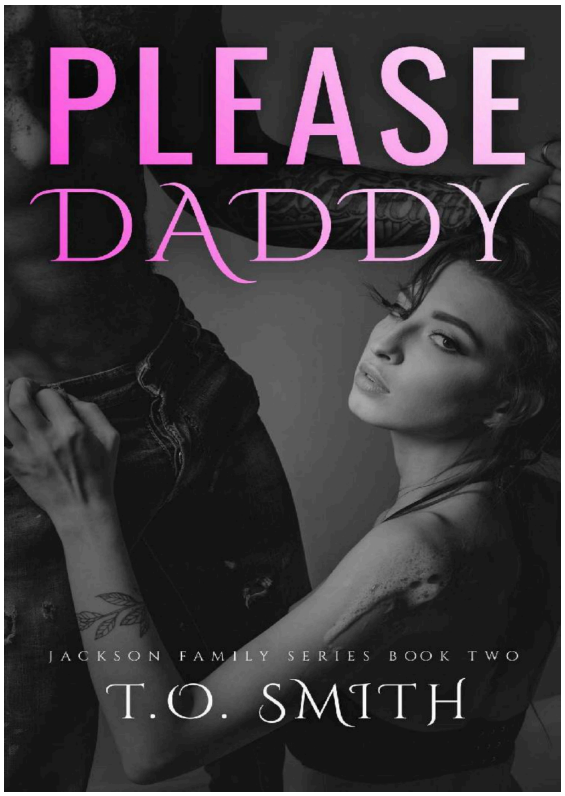


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One

DARREN

I leaned my head back against the seat, letting my tired eyes slide closed. It felt so good to finally be able to shut my eyes and relax, not having to constantly keep one eye open and stay on guard at all times, even in the dead of the night

James, my brother and head of the Family, was the first person to be notified of my release. Hell, he was notified before I was. So, when I was released from prison, he already had a car waiting on me outside with a driver, fresh clothes that would fit *way* better than my old ones, a phone with all important numbers programmed already, and a gun with two extra clips.

Even as a kid, I had always been able to rely on my older brother, and I was glad to see that hadn't changed while I'd been inside.

The phone that had been given to me suddenly blared in my lap. I pulled it up, glaring at the damn piece of technology, trying to figure out how the fuck you answered the shit.

In ten years, technology had advanced like a mother fucker.

"You put your finger on the green phone symbol on the screen and swipe, sir," the driver told me.

I glanced up at him. His eyes were flickering between the rearview mirror and the road. I'd been expecting pity, but there wasn't anything in his eyes, just as I knew James had made sure he was trained. The driver was just very matter of fact, trying to help someone who'd been locked away from society and all of its advancements for ten fucking years.

I did as he'd instructed and pulled the phone up to my ear. "What?" I grumbled.

James's laugh rang in my ear. "Happy to hear from you, too, brother," he sarcastically replied. I just grunted. "How far out are you? Emmaline is excited to meet you."

Emmaline was my brother's wife, making her the queen of the Family. I'd never met her, though they had been together for a while now. It was code that no one visited me while I was inside. I didn't even receive letters. I just got silent protection, and every once in a while, a guard who was part of the Family would let me know what was happening outside of the walls I'd been confined to.

"I don't know," I told him honestly. "Don't particularly care, either. Been stuck in confinement for fucking ten years, James. I'm just trying to enjoy the fact that I don't have to worry about someone slitting my throat because I let my fucking guard down."

He made a humming sound. "Understandable. Should have made our parents pay for that fucking mistake a lot sooner."

I stayed quiet. I knew both Mom and Dad were dead, but honestly, for me, there was no love lost there. For a while now, I'd had a gut feeling that Mom had been shady, and Dad was always off the fucking rails.

As far as I was concerned, James had done everyone a favor by getting rid of both of them. I was just sorry his wife had been at the center of all the chaos.

"Daddy!" I heard a kid scream in the background.

"Where's Mommy?" I heard James ask Carter, his son. I'd never imagined my brother as a dad. He'd never wanted kids, but I guess shit had a tendency to change when you ended up getting the woman of your fucking dreams.

And trust me, my brother was infatuated with his wife. I knew that much from the talk of new inmates. My brother had made Emmaline and their son untouchable.

I ignored my brother as he spoke to Carter, waiting for him to put his attention back on the call.

Looking around, I noticed we were nearing James's place. "Give me about three minutes, and I'll be pulling into the driveway," I told James.

We hung up a moment later, and I let my eyes close again, enjoying the sound of the tires moving over the asphalt of the

road. It was a sound I hadn't heard in so long, and honestly, I had missed it.

~*~*~

James was waiting near the front door when I walked inside the house. His wife was standing beside him, and his son was on his hip.

I quickly ran my eyes over Emmaline.

Fuck, my brother had gotten lucky.

Emmaline quickly took Carter from him, and James engulfed me in a brotherly hug, clapping me on my back. "Fuck, it's good to have you back home again, Darren," he told me. "And shit, what the fuck have they been feeding you in that fucking place?" he asked, laughter shining in his eyes as he ran his eyes over me.

I grinned, intentionally flexing my muscles. "When you don't have shit else to do but work out for ten years, you'd look like me, too," I told him. I turned my attention to the blonde beauty at his side, giving her a warm smile before I wrapped her up in my arms, pressing a kiss to her cheek. She blushed. The inmates hadn't been lying. She really was a sweet, innocent, little thing. "It's nice to finally meet you, Emmaline."

She tucked her hair behind her ear. "Likewise, Darren."

Carter put his hand on my chest. "Uncle Darren?" he asked.

Ah, so my brother and sister-in-law had spoken to the little guy about me.

"Yes, Uncle Darren," I told him, grinning at the boy. He was the spitting fucking image of James at that age, and it was slightly freaky.

He looked at James. "I like him," Carter bluntly spoke, making me laugh with my brother.

James ruffled his hair. "I know you do, kiddo." He took Carter from Emmaline and set him down. "It's time for lunch. Go," he ordered.

Carter took off running for the dining room, and a moment later, I heard Mrs. Judy scream in shock. James sighed and shook his head. “He has way too much energy,” he grumbled as he wrapped his arm around Emmaline, leaning down to press a kiss to the top of her head.

“Glad to see you finally settled down and happy,” I told James honestly. He deserved this.

He just shrugged, but the love he held in his eyes every time he looked at Emmaline spoke volumes.

I looked at my phone for the time, making a mental note to get a watch. “I need to eat something, and then, we can sit down and discuss what I need to do,” I told him. “I’m ready to get back into shit.”

James nodded, and the three of us walked towards the dining room. “Right now, I’ve got some paperwork you can look over.” I shot him a dark look. He only grinned. “But Adrian has a job to do tonight if you want to go with him.”

“How is that fucker?” I asked, mentioning one of our good, childhood friends.

“*That fucker*,” Adrian spoke up from behind us, “is just fucking dandy.”

With a grin, I turned to face him. We gave each other one-armed hugs, clapping each other on the back. “Good to have you back, man,” Adrian told me. “Tag along with me as much as you fucking want. After ten years, I’m tired of doing your shit,” he joked.

“I’ll gladly take my job back if you deal with the paperwork,” I told him. His mouth twisted in disgust at the thought, making me snicker.

We stepped into the dining room. Mrs. Judy looked up, her eyes brightening the moment they landed on me. She had been our nanny when we were little, and James had taken her in afterward, though Mrs. Judy refused to just live with him for free. So, she cooked and cleaned and helped keep other workers in line.

She rushed around the counter and launched herself into my arms. I laughed, leaning down to hug her as she started crying. “Boy, do not get your stupid ass sent to prison again,” she scolded, leaning back to swipe at her cheeks. “Ten years is way too long.”

I leaned down and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “I have no plans on going back ever again,” I promised her, and that was the damn truth. I’d rather kill myself first. “But do you mind feeding a starving man?” I teased.

She rolled her eyes, smacking my abs, though it didn’t affect me. “Like you’re starving,” she scoffed. “You’re huge, boy. Did you eat steroids in prison?”

I rolled my eyes at the same time James barked out a laugh. “No, Mrs. Judy,” I told her. “I had a lot of free time on my hands, so I worked out.”

She handed me a heaping bowl of chicken alfredo with a warm, motherly smile on her face. “Go sit down and eat, Darren, before your food gets cold.”

I saluted her, just barely jumping out of the way in time as she swung her towel out at me, but she was laughing. I turned and sat down at the table that everyone else was at. Carter was almost finished with his food, and his eyelids were beginning to droop.

“Almost nap time?” I asked.

Emmaline nodded. “Thank God, because I need a breather.”

James smirked at her. Her cheeks burned red under his heated gaze. I laughed and dug into my food, my stomach rumbling.

Fuck, I had really, *really* missed home-cooked meals. I probably missed it more than I had missed my damn freedom, to be honest.

~*~*~

James pushed open my office door and flicked on the light. My eyes widened in disbelief.

Someone had redecorated my office. I had all new furniture and what looked like top-of-the-line equipment that I already knew I was going to get pissed at when I tried to figure out how to work it all.

"Jesus Christ," I swore as I moved around the desk, staring at the computer in front of me. "The fuck am I going to do with all of this shit?" I asked.

James laughed. "You'll get used to it but thank Emmaline for all of the furniture. She wanted to make sure you would be comfortable when you finally got to come home."

I shook my head in disbelief. "Your wife is too damn good for you."

James shrugged. "I know." Thumbs up to the man. He hadn't even tried denying it.

James and I had never pretended to be better than we were. Even though we were rich, highly feared, and had more connections than the fucking President himself, we also knew we were no better than the next low-life piece of shit.

But his wife was pure fucking gold.

I could only *hope* to find a woman as amazing as she was one day.

I blew out a soft breath. "I'll fuck with all of this fancy shit some other time." James snickered when I cast the equipment a look of distaste mixed with hatred. "I need to run out and get a few things and also get my license again. What time is Adrian leaving?"

"Nine," James informed me. "Make sure you're armed when you leave," he said, striding towards the door. "And don't call me unless it's a fucking emergency. I've got an appointment with my wife."

I rolled my eyes, watching as my older brother walked out of my office. Shaking my head, I grabbed the keys that had been left on a hook by the door and locked my office, heading out to the garage to see which vehicle was mine. I knew my brother well enough to know that he would have traded in my old car and gotten me something else as a welcome home gift.

It just better not be a fucking SUV. I needed a fast, small vehicle that I could easily whip around and maneuver. Ten years ago, I'd been drowning in dead bodies, enemies, and bullets. I lived for the adrenaline, and I knew that wouldn't be any different now.

I enjoyed getting my hands dirty.

And I needed the equipment to be able to do that.

When I stepped into the garage, I hit the panic button, grinning at the fancy-ass sports car that sounded off.

I could always count on James to come through for me.

I slid into the driver's seat and backed out of the massive garage, heading to the DMV. First, I needed to get my license. After that, I could get a watch, buy some new clothes, do this job with Adrian, and then head to my brother's BDSM club – all in that order.

I hadn't had pussy in fucking *years* – only the company of my hand – and I *badly* needed a release.

Two

“Jesus Christ,” Adrian swore as I slowly slit the man’s throat, his blood coating my hands. I watched with a sick, twisted grin on my face as his eyes slowly rolled back in his head and the life left his eyes. “I forgot how fucked up you are in the head.”

I laughed and walked over to the sink to wash my hands and clean and disinfect my knife. “How the fuck do you think I’ve survived the last ten damn years in prison?” I asked him. “It wasn’t because I was a nice guy.”

Adrian scoffed. “I fucking know that, dickwad.” I quietly laughed. “Besides, what the hell *have* you been doing for the past ten years?”

“Taking care of hits.” I shrugged. “One of the guards would let me know when James needed something done, and I took care of it. Everyone else turned a blind fucking eye to it all.” Sometimes, it was easy to forget that once I went inside, the family wasn’t notified about anything I was doing. All everyone knew was that I was alive.

It was our life. You went inside, and you became secluded from everyone and everything you’d ever known in more ways than one.

Adrian shook his head, shoving his hands in the pockets of his slacks. “I should have known you were doing some fucked up shit while you were inside.”

I shrugged. “Wasn’t as fun as this, though,” I admitted, leaning my back against the counter as I dried my hands on a towel. “In prison, you’ve got to do shit quickly and quietly, can’t play around.”

Adrian made a disgusted sound in the back of his throat. “I’ll never understand how you’re the more demented one out of you and your brother.” He shook his head.

I grinned at him as I slid my knife back into its case on my hip. “James was always the one with the brains for this shit. I’ve got the brawn.”

Adrian cut me a dark look. “He’d kick your ass if he heard you say that.”

I rolled my eyes. James had the head for the business side of our family; I didn’t.

“I don’t have the patience for the shit that James deals with on a daily basis,” I reminded Adrian as we walked past the guys cleaning up the mess I’d made. “I like to be in the shadows, doing the dirty work that most other people don’t want to do. It’s always been like that for us, even as kids.”

Adrian sighed, striding towards his SUV as I walked towards my sports car. “Don’t get pulled over on your first day out, Darren.”

I laughed. “I’ve got my license.”

He just rolled his eyes and shut the door. As soon as he was rolling out of the lot, I scrubbed my hands down my face and got in my car, calling my brother.

“You better be glad I wasn’t busy,” he rumbled.

I rolled my eyes, though he couldn’t see me. “As if you’d answer if you were balls deep inside of your wife.”

“Watch yourself,” he warned me, an edge to his words. When it came to Emmaline, he was very particular about how anyone spoke of her and anything they did together.

Never thought I’d see the day that my brother was head over heels for a woman – especially one as sweet as Emmaline.

I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel as I pulled onto the empty, deserted road. “You still allow family into your club?” I asked him.

“What’s mine is yours, brother,” he reminded me. “Don’t call and ask me something stupid like that again.”

With that, he hung up the call. I scowled at the screen for a moment before focusing back on the road. James could be a dick when he wanted to be. I knew that would never change.

Wouldn’t have it any other fucking way, though.