The nice thing about the Laundromat was it was quicker than doing one load after another, so it wasn’t much past dinnertime when I was loading everything up into a cab and went home.

Not trusting the disinfectant, I shoved the suitcases ensconced in plastic into the basement storage area my apartment came with. I’d deal with them later. I just wanted to take a long hot shower, throw on a onesie, and sleep for a week cuddled up with Charlie.

Only, when I unpacked my laundry, he wasn’t there. I’d never hopped into a cab so quickly in my life, only to arrive there with the door locked.

“Fuck!” There was no after-hours contact information on the sign, and they didn’t even have their messages open on social media. What kind of business did that?

The one that had my most favoritest thing in the world,
that kind. I needed a plan...a plan and a whole lotta luck.

Chapter Four

Jared

On the flight home, all I could think of was the guy. Easton. I had joked that I still owed him a dinner, but his “Don’t worry about it,” hadn’t been indicative of a desire to meet again. We flew out at different times, so I hadn’t even been able to travel to the airport with him.

Our night together would be one of my strongest and best memories, even if I never saw him again. It had been incredible in every way except the one that I most desired—a way forward. Still, sometimes you don’t get what you want, and we’d had a really nice week together, one that made my heart happy when Easton grew less shuttered and more open and comfortable with those who visited his booth. His boss was likely to be more than pleased at the results.

I’d have to call the week one of those special times that Fate gifts us, meant to be enjoyed for what they are and not looked at too deeply.

I just wished I could get Easton’s face out of my mind.

But life would go on, and time would help. Hopefully. And until it did, I still had things to take care of like the work that had gotten behind while I was away and my little brother to check on. Our parents only let him move to the big city for college because I guaranteed I would keep an eye on him and make sure he didn’t get into any trouble. As if. I’d always done fine in school and liked to think I was doing a good job in my career, but Roy’s focus was beyond admirable.

He'd graduated from high school a year early and was working part-time to help pay his expenses.

My "checking" on him generally involved meeting for a meal and catching up. It made our parents happy and although we never admitted it, we generally had a good time catching up. Tonight, I drove to the Laundromat where he worked to take him out when they closed. My folks weren't thrilled that he worked evenings, but I assured them it was a very nice place, and Roy mentioned that since he went to school during the day, he had no other hours to work.

I arrived at the Laundromat about fifteen minutes early and sent him a text to let him know I'd be out here when he was ready. Sitting back in the car, I closed my eyes and Easton's face swam back into focus.

Not just his face though.

When we got to my hotel room, that last night, the plan was to drop off my things from the convention and head right down to dinner, but that did not happen. We were no sooner in the door than the items fell from both our hands and we were in one another's arms. Nothing had given me the impression that this would happen, but it felt so natural to hold him, to have his face tip up to mine, and for our lips to crash together. And he'd been the one to let me know he wanted that, his cheeks flushed and words rushed yet hesitant. I wouldn't have made any kind of move without that. And I was not a fan of one-night stands, which all logic said this would have to be. And I couldn't say no. Everything in me insisted that even one night with Easton would be too special to pass up.

Everything in me was right. But also wrong because when I got up and found the note he'd left, it broke something in there.

Thanks for making this week so much better than I'd ever expected it to be. I had a great time tonight. Safe travels home.

Home...it had felt much less welcoming when I arrived than when I left. One-night stands weren't supposed to leave emptiness behind when they left. Most of my friends claimed to be relieved when the person didn't try to make it more than it was.

I guess I was the one who did that.

He'd been so perfect in my arms, sleeping cuddled against me while I lay awake for a long time just soaking up that feeling. It was a special week capped by that magical night, and I'd have to call that enough.

No matter how hard it felt. Contacting him at his company was way too stalkery. If he'd wanted me to reach him, he'd have added a phone number or email to his note.

Accept it. Move on. At least try.

Roy texted back and let me know he was still tied up, and rather than dwell any longer on something that was over, I decided to move forward. Easton had given me a pleasant week and one mind-blowing night. He hadn't said he wanted more. I had to remind myself of that over and over.

Unable to sit and think any longer, I headed into the Laundromat to wait in there. At least there would be some distractions from thoughts that served me not at all. The place

was busy, as always, with some of the most interesting people in the city making use of the machines to wash and dry their clothing and other fabric items. This one had several of the large washers and dryers for oversized items as well, making it even more popular.

Roy was helping an older woman who didn't look strong enough to yank the huge, heavy denim quilt out of the dryer and who was trying to talk him into a free load next time. The help she got. The free load, not so much, but my brother's charm soon had her laughing.

Most of the other people were folding and stuffing their clothing and towels and sheets and things into baskets and bags preparatory to leaving. Roy walked around shutting off lights and making sure all the machines were empty. He found a couple of socks—not matching of course—and a washcloth and came to the desk where I stood. “Get me out that plastic box under there, please,” he asked.

“Sure.” I reached underneath and pulled out the box, setting it on the countertop. “What is this?”

“Lost and found.” He tossed the socks and washcloth in it, but not before something caught my eye.

I reached and pulled the stuffie out of the basket. “It's an otter.”

“Yes, I think it is. Did you want it? If nobody claims it in thirty days, it can be yours.”

“No, it's not that I want it but that...I met someone at the conference who had one just like this. But I don't think he lived here.”

“Where does he live?” My brother was continuing on his rounds, turning things off and locking up as he went.

“I don’t know...” I petted the little stuffie. “Did you get a look at the person who lost it? I mean, it would be too weird if it was him.”

“I think I know who it was, yes.” He went on to describe Easton.

“Ummm. It couldn’t be.” But what if it was. “Would it be all right if I left a note or something? I mean, we didn’t say we’d see each other again, but I really like him.”

“Sure.” Roy dug through the basket and came up with a postcard and a pencil. “Can you use these things?”

I wrote out a little note and added my contact information. “Do you have anything I can tie this on with?”

He checked again and came up with a broken piece of ribbon. “This?”

I took it and held it up to the stuffie. “I think if I trim the ends, it can be a collar.”

“If he comes back for it, he’ll get it. Even if I’m not here.” Roy set the otter in the basket and returned it under the counter. “But if we’re going to eat, we’d better get going.”

We went to the diner down the street where we both ordered cheeseburgers and thick chocolate shakes as well as a plate of garlic fries for the table. We were contentedly munching away when he broached the subject. “Want to tell me about this guy?”

So I launched into the tale of meeting Easton at the convention and spending the whole week together. I was way too enthusiastic about someone I had only known for a week. I told him how sweet he was and kind and adorable and shy. And I told him about how he'd shown me his otter.

“Oh, bro,” he said. “You’ve got it bad.”

“I would argue with you, but I do, indeed, have it bad. And what’s worse? He’s a little, I am almost sure, and I...”

“You’re a daddy. So, isn’t that perfect?”

Having it said like that, it sounded perfect. “I’ve never had a boy before. And when he showed me the otter, I kind of shut him down. I didn’t mean to, but it just happened.”

“Bro, you’ve always taken care of people. It’s second nature or maybe first nature to you. Is that a thing?”

“I don’t know, but I appreciate your faith in me. He probably isn’t interested anyway.”

“We’ll find out.”

Chapter Five

Easton

Trying to sleep without Charlie did not go well, especially with me not knowing if I was going to be able to get him back. For all I knew he fell out and somebody saw him and took him home. Just the thought of it had me wanting to puke.

I gave up on sleep at five and showered and changed, more to have something to do. The laundry mat didn't open again until eight and I planned to be there when the doors opened. I was fully aware that my attachment to him wasn't normal for a man my age, but I didn't care. You like and care about the things you like and care about. That's all there was to it.

I opted for a cab, not wanting to figure out the Sunday public transport and far too sleep deprived to take my own car safely. They dropped me off ten minutes early and I stood at the door watching through the window, hoping the attendant from last night would recognize me and open up.

Only, when an attendant did finally come to open the door, it was a woman with fiery-red hair and a lip ring. Not only was she not the person who had helped me, she wasn't there at all. I'd remember her if she was, her look very similar to that of one of my ex's.

“If you're here about the job, the owner's not here today.”

At first, her question took me aback, but then, I realized that without a basket of clothing, I didn't look like a customer.

“I was here last night and I lost something. I was hoping someone found it?”

She stepped out of the way and let me in. “Yeah, let me snag that for you once I had everything unlocked and the sign lights on.”

I stood inside the doorway and waited for her to signal me to follow her.

“It’s mostly socks, many with holes.” She stepped inside a room and came out with a basket of orphan socks, a sweater, and no Charlie. “Not here?”

“No. It’s an otter. Sentimental value.” I didn’t know why I felt the need to qualify things, but out it came.

And it wasn’t even that I was ashamed of being little. I very much wasn’t. But that didn’t mean I wanted to make others uncomfortable by sharing it every chance I got.

“Oh, wait a second. I think I saw that.” She disappeared for less than a minute and came back with him only he wasn’t the way I left him; he had a note around his neck.

“Thank you.” I snatched him far too quickly and he nearly fell to the ground. “Do you know about the note?”

“Nope. I only know it was here when I got here.”

The bell on the door jingled.

“Gotta help that guy.” She pointed to the doorway and away she went.

I read the tag and my stomach tied up in knots, the kind you get when you first meet someone, a mixture of excitement and nerves. It was from Jared. My Jared. I had no idea how or

why he was here, but it had a phone number—a local phone number.

More than anything I wanted to call him right then and there, but being in public would limit what we said if he even answered. If he were smart, he was still sleeping. It was too freaking early in the morning for making phone calls. At least, on a weekend it was.

I held onto Charlie with both hands as I made my way home using yet another cab. He was back, really back. He didn't smell right, thanks to being freshly washed and dried, but he felt right in my arms. I couldn't wait to fall into bed with him and take a nap.

Only one foot was in the doorway when I dialed Jared. It was still early, but not gods awful early. Relief flooded into me as he answered sounding both chipper and wide awake.

“Is this Easton?” he answered, and I couldn't hold back the ginormous grin erupting on my face, even if I wanted to and I didn't. It was Jared, my Jared, and he had known it was my stuffie.

“It is. I have so many questions, but first—thank you. I didn't know you lived here, too. I thought you were in Chicago.” Where his company was based. Or so I thought. How could I have not bothered to ask him where he lived? That wasn't a tiny detail.

“I thought you were in NYC and then I went to visit my brother at work and I saw Charlie.” He remembered his name. That shouldn't have mattered as much as it did, but it did. A lot.

“How did you know it was him?” I asked.

“Because he is special to you and I paid attention.” Best. Answer. Ever.

“I showed you because I’m little and I thought that you were a daddy and that was my way of, I don’t know, coming out, I guess? But then you said he was my lucky charm and... yeah.” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “But I liked our night together. I wasn’t meaning that.”

The phone went silent and just as I was about to ask if he was still there, he said, “I knew that or guessed that. My brother teases me that I’m a daddy.”

“But you’re not.” Still sucked, but for some reason, it no longer felt like a deal breaker to me. At least not with Jared.

“I don’t know, but I do know that I wanted more than one night with you and when I saw Charlie, it felt like the second chance I wanted. Wanna video chat?”

“Yeah.” I hadn’t realized he meant right then and there and when the notification popped up, I hit it and winced. “Sorry I didn’t think about the fact that I was in bed.” And my face was burning. Great.

“I’m glad you felt comfortable enough to say yes when you were.” He was sitting at a table from what I could tell. “Exhausted from the trip?”

“Partly, but also I don’t sleep well without Charlie.” It wasn’t as if he couldn’t see my stuffie in my arms. “Can I ask you something without making it weird?”

“Would you still want to go on a date with me after seeing me snuggling a toy in bed?”

“Absolutely. I don’t know how I fit in with your little desires or if that is even the right way to say it, but I loved talking to you last week. I still can’t get over the fact that we live in the same town and it never came up.” He and I both.

“My company is big in the ‘NYC image’ and I guess I was in that mode. Of-course-I-was-from-there kind of vibe. At least that was what I was aiming for and not to keep it from you, but to make me less likely to piss off my bosses. I love teleworking and don’t want to give them any reason to have me move to headquarters.”

That was a whole lot of words for I was more focused on my job than I was on him. Thankfully he didn’t take it as such.

“Same but Chicago. I like it here. It’s big, but not too big.” He stood up and walked to a couch, lying down on it. “Now we are the same. What would you say to a date? Like a normal, nothing daddy or little date. I want to spend more time with you, to get to know you better, and I think the other might be...might be...much.”

It would be, especially for a second date. At least in this scenario.

“I would love that.”

“Me, too. Now tell me about why you were putting your suitcases in garbage bags.”

“It all started with a text...” I told him all about the bedbug fiasco and hitting up the laundry mat the second I could get there. “It was pure luck that I wound up in your brother’s store. Funny thing was I thought I was seeing you in everything—like you got so under my skin that suddenly

everyone looked like you. Turned out that it was your brother and he really did look like you.”

“I was afraid I had the wrong otter and that I just wanted it to be yours.” His confession hit me in feels I hadn’t used in a long time. There was such a sweetness to them—to him. If I wasn’t careful, I could find myself falling hard for this man.

Who was I kidding? I already had.

Chapter Six

Jared

Miniature golf...who knew that would be a fun evening? I hadn't gone in forever, since I was a kid. But Easton might like it, and it was a relaxed atmosphere where we could also play some arcade games and eat really fun food.

The new course had just opened, and several people at work had taken their families there. The theme was unicorns, and I thought with the joke of being hungry enough to eat the horn, it might be a nice lead-in. If I could have found an otter course, I would have for sure.

"This place is great." Easton hopped out of the car and looked all around. "I haven't played in a long time but I like it so much more than regular golf. I wonder what the holes will be like."

The sign on top of the arcade was a giant neon unicorn that appeared to be galloping and tossing its head. It was very cool. We made our way to the ticket window where we were issued sparkly clubs, blue and purple, and matching balls.

"Which one do you want?" he asked, but I could see where his gaze focused.

"I like blue," I told him. "Do you mind purple?"

His lips tipped up in a grin. "It's my favorite color. And lucky."

"I'd better watch out, then." I'd asked him if his otter was his lucky charm but he was so much more than that. Easton

was a little, and Charlie was his favorite stuffie who even now rode in his zipped-up jacket. “But I’m warning you, I am not just going to lie down and let you beat me.”

He gave a little bounce, his smile lighting up his eyes. “We could have a bet?”

My interest was piqued. “What did you have in mind?”

Easton leaned in close and whispered, “Winner’s choice.”

Our one-night stand had blossomed into something more, and while I wasn’t sure what it would lead to, I was determined to take it one step, one day, one hour at a time and enjoy the ride. Or at least that was what I tried to convince myself of. But under no circumstances was I missing out on what he was willing to offer me.

As we approached a unicorn-themed windmill, I stood back while Easton took the first swing. He was not “little” at the moment, but even big, he effused a joy that few adults managed. A pleasure in the small things of life, like when he managed to get his ball up the ramp, past the windmill blades, and through the center hole. The one that had the chance of a hole-in-one. He darted around the structure to see, and his cheer told the whole story. It took me three shots on this one, but that was fine. Better than fine.

I was intrigued to see what his selection of “winner’s choice” would be. I was competitive enough to give it my best try, but by the fourth hole, he was well ahead of me, and I had to double down to try to catch up.

“Told you purple was lucky.” He studied the fantasy cottage, the sparkliest, most intricately painted and decorated

hole so far. “This one looks hard though.” I sat on the bench by the tee, enjoying his intense focus, lips moving as he moved back and forth. Also, his hips shifting from side to side in what I assumed was mental practice strokes. It was only a game, but there was nothing silly about how he took it on. I’d always been a daddy but never acted on it beyond my natural caregiver instincts. And those had caused me problems in past relationships because my exes either resented my “overbearing” behavior or took advantage of my willingness to take care of them.

I’d just about given up on dating because I got little satisfaction from it, and I didn’t want to be someone other than who I was just to please them. Or to be used. Not a fan of that. But even this early in our time together, the difference between the past and present were glaring. I’d been dating the wrong people.

And while I probably would have done better with another little than my past dates, Easton was special. He came back toward me now, eyes narrowed in concentration and a determined stride to his step. “Okay, I think I know how to do this one.”

I handed him his club and took advantage of the connection to pull him in for a quick kiss. “What’s that?”

“Oh no.” He stepped back, waving his hands, sparkly club catching the overhead light. “You are trying to trick me into revealing my secret. We have a bet going, and you’re just going to have to watch and learn.” He tipped his chin up and set his ball on the tee. “If you can.”

After a glance around, I was on my feet and behind him, arms wrapped around his waist before he could swing. “Maybe I can learn by feel?” It was late enough that there were no kids on the course, and the few adults were several holes away. We were hidden from direct view by the fantasy cottage. Not that I’d take it too far. Still public, but the flirting was so much fun.

He leaned back into me with a sigh. “You’re distracting. But in a good way.”

“Mmm.” I nuzzled his neck. “Just hoping to get a lesson.”

“But shouldn’t I be behind you if I’m the teacher?”

“Depends on what you’re teaching me.” Voices cut through the moment before we could do or say anything more. I pressed a kiss to his neck and stepped away. “Golf. I guess.”

He chuckled. “Then watch and learn.”

We continued through the course and, despite my best efforts, I fell further and further behind. Easton was serious and gleeful in turns, and I enjoyed both. I loved that we would be able to do things like this in future.

The last hole was the traditional castle, of course, but they must have had to buy all the glitter from three states for the outer coating, and the imprisoned character in the top window was a golden unicorn prince being rescued by a silver unicorn bracing a ladder against the tower wall. Whoever designed this place had a real thing for the horned horses, but my date was 100 percent enchanted by the experience, and I also found it pretty adorable.

“This is the best one!” He made a circle around the castle and came back to say, “And the hardest. The ball goes into the tower then rides a kind of elevator to the top before coming down one of five—five!—ramps to the green.”

“How do you know all that?” He was good at this, but unless he’d played here before...

“Come and see.” He took my arm and dragged me around the side of the castle. “There’s a window.” It was actually a glass-paned slit from top to bottom where you could not only view the workings but a view of a small screen running a demo of how it worked. “I am not sure how to make it work best.”

“Might be luck of the draw?” I suggested. “Rather than skill?”

He snorted. “You’d like that.” Then his grin returned. “I cannot remember ever having so much fun. What are we going to do on our next date?”

“Bowling?” I put out there. Clearly dinner dates were not going to be our thing. Not that we’d never do that, of course, a person had to eat. But this man liked being active, and I would have to be creative to come up with something better than unicorn mini golf.

“Ohh, yes. Cosmic bowling.”

While I wondered what that was, Easton stepped up to the tee and took his shot. Then he raced to the side of the castle to watch what happened inside. “It’s going up! Up...up...and oh shoot, I don’t think it’s going to... Yes! It is going down the

middle ramp.” His voice grew muffled when he went around back, but there was nothing muffled about his crow of victory.

Winner’s choice turned out to be something we both enjoyed. Back at his place, where we were finally alone, he had me take both of our cocks in my hand and rub them together until, in a magic only the gods could explain, we simultaneously spurted cum over my fingers, leaving us lying back on the sofa. I stroked his hair and kissed him gently until his breathing evened out.

If this was losing, I could only imagine what it would be like to win. Hell, who was I kidding. Every minute I spent with this man was a win. And we hadn’t even explored what being a daddy and boy together might mean.

Chapter Seven

Easton

Work had been rough. After six back-to-back meetings, I was good and done. I shut down my computer and walked away from it. That was something that took me a long time to figure out. Just because I worked from home didn't mean that any time I was home, I was working.

At least I shouldn't be. That was the fast train to burnout.

I headed into the bathroom and started a bath, with bubbles. I absolutely loved tubbie time, and I might not have a daddy, but nothing about taking a bath with bubbles and rubber duckies mandated one.

Under my sink, I kept my bucket of ducks. I had picked them up at random places over the years. So far, I hadn't shared them with anyone. They were my special ducks for times like this—when I wanted to be sort of little. Sort of because I never managed to be truly in little space, but it was relaxing and was better than nothing.

I pulled out my pirate duck, my ghost duck, my teacher duck, and my fairy duck and popped them into the water and put the rest of them back under the sink for another day. Rubber duckies were the best bath toys. You could use them as boats, race them, or even act out little stories with them. They were by far the most versatile, and no one batted an eye when you looked at them while shopping. I adored them.

While the tub finished filling, I laid out my clothing for the evening. I opted for my thick trainer underwear, my super-

soft thigh-high socks, and a pajama set with shorts. It featured my favorite cartoon cat and was softer than soft. Perfect for tonight.

I took my tubbie, staying in a lot longer than I had planned, my fingers all pruney. I'd been having so much fun playing school with my duckies. The teacher took the class on a field trip, and they were kidnapped by pirates—as could happen. It was silly and over the top and the perfect escape. I was already feeling more relaxed by the time I was dried off and slipping into my pajamas.

My tummy rumbled.

“Dinnertime.” I hadn't really thought that far ahead, my mind too focused on the day when I got home and opted for the bath. Now that the worst of the stress was washed down the drain, I was ready to eat. Normally, when I was being little at home, I prepared the food, set up the movies, and laid out the clothes long before I allowed myself to slip even a tiny smidgeon into little space. Basically, I was my own daddy, which was weird if I thought about it too much.

I padded into the kitchen and pulled out a cookie sheet. It was going to be a *throw it in the oven and call it good* kind of night. Chickie nuggies and smiley fries went in, and I set out my divided dish and filled my sippy cup. I had enough time to set up my show and grab my comfy blankie and Charlie.

Only when I went into my room to get my blankie, my phone chimed. I wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone, needing to unwind instead. I'd grabbed my phone to silence it when I saw who it was. Jared.

I wasn't sure if you were an I-can-call person or a just-text-me person. Up for a call?

I was closest to neither, my phone usually only going off when it was work related. But, with Jared? I wanted to talk.

I held my phone out at arm's length and took a selfie that would show him I was attempting to be little without being too in your face about it in case anyone saw it over his shoulder and sent it.

You can, but this is what I'm wearing. It's okay if you'd rather not.

I quickly added a second message.

I'd like you to talk to you though. No pressure.

The phone rang in reply.

“Hey. I wasn't sure if you would be comfortable with me like this.” I snatched my blankie up. “I was just getting ready.” I didn't want him to think he had interrupted my headspace. “I'm glad I forgot to turn my notifications off.”

“I am, too. I was just calling to see how you were and maybe talk about another date, but I'll let you go and get back to your evening.” He was so sweet and considerate, I nearly melted into a pile of goo right then and there.

“No need. I never get too intense on nights like this. Work was just...much.”

The timer went off.

“Mind if I put you on speaker so I can grab my dinner from the oven?”

He, of course, said he didn't mind, and I accidentally tapped the video chat button instead of speaker.

"Sorry," I mumbled as I attempted to fix my mistake.

"Did you want to be on camera?" he asked, and it had me realizing I really did. It hadn't been my intention, but now that it was on the table, I longed for it.

"Yes?"

Before I could second-guess myself, he accepted the call.

"Here is a tour from my bedroom to the kitchen. You are super lucky to be on tonight," I teased and stepped a bit livelier, the chicken smelling very done.

I set the phone down on the counter and reached for my potholders, narrating what I was doing so that he didn't think I was blocking him from seeing me on purpose.

"What did you make for dinner?" He sounded genuinely interested.

"I made chickie nuggies and smiley fries." I loved how I wasn't embarrassed by any of this. Not by my clothes or by my food. Heck, not even by not having someone "here." This was just me.

"No veggies?"

"No veggies. But I wasn't planning on today, not really. If I had, there would've been some. I have a bunch of those really cute bento box cutters to make fun-shaped veggies and cheese and the like. My favorite is cucumbers."

"Dipped in ranch?" He chuckled as if pulling from a memory. I didn't ask what it was. We weren't really at that

point, which was weird, given he'd seen me naked already.

"I prefer Caesar for cucumbers. Ranch for smiley fries."

I dished up my food, chatting with him about little foods I liked and or didn't like.

"Do you usually eat at the table?" Jared asked as I placed my dish down. "On nights like these, I mean."

"Usually I eat on the couch with Charlie and my blankie and watch cartoons."

"Then why don't you do that, and I can watch the cartoons with you, too."

I glanced down at my phone and saw him walking. A few seconds later, he was sitting on his couch. Unlike me, he was wearing jeans and a tee, nothing close to resembling pajamas. Damn, he looked good. A very large part of me wished I was there, sitting beside him.

"I'd like that."

It took me two trips and some trial and error on phone placement, but we finally had everything set up so we could watch the cartoon together. It was all kinds of sweet that he would even want to do it. And while in the back of my head, I kept worrying that I should be having a more adult conversation with him, he seemed to truly be enjoying himself. And me? I was in my glory.

Jared wasn't my daddy. I wasn't about to delude myself into thinking he was. But still, this was nice. Him being here with me, talking about the silly cat on the screen with enthusiasm and making me feel both safe and appreciated.

I didn't get much deeper into little space, but I didn't need to. This? This was nice. I could see myself maybe wanting to do it again. No. That wasn't accurate. I wanted to do it again, full stop. And not just on the phone but in person, too.

"I'm glad you called." My phone was about to die, and where it was sitting, there was no way for me to charge it. "It was nice having you here with me, even though 'here' was only in the virtual sense." I clicked my television off.

"It was an honor." From most people, that would've sounded really cheesy or even condescending, but the way Jared said it, there was nothing but sincerity there. "If your phone wasn't dying, I'd offer you a bedtime story."

"Rain check?" I still needed to take care of my teeth and such before bed, so even if I had full charge, it probably wasn't the best day for it. Still, the idea of him telling me a story as I fell to sleep? I was there for it.

"Most definitely. Night, Easton. Night, Charlie."

He even remembered Charlie.

"Night, Jared."

Chapter Eight

Jared

After our video chat, I was anxious to try a bit of little play. Easton had experience at the club he belonged to, and I hoped my awkwardness wasn't going to make it less good for him. If finding the right person, one who met my needs as well as he did so far was working so well for me, I didn't want him to not share the experience. Every step we took toward the daddy/little relationship had woken things inside me that my heart insisted were right. My mind flowed right along, and my body reacted in strong ways.

But I needed to take a bigger leap and not allow my doubts to hold me back. Seeing him as a little, chatting with the little side of him had been extraordinary. I saw hints of that person in his big side, but when he let his little out fully, wow.

I called him the next day on my lunch break.

“Hi, handsome,” he answered. “What’s up?”

“Are you alone?”

“Why, do you have something NSFW to chat about?” He laughed. “Seriously, I’m always alone here in my remote office otherwise known as my living room.”

“I thought you might be in a meeting of some kind.” He did have those often, and this was not something we could talk about while he had something else on-screen he needed to pay attention to. A couple of times I’d called when that was the case, he’d muted his side for a minute or two to chat.

“Nope. Just eating a tuna sandwich and watching a video on my break. What are you up to?”

“I was thinking about last night.”

“Oh?” His voice held a hint of wariness I wanted to get rid of ASAP. “And?”

“And it was great. You were great.”

“Just being me. So, what about last night did you want to talk about?”

I chewed on my lower lip. While I was out of the office, I was sitting on a park bench, and the privacy element was not ideal. “I think it’s time to try a little of that in person.”

“Yeah?” The wariness was gone. “I’m all in. When is good for you?”

I sucked in a breath. “Tonight?”

“All right. Why don’t you come over here, then, since I have some things that I like to use when I’m little.”

“I know I’m supposed to be the daddy,” I said, relieved that no passersby were currently within earshot, “but I’m going to need some guidance because theory is not the same as practice.”

“Oh, Daddy,” he said, making my breath stall, “you’ll be fine. How’s six o’clock?”

“Okay. We can have dinner.” I was starting to wonder already how that would work. What he’d like to eat and if I needed to go to the store or...

“I have some steaks we can grill on the balcony before we start.” He sounded so happy, I really didn’t want to screw this

up. “Thank you for this. I can’t wait to see you.”

“Me, either. Can I bring anything?”

“Dessert would be good. Cookies.”

“You got it. I’ll stop and get some on my way. Now I’d better get back to the office. Have a good rest of the day.”

“You, too, Daddy.”

The afternoon crawled along while I overthought our plans for the evening. Something I’d wanted to do for the longest time loomed at the end of the day and my self-doubts crept up more often than I liked. Easton had that club where he could go to be little with like-minded people. It didn’t have to be a relationship, and maybe I should have done that long ago. Joined a club where I could have practiced my daddy skills without it meaning so much to me.

Not that I wouldn’t have wanted the littles to have fun, but tying in the feelings growing inside me for Easton added some real weight to the whole thing. I had only one job before I got there, and that was to buy cookies, and when my total lack of focus made my productivity nil, I checked out of the office early and headed off to find the very best cookies in the city.

I went to three bakeries before I found the perfect ones. Dinner was clearly a big activity, and I wasn’t sure if the cookies would be part of that or come later, but in either case, I wanted them to celebrate our first time as daddy and boy together. Then, box safely on the passenger seat next to me, I headed for my place to shower and change before steering the car toward Easton’s building.

Doubts had not dissipated by the time I stood on his doorstep wearing jeans, a button-down shirt, and a cardigan I'd had in the back of my closet for a long time. It just felt like something a daddy would wear, and I needed all the confidence I could get. He knew I didn't have any experience, but I didn't want him to feel as if I also didn't have a clue.

Easton answered the door all smiles and took the box from me in exchange for a kiss. "Bakery cookies? I just figured you'd buy animal crackers or something."

Animal crackers. The perfect little treat. Darned overthinking anyway. I followed Easton to the small balcony where the steaks were grilling along with some vegetables in a basket. "I hope you like zucchini? I always enjoy it on the grill with tomatoes and peppers."

"Smells amazing." I inhaled the savory smoke. "I wasn't even hungry until I got here, but now I could eat a..."

"Unicorn," we finished together.

Everything was delicious, and just being with Easton eased my nerves somewhat, but I was still quieter than usual, just listening to him tell me about his day and adding appropriate comments. When we had devoured all the food and were sitting with cups of tea, he rested his hand atop mine. "Okay, Jared. Talk to me. What has you so worried?"

I set my cup down and turned my hand over to link our fingers. "I want to do this right."

"Do what right?" He squeezed my fingers. "Explain."

"What if my version of daddy isn't what your little needs? What if I'm so awkward you don't like me anymore?"

“That’s just getting it all out there.” He released my hand and came around the table. “Push out your chair.”

I did and he plopped down on my lap. “Can I have a cookie?” His entire demeanor had changed, and it reached deep inside me.

“Of course, after you have your tubbie and get in your jammies.” I was pretty sure he’d have pajamas for his little side. “Then you can have a cookie.”

“And I don’t brush my teeth till after ’cuz all the sugar is bad for teeth.”

“That’s right.” I kissed his hair and stroked it back. “You were such a good boy, eating all your vegetables, I think you might have two cookies.”

His jaw dropped and eyes opened wide. “I have ducks.”

It took me a minute to put that together, but then I set him on his feet and stood up beside him. “Let’s go meet your ducks.”

He had a box of them on the counter beside the tub, and while I turned on the water and added bubble bath, he pulled out each duck and told me its name and a little about it. “And the last one is Bobbzey, and he is a professor.” Each of the ducks was a little different, but this one wore glasses and a tie.

“Are they ready for a swim?”

He bobbed his head and put his arms straight up. “And me, too.”

I took my cue from him and helped him undress then watched while he placed each duck in the tub before he let me

assist him in. He was same person I'd had dinner with, but in a way he was not. Chattering away, he moved the ducks around, giving them adventures no regular duck had ever experienced. His creativity knew no bounds, and soon the entire flock was lined up for a journey across the ocean.

It was such a fun time, I hated for it to end, but we had other things to do, too. I tested the water. "Oh, that's getting cold. I think it's time for little boys to get out and get dried off before they get chilled."

"I'm not washed though."

"Excellent point and I'm so glad you reminded me." I added a bit of warm water and then soaped up a washcloth and gave him a good scrub. I missed not an inch, but did not pay more attention to any parts than any other.

I considered shampooing his hair but decided that could be another time. It definitely wasn't dirty and had probably been washed in the shower that morning. I was also just a bit nervous about technique. One thing at a time. When he was lathered and rinsed, he held his arms up, and I helped him climb out of the water and onto the bath mat. Wrapped in a big towel, he led the way to his bedroom where he'd laid out the jammies and some thick white training-style underwear.

"You have otters on your pajamas," I said as I patted him dry. "They are very cute."

"Charlie is cuter," he said, taking the stuffie from the pillow where it had been lying.

"Charlie is the cutest." I ruffled his hair. "Next to his friend Easton."

He giggled.

“Okay, now put your hands on my shoulders and lift one leg into your underwear.”

He obeyed. “I used to wear diapers, but I’m a big boy now.”

“Yes you are. And as soon as you’re ready, we can go have those cookies.” I managed to get him dressed without too many goofs and he padded behind me back to the kitchen. “And milk.”

“I can have juice, Daddy,” he said, smiling wide and sitting in the chair I pulled out.

“The cookies have a lot of sugar already, so I think milk is a better choice.”

He thrust out his lower lip, and I held back my grin at the adorableness of him there in his footie pj’s, rebellion written across his face.

“Well, maybe, but you can’t dunk cookies in juice.”

“I can’t?” His brows drew together.

“I don’t think so. Dunking is for cookies and milk.”

“Like on my show. With the dogs. They dunk their cookies.”

I got the milk out of the fridge and filled a small glass then brought it over to the table, along with the box of cookies. Finding a plate in a cupboard, I set it next to his drink and opened the box. “Want to pick out two?”

“Yes.” Then silence as he peered into the box. “They are all baby animals. Look, there’s even an otter.” He took out one

of each of the animals, “so I can decide,” and studied them for a while before putting them all back but the otter and a pink-and-white bunny. Then he had the cookies play together before dunking the bunny and taking a big bite. Mischief sparkled in his eyes. “He doesn’t have a head, Daddy.”

“No, he doesn’t. I guess you’d better eat him all up, then so we can brush teeth and get you to bed.”

Chapter Nine

Easton

Jared was away for work. Unlike me, he traveled quite a bit. And also, unlike me, he didn't seem to hate it. I didn't love that he was gone, but also, my opinion on it didn't really matter. This was his job, and I needed to remind myself that this was how I met him in the first place. If it hadn't been for the convention, I'd never had met the sexy daddy.

My work week had been intense. A huge project I was spearheading was hitting some major due dates, and tons of little things kept getting thrown in the way. They were all easily smoothed out, but that didn't mean they weren't beginning to wear on me. When I got the email about a special guest for story hour at Chained, the decision was made. I was going to hang out with some littles and try not to think about work or miss Jared—too much anyway.

It was difficult not to leave too early. I had my bag packed at lunchtime, the only item missing, Charlie because the day was filled with more meetings than should be legal, and I had him on my desk just outside of the camera's reach to ground me a bit.

“We can circle around back to this next Friday at noon?” I needed to get off the phone and leave already. We'd been going in circles for fifteen minutes and until we had the data we needed, the line was never going to straighten any and the circles would continue.

The rest of the team agreed, and I never had my computer shut down more quickly in my life.

“Let’s go, Charlie.” I put him in my bag, grabbed my keys, and off I went to Chained.

I wasn’t sure if I was going to see any friends there. It didn’t matter. They were having someone come and read to the littles, and I was there for it. Had I seen the email with enough time, I’d have invited people. Or maybe I wouldn’t have. I had in my head that the next time I went to Chained, it would be with my daddy. And no, we hadn’t officially decided that was who he would be to me, but we’d been testing out the name and playing a tad, and it felt right.

Inviting others to come and play with me...it didn’t sit right, even if those friends would be little. Jared would probably tell me I was being silly and to go ahead and call my friends. He wasn’t a dick like that, trying to keep entire parts of me all to himself. No, I was doing this for me, not for him.

When I checked in, they offered me an upgrade on the changing room I booked, and for half a second, I considered it. They were stunning and outside my normal playtime budget. But then I thought of getting a fancy little room complete with changing table but not having a daddy to share it with and opted to keep the normal, *sort of like you were at the gym only with kinky attire* dressing room.

I wasn’t the only little in there getting dressed, but I didn’t recognize anyone. And from the looks on quite a few of the faces, this was one of, if not their first time here. I remembered being in their shoes—or footie jams as the case might be. It was exhilarating and terrifying at the same time.

“Are you here for story hour, too?” I hugged Charlie to me. I almost didn’t bring him, not wanting to risk him getting glue or paint on him if there was a craft after the story. Today was a day I needed him, though, and I was just going to have to risk it.

A little wearing a Sanrio T-shirt over their onesie nodded their head, while a few others said they were. We chatted briefly and off we went to the little room. It was a great time, and I found myself wanting to call Jared the second I reached the car at the end of the night.

Instead, I sent him a quick message.

I’m about to drive back from story hour and wanted to say good night before you went to bed.

I set my phone down and turned on the ignition. I was exhausted and ready to be home and in my bed. Jared messaged me back before I put the car in gear, asking me to call him when I got home and saying that he wanted to hear all about it.

Waiting that long wasn’t my preference. I’d have loved to call him right there and talk about it all the way home, but I wanted to show him the story I learned, and that required me to be standing up and very much not operating a vehicle.

I wasn’t even all the way out of the car when I called him, his voice music to my ears when he picked up.

“I hope you had a good time.”

“I did. I can’t wait to show you my craft and what I learned.” After fumbling with my keys, I finally got my door

open and my body inside. “I’m going to set my computer up so I can get a better setup. I want to show you something.”

“I can’t wait.”

A couple of minutes later, we were on a zoom. Gods, he looked good but also tired.

“How was your day?” I sat down, not wanting him to feel the need to rush.

“It was fine. The time zone change is a bit to get used to, but other than that, I consider this a successful event. Nowhere near as wonderful as the last one I was at.” He winked. “But I’m getting some good connections, and that is great.”

“That’s wonderful. Did you want me to let you go so you can catch up on your sleep?” Nothing I had to tell him couldn’t wait.

“You were going to show me something?”

“Oh, yeah.” It felt kind of silly now, especially after we just finished talking about his job. “They had a special guest, an author, who read us their book. It was super fun. And their daddy was there with them, which I don’t know, made it somehow even better.”

“That sounds great. I’d love to hear all about his book. Did any of your friends come after all?” He was sincerely interested, and it brought back every ounce of enthusiasm I felt when I first wanted to share all about my night out.

“No. It was just me. I did meet a few new people—new to the scene, that was. They are potential new friends, so that was nice.” I stood up and turned the computer so that I could stand up and show Daddy the story. “Can you see me fully?”

“I can. What are you going to show me?”

“He wrote a book about a bunny who tricks all the forest creatures into not eating him and instead giving him presents. The story was good, but the way he wrote it so it could be acted out—genius.”

I bent at my knees and began to tell the story using the cadence and physical movements he taught us. The story itself was very repetitive, and it made it easy to both learn and perform. I hopped and shook my tail and even picked some imaginary strawberries, the entire time reciting the tale. I had a blast showing off.

He clapped when I finished my presentation, and I beamed.

“It sounds like you had a great time.”

“I did. But it would’ve been better with you there.”

“I was about to say the same thing, about me wishing I was there.”

“Next time?” It was a huge step to go from some quasi-little play at one of our places, to being at Chained. I wouldn’t push. Ever.

“I would love that.” He yawned.

“Why don’t I let you go? You have another busy day in the morning. You don’t need me to be keeping you up.”

“Or...we could both climb into our own beds and talk until one of us can no longer stay awake,” he offered.

I didn’t even care if he spent the time talking about the weather. I simply wanted to be with him in the only way I

could at this distance. I told him I'd call him back from my phone after I got ready for bed and five minutes later, I did exactly that.

And just as he planned, we talked until we fell asleep. I wasn't sure who snoozed off first. But when I woke up in the middle of the night to our phones no longer connected and me all alone, I found myself hugging Charlie to me extra tightly.

"It's okay, Charlie. Jared will be home soon." Two days. That wasn't too bad. Or at least I tried to convince myself of just that.

Chapter Ten

Jared

Turned out, Easton did like dinner dates, especially those followed by a movie. But he did prefer “playing” dates like another trip to the mini golf, cosmic bowling—how had I never heard of this?—and so many other things that I never considered doing. At least not since I grew up. Being with Easton was reminding me of how much fun a person could have. And that was just when he was big.

Our time together as Daddy and boy was not quite so smooth and easy. Oh, it was working, and it was still a revelation every time. Being Daddy to this boy was an element of my life I’d never been free to experience before. Or let myself be free enough, perhaps. If I was going to meet all of Easton’s needs, I had to find out more about what being a daddy meant. Easton was encouraging and seemed to be happy with me, but I was approaching being a daddy from the boy side. And he was counting on me to know more about the daddy side.

I’d never interacted with other daddies. Never gotten to watch them IRL interact with their boys. One evening, when we were curled up on the couch at my place with a movie on, and I got locked in those thoughts, things came to a head.

“Earth to Jared?” Easton gave me a friendly elbow in the ribs. “Anyone home in there?”

“Hmm? Sorry. Did you want something? Should I make popcorn?”

He gave me that impish grin. “No popcorn. But I would like to know what has you so lost in thought.”

“I was just watching the movie.”

“It ended five minutes ago.”

Oops. “Maybe I was thinking.”

He rested his chin on my chest, looking up at me. “Want to share?”

“I do.” I’d been keeping this to myself long enough, not wanting him to think I wasn’t confident enough in my daddy side. But in truth, I wasn’t. “I need to find a place to talk with some other daddies.”

He arched a brow. “Like at the club? I can get you a guest pass.”

“Eventually, maybe. But I was hoping for something else. From what you’ve explained, the club has a lot going on, and it might be noisy.”

“Oh, it is that, sometimes. But I might have an idea. Have you ever heard of a munch?”

Which was why, a couple of evenings later, I found myself here at a small coffee shop where a big section of tables had been taken up by people attending a munch. A gathering of people in the lifestyle and those who were lifestyle curious.

Easton headed right for a table with four chairs and greeted two men sitting there. “Jared, I’d like you to meet Soren and Bridger. They are daddies who spend time at

Chained with their littles. Jared is my daddy, but he doesn't know any other daddies." He nodded toward an empty chair. "He was hoping to get to know some and I told him the munch was a good spot to do that."

"Welcome." Soren stood and reached out to shake my hand. "Sit and talk. We've known your little for a while. He's good friends with my Archer."

"And Hudson, too," Easton put in. "He is Bridger's little. Are they here tonight?"

"Over at that table talking to a couple of littles who aren't sure they're little." Bridger set the yarn he was crocheting on the table and pointed. "Did you want to go and help?"

Easton bent and kissed me on the cheek and darted off to where the others sat.

"He's so welcoming to new people," Bridger said, picking up his yarn and hook again. "Makes them feel right at home."

I watched Easton slide into a chair and ease right into the conversation. Soon, laughter lifted from the group. "Looks like all of them are having a good time. Which two are yours?"

Soren pointed them out. It was a funny conversation, like parents in the park pointing out their own kids, but it felt right. Also, once he'd identified which two were theirs, I could see the difference between them, and also Easton, and the others. The ones who were here with their daddies held themselves taller and seemed more confident, but also more relaxed.

I returned my attention to the daddies at my table. "What are you making?" I asked Bridger. "Some kind of animal?"

“I design crochet patterns,” he replied. “This is a duckie I’m working out.”

“He has a lot of duckies,” Soren put in. “They are your bestsellers, aren’t they?”

“Pretty much, yes. And Hudson likes them.” He lifted the project to show me. “It’s got a ways to go. This one is a doctor duckie.”

“Easton has a whole collection for the tub. He even has a professor.”

“A professor.” He tilted his head to the side, studying his work. “Cute. Every time I finish one, I get another idea, or Hudson does. It never gets old.”

“We hadn’t seen Easton much at the club lately. I guess he’s had other things to do. How did you two meet?” Soren asked.

“At a convention.” I launched into the story of our cute meet, one that I’d been dying to share but hadn’t had anyone to tell about it.

“And he left you a note?” Bridger chuckled. “Some of these littles are gutsy, although it worries me that he was with a relative stranger.” He shook his head. “Sounds like it worked out though.”

“Luckily. We didn’t have any way to contact one another after he left. I wasn’t going to track him down at his company.”

“How did you find one another?”

“He left his stuffed otter, Charlie, at the Laundromat where my brother works. And when I saw it, I hoped...it might not have been his at all.”

“But it was.” Soren leaned back in his chair. “Did you know he lived here?”

“No, his company is based in New York City, and my head office is in Chicago, and we both assumed that the other was in those places.” I told them about the ribbon and the note and how we’d reconnected.

“That’s one romantic story. He found his daddy in Sin City.” Bridger continued his crocheting but his attention was on me. “How is it you don’t know any other daddies? I mean, it’s not like we run in packs, but usually like seeks like.”

“This is my first experience as a daddy. I always kind of knew, but I hadn’t ever acted on it. And all I knew about Easton was how attracted to him I was. We chatted from booth to booth but until that night, I thought he had no interest in me beyond a friendly neighbor for a week.”

“How did he do there?” Soren asked. “Easton works at home usually, Archer tells me, and he has always struck me as a bit shy. Isn’t that event huge?”

“Immense. One of the biggest in the world.” I smiled, remembering my first sight of him. “And he was not very comfortable at all. So I wanted to help. And we ended up having a pretty good time all week. We brought each other coffee or food, watched our booths when someone needed a pit stop. People watched a lot.” I sighed. “It was a really good week.”

“And how did Easton do as that time went on? Doesn’t it get really crowded on the weekend?” Soren went on. “I’d have thought it would be harder for him.”

“I made sure to stay close to his side of the booth in case he needed anything. And the few times he had jerky people stop by, I slipped in and helped out. Made sure he always had something to drink or a snack. It’s really easy to skip meals and end up hangry or spacy when you are at these things.”

“And at the end of the day?”

“I walked him to his car. It’s not really safe there, even outside a big hall like that.” I’d forgotten I did that. It just seemed natural.

“And this one night you had together? Did you ask him up to your room?” Bridger spoke again.

“No, I was going to leave him in the lobby while I went up with some things to leave there and he asked to come.”

They weren’t looking at me anymore but at each other.

“So you see, I don’t have a lot of experience as a daddy, and I’m concerned I might be failing to meet his needs. It’s really important to me that I do a good job.”

“Because you care about him.” Soren’s gaze was back on me.

“Of course,” I insisted. “He’s kind and sweet and well, everything.”

Over at the other table, there was more giggling, but I caught some looks my way. Was he talking about me as I was him? My cheeks warmed.

“They are,” Bridger said, “talking about us.”

“You knew what I was thinking.”

“Anyone would be. And your little is smiling awfully big. Look like a little whose needs are being met to you, Soren?”

“He’s good.” Archer’s daddy’s eyes sparkled. “Jared, you want to learn how to be a good daddy?”

“Exactly.”

“Let me tell you what a good daddy does. He sees a little who is over his head in a situation his company should never have put him in. He makes friends with him and watches to be sure everything is okay.”

Bridger picked up the narrative. “He brings him food and drinks and makes sure he’s not overwhelmed. He ensures his safety by walking him to his car and doesn’t allow him to be bullied.”

Soren again, “And, when he wants something more, as I’m sure you did, he waits to be sure he’s not suggesting something that the little might feel compelled to do out of gratitude.”

“We’ve known Easton for a while, have seen him playing at the club,” Bridger added. “And we’ve never seen him look the way he does tonight. He’s happy and comfortable in his own skin. Jared, you don’t need to learn to be a daddy. You could teach classes.”

“But what about what littles want to eat or to do? How do I treat him?”

“He will let you know that.” Bridger went back to his crocheting again. “You just have to be a good listener.”

“And don’t hold back if you have concerns. Daddies are just humans like everyone else and if you don’t share what you are feeling, Easton will feel it and wonder why. It also makes it hard to resolve things if you both aren’t in on it.”

The conversation drifted to other topics as we were joined by someone new, but my mind was blown by what I’d learned. It was a lot, despite their saying I already had this. But they’d given me a huge key. Listening. And communicating. So important, often forgotten.

I might get Bridger to teach me how to crochet it on a scarf.

Chapter Eleven

Easton

Tonight, I was leaving work and heading straight to Daddy's for a weekend of fun. And it wasn't just a little weekend, either. Although, there would be some of that. We had reservations for dinner, an entire movie marathon planned out, and tickets for a riverboat ride.

Originally, we didn't have any real plans other than, *let's spend the weekend together*. That morphed quickly into a fun-filled itinerary with the option to cancel everything to just veg out together and enjoy each other's company. I loved how neither of us felt pressure to be more or less than who we were. At least, it felt two-sided.

At least, it did until I showed up, backpack in tow. Something was off with Jared.

"Thanks for inviting me over." I hugged him close. He hugged me back but with a bit less enthusiasm. And, of course, being me, I began to overthink about it instantly.

"I'm glad you're here." He kissed the top of my head and my worries fell away. Of course, I was reading more into it than there was. I was nervous. As much as we had left communication open, there was a lot going on all at once this weekend.

He helped me put my things away. We had dinner reservations at a local family owned Italian place that had been featured on a food channel special. According to the show,

they had the best soup in the city, along with an array of fabulous pasta dishes.

“I already know what I’m getting.” I reached for Jared’s hand. “Is this okay...I mean, in public?”

We hadn’t really discussed things like that yet. It was one thing to be out but another to show signs of affection in public spaces, even little gestures such as holding hands. I didn’t want to push, but also, I was so used to Daddy taking charge that this was new territory for me. I didn’t mind. Everyday life wasn’t when I wanted to have someone take care of me and that’s what these types of conversations were at their root. It was just different, and I was getting my footing.

“It’s more than okay.” He gave my hand a squeeze.

When we got to the restaurant, there was a line down the sidewalk for people wanting to get onto the waitlist.

“I’m glad you made reservations.” I leaned into his side a bit. “I wouldn’t have thought of that.” Not for a family owned place, even if they had been on television.

“Me, too.”

Our line was shorter, and we lucked out with a table in the back corner, keeping traffic and noise to a minimum. We both ordered their famous soup-and-pasta sampler meal and nibbled on bread as we talk about our day.

“This looks delicious.” I looked down at the soup sampler. I’d never had one and been sure unsure what to expect. My guess was that they created a special serving dish just for this concept, and every part of me wanted one for home.

“It really does.”

“I think this would be great for cereal. Then I wouldn’t have to decide.”

That was always the hardest part for me. I’d get four or five different ones, unsure what I would want when I settled down to enjoy them. Each and every time, at least half of the boxes were tossed in the garbage for being stale. This way, I could have a little of each every day and avoid that. Or so my current theory went.

“Do you eat cereal a lot?” He dipped his bread into the wedding soup.

“Only a little.” I emphasized little to give him the point without it being something that others might pick up on.

“My favorite is Cap’n Crunch.” He surprised me. In a good way, but a surprise nonetheless.

“I like that, too, but I really like any that have marshmallows. I can never decide which one.” I looked down at the soup. “It’s like now, even with all of these, I can’t pick one to start with.” They all smelled delicious.

“Go clockwise, starting at six o’clock.” He wasn’t suggesting; he was telling me. It was as if he sensed this was a time to be more daddy. Or maybe he was a bossy pants. Whichever, it broke me out of my indecision, and I started on my soup.

The rest of our dinner was just as amazing our conversation, lively, the food spectacular, and the flirting just enough to keep that butterfly feeling in my middle.

“This date is going down on my list of best ever.” I kissed his cheek and then lowered myself into the passenger seat of

his car. “Thank you.”

“It was my pleasure.” He shut my door and walked around to climb into his side. “Just out of curiosity, where is this list?”

“In my head.” I giggled. “Do you want to know the other ones on the list?”

“Do I?” He started the ignition.

“I think so. It was the first night we went out and miniature golf...and tonight...that is the entire list. But I fear that if we keep having dates like tonight, I’m going to need to start a spreadsheet or something, so I don’t forget.” I was teasing, of course. I doubted I could forget a single second with this sexy man.

“I’m glad. If you ever don’t like a date, maybe tell me that, too.” He pulled from the curb, his question raw and deserving so much more time and attention than a car ride could give.

“I promise.” We would talk about it more when we got home, but, for now, that would do.

The original plan was for me to get all cute and for us to watch a cartoon or something equally serious when we got back. Instead, I opted to rip the bandage off, one I wasn’t even sure was there.

“So, Jared...sometimes I think everything is great and we communicate openly and freely, and then sometimes I feel we let our nerves get in the way and hold things back a bit.” I lay down so my head was on his lap. I wanted this conversation to

be...home-like? Was that even it? Not formal and stress building, though, that was for sure.

His hand came down, and he ran his fingers through my hair. “That’s probably my fault. I like you... I more than like you, and I worry that I can’t be what you need because I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“I was worried that maybe you thought what I was into was more than you were willing to...I don’t know, handle. And it wasn’t because you acted like I was. Was just overanalyzing silly things. Do you want to know the most messed-up part?” I was babbling, but it was all I could manage. The feelings and words were rushing at me and I had to let them out or risk losing them.

“I do, but also, I want to make you not feel like this. Which should come first?” His fingers soothed my nerves as they ran through my hair, his other hand gently resting on my arm.

“I think I should tell you.”

“Then do, Easton. I’m listening.” He was looking down at me with such focus but also with affection. We hadn’t known each other long, not in the scheme of things, but my feelings for him were real and, in that moment, I saw that his were, too.

“I was all happy today, thinking about how we organized this weekend to be low stress and how we could change plans as they felt right. And then, suddenly, I second-guessed everything.”

“That’s not messed up. That’s called being human. Emotions are hard, and feeling like we might not be accepted?

That's human, too. But as long as you come to me when you feel like this and I do the same...I think we'll be okay."

I rolled onto my side and gave him the world's most oddly angled hug. "I think so, too." I squeezed him a bit tighter. "I think so, too, and, Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"I was wondering if maybe you could give me a bath and then we could watch that new robot movie you were telling me about?" It was an odd mix of big and little and I didn't care. It sounded absolutely delightful.

"I'd enjoy that. Should I take out the duckies?"

"Ohhh...yes. Maybe we could have the teacher and the professor getting married by the pirate." I giggled at my own silliness.

"We would need some wedding guests, too...fae and maybe the alien duckie?"

Oh yeah, we were going to be fine.

Chapter Twelve

Jared

We'd cleared the air. Bridger and Soren, who had been kind enough to give me contact information in case I wanted to talk more, had been right in their advice. Since our weekend together, Easton and I had moved to another level of our relationship, one where we'd promised to be open and share our feelings. This was not just good for a daddy/little connection but for any one between people who cared about one another.

And with our new level of understanding, I felt ready to try something new. But in the spirit of communicating, I made Easton dinner and presented my idea. He came over after work, tired after a long Friday, and walked into my arms. I'd always had the impression that remote workers had less stress than those who went into the office every day, but since knowing Easton, I'd learned different. He had every bit as much to deal with as anyone else, and judging by the fact he'd gotten stuck with the convention, probably got volunteered for things just by not being present when they came up in the office.

He liked working from home, but sometimes, like today, he just needed to sit down and be held while he unwound. And other times, he needed to be little. But for now, I led him into the living room and sat on the couch, pulling him down next to me.

Easton rested his head on my shoulder with a sigh. “I thought I’d never get out of that last meeting. There’s one guy, Clarence, who always wants to pick every decision apart until finally the supervisor has enough. But he lets him go on a long time.”

“Can I get you anything? A cold drink? A beer? Dinner will be done in about a half hour.”

“For now, just hold me. That’s the best thing. And it’s the weekend, so we can just relax.” He looked up at me. “Right? We don’t have any plans in particular?”

“No, but I did have a suggestion.” I kissed his forehead and smoothed his hair back. “But just relaxing is fine.” Easing him off me, I said, “I have to go check on dinner, but I’ll be right back.”

I was peeking in the oven when I heard him come up behind me. “Did you want a drink after all? Or something to tide you over until we eat?”

His arms looped around me, and I stood and turned to face him. His eyes still looked tired, but a smile teased at his lips. “You can’t just tell me you had an idea for our weekend then wander off to check the lasagna.”

“It’s manicotti.”

“Or that, either.” Nuzzling the base of my throat, he pressed a kiss there. “Come on, Daddy, talk. I’ll die of curiosity otherwise.”

“You’re tired. Resting is what you need.” I tried to sound stern, but this wasn’t one of those moments, no matter that he did call me Daddy.

“Please?” His wheedling tone just made me laugh. But he was adorable and irresistible.

“All right. But if you don’t want to, if you’d rather do it another day, promise you’ll say so?”

“Promise.” He held up two fingers in an oath.

I led him to the table and sat down, bringing him onto my lap. “I thought it would be a good time to try a full day being your daddy tomorrow. But if you’re not feeling it, we’ll just do it another day.”

Suddenly, his energy level spiked. “All day? Tomorrow?”

“If you want to.” I’d done some shopping and had surprises for him that I hoped would make it a special day. He’d brought some of his little things over here and had planned to spend the night anyway.

“Do you really want to, Daddy?” He leaned against my chest, putting one arm around my neck. “The whole day?”

I swallowed, still just a bit nervous about the idea but also a bit excited. “I do want to.”

“Then I want to, too.” He smiled at me. “I definitely want to. When does it start?”

“Tomorrow when we wake up.”

“Really the whole day, then.” He bounced to his feet. “We’d better eat dinner and get to bed early.”

“It’s only six o’clock, so we might not have to go to bed right away. Wouldn’t you like to watch a movie after we eat?”

“I guess so, but I want to get up early and eat cereal and watch cartoons.”

I loved how he was willing to tell me what he wanted and needed, but he was being just a little pushy, and a stern look had him flushing.

“I mean, I like to watch cartoons on Saturday mornings, and cereal is my favorite breakfast when I do. But if you don’t have cereal, anything will be fine.”

Again, adorable and a little funny. “You’ll have to wait and see. I have lots of surprises for you tomorrow morning.”

“Is dinner ready yet?”

It was, and we ate then watched a movie in bed because he wasn’t the only one excited about tomorrow. Although, I did feel just a little like I was taking a test. A whole day...I did have plans, and they were flexible, but would I be able to take care of my boy for that long and do a good job?

He wasn’t kidding about wanting to wake up early. It was barely light when I opened my eyes with the feeling I was being watched. Looming over me was the smiling face of my boy. “Morning, Daddy. You’re awake.”

“I am now. Ready for our big day?”

“So ready!” He bounced on his knees next to me. “Hungry, Daddy.”

“All right, Easton.” I pushed the covers aside and put my feet on the floor. “Let’s get you in fresh jammies and we can have a fun morning at home.”

“Cartoons?” He was still in jouncing motion.

“It’s Saturday, isn’t it?”

I opened the dresser drawer I'd filled with some of my purchases and pulled out a pair of footie pajamas. And then another. "Easton, come and decide which jammies you want to wear this morning."

He was behind me in an instant. "Baby animals!" Cuddling the chosen set to him, he plopped down on the side of the bed and ran his fingers over the fabric. "Soft!"

I followed him, training pants in hand. "Before you put on your underpants, let's make a quick stop in the bathroom, all right?" I took his hand and led him to the door. "Do you need help?"

"No, I do it myself." So I waited outside and then went in to supervise handwashing. I would wait to help him brush his teeth until after breakfast, which he was sure to be happy with. I dressed him in the underwear and then the footie jams, and together we headed for the living room where I turned on cartoons and promised he'd have breakfast right away.

When I returned, he was lying on the floor on his back, one leg crossed over the other bent knee. "Easton, would you like to eat your cereal while you watch your shows?"

He nodded, still focused on the screen, so after I set the tray down, I bent and took his hand, guiding him to his feet and leading him to sit on the floor behind the coffee table. "Here you are."

"Cereal." And not healthy cereal, either. I had some better foods planned for later, but something about cartoons and Saturday morning stirred my own memories and made me buy the box with the biggest cartoon lion on it and the brightest colors in the bowl of cereal he held. It seemed a fitting way to

start our first full day as daddy/little, although I did feel a little guilty about choosing it. I also had a big surprise headed his way, but it hadn't arrived in time for this breakfast. Still, I had a feeling he'd be very happy when it did come.

I let him watch an hour of cartoons before declaring it time for tooth brushing and dressing for the day. He protested until I hinted at more fun surprises afterward. I had more than a few, but not all for today.

I hadn't ever brushed someone else's teeth, but it was easier than I'd anticipated, and soon we were working on a puzzle and doing other art projects. He was adorable and focused, and by the time we finished lunch, he was ready for a nap.

And a story.

Chapter Thirteen

Easton

“Once upon a time, there was a prince who was very naughty.”

I snuggled into my daddy’s side. I was sleepy and had planned to just drift off to sleep, but when Daddy said he was going to tell me a story, he hadn’t meant from a book. One sentence, and I was always in.

“I’m not naughty. I’m a good boy,” I interrupted, needing to set the record straight for no reason whatsoever other than I did.

“You are a good boy and have been very well-behaved today, but the prince in our story was very, very naughty. He didn’t want to be king—ever, and he thought that if he misbehaved, they would find someone else to take his place.”

“That’s not how being a prince works.”

“No, it isn’t, Easton, and that is why his plan was only accomplishing one thing—getting him in big trouble. So much trouble that his parents sent him to a dragon school.”

He pulled the covers up a bit more.

“And I want to tell you all about what it is like for a prince to go to school with dragons, but you are supposed to be getting ready to sleep, and instead, you are more attentive than ever.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“That’s because it’s too good a story. Make it boring, Daddy. Then I sleepies.”

“That doesn’t sound like fun.” He kissed my brow. “How about I snuggle you and, after your nap, I will tell you the rest of the tale?”

“I lubs snuggle buggles.”

Daddy got up and helped me get resituated with Charlie and then climbed in behind me, holding me close until I fell asleep. When I woke, he was in the other room and I was alone with Charlie, feeling refreshed and content in a way I hadn’t felt in a long time.

“Daddy, I awake!” I called, not even thinking about it.

A few seconds later, he came in, a smile on his face. “Did you have a good sleep?” He crossed over to the bed and sat beside me.

“Yes, Daddy. But I thirsty.” I stuck out my bottom lip.

“Let’s get you something to drink, then.”

We spent the rest of what was left of the afternoon with Daddy telling me all about the naughty prince and how he fell in love with the dragons and the two of us playing with blocks. It had been a long time since I fell so deep into my little space, and I hadn’t realized how much my entire well-being longed for it. I understood that I enjoyed it and that it made managing the stressors in my life easier, but in all my time exploring my little side, this was the first time I had a firm grasp of the depths in which it mattered.

“Pizza for dinner?” he asked when dinnertime snuck up on us.

It was perfect timing. I was starting to slip out of my headspace and was ready to spend some quality time with Jared.

“Yeah, and maybe jeans.” I enjoyed having all of this time with him as my daddy, but it was time to be big. Mostly because I wanted something big of his in my mouth. “Or less.”

“Less?” He tilted his head in confusion, and fair enough. My flirting had gone awry.

“I was trying to be flirty and got the *who should have on less clothing* part wrong,” I giggled and stood up. “But if you don’t mind, I’d like to maybe be big for the rest of the night.”

He, of course, had no problem with it, but that wasn’t what hit me about the moment. It was the ease with which I was able to simply tell him what I wanted. Not once did I worry it would go wrong or that I would ruin everything. That should be the norm for all relationships, but, in my experience, it wasn’t.

Only it was for us, and it had me on cloud nine. My jeans plan quickly turned to sweatpants for comfort, but it had never been about the clothing. Not really.

We ordered from a new place that was supposed to be the best around and, when it came, Jared went to the door to grab it and came back in with a box as well, along with our order.

“This is for you. Can you grab it?”

I jogged over and did.

He put the pizza on the table, and I opened the box, not even thinking about what it might be or why it was there.

When I pulled out the paper-wrapped item, I instantly knew what it was.

“You found it...for me?”

His eyes were focused on me, his mouth forming a small and sincere smile. “It wasn’t easy, but I knew you needed it. It wasn’t supposed to be here for another week.”

He said something else, but I was too busy ripping away the paper to see the perfect cereal bowl, the one from the restaurant. Sure, technically it was for soup, but it was perfection. I set it down and ran over to him, nearly knocking him on the ground as I tackle-hugged him. “You’re amazing!”

“You know what this means, don’t you?” He looked at me expectantly.

“That you are considerate and listen to the things I say to you?”

“Well maybe that, but it also means that after pizza, we need to go and buy all the cereal.”

I was so not turning that down. The dish sat on the table as we devoured the pizza. I’d been having so much fun that I hadn’t noticed how hungry I’d gotten. The pizza hit the spot and then we were off.

“I did like the cereal you had for me this morning.” I grabbed his hand after getting out of the car. “It was a really sweet gesture.” I leaned into his side a bit.

“It seemed like the little thing to do. It’s not healthy, so I might be missing the mark on my responsibilities, but it made you smile.” He kissed the top of my head. “I’d do most anything to see one of your smiles.”

The grocery store was far more crowded than I thought it would be, given the time, but since we were only there for one aisle, it didn't really matter.

"It's hard to decide." Now that I didn't need to consider mushiness, so many new options opened up for me. Rice Krispies were great, but not when you had a whole bowl because they became grossness. But with my new dish...they were back on the table. And they were healthy-ish. Win-win.

I grabbed a box and put them in the cart.

"Nice choice."

"Don't think this means there won't be marshmallows galore in here before we hit up the cash register." I already had a few in mind. It was the narrowing down that was proving to be problematic.

"I wouldn't dare." He was very obviously amused, and that only encouraged me on.

"These don't expire for months if unopened." I tossed three more boxes in. "And I probably should have enough to have some at home and at your place."

I hadn't meant for it to sound like I was assuming I'd be a frequent guest, even though I sort of was.

"You know what I mean." Because that would make it less cringy...maybe.

"I do," he laughed. "One problem with your plan... I was only able to find one of those dishes, and it was on one of those resale sites. Are you going to carry it back and forth?"

He grabbed a bowl of blue ghost cereal and put it in the cart. I had no idea if it was for him or me, and it didn't matter—some of it was going in my belly. It looked delicious.

“Maybe...I need to get a special cereal bowl backpack?” I tossed another box into the cart.

“I've heard worse ideas.”

I couldn't even imagine what the cashier thought when they saw my boxes lined up on the conveyor belt. It was ridiculous for anything other than buying for an entire school or small town. The price tag, even more so. But as we carried them inside to figure out which place had custody of which cereal, it hit me—this was the most open I'd been with anyone. Sure, it was just a breakfast food, nothing serious. And yet it was.

“Thank you.” I wrapped my arms around Jared's middle. “For today and for indulging me with the cereal and for going out of your way to find me the perfect dish and for making up a story about dragons... I guess what I'm saying is thank you for being you.” I nuzzled his chest.

“Thank you, Easton, for being you and giving me the opportunity to be myself.” He pressed a kiss on the top of my head. “I'm so glad you lost Charlie that day.”

And while I would never say it with Charlie in the same space, stuffie or not, I was, too.

Chapter Fourteen

Jared

Over time, we spent more and more nights together, mostly at my place because it was larger, but every time he went home, I wanted to ask him to stay. Easton's warmth next to me at night, his smile over the breakfast table, and the sight of him coming up to the door after work made it harder when he wasn't there for those things.

I'd always wanted to let him tell me what he needed, to put him first, and be the best daddy I could, but I had also promised both him and myself to keep the lines of communication open between us. That meant, I had to tell him what I was thinking as well. I'd hoped he'd make the suggestion himself, but if he wasn't ready or didn't like the idea, I'd back right off.

We had come so far, and I really believed we were ready to make that leap. But asking him to make his life with me was very important and not something to be done over toast and coffee or via text.

No, I wanted it to be special. Because nothing could be more so. I wanted to do it in a way that would celebrate both sides of our relationship. The daddy/little part as well as the two men who enjoyed watching movies together or discussing the day's news. Laughing at silly jokes. Of course, that laughter carried into both sides of things. We'd met at the convention, a business situation that rapidly led us into a more personal relationship, one in which I learned more about

myself, my own needs and desires, than should be possible in such a short time.

Being the best daddy I could be fulfilled a part of me that had been neglected.

But musing about those things wasn't helping me plan the moment I wanted to be special for both of us to remember forever. How did other alphas do this? Somehow, calling Bridger and asking him didn't seem like the thing to do. Because only my Easton and I knew what was most special for us.

I spent days thinking, trying to come up with the very best scenario. Dinner date? Done that. Mini golf...same. Cosmic bowling we'd done more than once. What did he love? Cartoons, tubbies...rubber ducks.

Easton adored his family of rubber ducks, and while they were part of his little side, they were so dear to him in general. But what could I do with that? Rubber ducks... *"And the last one is Bobbzey, and he is a professor."* Easton loved making up little stories with his ducks, and I thought his imagination was over-the-top awesome. If I was going to ask him to be part of my life, to live in a home with me, could I find a way to incorporate the ducks, or maybe just the one duck? Or maybe he has a friend? Hadn't he had the professor marrying the teacher?

It took me a week to put together with the help of a local shop that could make anything, and I had to get a picture of Bobbzey and one of the teacher duck for the artist. I hoped he would like them and wouldn't think my whole idea was too silly. But...one evening, we went upstairs to the bedroom to

change. Easton did keep some comfortable clothes at my place, and that was part of what inspired me to order the little surprise even now in a box wrapped with duckie paper and sitting on the bed.

As I made the pizza and picked out a perfect movie, I'd second- and third-guessed myself. Such a simple solution to my quandary. It had to be wrong. But it was so cute...but asking him to move in was such a serious thing...

In the bedroom, I turned him toward me and kissed him long and deep, breathing in his scent and taste and hoping he'd say yes. He felt so perfect in my arms, so warm and strong and gentle at the same time. When we paused to breathe, he leaned back in my embrace and studied me. "That's a nice greeting. Do I smell pizza?"

"Mmm." I leaned my forehead against his. "Homemade. From scratch even."

"Impressive." He brushed his lips over mine. "What's the occasion?"

"Can't a man make a special dinner for the one he loves?" My breath rushed out in a whoosh. "I mean..."

"You mean, you love me?" He tipped his lips up for another kiss before saying, "It's lucky I love you, too. Nice how that works."

"Kind of perfect." I led him to the bed and sat on the edge, with the present on the opposite side of me. "I actually had a whole speech planned to tell you I love you, but I got caught up in the moment."

“You have a speech?” A twinkle in his eye made me smile. “I want to hear it.”

“It seems unnecessary, since I already blurted it out like a teenager.” I stroked a lock of hair back from his forehead. “But I do love you.”

“I really want the speech,” he pouted. “Come on. Did you rehearse it?”

“No—well yes, a little. You sure you want it? I have a present for you and we could just get right to that?”

“That’s a tough choice, but I think I’m going to hold my ground and wait for the present until after the speech.” Easton sat up very straight, hands linked in his lap. “I’m ready.”

I was feeling sillier by the minute, but having boxed myself into a corner, I had no choice but to deliver the speech. “All right. It’s not a big speech.”

“Daddy, are you ’crasinating?”

Adorable. He was just too cute for words even when not really in little mode.

“Easton, we’ve been spending a lot of time together.”

“Nearly every night,” he agreed. “Is that okay?”

“More than okay.” I reached for his hand and held it between mine. “I love sleeping with you and seeing you first thing when I open my eyes in the morning.”

“Me, too.”

“I love everything about you, in fact, I love you.”

“I love you, too! That was a great speech.” He brought his lips to mine and I obliged by kissing them. “Now do I get my present?”

“Yes.” I reached behind me for the box. “Go ahead and open it.”

He eagerly ripped off the ribbon and paper. “It looks like a shoebox. Is it shoes?”

“Would I buy you shoes?”

“Maybe not.” The last of the paper fell to the floor, and he glanced from the box, an unmarked shoebox. “Or maybe so.”

“There’s a note taped on it,” I pointed out.

“Okay.” He unfolded it and read, silently, lips moving just a little before he looked up at me with tears sparkling in his eyes. “You want to see these under the bed every day. Are you asking me what I think you’re asking?”

“Do you think I am asking you to move in with me and live with me forever?”

“Yes.” He pried the lid off the box and looked inside. “It’s Bobbzye.” He held up the yellow fuzzy slipper based on his duckie. “And who’s this?”

“The teacher,” I said. “He is kind of a daddy who takes care of all the other duckies.”

“Where shall we live?”

Chapter Fifteen

Easton

Making the decision to move in together was far easier than the *figuring out where to live* part of it all. We both agreed that we didn't want to move into one of our spaces, but instead to find a place that would become both of ours. It made sense.

If only the real estate market was in agreement. Sure, there were apartments available, but neither of us thought of that as a step in the right direction. We wanted a house...a home. I worked from home most of the time, and Jared traveled quite a bit, so a location near the airport that had a room I could turn into an office was our jumping-off place.

"I don't know." I scrolled through the house listings that met all of our criteria for the fifteenth time. "Everything there has been on the market for a long time, and that tells me it is either falling apart, haunted, or filled with mold. And the new stuff is under contract before we can even get a showing."

"Yeah. Maybe we need to be less picky on what we are searching for. Maybe we need to just look for all new listings and see if anything catches our eye." Daddy was so much more logical about all of this. But even though his advice was solid, I was *put a fork in me done* with the house hunting for the night.

"Wanna go out?" I was whiny and not even pretending not to be.

"What do you have in mind?" he asked.

“Wanna hit up the munch?”

There was a regular munch at a local coffee shop. We’d been before, and it was fine. Nothing I would go out of my way to make sure I didn’t miss, but it was fun enough. Tonight, I needed the distraction. And it was the perfect excuse to get out and away from all of the real estate listings.

We grabbed something to eat and headed out to see who was there for the night. Jared’s friend Bridger was already there, along with his friend Soren. Neither of their littles were there yet but would be coming in a bit. There were a few other people I recognized from Chained as well as some of both of our other friends.

Was coffee the best idea for this time of night? Absolutely not. I still ordered the largest and sweetest one I could find with the help of Sarah, the barista, on duty.

“Let me know how that works for you.” She handed me my drink, along with a tea for Jared. It was fair to say he was much more reasonable than I was in his decision-making. But, then again, he was Daddy, so that was pretty on brand.

“Will do.” I brought our drinks over to where Jared was chatting it up with Bridger. While he was trying to act like he was just catching up with a friend, the fact that I was the one holding our two drinks told a different tale. Normally, he’d want to be the one getting our drinks. Today, he was quick to ask me to get him a tea.

I made sure he saw me before heading over. He was probably wanting to talk about getting me a duckie stuffie or something equally benign. But just in case either he or Bridger

had something heavier on their minds that they might not want me to know about, I decided this was the way to go.

“Are we earlier than I realized?” I handed him his tea. There were less than a dozen people there and tons of unoccupied chairs.

“On time.” Jared tapped the seat beside me. “But yeah, it’s a pretty slow night, isn’t it?”

“There is an event at Chained for pups tonight, and a lot of the regular crowd is there.” Bridger set down his crocheting. “We thought about rescheduling but figured those who wanted to come would be sad.”

I only half remembered reading about an event. It was an adoption event where pups and kittens or whatever your pet play of choice was could meet new people to do scenes with or date or whatever they might be interested in. It sounded like a fun time, if that was what you were into.

“I forgot about the event.” I took a long sip of my coffee and immediately regretted it. It wasn’t just sweet, it was instant-cavity sweet. I set it right back down.

“Not good?” Jared looked down at my cup.

“It’s what it says it is. I just made a bad choice.” I shrugged. “But that’s fine. I usually make really good ones.” I rested my head on his arm. “I chose you, didn’t I?”

“Hey, I thought I chose you.”

“Speaking of choosing, how is the house hunting going?” Bridger asked, and both of us moaned.

“That good?” Soren said. “Do you have any leads at all?”

“All the older listings are older for a reason, and the new ones get snatched up before we can even see them. It’s frustrating.” I was at the point where I was about to buy the first house I saw and that would turn out just ducky.

“Here you are.” Sarah sat a cup of what I presumed was coffee next to my sugar in a cup—*I mean coffee*. “I saw your face.” She chuckled. At least I hadn’t hurt her feelings. “I couldn’t help but overhearing. Are you in the market for a new house?”

“Our first together,” I said.

“This might sound presumptuous, but I just got my license and am looking to do less of this and more of that.” She looked terrified, and I suspected we were one of the first people she’d ever approached like this. “I have a card out back. Maybe I can help you find something?”

And that was the day Sarah became our Realtor. We’d been so busy focusing on properties we wanted to look at that we hadn’t settled on any one Realtor. That had been a bigger mistake than we realized in the current market because it put us three steps behind. Sarah managed to get us into properties on day one. Most weren’t any better than what we saw in the long-time listings, but a few weren’t too bad.

“Sarah called and asked if we could meet here early today,” I said our third week working together. “This one just came on the market and she said it was perfect for us and ummm...what we like.”

I wasn’t 100 percent sure Sarah understood our dynamic, nor did she need to, but she knew we were kinky, given we met her at a munch.

“This should be fun.” He chuckled. “What time?”

“We should leave now.”

“Of course we should.” He was already reaching for his keys.

The address she sent us was the perfect distance from the airport, which was one of our nonnegotiables, although it was getting less and less nonnegotiable and more and more *it would be nice* as time ticked on. It wasn't in a neighborhood we had seen on this adventure in housing. I opted to believe that was because the neighborhood was so amazing, no one ever wanted to move.

“It's the next block over.” Jared turned into the subdivision. It was an older one, the houses all mid-century modern, one of my personal favorites. “This is pretty nice in here.”

“And no HOA,” Jared said. He'd been firm in not wanting to be tied to a governing body. I didn't blame him. “Here we are.” He pulled up behind Sarah's car and parked.

She had been right about the house being one *I'd definitely have on your list* because I was already in love and we hadn't even reached the stoop.

“Let me show you around.”

We followed her in, and the layout was one we had already discovered we both enjoyed. The kitchen was retro yet usable. There was an adorable little office with built-in bookcases, and the bathrooms were both decent size. All of that was great, but nothing was wow. That was until Sarah took us into the primary bedroom.

“This is the room that had me thinking of you.” She opened what I assumed was the closet, only it wasn’t a closet at all. It was a small bedroom. “The former owners used to keep their nursery in here. They didn’t have any babies.”

“I see.” Jared was attempting to hold in his amusement and doing a really bad job at it. Not that I was doing much better. “And what furniture did they have in there?”

“A crib, a changing table, and a dresser, I believe. They also had one of those bookshelves with the cube shapes so you could put buckets in them along that far wall.” She turned and tapped on the windowsill. “And of course, the privacy film on the window that lets the beautiful colored light through but not any nosy neighbors.”

I hadn’t been married to the notion of a nursery, but seeing this one so easily hidden away as a closet had me second-guessing my stance.

“What do you think?” I asked Jared when Sarah stepped outside to take a call.

“I think it’s perfect.” He intertwined his fingers with mine. “Absolutely perfect.”

“Thank gods. I do, too.”

We submitted an offer that day. This was our dream house. We just had to cross our fingers that it was going to be our dreams-come-true house.

Chapter Sixteen

Jared

It seemed like it took forever from the moment Easton agreed to move in with me until we got to the day of our housewarming party.

I was so glad we'd decided to get a place all our own. Neither of our previous ones were just what we wanted, but we'd scored with our new home. It held all the features we wanted, and we'd of course make some changes over the years, but for now, it was pretty perfect. The nursery—Sarah really did get us, and we decided to bring in just a few pieces of furniture and build that as we went along. And with nearly everything in place, we decided it was time to invite some friends over for a housewarming party. Our home should always be a welcoming place for those whom we cared about, and that was the main thing we wanted to share. We weren't doing it to get gifts, and we wanted that to be clear to our friends as well.

Easton, the more creative of the two of us, made it his mission to create the invitations on the iPad pro we'd bought him recently, and he made several sketches before declaring he had the perfect one. When I went over to see, he covered it with his hands and waved me off. "No peeking at the work in progress," he declared, chuckling.

I agreed and backed off. Considering Easton as his little loved to share works in process, and he didn't do a lot of drawing when big, I didn't know no-peeking was a rule, but I

left him to it and went into the kitchen to check on dinner. Wanting to give him a little time, I set the table, made a chopped salad and, when it was still absolutely silent in the living room, I dug a blueberry pie out of the freezer and slid it into the oven with the almost-cooked roast and veggies. Finally, my curiosity got the better of me, and I poked my head through the doorway. “Just about done?”

He lifted his face and grinned. “Come and see.”

I plopped down next to him on the couch and took the iPad. My eyes no sooner lit on what he’d done than they filled with tears. It was a drawing of our bed with the duckie slippers underneath and next to them... “Easton, what are the other ones?”

Reaching under the sofa he pulled out a box and handed it to me.

I opened it to find what I saw in the drawing. Pulling them out, I studied the workmanship and knew where he’d gotten them. “Rob’s work?”

“When you had the duckies made, the artist left a tag inside, and I asked if they could do a pair of Charlie.” He grinned. “And his mate.”

The pair was very similar but slightly different. In the shortish time we’d been together, we already had shared history. The time I found his lost otter, the day he showed me his duckies, the slippers I’d gifted him with when I asked him to move in with me. As the years passed, we’d have lots of significant moments, but I didn’t want to rush to them. For the first time, I was happy right in the moment, something I had

not realized I was not until I was. It barely made sense to me, but there you had it.

“I’m glad Charlie has a mate,” I told him, setting down the iPad and hugging him against me. “Do you think the real Charlie needs one?”

“Once, I’d have said no because he has me...”

“But now?” I was already standing up and heading for the hall closet. “Do you think he’d like to have someone of his own?”

He followed. “What are you up to?”

“It was supposed to be a Christmas present, but I don’t want Charlie to have to wait.” I opened the cupboard door and laughed. “It’s already wrapped.”

“Let me get Charlie.” He darted down the hall to the bedroom and came back cuddling his friend. “Okay, we’re ready to meet them.”

Returning to the sofa, I settled back to watch Easton open his gift. He peeled the paper—otters sledding down a hill in the snow—away from the box and then opened it. “Ohh, look, Charlie.” Holding Charlie in one hand, he pulled the other otter out and showed him. “I think Jared likes us.”

I was untying my shoes and sliding my feet into the otter slippers. They were lined with sheepskin and so comfortable. “They fit perfectly,” I pronounced. “I may never wear shoes again.”

“These are only for inside the house,” Easton pronounced. “And that’s why I thought slippers was a good theme for our party.”

Intrigued, I leaned back, putting my slippered feet on the coffee table. “Go on...”

Two weeks later, at four in the afternoon, we were all set for our housewarming party. Slippers were indeed the theme, and we’d insisted that nobody buy us any gifts, but that they wear comfy clothes and their favorite slippers. On a roll with the creativity, Easton had designed all the decorations, and the tablecloth was white in the middle with a border of otters and duckies tumbling around in a truly adorable frolic. We had considered doing a daddy/little party, but there were at least a couple of friends we wanted to invite who, while they were aware of our lifestyle, didn’t follow exactly the same one, and we didn’t want them to feel left out.

Still, as everyone padded around in their slippers, I noticed some of the littles were wearing clothes very close to pajamas and that was fine. Everyone seemed so comfortable together, eating all the food and drinking the punch and coffee and tea. We’d decided not to do alcohol beyond wine and beer for those who wanted to indulge.

And while we did not do “little” activities, Easton had the idea to set up board games, something everyone could enjoy. I hadn’t played them in a very long time, so I had my doubts, but about a half hour in, I noticed that each of the card tables I’d set up with Sorry or Monopoly or any others were occupied. And everyone seemed to be having a great time.

I was on the grill, a skill I’d recently mastered, and Easton was master of ceremonies at the gaming tables. When I came

in with a tray of kebabs for the buffet, I found him settling a dispute between Monopoly players with great panache.

“Easton, how’s it going over there?”

“Splendid.” He waved me over and leaned into me.

“Everyone is having the best time. They all want to come over again.”

“And again!” Hudson, who had a mountain of cash in front of him stacked it more neatly. “Next time, there will be glitter.”

Chapter Seventeen

Easton

Chained.

We were going to Chained and not even to hang out with our friends or to explore. We were going for a daddy-and-me-event. It was going to be an age play extravaganza. Well, maybe not an extravaganza, but the night was going to be fun.

“Do you have everything you need?” Jared grabbed my backpack.

“I think so. I want to bring Charlie, but also, I’m scared to.” It was a carnival-themed event and would most likely have some stuffie prizes. The last thing I wanted was for Charlie to get in the mix of that.

“He should stay home.” Jared set down the backpack and went into our room, coming back out with a small plastic bag. “This was for Christmas, but I think you need it tonight.” Daddy was not good at keeping things put away for Christmas, and I loved that about him.

When I opened it up, there was a onesie inside and not just any onesie. No, it was a onesie with Charlie embroidered on it, including his name. The odds were great that I was going to be called Charlie a few dozen times tonight, but I didn’t care. I was going to get to have Charlie with me.

“I love it so much.” I hugged it to me. “I’ll be right back.”

I ran into the bedroom and stripped my clothes off and put it on. Daddy would help me get dressed in the rest of my

clothing, but I wanted this on when I left the house. If I had asked, he'd have put this on me, too. Only, once his hands were on me, and I was naked, we were going to end up extremely late, and I didn't want to miss out on winning good prizes when simply dressing myself could prevent it.

"I'm back." I hopped on one foot as I pulled my shoe on the other. "Let's go."

"I'm glad you love it." He grabbed his keys. "It didn't turn out the way it was supposed to. It kind of looks like you are Charlie."

I'd hoped he hadn't noticed. It was such a sweet and loving gesture, I wanted him to see it for the fabulousness it was and not the potential, maybe mistake that it had.

"I've been called worse." I brushed past him. "Let's go. There are toys to win."

"Toys?" Jared pulled the door closed behind him.

"Yes, stuffies, but I didn't want to make Charlie feel bad." Which had been obvious to me when I said it, but now I suddenly figured out what most people would think of as toys when discussing a club like Chained. "I maybe worded that poorly."

We both laughed.

The drive took us longer than expected, construction being a pain in our backsides, but when we got there, the event hadn't quite begun. We were led to the changing room we booked and were told that the playroom was open but that the other rooms were going to be at least another ten minutes. Worked for us.

“This is my favorite room.” I spun around, taking it all in. “Maybe after I win my stuffie and do some crafts, you can fuck me on that chaise where my backpack is.”

Daddy let out a groan. “You do that on purpose.”

“Do what, exactly?” I toed off my shoes. “Make you hard? Because that was kind of the point.”

“Your point was to keep me hard all night?”

I nodded.

“Then well done, my sweet boy. Well done.” He shook his head with amusement. “Let’s get you dressed. There are stuffies to win and, if the daddy behind us in line was correct, lots of glitter to get everywhere.”

“And stickers. Don’t forget the stickers.” Rumor had it, they even had scratch-and-sniff stickers like the kind I loved as an elementary school student.

It wasn’t hard to get me dressed, the onesie already on me and my outfit simple. I had pajama shorts with elephants on them because in my mind, elephants could be considered circus-themed, and carnivals were close enough to circuses to count. I had brought a matching top but wanted to keep my onesie front and center, at least for tonight. And for my feet? I had dragon slippers because...dragons. I wasn’t sure how Daddy found them, but they were everything. I was getting really into slippers, but the duckies stayed home because they were special for our house.

“Ready?” Daddy held out his hand out for me, and I grabbed it quickly. “We should get out there before the crowds.”

“That’s a funny way of saying that if we stay here longer, I’ll be naked.” I nipped at his bottom lip. “Let’s go, Daddy. I need to win some stuffies.”

The main rooms of the event were already open once we got down there. It was probably better to not be in the initial rush to get to do all things. It gave me time to take it in and decide what I wanted to spend my time doing.

“Checking in?” a man I didn’t recognize asked. Not that I knew everyone here, but still...

“I’m Easton, and I’m here with Daddy.”

The man handed Jared a name tag that said Daddy on it and he gave me a lanyard with a punch card in a little plastic sheath hanging from it. “At each station, they will punch your card and, at the end, you can put it in the bucket for a chance to win the grand prize.”

“Grand prize?” He had all of my attention.

“A prize pack from some of the local artisans that make fun items for littles and their daddies.”

I was no closer to knowing what the prize was than when I asked. That didn’t matter. I was going to get all the punches, and my need to do so would’ve been just as strong if at the end, I got a sticker.

Chained had officially outdone itself. They had full-on carnival games only instead of them being rigged for players to lose, they were rigged to win. I’d seen enough men throwing balls at milk bottles on midways to know that it was a challenging, if not impossible, task. And yet they had winner

after winner, including me. It didn't detract from the fun at all. In a way, it was encouraging.

None of our friends were going to be here until later, so, for now, I had Daddy all to myself. I loved it.

I went from game to game and won a squishy ball, a candy bar, a plastic crown, and an assortment of stationery items. But not one stuffie. And I didn't lose any of the games, either. They weren't included in the prizes.

I did my best not to let myself get upset over it. I was still having a great time, hanging with the man I loved more than anything, playing fun games, eating cotton candy and not caring that it covered my face, and heading over to the craft area to get glitter everywhere. It was an amazing night, and we had plenty of time to stay and continue our good time.

"I need 'stractions." I looked up at Daddy. "I keep think about my sads and not my happies. Make me think of happies." Did emotions work that way? Nope. But a good distraction was a good distraction.

"Want to make your craft now?" he offered.

I looked up at him, undecided, eventually nodding my head. We walked in together and Daddy gave my bum a playful smack. "I think this might be what you were looking for." In the back corner sat a stuffing machine for when you make your own stuffie.

I squeed so loudly that more than a few heads turned. I didn't care. I was getting a brand-new stuffie and not just any stuffie, either. I was going to get to make this stuffie with my daddy.

They had plenty of bodies to choose from, including a purple dragon. The process was shorter than I thought it would be, thanks to the people helping with the stuffing machine. And before I knew it, I was holding my brand-new dragon prince stuffie.

“I love it.” I pressed against Daddy. “But you know what I love more?”

“Is it your new onesie?”

“That, too, but I was thinking you.” I kissed his cheek and then brought my mouth to his ear. “I think we have a lounge chair calling our name.”

“Our friends are coming soon,” he countered.

“Soon, but not now. Let’s hurry up, Daddy. We have a lounge chair to find.”

And find it we did.

Epilogue

Jared

We managed to get our booths next to each other again.

It was hard to believe a full year had passed since that day when I noticed the cute, shy guy getting set up for the event. In that time, we'd discovered so much about one another, and about ourselves.

Knowing I was a daddy but not how to make it real in my life had been an ache deep inside me, but from the moment I met Easton, everything changed. He knew what he wanted, was not new to the lifestyle, and he could have had any daddy he wanted, but instead he chose me. And patiently gave me all the time I needed to get there. When I met his friends at the munch, I recognized that I was the one without confidence and that if I was going to be the daddy he needed, I'd better get there fast.

Not because he demanded anything of me but because I wanted to give him everything.

The event was even bigger this year, and the early attendees they were allowing right after setup made for more opportunities to connect with potential customers. Easton and I had arrived just a few hours earlier and between getting up at dawn to catch our flight, the travel itself, and setup, I was exhausted and knew he had to be, too. Last year, we'd been able to rest at this point, but now, we would need to be at our best, ready to greet the customers and chat up our product lines.

Easton still preferred his hours of working at home, but you'd never know it to see him shaking hands and laughing with the various people who approached him. His warm personality and enthusiasm soon had a crowd forming, while I looked on with pride. We'd both grown so much in the last year, and coming back here had me feeling sentimental and wanting to mark it with something special.

When the doors were finally closed and we could leave, I linked my arm with Easton's and gave it a squeeze. "Got Charlie?"

"Right here." He showed me where he had him cuddled to his other side. "Hungry? Want to go to a drive-thru and grab a bite before we go back to the hotel?"

"Well, I was thinking of a drive-thru, but not a restaurant."

We were strolling toward the exit, but he stopped and asked, "What kind, then?"

"I hear they have wedding chapels where you can drive right up and take your vows."

"Really?"

Oh hell, he didn't want to. "No, it was just a suggestion. Don't even think about it." He'd probably want a real wedding with tons of people and cake, if and when the time came.

"But it sounds amazing." He sped his steps, towing me along. "What a wonderful idea. And where better than the place we met? We need to stop by the license bureau first, I think, and then there's this really cute chapel just off the strip where we should be able to get an appointment tonight."

I laughed and followed him toward the door. “Sounds like you’ve put some thought into this.”

He slowed down and glanced at me, cheeks reddened. “I guess I have. I have always wanted to get married here, and to do it in some fun, quirky way. I just figured you’d prefer something more traditional.”

“I’m so glad you were thinking of marrying me.” My heart was so full right now. “Would you rather wait until at least the end of the event?”

“I’d rather not wait even five minutes.” His voice dropped. “Daddy.”

It was a short wedding. The officiant was dressed as a showgirl with entirely fabulous feathers, and we took our vows from the front seat of the car in a completely memorable ceremony that I would replay in my mind for the rest of my life.

Charlie came with us to the convention center the next day, and we were both very careful he didn’t wander off. It had been a good thing once, but from now on, one little otter was going to have to stay with his Easton. And so would I.

Thank you so much for reading *Easton’s Lost Otter*. Next in the Found by Daddy series series is *Owen’s Lost Hero*, which may have the cutest cover yet! Turn the page for a sneak peek!

A Sneak Peek at *Owen's Lost Hero*, Book 6 the Found by Daddy Series



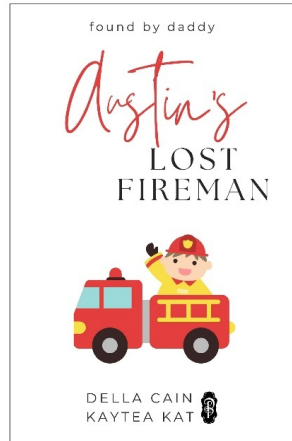
I was more than just my scarred face. I just needed a daddy who would look that far.

Growing up, I wanted to be a superhero and rescue people from peril. Little did I know I was going to be the one needing rescuing after the bus I was on collided with an 18-wheeler. The accident stole more from me than my childhood aspirations. It also stole my *movie star good looks*, leaving me disfigured and with residual pain.

When I discovered age play and the carefree moments it could bring me, the first toy I bought myself was a superhero teddy bear. It gave me comfort and brought me back to a time when my future was bright. That was until the day it went missing and I cried into a stranger's shoulder... a hot stranger... a hot stranger with daddy vibes.

Owen's Lost Hero is a sweet age play romance featuring a little who loses his prized possession, the daddy whose shoulder he cries on, accepting one's true beauty, snuggles, cuddles, stuffies, footie jams, a memorable day at Chained, some old friends, true love, and a guaranteed happy ever after. If you like your romances on the Hallmark side but a bit kinkier, check out Owen's Lost Hero by USA Today Bestselling author Della Cain and her bestie and frequent partner in crime, Kaytea Kat.

An Excerpt from *Austin's Lost Fireman*



Chapter One

Austin

I wasn't a fan of traveling, especially of the work variety. I loved being at my house, in my pajamas, cuddled with my stuffie when I went to sleep at night. When that didn't happen, I woke up Mr. Grumpy Pants. This was one of those mornings.

The hotel was fine enough, I supposed. It was nearish a huge theme park and, while most people tended to stay in park-themed locations while on vacation with their families, last night had been filled with families...loud families all excited to see the mouse today. Most people would've been pissed that it was loud, with kids running the halls. I wasn't most people. I sat in my room, missing my comforts from home, and wishing my daddy was here. Maybe he would take me to get pictures with the mouse or ride on flying elephants.

I should've known by now that I needed to be careful what I wished for because half my wish came true, but it wasn't the best half.

After a quick shower, I checked myself in the mirror, not wanting to look the mess I felt. Other than tired, which I was, I deemed myself presentable and sent for a rideshare to get to the first meeting of the day, thinking I had plenty of time. The closest driver was an hour away, which sucked, given I only needed a five-mile ride. I grabbed my fireman off the nightstand, put him in my pocket, and headed for the lobby.

Once downstairs, I went to the front desk and asked if a cab would be quicker. They gave me the unfortunate news that I was leaving at prime theme-park time, and it was going to be

a while, but gave me a breakfast voucher citing that they felt bad. I thanked them with a smile and walked over to the in-house restaurant.

It was less crowded than I feared it would be, and they seated me right away. I wasn't normally a breakfast kind of guy, except on the mornings I woke up with my daddy by my side. He would insist I eat, and I would. But those days were few and far between.

Daddy and I had been together for over a year, but we weren't a true love match. Not really. I cared about him, sure, but he didn't have the time to devote to making us much more than that. His fancy-shmancy corporate job had him working far more hours than should be legal. But it had him in my city a couple of times a month, so at least there was that.

I sat in a small booth, drinking coffee and messaging my boss to let him know that I was going to be sliding in to the meeting just on time. It wasn't ideal. I preferred to get a lay of the land and meet a few people beforehand, but on time was far better than late.

“Daddy!” a little girl screamed from across the room. Normally, I could block it out, but she didn't sound angry, more like something was wrong. I popped up to see if help was needed, fearing a medical emergency, only to see a little girl covered in grape juice, her mom helping mop it up. My heart pounded for a spill. Only me.

I was about to sit down when a man arrived at her side, a small boy holding his hand. From the back, he looked like my daddy and, for a split second, I got the urge to call him. That urge ran away the second the man turned around, replaced by a

sinking sensation in my stomach and a pall over my emotions. He didn't look like my daddy—he was my daddy.

I dropped back into my seat, trying to figure out what to do. Daddy said he was going to be in Milan this week. Florida was not Milan. Not even close. But why would he lie to me, and who were these people?

“Here's your breakfast, sir.” A plate was put in front of me, and I looked up to see my server. I hadn't even noticed them coming. “Let me know if you need anything else.”

I nodded, almost afraid to speak. I was unsure how to proceed. Should I go over and say hello? Should I message him? Should I be mad? My entire being was unable to process anything. I didn't even know he had nieces and nephews, much less that he would be taking them on vacation. But why would he say he was going to Milan?

Taking out my phone, I swiped away, bringing up Daddy's contact info and letting my fingers hover over it. And then it hit me. The little girl had called, “Daddy.” Not uncle. Why did I jump straight to that conclusion?

Because you don't want to see what's in front of your face. I was constantly making excuses for the man. He didn't see me a lot because he traveled, he worked too hard, he lived far away, or he had other things he needed to do. Apparently those other things included his girlfriend or wife or whoever she was. Had I only opened my eyes earlier.

I tapped away at my phone. *I'll be in the lobby.*

I threw some cash on the table and then walked around so he would see me, not being brave enough to look his way as I

did so. I hit send as I passed the table, wanting to hear if his phone beeped. It did.

My stomach churning with nerves, I was unsure how I had missed all the red flags. Or more accurately, pissed off that I ignored them. I reached the lobby and looked around for a place with some semblance of privacy. If he had been lying to me, there was no way he was truthful with his wife, and with their kids there. I refused to be that guy.

He came out a minute later, visibly shaken. I couldn't remember seeing him like this. "I can explain," he whispered as he reached me, not that he was looking my way. The asshole was looking out the window, like that was his reason to be out here.

"Explain that I was your side piece and that you've had a family this entire time? No need." Thank the gods we always used condoms. "How many others are there?" I kept my voice low as well, not wanting to cause a scene.

"Just you. There's only been you...ever." He was such a liar. I wasn't his first little. He'd told me as much when I met him at Collared. And even if I was, he had a membership at Collared, which meant he'd been in the scene enough to shell out that kind of money.

"I deserve better."

"You deserve everything, but things are...they're complicated."

"Go back to your family and either do right by them or leave. They are the ones who deserve everything." I walked out the front door, not looking back.

My reaction didn't hit me until I climbed in the back of the car and the tears started flowing. Angry tears were the worst. And the messed-up part was that I wasn't half as angry at Daddy as I was at myself. I knew better, saw better, and still, I stayed with him, brushing the red flags aside and pretending they were a pretty pastel instead.

I put my hand in my pocket, holding onto my little plastic brick block fireman, the one I brought with me everywhere, and closed my eyes. It would be okay. This wasn't the first and wouldn't be the last time I dated someone and didn't have it work out. That was just the way of things.

My meetings were a blur and, when I got back to the hotel that evening, I stayed holed up in my room, using room service so as to not run into him again. And when my phone lit up with a message from him asking if I could meet him at a bar down the road, I did what every self-respecting boy would do; I blocked his number. It was one thing to fall for his lies once, another to allow myself to be bombarded with more.

My flight was dark and early the next day, which was perfect. I was gone long before his family would be up and, instead of waiting an hour for a rideshare, I waited less than five minutes. I was so ready to be home and to climb into my footie jams to play with my fireman and my plastic bricks.

I was home by noon and took the world's longest shower, trying to wash away all of the grime of travel as well as the yuck of the breakup. It didn't work. That would take time to get over. A lot of time.

My favorite jams were in my "little" drawer and, when I pulled it open, the first thing I saw was the match box my ex

had given me only a couple of weeks earlier. Inside it were two tickets to the Brick and Build Con that was coming to town in six months. He'd promised we'd make a full weekend of it, and I'd been so excited. What a fool.

I intended to throw the tickets away, but once I opened the box and saw them, I second-guessed everything. Why couldn't I go without him? Maybe I could even find a friend to come along? That would be easier said than done. Unlike my ex, I'd only been at Collared for a little open house. Their price points were outside of my budget. I didn't have little friends here. I only had Daddy, and I'd never really had him, either.

“What should I do, Fireman Jim?”

“Bring me,” he said—or, rather, I said in my Fireman Jim voice.

“Yeah. I'll bring you.” I shoved the match box in the drawer and grabbed my firefighter jams. “Let's play.”

Chapter Two

Clark

Every event is important.

It was my motto or maybe my watch phrase, but whichever it was, I repeated it to myself often and to my staff whenever they fussed about a particular affair or conference or when a bridezilla threatened us with a lawsuit because the florist—whom she hired—delivered the wrong number of hyacinths and replaced them with something else.

From a rock concert that filled the main auditorium to a comic conference that packed every nook and cranny of the building to the home show to a business meeting that occupied only one small room. Every event held equal importance and was to be treated as such.

Every client would receive the kind of respect we would give to that billion-album-selling rocker or—and this happened once—visiting royalty. The previous manager did not share my business outlook, and it had cost the company more than one large paycheck. I had been in charge of a smaller event center in another city but been offered a nice signing bonus and a commission for new clients who followed me here.

Our reputation stemmed from this attitude, and while we did have a beautiful venue, I believed we were booked out for three years because of how we treated clients and attendees alike. As important people we were glad to host. But while I would swear that every event was important, and they

certainly were, the Brick and Build Con was the jewel in the crown of our year.

Since it was my first year in this position, I had not recognized the significance of the little plastic bricks. I thought they were toys, played with by children until they outgrew sticking them together to build towers that could be knocked over. A fact that my boss was quick to correct before my first meeting with the event organizers. Plans had been in effect well before I came aboard, but once I did, it became my baby. And one stressful, colicky baby it was. We were expecting vendors and attendees, presenters and performers, contestants...and they were coming from all over the world.

When I accepted the job, I'd hoped I'd be up to the task of managing such a big place. My interview took place in an office building in another city, and I was shown pictures, but I didn't actually tour this venue until after I'd signed on.

I thought I knew what I was doing, but it took me most of a day to spend enough time to feel like I wasn't going to get lost. And that was with nobody in the place except some staff members. The main auditorium area had a ceiling about three stories high with complicated lighting harnesses and other equipment for when there were concerts and performances of all kinds. There were moveable walls that could partition it off into smaller areas depending on the needs of the clients, so there could be several smaller events happening at the same time.

But the Brick and Build Con was the most important thing on my schedule every day, and as it barreled closer, and details fell into place, I gained confidence. It made for long days, but

as long as I followed the schedules, agendas, and spreadsheets, we were accomplishing what we needed to. And in between all of those tasks, we had to take care of all the others. A wedding with a groomzilla. A dog show. A meeting of accountants who all had dietary requirements, none of which seemed to be the same as any of the others'. A circus. A punk rock show.

Life was all work and no play, but that wasn't actually any different for me. At the other venue, I'd had a smaller staff and had to take on more of the day-to-day myself. Here, I could delegate, but that in itself was a big job. Every night, I went home to the apartment I'd rented but barely seen, except to sleep in, gobbled a sandwich or takeout, and fell into bed.

Clark was definitely a dull boy. And then one day, I got a text from an old friend. Bridger and I had known one another for a very long time, but we hadn't seen each other for years. We exchanged the occasional email or text, but that had been it, and I'd forgotten he lived in this town. Also...I hadn't told him I was moving here.

Instead of replying to his inquiry on *How you doing* via text, I hit the picture of the phone and called him. Two hours later, I was on the way to his home for dinner with him and his partner, Hudson.

Bridger opened the door and dragged me into a back-slapping hug. "Why didn't you tell me you were in town? We would have had you over sooner."

"Honestly, I forgot you were here. Until you sent that text. I was thinking I was all alone here."

"Still a workaholic?"

I flushed. “Even after all this time you know me too well. This is my first break in a while. What smells so good?”

He led me into the house and toward the kitchen from which the delicious smells emanated. “You probably haven’t had anything home cooked in five years.”

“That’s unfortunately not far from the truth. I hope you don’t regret having me over. I’ll probably be begging outside your door every night.”

“And we’d be glad to see you.” As we arrived in the kitchen, the other half of that “we” was tossing a salad in a big wooden bowl. “Hudson, this is my friend Clark who I’ve told you so much about.”

He carried the bowl to the table before turning to offer me his hand. “Glad to meet you. Sometimes I wonder if Bridger’s stories about that time of his life are fairy tales. He’s such a responsible guy.”

I arched a brow at my old friend. “We were all young once, but I think he was always on the responsible side. He was the one who kept us out of trouble more often than not.”

“You did, too,” he protested. “Sometimes I thought we were the only grown-ups in our group of friends.”

“And sometimes I wished I could just do what I wanted without thinking about the repercussions like the rest of them did.”

We both laughed because it was not the first time we had this conversation. Our friends weren’t that bad, but we were the ones who made sure everyone got home safely and nobody

did something they'd live to regret just in the name of a night of fun. Or as best we could.

What smelled so good was pasta carbonara, one of my favorites, and garlic bread. "Yes, I will definitely be peeking in your kitchen window at dinnertime," I said, pushing back in my chair after eating far too much. "Do you guys eat like this every day?"

"No." Hudson was stacking plates and silverware to carry to the sink. "Sometimes we eat chicken nuggets and macaroni and cheese."

"But I make them myself," Bridger said. "Usually."

"He hasn't mastered the shaped ones though. I am partial to the dinosaurs," Hudson said.

They teased one another about food and such for a few minutes, while I looked on in pleasure for my friend finding someone he obviously cared so much for and was so compatible with, and just a little envy.

"Where did you find him?" I asked when Hudson left for a moment to take a phone call. "I've never seen you so happy."

"I really am. He worked at a place where a group I belong to has some get-togethers."

"I'm glad for you. Both of you."

Hudson came back in. "Who's ready for pie?"

"I shouldn't. I might explode."

But of course I did. And they packed up leftovers for me as well. "For the poor single guy who doesn't get anything

good to eat,” Hudson said as he handed me the bag holding several plastic containers. “I know you were kidding, but you’re welcome anytime you want a decent meal.”

“Thanks.” I hugged them both. “And I’d like to return the favor, but I don’t really keep any food in the house. Maybe I could take you out to dinner sometime?”

“And maybe we can invite you to visit the club we belong to, Chained.” They beamed at me and waved before closing the door to their lovely and comfortable home.

They were glad to accept, and we made a plan to get together after the event when I could count on another free evening. As I drove home, I was surprised how much better I felt just having a friend in town. And how their happiness pointed out something I’d tried not to think much about. Loneliness.

About the Authors

By day, Della Cain writes sugary sweet with a dash of heat caregiver romances about littles and their daddies, pups and their masters, and everything in between.

By night, their life is a bit more tame. They enjoy baking, cute pens, stuffies, kawaii, oh, and of course puppies and kitties! Basically, anything that makes their heart happy while bringing a smile to their face.

Della hopes they give their readers that same warm-hearted feeling with each of their books...along with a naughty little tickle.

Kaytea Kat writes stories about adorable littles and their strong, protective daddies/caregivers that let them explore both sides of their relationship in whatever way makes them happiest. Even if it means there's lots of glitter to be cleaned up after a play session...or maybe especially those times.

She loves gardening and baking and watching old movies where love conquers all. Because she believes that it just might.