

Tiny

I ducked my head and turned slightly sideways as I stepped through the door of the large warehouse, a habit born from years of door frames too small for my frame. The club had renovated the structure several months ago because the club's old ladies demanded the place be secured for their new project. The shelter only accepted horribly abused women deemed high risk for retaliatory violence from their abusers. We'd started calling the shelter Haven. The girls all did their best to make it a haven. It also meant men with my size weren't exactly welcome.

I smelled fresh coffee when I stepped inside, a stark contrast to the leather and exhaust fumes that clung to my clothes. Inside, the few conversations stuttered to silence as heads turned my way. The newer people stared at me with wide eyes and a touch of fear. I was used to it. Nearly seven feet tall, shoulders wide as a doorway, with a mohawk and a beard you could lose a small animal in, I never entered a room without changing its atmosphere.

Violet spotted me from across the common area and waved me over with an enthusiastic smile. I moved carefully, each step measured, making myself as predictable as possible. Prison taught me how to move without threatening, how to exist in a space where sudden movements could get you shanked. Also taught me how to use my size to every advantage I could. Here, those same skills served a different purpose.

"Tiny, I'm glad you could make it," Violet said, her voice warm but pitched just loud enough that others nearby could hear. Deliberate. Showing them I was expected and approved of. Safe.

"Knight asked me to check the security systems," I replied, keeping my voice soft. When you're my size, everything about you can intimidate, even your voice. Especially when there were young children around. It's why I played Santa at Christmas. It helped the kids associate me with Santa so when they saw me out and about, they remembered. At least, that was my theory. It had worked pretty well last year, but the very nature of this place meant the kids didn't stick around long. Though, I was pretty sure the old ladies had invited every mother and child who'd come through this place in the last year to the Christmas party.

As I headed to the back of the big room where the security office sat nestled off to itself, I noticed three new faces huddled on the worn sofa near the window. A woman in her mid to late twenties with light brown hair and hazel eyes sat in the corner with a book while the girls played quietly on the floor with LEGOs. All three glanced up as I neared the office door.

The girls, though they appeared to be twins, had very different stances. One with fists clenched, shoulders squared, stood to put herself slightly in front of her sister. The other girl reached for a threadbare stuffed rabbit with one missing eye, clutching it to her tightly.

I recognized the signs as clearly as if they'd been written in neon. The way the woman's eyes darted to the exits, how she stood slowly, not making any sudden moves, to put herself between me and her daughters.

"This is Penny and her daughters, Zelda and Kira," Violet said, gesturing toward them. "They arrived a few days ago. Penny, this is Tiny. He's with the same club Riot's with. They provide security for us here."

I nodded once, not approaching. "Ma'am."

The woman, Penny, gave me a tight smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. It was the smile of someone who'd learned to hide her true emotions.

"Tiny helps maintain our security system," Violet continued, her voice still carrying that deliberate lightness. "And he sometimes escorts our residents when they need to go to appointments or court dates. Tiny is an amazing friend to have in those kinds of situations."

"Yes," Penny whispered. "I imagine he is."

I thought Violet would move with me to the office where we could talk. Instead, she sat on the other end of the couch from Penny. There were two more couches in the area arranged in the shape of a U. Normally, I'd take a seat as far away from the women as I could, but I'd still be at a distinct height advantage even sitting down. So, I sank to the floor, sitting cross-legged with my back against the couch.

The change was immediate. I watched Penny's shoulders relax. The girl unclenched her hands, giving me a curious look. From my position on the floor, I was still eye level with most people standing, but the psychological difference mattered.

"Knight and I updated the cameras last week," I said to Violet, keeping the conversation normal, mundane. "But he thought one on the east side might have a small blind spot."

Violet nodded, following my lead. "That's the one near the service entrance, right? I noticed it seemed off when I checked the monitors yesterday."

As we talked, I kept my peripheral vision on the small family. Though Zelda had relaxed somewhat, she still kept a wary gaze on me. Kira watched me with cautious curiosity now. She clutched her rabbit tighter, its worn fabric testament to years of comfort sought.

Then it happened. The rabbit slipped from her grasp, falling to the floor and bouncing once before settling a few feet from where I sat. The girl froze, eyes wide with alarm.

I didn't move immediately. Instead, I telegraphed my intentions clearly. "Would you like me to get your friend for you, Kira?" My voice was soft as I addressed her directly.

The girl looked to her mother, who gave a barely perceptible nod. Only then did I slowly unfold one long arm, reaching for the toy. I kept my movements smooth and deliberate, picking it up with the gentlest grip I could manage.

I didn't extend it toward her -- that would force her to come to me. Instead, I leaned over, stretching as far as I could, and placed the rabbit gently on the floor halfway between us, then returned to my original position.

"Thank you," the woman, Penny, said when her daughter didn't speak.

The moment crashed into me like a wave, dragging me back fifteen years. My sister Julie, sixteen and broken, flinching from every raised voice after what that bastard did to her. The way she'd curl into herself when men came near. The stuffed horse she'd kept since childhood that she clutched at night when she thought no one would see.

The same stuffed horse that had been torn to pieces the day I came home and found her hurt and half dead.

I blinked away the memory. That had been the worst night of my life. I think it hurt just as bad as when she died a few days later.

"Tiny's road captain for the club. He also helps with security both here and at the clubhouse." Violet spoke to Penny and her voice pulled me back to the present. "He's been instrumental in setting up our security systems here."

I shifted uncomfortably at the praise, my vest creaking again with the movement. I understood why Violet was doing it. These women needed to know I wasn't a threat, but praise had never sat well with me. Not before prison, and certainly not after. "Just trying to help," I mumbled, examining the tattoo on my forearm to avoid meeting anyone's eyes.

"Tiny volunteers for most of the escort duties when our residents need to go to court," Violet continued. "He's been a huge help to many of the women who've passed through here."

I glanced up to find Penny studying me with a careful gaze. Not fearful anymore, but assessing. I recognized that look too. She was recalculating, reshuffling whatever assumptions she'd made when I first walked in. No doubt because she knew Violet had a point. I was a big fucker. The intimidation factor alone was generally enough to keep unwanted people at a distance.

“Good to know.” Penny spoke softly, almost timidly. I got it and wasn’t insulted. I didn’t know their story, but to be here in the first place, there had to be some pretty horrific details.

The smaller girl had reclaimed her rabbit by now, holding it against her chest as she whispered something into its tattered ear. For just a moment, our eyes met, and I saw something there that squeezed my chest tight. Not fear, not anymore. Something closer to recognition.

I knew that feeling. The paradox of finding safety with someone who looked like they could crush you with one hand. I’d seen it in the eyes of younger inmates who gravitated toward me in Terre Haute, seeking protection in my shadow. It was a burden I carried willingly, both inside those walls and now here, in this shelter with its mismatched furniture and reinforced doors. I wasn’t an overly religious person, but I’d always felt God put me on this earth with my size and strength to be a protector. It had started with my sister. Now I did my best to continue as much as I could. It took a while, but I could usually prove that sometimes safety came in unexpected packages. Like a giant with a mohawk and prison tattoos, sitting cross-legged on the floor to avoid scaring a little girl and her stuffed rabbit.

That’s when I noticed the small movement at the edge of my vision. Kira, the girl I’d handed back her stuffie, had moved in my direction. The stuffed rabbit dangled from her hand as she took one cautious step in my direction, then another. Penny was distracted, talking with one of the shelter staff, but her sister had noticed. Zelda’s eyes narrowed and I could almost see the fierce protective instinct that sometimes rode me, too, envelop her. She stood but didn’t immediately hurry our way.

I remained perfectly still, not wanting to spook either of them. The girl’s approach reminded me of how stray cats would sometimes appear at the prison fences, wary and ready to bolt at the slightest provocation, but driven by some need stronger than fear. She stopped several feet away, her small fingers working nervously at the rabbit’s worn fabric. Up close, I could see the careful stitches where someone had repaired a seam, the worn spot where fur had been loved away. A well-tended comfort object. Someone cared enough to keep fixing it.

“His name is Mr. Hoppers,” she said, voice barely audible. The first words she’d spoken in my presence.

I nodded solemnly, giving the introduction the gravity it deserved. “Good name.”

She studied me with an intensity that belied her age. Not the fearful assessment I was used to, but something different. Searching. Her eyes tracked from my hands to my face, then back to my hands again.

“You have big hands,” she observed.

“Yes.”

“But you were careful with Mr. Hoppers.”

I understood then what she was doing. Testing a theory. “I try to be careful with things and people smaller than me.” I shook my head slowly. “I don’t like hurting people.”

Her head tilted slightly. “My dad has big hands too. But he breaks things.”

The simple statement hit me like a punch to the gut. I kept my expression even, though something hot and angry flared in my chest. “Some men don’t know how to be careful.”

She nodded as if I’d confirmed something important. Then, with deliberate care, she extended her arms, offering me the rabbit. The trust in that gesture staggered me. I held perfectly still, afraid that any movement might shatter this fragile moment. Then, with the same care I’d use handling a newborn, I accepted the offering, cradling the worn toy in palms that could crush a man’s skull.

“He likes you,” she said with the conviction of absolute certainty.

“I’m honored,” I replied, meaning it more than she could know.

That’s when I saw it, the recognition in her eyes. Not of me specifically, but of something in me that felt safe despite appearances. I’d seen the look often but this was the first time I could say someone making that judgment had the right of it. I could be deceptively calm. Until I wasn’t. But not with this girl. Or anyone here seeking shelter.

The moment stretched between us like a bridge, this strange connection forged in the quietest of gestures. I gently returned Mr. Hoppers to her waiting hands, and she clutched him close again, a half-smile ghosting across her face.

Then the spell broke when the very kind of man this little girl had been running from just walked into the Goddamned foyer.

“Let me in, you little bitches! I know she’s in there!” The male voice exploded from outside the main area but still inside the warehouse, followed by the sound of something hitting the front door hard enough to rattle the windows. I wasn’t certain how he’d gotten in but I knew at least two of the brothers wouldn’t be far behind him.