

## The Padded Palace Act III: Chapter 5

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With the minute hand sharply pointing upward and the hour hand in the opposite position, Connor stared at the pastel-colored clock in the nursery dreading life as the sound of three extra-hyper munchkins invaded his eardrums. Typically, six o'clock would mark the end of the working day, where he would get to wave goodbye to Stacy, Riri, and Ellie before enjoying a nice, relaxing weekend off. Tragically, that was not the case today as all six o'clock signaled that it was time to change out of their coveralls and dresses, and into the PJs they had brought from home.

Stomping over to the rocking chair where Connor was resting, Stacy placed a hand on her hip while pointing toward the door to the nursery with the other. "We not changin in front of chus," she said as she grabbed the sleeve of his button-up shirt and attempted to yank him up from his chair, though she lacked the adequate strength to pull off such a maneuver.

"Alright, alright, I can see when I'm not wanted," said Connor teasingly as he made his way out of the nursery, stopping as he reached the door, "You know, Stacy, it's nothing I haven't seen before."

"GET OUT!" shouted Stacy in response, grabbing a nearby plushy and chucking it at Connor, forcing him to flee to avoid being hit.

Placing her hands on her cheeks in shock, Riri scrambled to her feet and sprinted toward the door. "TUMBY!" she yelled, rushing to the aid of the stuffed animal that had been used as an impromptu projectile. Holding the stuffy in her arms, she turned to look at Stacy with watery eyes, "Don fwow fwens! Chus neesa apple-a-gize."

"Ish a pwushy, ish fine," said Stacy, rolling her eyes at Riri's genuine panic over the well-being of what to her was nothing more than an inanimate object.

Folding her arms around Tumby, Riri took in a big lungful of air before shutting her lips tight with her cheeks puffed out.

"What are you doing?" asked Stacy, annoyed but slightly amused by whatever Riri was up to. As the seconds began to tick by, though, she watched with growing concern as Riri's face took on a fainted blue hue, "What the...just breathe!" She placed her hands on either side of Riri's shoulders and shook her to no avail. Panicking, she said the only thing she could think of to make Riri stop. "Okay, fine, I'm sorry!"

Gasping for air, the color of Riri's face returned to normal. She smiled, wiggling her shoulder in victory. "Hehehe! I gots chus to say chus sowwy," she said, her mouth forming a very toothy smile.

"Dang Riri, you got Stacy to say sorry? I didn't even think she knew that word existed," said Ellie, not even trying to sound Little as she stood with her back turned to the others and pulled her green, t-rex footie pajamas up over her shoulders. Despite the incident with Connor and the caterpillar stuffy happening well before lunch was served, Ellie was still stewing over the

way Connor sided with Stacy, causing her to feel animosity toward the both of them. Even when Connor had her up on the changing table, she refused to make eye contact with him, let alone say anything.

Sighing, Stacy recognized that if tonight was going to go how she wanted it to, then she was going to need Ellie on her side. Having already humbled herself once with Riri, she decided to rip the bandaid off now rather than letting it slowly peel. With the alphabet caterpillar in hand, she traversed the length of the nursery and set it down next to where Ellie was changing. "I didn't mean to make chus sad. I hope chus can fowgib me," she said, strategically avoiding saying the "S" word so as not to concede more than she had to. If Stacy was anything, she was prideful.

Thankfully for the sake of friendship, Ellie didn't question the lack of a direct apology and decided to take whatever Stacy was willing to give her. Her lip quivered as she turned around and threw herself into Stacy's arms in a hug. Ellie may have been one to talk tough, especially when she felt slighted, but she was a big softie through and through.

Wrapping her arms around Ellie, Stacy was in no hurry to rush their embrace to an end, letting Ellie stay in her arms for however long she wanted. When Ellie finally broke from the hug, it was time for Stacy to go to work. She took hold of both of Ellie's hands and leaned into her ear, whispering something quiet enough so that Riri couldn't hear.

Giggling like the Little girl she was, Ellie nodded her head yes, agreeing to whatever Stacy had secretly asked of her. "Dis ish gonsa be a supa fun seep over," she said, her body radiating pure energy as she was too excited to contain herself.

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Folding the large pizza box in half, Connor shoved the grease-covered container into the garbage can before wiping the sweat off of his forehead with the back of his arm. "Goddess-damn, it's getting hot," he said, commenting on the over 100-degree garage that he was standing in. Thankfully, the sweet embrace of AC was waiting for him as he stepped back inside the house and shut the door firmly behind him, "Perfect! Now all I have to do is get the dryer going and I'm done with housework."

Jogging over to the washing machine, Connor popped it open and began depositing the damp clothing into the neighboring machine, doing his best to keep from fawning over the silky, frilly outfits. Over the past two months, his jealousy of the female sex had only grown stronger to the point where he dreaded removing his nighties every morning to put on his boring boy clothes. The material of his crew-neck t-shirts and blue jeans felt like sandpaper on his skin in comparison to the milky smoothness of silk and satin. Maybe he could convince Latasha to let him exchange his pull-ups for panties. Not every day but maybe once or twice a week.

\*Bzzzzzzzz! Bzzzzzzzz!\*

Suddenly, Connor's eyes were drawn to his jeans pocket, where his cell phone was buzzing loudly for his attention. Pulling his phone out, a warm smile crossed his face as he saw Latasha's name on the caller ID with the word, "Mommy," next to her name in parenthesis. "Hey, Latasha! You guys still on the road?" he asked, leaning casually against the washing machine.

“Hi, Connor! We’re just getting checked into the hotel right now. The line is ridiculous, though. I don’t think I remember AB DL conventions being quite this packed,” she said in a half-joking, half-serious tone, “How’s everything going with you? Is the Palace still standing?”

Snickering at the way Latasha could sprinkle sugar over even the most probing questions, Connor decided to keep a tight lip on how stressed he’d been working as a solo caregiver. Latasha was just starting her vacation, after all. The last thing he wanted was for her not to trust him again in the future. “Everything’s fine on our end. The girls are actually changing into their PJs as we speak,” he said, trying to avoid going into too much detail about the day’s events.

“Excellent! I knew you could handle it,” said Latasha, unaware of how she was amplifying Connor’s guilt over not being more forthcoming about how challenging handling Padded Palace duties on his own had been, “Glad to hear you haven’t had too much trouble with the three little piglets.”

Before Connor could respond, another voice came through Latasha’s end of the call, one he recognized instantly. “Mommy! Mommy! Ish ouw tuwn!” shouted Skye excitedly just loud enough for the phone’s speaker to pick it up.

“Hehe! I think you need to worry about your own little piglet right now,” said Connor, deciding not to keep Latasha’s Little girl waiting any longer for her Mommy, “We can talk more later when you have time. I should probably be getting back to the girls myself.”

“Sounds good, Connor! If I don’t call again tonight, I definitely will tomorrow,” said Latasha, her voice turning into more of a whisper-yell as her sentence neared its end, “Love you, Connie.”

Connor’s face instantly turned red hearing Latasha said his Little name so soothingly. “I love you too, Mommy,” he said, beaming with youthful energy as he said those endearing words. As the call came to an end, he placed his phone back in his pocket and quickly finished putting clothes in the dryer before rushing back to the nursery with an extra pep in his step. “Okay, girls! Are you all done changing?” he said, placing his hand over his eyes as he entered the nursery.

However, before anyone responded, Connor was impacted by a pair of grabby arms wrapping themselves around his body. “Hiya! I gotchu!” said Ellie, giggling as she squeezed Connor tightly.

Ellie’s actions were enough to cause Connor to remove his hand from his eyes as he looked down at the felt dinosaur that was attacking him. “Eeeep! Someone help! I’m being eaten alive!” he said playfully, throwing himself against the wall as Ellie continued to cling to his torso.

“Wuh chus fink of my nightie, Connow?!” shouted Riri, jumping up and down on her tiptoes as she stood happily in her sparkly, purple nightgown, which stopped just as it reached her butt, keeping her diapers exposed at all times.

Peaking overtop Ellie’s dinosaur hood whilst keeping her distant enough from his pelvic region so as not to rustle his pull-ups, Connor bit his tongue behind his endearing smile, doing

everything in his power not to feel envious of Riri's adorable outfit. "You look cute as can be, Riri," he said, transferring the blush that had previously filled his cheeks to Riri.

"Yeah! I love the look, Riri. Giving off real Target Exclusive vibes," said Stacy, doing nothing to disguise how back-handed her compliment was. Unlike Ellie and Riri, Stacy's sleepwear looked almost too normal, donning a simple, gray hoodie with no bottoms on to cover her bulbous diaper, "What about you Connor? Got any fun PJs you wanna show us?"

Knowing that Stacy was alluding to the pink pull-ups that were hidden under his jeans, Connor refused to drop the warm smile that he had given Riri, deciding to kill Stacy with kindness instead of barking back. "Sorry to disappoint. I typically just sleep in boxers," he said, his statement only slightly false since that was what he had previously worn to bed before moving in with Latasha. He quickly changed the subject, not wanting to dwell on his own wardrobe for too long, lest Stacy get any mischievous ideas, "Well, girls, the night is young. Do you three wanna snuggle up and watch a movie or maybe play a board game?"

Stacy and Ellie made eye contact for a brief moment, prompting Ellie to raise her hand. "I wanna pway hide n' seek!" she said, curling her lips inward to keep from chuckling like the naughty, scheming Little she was.

"Hmmm...I suppose a few rounds won't hurt! Hide and seek it is!" he said, smiling brightly as he thought nothing of Ellie's request, "You three go hide while I count to thirty."

TO BE CONTINUED...