

## The Padded Palace Act III: Chapter 3

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\*CLUNK!\*

A flock of birds chirped as they flew across the crisp morning air as Connor loaded up the last of Latasha and Skye's luggage and slammed the trunk door shut. "Okay, you should be all set to go. Do you wanna run over your checklist again?" he said, pretending to be wide awake despite the fact that his eyes kept drooping every few seconds.

"Going through the list a fourth time would definitely be overdoing it," said Latasha, chuckling at her own excessive thoroughness. She pulled Connor in for a hug, brushing the back of his hair and she held him tightly in her arms, "Oh wow, this'll be the longest I've been gone for the Palace in a couple of years now. Feels almost bizarre."

Leaning his head against Latasha's chest, Connor enjoyed the last moments of bliss with his secret Mommy, especially since he was going to be left alone hosting a slumber party for the triplets of terror. "Don't worry, everything will be fine back here, so go enjoy your diaper convention with Skye."

"Okay, but you promise me you'll call if anything goes wrong," said Latasha sternly, breaking from her hug momentarily to get a nod of understanding from Connor, "Ugh! I'm already missing you." She yanked Connor back into her arms without warning, smothering his face in between her boobs as she hugged his head.

Unfortunately, not all were as happy as Latasha was on an extra early Friday morning. Exiting the house with her My Little Pony backpack strapped to her back and a fresh diaper taped on under her multi-colored, pleated skirt, Skye scowled at the affectionate display that Connor and Latasha were putting on, having no energy for a poker face. Without acknowledging either her Mommy or her caregiver, she waddled around to the passenger side of the van and climbed into the backseat where her car seat was waiting.

"Uh oh, I think Skye's a little grumpy this morning," said Latasha, finally allowing air to re-enter Connor's lungs as she spotted her precious angel's pouty face in the corner of her eye, "Why don't you go say bye to her. I might cheer her up a little."

Scoffing lightheartedly at how diligent Latasha was, Connor responded, "You're never not in Mommy mode, are you?"

"Oh, I have my moments. I've just got eyes like a hawk. Nothing, especially a crabby Little, can get past my perfect peripherals," said Latasha, holding her hands up next to her eyes to mime a pair of side-view mirrors, "Now scoot, I need to grab my purse from the house anyhow." She swatted the back of Connor's pull-up, shooing him off in Skye's direction before running back into the house.

Sighing, Connor slowly rounded the van, trying to wake himself up enough to put on a sunny face for Skye. Much like the angsty girl in question, he too was far from a morning person. Ironically, he was a tad jealous that Skye would get to go back to sleep once the car got

moving. Meanwhile, he had to stay up and prep the nursery for the day without Latasha, which would be followed up by a full day of work and a sleepover to boot. Sliding open the van's backseat door, he put on the best warm expression he could muster. "What? No hug goodbye?" he said, holding his arms wide.

With her head back and her eyes shut, Skye scrunched up her face and groaned. She didn't want to open her eyelids, much less climb back out of the car, evident by the fact that she had already kicked her shoes off. However, the prospect of a hug from Connor was too good to pass up, no matter how tired still was. Hopping out of her car seat, she leaned out of the car and wrapped her arms around Connor's torso without saying a word.

"Aww, such a sleepy girl," said Connor, placing one arm around Skye to support her body while using the other to pet her hair, "You got Lyle with you, right?"

Nodding her head while still nuzzled up against his chest, Skye responded, "Uh huh! He's ridin shodgum." Breaking from the hug, she pointed to the front seat, where Lyle was sitting slumped over.

"Ooh, good call. Latasha's gonna need a navigator," said Connor, earning a playful giggle from Skye for his efforts. He helped Skye back into her seat and buckled her in before planting a kiss on her forehead, "Have a safe trip and make sure to keep Mommy safe, okay?" He offered his pinky to Skye.

Now wide awake thanks to the shot of energy Connor's hug gave her, Skye nodded her head again, this time much more enthusiastically. "I will, I pwomise!" she said, locking pinkies with Connor.

Glancing over at the crumpled lion plushy, Connor shook his head as he stepped away from Skye to open the passenger door. As he did so, he made an exaggerated gasp. "Lyle! You're not planning to ride in the front without a seatbelt on, are you?" he said, leaning inside the car and clipping on the stuffed lion's seatbelt while Skye squealed and giggled gleefully in the back, "There. Safety first, Lyle." He patted Lyle on the head as he shifted the plushies snoot over the waist belt.

"Aww, isn't this precious?" cooed Latasha, walking up behind Connor as he was fiddling with the strapped-in stuffy, "You giving me a front-seat buddy for the long trip? How sweet." She placed her hand against Connor's padded tushy, silently reinforcing his role in their relationship without tipping off Skye.

Connor's face turned as red as a fire engine as he remained crouched over the passenger seat. He cupped his mouth with his hand, keeping himself from making an embarrassing noise that Skye might overhear. He wanted to tell her that he was doing it for Skye but he knew he was far too flustered to address her casually.

Thankfully, Connor's salvation came when Skye spoke up to ensure credit was properly given. "I puts Lyle dere! He's gonsa be da shodgum! Connov was jus puddin on his seatbewt," she said, wiggling in her seat and puffing her chest out proudly as she awaited praise for her excellent decision making.

“Why, thank you, baby girl. I need someone to pick the tunes, after all,” said Latasha, shifting from Dommy to Mommy in the blink of an eye as she moved to the backseat to pepper Skye’s face with kisses, “Happy to see you’re in a better mood now. Ready to go have fun at CrissCon?”

Skye was practically bouncing out of her car seat to let Latasha know how excited she was. As anxious as she was to be gone from Connor and her home for the next few days, she was also elated to be going to her first convention in over two years.

Shutting both passenger side doors, Latasha clapped her hands together, fighting off the morning coffee jitters as she smiled at her dutiful employee. “Well done with Skye. It usually takes a long nap and some candy bartering to cheer her up on a super early day,” she said, patting Connor on the back, “You’ve really come into your own as a caregiver. Well, for the most part anyhow. I’ve definitely seen you have your anxious moments.”

Not wanting to admit that the vast majority of his nervousness at work was because Stacy was constantly reminding him of both his padding and the blackmail she had on him, he forced out a chuckle as he rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, sorry about that. I...probably just need to stop second-guessing myself is all,” he said, coming up with a generic excuse.

“That’s the spirit. Ooh! Let me give you the key,” said Latasha, reaching into her pocket and pulling out her ring of keys. She twisted the pink house key off the metal coil delicately, “Keep ‘er safe. She’s yours for the next three days and I expect to find her as I left her.” Her fingers clung to the key for a half-second too long as she passed it off to Connor. It was the first time she’d ever entrusted her house to someone else and her apprehension was obvious.

Doing his best to be reassuring, Connor responded, “You worry too much. Everything will be fine. You hired me so you’d be able to do stuff like this, didn’t you?”

“One, if you ever pay for your own mortgage someday, you’ll understand. And two, yes, weekends like this are exactly why I hired you,” said Latasha, stepping toward Connor and bringing him in for a big bear, “Thank you, by the way. I’m glad I have someone I can trust.”

“Me too,” said Connor, maneuvering his arms around Latasha’s waist while tightly held within hers. The way her arms forced him into such a low position made him feel unbelievably small in the best of ways. Leaning into her chest, he felt a rush of energy not too dissimilar to how Skye felt in his arms, almost as if her embrace gave him all the strength he needed to power through this weekend on his own. His face was practically glowing as the pair broke from their hug, setting both of them on the path toward a very unforgettable weekend, “Love you, Mommy. Have a safe trip.”

Ruffling his near-shoulder-length hair, Latasha replied, “I love you too, Connie.” It had been an interesting two months, for sure, but nothing filled her with more heartwarming bliss than hearing Connor call her Mommy so casually. That was their normal relationship now and she couldn’t have been happier. She pressed her face to his tangled hair, nuzzling against his soft curls. “Your hair is getting so long and fluffy. Bet that makes Baby Connie feel all fuzzy inside.”

The blush on Connor's cheeks was amplified to new heights. He couldn't deny that he loved the way longer hair softened up his facial features and tickled the back of his neck. As per usual, Latasha always had a way of locating and striking at his most vulnerable weaknesses.

\*HOOOOOONK!\*

Connor and Latasha both jumped as the car's horn brought an abrupt end to their hug. Leaning over the center console with her seatbelt unclipped at her side, Skye was mercilessly slamming her palm into the steering wheel as her way of asserting her disapproval of their lengthy embrace.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the way Latasha saw it. "Welp, I think I've kept Skye waiting for long enough," she said, snickering at what she perceived as nothing more than a Little's impatience.

"Better get a move on before she wakes up the whole neighborhood," said Connor, giggling alongside Latasha. The two shared one last brief hug before dashing to the driver's seat to put an end to Skye's ruckus.

Watching his Mommy wave goodbye as she and Skye drove into the distance, Connor felt a twinge of sadness in his chest. He hadn't been alone in quite some time and the energy of the house always cranked up to eleven with so many Littles running around. So, as he stepped back inside the house to find a completely quiet house, his heart ached a tad. At least he knew it wouldn't be long before the halls of the Palace were filled with the obnoxious voices of Ellie, Riri, and Stacy. Placing a pair of earbuds in and turning on some music, he got to work setting up for the girls to arrive, doing his best to distract himself from the quiet.

TO BE CONTINUED...