

Twelve Months to a Better Life
December 2023 – Prologue

Trigger Warning: Depression, suicide

"Jayden, you know what? You're a fucking mess."

Tell me about it. He stared, unseeing, into the denim nothingness of his lap. Saying nothing. Feeling nothing. Thinking nothing – nothing except the bleak truth of his wife Erica's words.

The seconds dragged by. The silence in their little living room grew, punctuated now and again by the quiet shuffling and rustle of the three women seated around him. They were worried about him, they'd said. They refused to give up on him. They knew he needed help, and they were here to give it. But what help could they possibly offer him?, he wondered distantly. Him, a guy who had been fucked up – and done nothing but fuck up – since he was born?

"Erica." It was the therapist – Shannon, he seemed to remember – and as her voice cut the silence it was as if he could breathe once more. "Look, I know you're upset. And Jayden, maybe you think she's right. But calling each other messes isn't going to help us find a way forward." She paused, and if Jayden had dared to glance up he might have seen the dark-haired therapist leaning forward earnestly. "So instead of focusing on that, let's take a step back and simply go over what has happened, shall we?"

Oh, god. Here we fucking go.

"Um, sure! Great idea, Miss Silverman." It was Natalia, the curvy and effusive doctor whose long chestnut hair was done up in a grey-streaked bun. "Well, for my part it's simple. Erica called me up two nights ago – around ten, I think – and said something was wrong with her husband. I came over right away, of course, and found him unresponsive. On this very couch, in fact. My preliminary examination..."

She halted abruptly, then flashed an apologetic smile around the room. "Never mind I won't go into all the medical jargon. He, um, well. I found he had swallowed *many* more pills than are good for him. I told Eric we'd have to call in the ambulance, and, well. That was that. Thanks to a bit of quick work we got the meds out of his system, and it seems he's doing better. You *are* still feeling okay, Jayden?"

He nodded twice. Silently. Trying not to groan at how idiotic it all made him sound. God, he was so fucked up, he couldn't even manage to take himself out-

"Well, thank goodness for that!" In cut Shannon again with a breezy little attempt at a chuckle. "Now, for my part. Obviously, I only came in later. You called me up just yesterday, Erica, right? And of *course* I said I'd come over and listen to what's been going on. Anything for my college roomie, you know!"

She chuckled again, then grew sober. "Real talk, though. I know it's not easy, what you two have been struggling with. Something's clearly been going on with you two. So Erica, Jayden? We're going to need both of you to open up and tell us your side, okay? Can you do that for us? Erica... can you start?"

"Sure." Erica's eyes were troubled, her posture rigid as she glanced first at her silent husband and then at her two female companions. "Well, then. Natalie's already said how we, um, found him. And got him to the hospital, you know. But then there's so much other stuff. Things I discovered just yesterday..."

Oh, fucking hell. Did he honestly have to sit through all of this torture?! But Jayden couldn't muster up the guts even to get up, much less to leave the room. They'd talk about it anyway. Might as well listen to what a fucking loser-ass pervert he truly was.

"A lot of stuff," Erica sighed, and now she was leaning backward, crossing her arms in her chair. "All piled together in trash bags in our garbage bin. I don't even know what some of the stuff is. But some of it's like, adult diapers? Big onesies for adults. And some, I dunno, bondage gear, or something?"

She heaved another sigh, whether in disapproval or exasperation Jayden couldn't tell. "That's when I checked the credit card statement. Turns out there's, like, *hundreds* of dollars worth of charges to weird-sounding places I have no idea about. All I can figure is that he's been blowing money on this stuff, and then... what? Just throwing it away? But why? I've asked him, but he just refuses to even *look* at me..."

"And that's not all." She glanced first at Natalia, and then at Shannon. "I don't like digging through his stuff, you know. But after he did this... well, I found his laptop password. And turns out he's got all kinds of weird porn on there. Mostly of guys and women all dressed up like baby girls. You know, diapers and pacifiers and frilly dresses and- and everything."

Her voice was shaking now, the sense of betrayal and hurt vibrating in every syllable. "So I honestly don't know what to think. Shannon, you said it's an actual sex thing, right? Really? Please, *please* don't tell me I married a pedophile..." Her voice broke, and she struggled for a moment to regain her composure. "I don't want to judge, really. I just... It's just that what hurts me most is that he didn't tell me *any* of this. Not a fucking *word*, over these past seventeen years..."

Her voice was stronger now, and full of hurt and anger. "Jayden, just... Why? Why couldn't you tell me any of this? I- I thought we had something- a marriage- love-" She broke off again, but before she could resume, Shannon cut in with her calming voice. "Erica... Erica, thank you. It sounds like you're feeling a lot. It's only natural for you to feel this way. And Jayden, I'm sure this all must be hard for you, too..."

As Shannon continued to speak, the room slowly seemed to thaw. It was understandable, she said. This thing for diapers was definitely a kink, almost bordering on a sexual orientation. It wasn't anything like pedophilia. Folks often struggled with shame and self-loathing. There was something called a binge-purge cycle, in which some people would throw themselves into their taboo play and then come to hate it all shortly thereafter, throwing out everything they'd gotten...

Erica was nodding along in growing understanding. "Jayden, is that right? Is that what's been going on?" In the moment, and awash in the unprecedented sense that someone had finally understood his real self, he could only shiver and nod in silent, shameful acknowledgment. "Jayden?" He nodded again.

"Oh... okay then. Umm... wow."

"Erica, Jayden, I've got a question." Shannon was speaking again now, strong and confident. "I know you don't want to talk much right now, Jayden. But would you two be okay with us getting that laptop? I have an idea – if it's okay with you two..." Jayden stiffened instinctively. *Oh, fuck- they wanted to see it ALL? His stash? Those hundreds and hundreds of photos of his deepest fantasies?!* And yet, even as he opened his mouth to break silence, the protests died away in his throat. They already knew, right? So what? It wasn't like it could get much worse...

And so he nodded once more.

"Jayden..." Shannon's voice was kinder than ever when, three small eternities later, she'd finished calling up what she wanted on onscreen. "Jayden, I know this might feel embarrassing, but just

trust me, okay? I see this folder here – am I correct in saying you were the one who labeled it "My Dream"?

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck why the hell did I fucking call it that my fucking god I cant believe im so stupid-

He nodded. While his gut churned in self-loathing.

"I'm going to need you to take a look at just a few of these images, okay? It's just a simple thing, I promise. I'd like you to tell me if what's going on in these pictures is what you wish would happen to you. All you have to do is nod or shake your head. Is that okay?"

And so it was that the images of his most heated fantasies now flashed before his shame-filled eyes – literally. A helpless woman: ball-gagged, bound in a straitjacket, diapered, and cuffed within a giant crib. Next, a young man in a onesie and locking mittens, pinned on a massive changing table while two laughing nurses taped a diaper around him. A topless and diaper-clad woman, staring pleadingly into the camera from behind the bars of a crib and the massive shield of her pacifier. Another young man: this one decked out in an babyish, frilly party dress and a massive pink diaper, held snugly across the lap of a smiling woman whose other hand was simultaneously forcing a massive baby bottle of milk deep into his mouth. And on and on...

"I think we've seen enough." At last Shannon glanced at Erica, who was staring in a mixture of curiosity and disgust at the screen. "Jayden, just tell me yes or no. Is this really your dream? To be dressed up and treated like a baby girl? Perhaps even tied up and forced to do whatever a woman wants?"

It was the hardest nod of his life. But he did: silently. Bleakly. Hoping for nothing but the end of this horrifying debacle.

"There's nothing wrong with that, you know," Natalia cut in, and in her voice was a lilting smile. "Right, Shannon? I've always understood that fantasies are just fantasies, and as long as no one's getting hurt, it's all okay. Isn't it?" "Exactly," Shannon rejoined, and now she was folding the laptop and setting it aside. "So, Erica, I hope you can understand now a bit better why Jayden didn't want to tell you. In his place I'm sure you wouldn't want to either, right? Dressing like a baby and getting dominated by a woman is *super* taboo for- well, not just guys. For society as a whole. When you've got such ingrained toxic masculinity, we have to expect that-"

She cut herself off abruptly. "Oh, never mind. That's another topic for another day. What I want to

ask now is one final, simple question..." She trailed off, and with such a pregnant pause, even Jayden found himself darting a quick, nervous glance upward. What on earth was she about to ask now?

"Who wants to make Jayden's dream come true?"

A stunned silence fell. Then, a snort of something like incredulous mirth from Erica. "What? You- you can't be serious. You just said that it – all that stuff – it's just a *fantasy*..."

"And look where that's gotten us," Shannon rejoined, with a meaningful glance in Jayden's direction. "When we can't explore what our real self wants, we end up carrying a huge weight of shame: hating who we are, wishing we could be "normal" – whatever that is..." She paused. "And, yeah. When that festers for years and years... well, it can take us to some pretty dark places."

Erica's lips parted... then closed again. Her shock and disgust was past now, replaced by a look of tired pleading. "Look, I just want Jayden to be happy. I don't know what that means for him anymore, and I don't know what it will take. I just don't- I don't want us to have to go through this ever again..."

"And you won't – not if this works as I think it will." Shannon was leaning forward once more, her every syllable ringing with conviction. "Natalia, I'll need to talk the specifics through with you, of course. And Erica, we'll need to discuss what you're willing and able to do. But it's my firm belief that within a year – maybe less – we can actually give Jayden what he needs. We can help you both transition into a lifestyle in which he gets the treatment he so desperately needs."

What. What the actual heck? Was he hearing things right? Jayden was no longer sure. The tears, so long held back, were stinging his eyes now. His mind was awl with Shannon's words: *What he wants. The treatment he needs.* Was this just some dolled-up form of therapy? Or were they literally offering to turn his kinkiest dreams into... into *reality*? No – no, he must be imagining things again...

The long-pent-up sobs broke at last from his lips. And all he could manage, as the storm of his own pain and fear and self-loathing swept over him, was a single garbled plea, over and over.

"Please. Oh, please, just do it. Do it, please, please..."

(To be continued!)