**The Pool Girl**

by Leto Armitage

**Chapter 10**

Days passed and the fourth arrived. I found myself in the hotel room. It was a corner penthouse suite that overlooked the city. It wasn’t dark yet so I knew it would be a while before fireworks started. I had picked La Granier for two reasons. One, I had asked a friend who worked here if it would have a style that would impress a girl. Looking around I felt like I was in one of those fancy hotels that the gentleman thieves always use in heist movies. I hoped the girls would be impressed. The bill had certainly impressed me. On the rare occasions that I traveled I used Holiday Inns. The second reason was that I did try to make my way here about once a year to eat at the restaurant in the lobby, Ferme.

Leaving my night bag still packed I made sure I had my key with me and headed to the elevator. The hotel used some kind of short-range encrypted Bluetooth embedded in a physical key for that bit of old-world ambiance with modern technology. Keys were waiting for Melissa and Lavi at reception and I had texted them that they would need to show IDs to pick them up. The staff hadn’t even blinked at my request to have the keys picked up by two young ladies but I suppose that was another reason to pay these prices.

I walked into the restaurant and looked around. As I expected, even in a nice pair of slacks and a dress shirt, I lowered the average wardrobe cost by several digits. Standing at the maître d’ podium was a tall balding man with a severe face that made me think of a buzzard. I shouldn’t have been surprised to not recognize him but I had been expecting Phillipe, the old maître d’ though he had been well past retirement age.

“Hi.” I nodded to the fellow. “I made arrangements by email this morning. Robert Carlo.”

He looked blankly at me. “I’m sorry sir, you must have the wrong establishment. I take the reservations myself and we do not do any kind of... “ He looked distraught to even consider it, “online reservations. We don’t have any tables.”

I took an immediate dislike to this guy. I probably could have been more clear but now I wanted to return the favor and irritate him a bit. “Oh, I can just eat in the kitchen.”

“I ... I don’t know what makes you think...” he stammered only making a superficial effort to not be disdainful.

“I’m sure Helene won’t mind. She’s the one who told me I had a table.”

“Hel ... you mean Madame Latroude!?”

“Helene. I could call her or Mikal but since they’re probably both cooking I doubt they have their phones on.”

That was the moment when Herman walked by. Herman had been a waiter here longer than I had known Helene. He was an amiable and unflappable fellow who complained that he was getting fatter every year because of having to taste Helene’s menus.

“Monsieur Carlo!” Wow, he was loud, most of the restaurant turned to look. I took his extended hand and shook it.

“Herman, it’s a pleasure.”

“Why are you standing here, let us get you a table!”

“There is no table available.” That was the maître d’. “He claims to have made an online reservation.” The world ‘online’ was stressed to indicate it should be scrapped off a shoe and put into the rubbish bin instantly.

“No, I said I made arrangements. I emailed Helene and she said to come on down.”

Herman threw his hands up. “Then it is settled!”

“There are no tables!”

“Phaw, he can eat at the break table in the kitchen, now make yourself useful and get a bottle of the 2007 Black Coyote Reserve Cabernet. It’s sweetness and cherry hints will go perfectly with the meal.”

The taller man stared down at Herman and threatened death with a glare. “You work for me, do not presume!”

As if reading my mind Herman said with a laugh in his voice, “You can find a cathedral to perch upon and practice that on your own time. But, I work for Helene and if you want to interrupt her cooking to scold me for taking care of her friend you are welcome to. Now, wine. Scoot!”

With that he turned his back on the maître d’ and as I felt left out of the exchange I added. “I haven’t had the 2007 but it sounds wonderful.” I then followed Herman. Through the unobtrusive doors, we went from soft lighting to a blindingly bright kitchen with half a dozen people moving in quiet symmetry. I have seen cooking shows with chefs who scream and yell across a kitchen. But this was a small restaurant and Helene trained her staff to work like bees always aware of what each other needed to do. They spoke in casual tones and raised their voices only the amount needed to be heard. I knew that Helene was demanding of each one though. As I entered I earned a short wave from Helene who was indeed working. I sat at the simple plastic table in the corner that the kitchen staff ate at as time allowed.

Once we were out of the earshot of customers, Herman said, “You must forgive him. As my grandfather said, there are men who spend so much time with their noses in the air they can not smell when they step in turds.”

“If that’s the best you can do for a front of the house, maybe you should take the job.”

Herman reeled back in mock offense. “My dear Robert. If you insist on suggesting that I get a real job I’m afraid we can no longer be friends.” With a smile, he walked out. A few minutes later another waiter brought in an opened bottle and a glass.

“From the maître d’ with his regards.” He was grinning.

“I’m sure,” I said as I took them. I poured a glass and let it breathe for a few minutes before sipping. It really was good. Within moments a line chef I didn’t recognize showed up with a simple apple tart, a classic. It was only semi-sweet, awakened my taste buds and went perfectly with the wine. Next was a pair of baked chicken legs with mushrooms and wild rice, understated but showing the perfect moistness and flavor of the chicken. The mushrooms were in a thick wine sauce and tasted of damp earth on spring mornings. Damn amazing. Asparagus on the side was good but seemed like a secondary thought though prepared immaculately. Finally, not ice cream but a shaved ice with a homemade flavoring distilled from apple cider and it was cool and perfect and made me think of sitting outside on a summer day. It was served with coffee to drink, a cappuccino that took the edge off the sweetness while mixing caramel notes with the apple in the shaved ice.

I ate it all, and it put me in a calmed mood. I was nursing the cappuccino when Helene finally came over, a bowl of soup in her hand. The kitchen had slowed down and I saw several of the cooks drinking water and checking their phones. Helene was a thick woman, not fat but built solidly and thickly. She was originally from Paris but had lived here three decades and spoke perfect if accented English. I rose as she approached and kissed her cheeks.

“Helene, you are a treasure for the world. Still only one Michelin star? You should have two.”

“My grandfather said to be careful of bullshitters whose words smell like roses.” She smiled as she started on her soup.

“Between you and Herrman I get the impression that French grandfathers have a lot of sayings that involve excrement.”

She shrugged. “They do but I don’t think they actually ever say them until they have grandchildren to be an audience. Mine bribed me with sweets.”

“Well, I don’t know about Michelin stars but this is amazing. I always feel inspired by eating with you.”

She made a snorting sound while taking another spoon of soup. “You are a good cook but you tie your own hands by not going out more. Traveling and eating are mana of the soul for a chef.”

“I’m not a chef, just a cook. I’m more like your nana who never left the farm.”

“Ah my nana, lord rest her soul. You would have loved her cooking.”

“I can taste echoes of it in yours. Your best dishes make me think of a big family table and dinner served in huge servings.”

“When I got my first magazine cover I showed it to Nana. Do you know what she said?”

“No.”

“She said, why do you have such little things on such a big plate? Whose belly is that going to fill?”

“A wise woman.”

“So ... that brings me to my question. You’ve eaten my food, you are at my table, are you ready?”

I looked at her blankly. “Uh...”

“Her!” Helene’s face animated brightly. “Who is she? What woman would cause you to email me out of the blue and ask about romantic suites at the hotel? Why is she not here with you? You are blushing! Mon Dieu! I have to prepare for a wedding, how much time do I have?” Her soup was forgotten and she was talking with her hands making wide gestures.

“Enough, enough,” I was laughing and she was grinning. I held up my hands in surrender. “I give up, I’ll tell you.”

“Excellent.”

“Her name is Melissa, she and I met a few months ago. She actually took some work from me and I was seeing her every day and things kinda happened. She’s at an event with family and will be joining me here later.”

“Why are you not with her and her family then? As good a chef as I am I can’t make a man stop listening to his petite general.”

“They don’t know about me yet.”

“And this matters because...”

“She’s eighteen.” Silence sat between us as Helene looked at me. I felt like I was having my soul weighed outside the doorway to the afterlife. “What?” I finally asked.

“I have always thought of you as very American but maybe, just maybe, you have some French blood in you after all.” After she had successfully soaked in my stupefied expression she laughed.

“Don’t make fun of me, it’s complicated. Tonight isn’t even really for me. She’s coming with her girlfriend and tonight is for them.”

“Robert, you say, girlfriend, you mean as Americans sometimes mean a girl’s friend who is a girl?”

“No, as in lover, at least they will be as of tonight. Their first time. They’ve known each other for years and I am just standing aside.

“And one is your lover?”

“Yes, and maybe the other, later. She says so. I feel like I’m along for the ride.”

“And what are these girls to each other?”

“Best friends, they’ve known each other for years and this has blossomed and I’m getting them this place so they can have something special. It only seemed right.”

“And you will be with them?”

“No, no, this is for them. I don’t even think I’ll be in the room.”

Helene looked slack-jawed at me. “You are French, there is no doubt. I will have to teach you to sing La Marseillaise. However, I thought I was talking to a rogue, you are a saint, a saint of love. Can I have a finger bone to pass down as a relic to my descendants?”

“I’m glad I can amuse you.”

“No, no, it is beautiful.” She reached across the table and took my hand.

“You don’t think I’m a horrible old pervert?”

“I have seen these May December romances before. Even those that do not endure leave both the wealthier.” Those that don’t last. The words felt like little daggers and it must have shown on my face as Helene’s tone changed from casual to concerned. “I am sorry, I was indelicate. I was thinking of affairs, not love. Tell me about her.”

“I’m not sure what to say. Her name is Melissa, she’s eighteen, beautiful, blonde. Her hair catches the light and looks like a halo when it falls around her head. She’s smart and quiet and can be sarcastic but sweet even when crude. She’s never cruel though she can get angry. I feel more at peace with her and alone without her. Did I mention she’s smart? I never know what she’s thinking but she notices everything.”

“Your words are sweet but your voice is melancholy.”

“I’m more than twice her age. When people talk about love they talk about the future. Is she just infatuated, will she wake up and move on? Surely at some point, she’ll wish she was with someone who had more energy, who she shared more in common with, who there is a future with.”

Helene sighed. “You are definitely drinking deeply of the well.” I looked at her confused. “A saying of my mother’s this time. Did you know my father was a renowned chef in Paris in the 70s and 80s?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“He was. He was a rock star in his own right and partied with rock stars. I rode on Mick Jagger’s shoulders as a child! But that comes with a price. My father ... he fell in love easily and quickly with many women. My mother knew but she would say she understood because she married him knowing what he was and knowing that he only loved them in one way. She would say passion was like wine, it made you feel good but drink nothing but it and you would slowly wither. She would say their love was a well of pure water he had to come back to between bottles of wine. She said there were many kinds of love, of friends, of spouses, of lovers, of children and of memories. Americans talk about the strength of love but there is so much more.”

“Do all French mothers know this much?”

“Well, she was very understanding when she wasn’t wanting to cut his balls off. He made her so angry at times. But she said she knew what she was getting into and it was a fault she could live with if not like. It was hard on her at times. Love takes work, endurance, it challenges us to be worthy of it. It does not give its gifts for free.”

I thought about it. That might be my price to pay. I had thought it was letting Lavi in was my price but that really wasn’t it. Lavi had accepted me instantly. It had startled me but I could feel it’s sincerity. I was jealous of Lavi in some ways but it was shy jealousy. No, what ate at me was a wounded animal. I was afraid of Melissa leaving with Lavi or someone else but it was the leaving I was afraid of. My price might be living with that fear or finding some way to make it go away.

“You make it sound as easy as saying hello,” I said.

“It is not as if you have to drink the sea,” she said kindly, “just a well. A very deep one, apparently.”

“You are the second person to tell me recently that there is a price to pay for love.”

“Then they are wise too. It was probably a woman.”

I smiled. “It was.”

We talked more after that. She caught me up on her husband Mikal. He was her sous-chef but actually traveling and in Russia for a week to visit family. We talked about food a lot. We could have talked for ages but orders were starting to come back in and she needed to get back on the line. She patted my hand.

“You are a scandalous, terrible man and I am proud of you. Go show your girls what an older man can teach them about love.”

“Not tonight.” I smiled.

“Another kind of love, my saint.” She said.

I returned to the room and had taken my shoes off when I got the message from Melissa that they were on their way. Accompanying it was a photo of them leaning in together for a selfie while walking down the street arm in arm. A warmth kindled in me. Using the hotel phone I called the front desk and told them to send the champagne up. Then I went to my bag and I took the presents I got for them and put one in the bathroom off the main suite’s sitting area and the other in the bathroom off the bedroom.

I called up the Bluetooth sound system on the TV mounted in the sitting area and synced my phone, setting a John Coltrane playlist starting with a mellow piece from Blue Train. It was almost that instant that the door reverberated with a knock and I opened it to find a bellhop pushing a trolley that contained not only a bucket of champagne with three glasses but a covered dish as well. The bellhop announced that it was a gift from the kitchen and left. I uncovered it to find a dozen chocolate covered fresh strawberries. The bellhop in turn almost ran into Lavi and Melissa who were coming in as he was leaving, the near whiplash from him looking at them didn’t help him.

I hadn’t seen it well from the selfie but both were wearing light summer dresses. Melissa was typical for her in her simplicity, a white dress with red trim and she had paired it with some blue trainers. It ran down to the knees and her breasts stood proudly against the conservative hug of the dress that covered everything scandalous. But, it left no doubt she was the girl next door that Playboy would be honored to have in its pages. The only thing that broke the red, white and blue theme was her ever-present black and yellow earrings.

Where Melissa had gone subtle Lavi had ignored subtlety and ran in the opposite direction. Her hair was extra curly, the ringlets making her look like a dolled up vintage pinup. Her summer dress was patterned like the American flag complete with stars and stripes but was tailored to leave generous cleavage on display and where Melissa’s had been to her knees Lavi’s ended mid-thigh. Only the modern cut kept her from looking like a USO stage girl from WWII.

“Lavi loves that her birthday is on July Fourth,” Melissa said. I could tell she was enjoying my reaction, as was Lavi.

“Hey growing up in Israel, I didn’t get to celebrate the fourth, so it felt like half a birthday, even though I was American!”

“You just wanted to wrap your tits in stars and stripes.”

“Like you weren’t looking at them, slut.”

Melissa threw her arms around Lavi, “only because I was planning on seeing more of them.” Then she kissed Lavi. It wasn’t a friendly kiss, it was a passionate kiss and Lavi’s hands did not miss the opportunity to reach around and grab Melissa’s taut ass. I couldn’t blame her.

I cleared my throat. “Ladies.” They broke apart and both were flushed and I was more than a little affected myself. “There are gifts for you in the restrooms. You may want to get comfortable. Melissa,” I pointed at the door to the lavatory, “Lavi, yours is in the bathroom off of the bedroom. Why don’t you both refresh yourselves?”

Lavi looked a little disappointed to be uncoupling but I think they both realized they had been sitting outside in the heat. They gave each other a quick peck on the lips and then Melissa gave me a kiss before she disappeared. I poured us each a glass of champagne and drank one for myself quickly before putting another to drink more slowly.

Lavi came out first wearing the kimono style robe I got her. It was hand-painted pure silk with a scene of a sakura tree with its leaves falling. It flattered her curvy body. I handed her a glass of champagne. I noticed her hair was still dry so I guessed she had put it up in a cap while showering.

“Happy birthday m’lady.”

“This feels amazing.” She ran one hand over the silk while sipping from the glass.

“Good.” I smiled and sat on the couch.

“So, what are you doing tonight?” She sat sideways on the couch so that her legs crossed. They weren’t as long or toned as Melissa’s but still looked wonderful to run one’s hands along.

“I don’t know. I brought a book, but maybe I can find a movie.”

“I thought you were going to watch us?”

I was confused. “Then, why did you ask?”

“Well, I meant like, what are you going to do like, are you going to pull up a chair, or ... I don’t know, I just want to know what to expect. What do you mean, read a book?”

I shook my head. “Don’t get me wrong, I’ll probably look in. You’re...”. I looked at her, really looked at her, not just noticed her as I would any woman. “You’re gorgeous Lavi. And so is Melissa. And I’m not saying I won’t look in but just staying in there and watching ... I feel weird thinking about it. And I know what Melissa said but the more I’ve thought about it there are only two things I can see happening, either me being a distraction or me feeling like a third wheel.”

Lavi started looking down at the floor. “It’s not going to work, is it?” She said after a moment.

“Sure it will.” I forced myself to smile. “You love each other. It’s going to be wonderful for you.”

“But not you.”

“This isn’t about me.”

“God fucking damn it.” She stood angrily and put the partially empty champagne flute back way too hard on the trolley. Her hand missed the center and the glass broke against the edge of the cart. The glass shattered and a small piece of it embedded in her palm. I immediately saw the blood welling and terrified she would get it on her robe I grabbed the hand and pressed it to my shirt to soak up the blood and put pressure on it. That’s when I realized I was holding her bleeding palm to my chest.

“Just keep the pressure up. It looked like a small cut,” I said.

A bit stunned Lavi looked at me and then looked like she was ready to burst into laughter. “Is this really the best you could think of?”

“I also had the idea flash in my head of licking it up but I didn’t want you to think I had a blood kink.”

She raised an eyebrow, palm still against my chest. “Maybe I could have grabbed your arm though.”

“Fair enough. It was a kind of panicky thought. I didn’t want you to get it on the robe.”

“The robe is...”

“Irreplaceable.”

“Really?”

“One of a kind.”

“Expensive?”

“Ridiculously so. Don’t tell Melissa, she’ll get upset with me about the money.”

I looked down. So did Lavi. She looked at me and said. “This might not be what we want Millie to see when she comes out of the shower. Even she can only take so long to wash her hair.”

I made an awkward chuckle. “No, probably not. Let me look at it.” I looked at it and it was already clotting. I kissed it. “Sorry for grabbing you.”

“It’s OK. You can grab me, I told you that. Come on, let’s get that shirt in cold water.”

“And wash your hand.”

We walked over to the sink in the bar area and turned the water on cold, stopped the sink and let it start filling. Lavi rubbed the blood out and then left it to soak, then washed her hand. It had already stopped bleeding.

“No need for stitches.” She held it up.

“Good thing. Melissa doesn’t like blood.”

“I know! Did you know she talked about being a doctor for a long time? I can’t imagine it.”

“It’s easier to talk about Melissa isn’t it?”

Lavi looked at me. “Yeah, she’s what we really have in common.”

“And apparently Doctor Who.”

Lavi grinned. “Mellie told me about the jelly babies. So ... you’re a fourth doctor fan?”

“And Tenant. I feel like both of them really got the idea of the anger behind the humor.”

Lavi pointed at my chest. “Looks like some of the blood did soak through.” She took her wet hands and rubbed at my chest. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Yeah.”

“How do you really feel about tonight?”

“Honestly?”

“Completely.”

“Confused.”

“Confused?”

“I’m jealous of you and I’m not happy with myself for that.”

“Because of us excluding you?”

“No.”

“Huh? What else is there?”

“A lot more. Lavi, Melissa is amazing. I’m not surprised you’re head over heels about her. I don’t see how anyone couldn’t be. And I think you two would be wonderful together. I’m happy to be here to make this happen for you. I want you to have your Disney princess night.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen any Disney movies with two cheerleaders in a sixty-nine,” she said grinning.

I had to laugh at that. “Okay, fair point. I would have watched more if they did.”

“Me too!”

“But...” I tried to return to the point, “I’m not jealous of you in this room, I’m jealous of tonight before now.”

“What do you mean?” She turned her head in a cute way as she asked that.

“You get to spend the days and nights with Melissa. I steal a few hours before dinners. You get to eat meals with her with family and friends, you get to be a part of her life. I don’t.” It was a well-stocked bar so they actually had a nice hand towel for cleaning up spills and Lavi dried off my chest with it. “And I’m a bit jealous of Melissa.”

That stopped Lavi, freezing her in place. It took a split second but then she put the towel into the water with my shirt. After gathering herself, “What do you mean?”

“Deja vu.” I tried to joke but she wasn’t taking it.

“No, seriously, I need to understand.”

I took her hands. “I’ve seen you when you’re passionate Lavi. I think sexual love with you will be easy. It’ll be like ... I don’t know, like something natural and simple and a bit intimidating like falling but absolutely wonderful. I’ve seen hints of so much more and I’m terrified, Lavi. Terrified that this thing with Melissa won’t last but if it does that means there is you and me to think about. You seem like an amazing person I want to get to know and so I’m just a little jealous of Melissa and her time with you too. It’s not something I would have thought of if I wasn’t thinking about the future but I have been.”

Lavi just looked at me. “Wow.”

“Yeah. Sorry.” I leaned against the bar and closed my eyes. “I’ve kind of been ruminating on it all night. I didn’t mean to unload that on you. And I probably sound stupid.”

She adjusted her robe that was starting to slip. It didn’t do a great job of hiding her cleavage and her hips made it do nice things for showing her legs when she turned quickly. We were having a serious talk but I looked. I’m not a saint no matter what Helene may have joked. I heard the shower in Melissa’s bathroom shut off.

“I figured you wouldn’t want to be left out,” Lavi offered.

“I’m not saying I don’t feel awkward about it but that’s not what’s bothering me. I can be awkward and content. I have practice at that.”

She acknowledged the effort at levity with a smirk. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, I just wanted to be honest.”

“Disney princess huh?”

“Wrong thing to say? I really don’t see you like a Disney princess. Well, you kind of have Miranda’s hair right now, if it was red.”

“She was awesome.”

“So are you.”

“You mean that don’t you?”

“Completely. It’s why I think when I get to know you I’ll wish I’d gotten to know you sooner.”

“And you’re scared?”

“I’m fucking terrified. But, I figured it out tonight, that’s the price I have to pay. What we are isn’t going to be something that we can have without me being afraid that Melissa will decide to move on after sewing some kind of oats and ... I’m scared of falling in love with you and then you move on with her.”

“In love with me?”

“I’m not saying I am but I have to wonder if I will. I think I might learn to.”

“Shit, Mellie will be out any second. ARG!” She looked ready to hit something in frustration.

I waved my hands as if a motion could make this conversation have not happened. “Sorry, look ignore what I said. You have your night, this is my issue but I wanted you to know if I’m not in there sitting in a chair watching you and Melissa I’m not out here pouting or anything. I really am cool with that.”

“You know, Mellie said you were intense and controlling, in a good way. This isn’t what I expected.”

“Kind of disappointing, eh? A lot of people seek control because they don’t feel like they have enough of it.”

“No, the intensity. You’re like a ... I feel like I’m on trial just talking to you.”

“Again, I’m sorry, I don’t mean to unload on you. I’m not asking anything of you.”

“But a hell of a lot of yourself.”

That was when the door opened and Melissa came out, her hair quickly towel-dried and wearing the yellow and black kimono robe I’d gotten her. Lavi made herself look up and look more casual. I quickly tried to take stock of the scene as the first words out of her mouth were, “Is everything all right?”

I should note that if I were to cast Melissa as any fictional character it would probably be Sherlock Holmes. She may not have his deductive talents but she notices everything so I knew she had instantly taken in the broken glass, drops of blood, me shirtless and Lavi looking thoughtful.

“Lavi said my shirt was an affront to good fashion so it had to die. It’s bleeding out in the sink.” I smiled and she at least took it as things weren’t dire. She reached over to pick up one of the waiting champagne flutes. “Let me get another glass sent up and we can toast,” I said.

“No,” interjected Lavi, “Robert, you and I can share a glass. What’re a few more fluids between us, eh?”

“I’d like that Lavi.” For the first time, I felt something non-verbal pass between Lavi and I. Melissa noticed it too and she beamed. Lavi topped off both glasses and Lavi and I held one up, one hand each on the stem and toasted with Melissa.

“To love.” Melissa toasted.

“To love.” I echoed.

“To forever.” Lavi offered. Melissa drank but after Lavi pulled the glass to herself and drank instead of offering the glass to me she leaned forward and pulled herself to me and passed the champagne to me in a kiss. She then motioned towards Melissa and I did the same for her and then finally Melissa completed the circle, taking a large sip and passing it to Lavi. Melissa was then drawn to the chocolate covered strawberries. I tried one too and it was amazing, rich dark chocolate that definitely qualified as food porn.

“I’ll have to thank Helene,” I said.

“Who?” That was Melissa.

“The chef at the restaurant. She sent these up.”

“Is that where you ate dinner?”

“Yeah, she’s an old friend. I took a class from her ages ago when she was doing some teaching at a culinary institute. I was trying to improve my technical skills. We became friends.”

“You’ll have to introduce me sometimes.”

“Us.” Lavi offered.

“That would be my pleasure.” I meant it and ate a second one.

Lavi slowly nibbled on one and between bites asked, “You two have never really gotten to have a date, have you?”

“No, not really,” Melissa replied.

A heartbeat passed. “I am such a bitch,” said Lavi.

“What’s wrong?” That was Melissa instantly worried.

“Nothing. I think I’m finally getting it. I’ve been a self-centered bitch.”

“No!” That was me. “You’ve not done a single...”

Lavi made a hand motion and cut me off. She turned to Melissa. “I’ve had you with me all night and I didn’t even think about how he would feel about that.” She turned to me. “Robert, can I beg for something?”

“All you have to do is ask for anything.”

“You’re right, I’ve been seeking my princess night and I still want it but you need to be there. Can you be the prince who lays in bed with the two princesses dyking out with each other.”

“Such a pretty offer.” I meant it.

“I’m serious. I’m not up for a threesome. I’m not ready for that, I want to be but I’m not. But I want you there, with us, not just in the room. Lay with us. Touch us, kiss us, share this with us. Please. And someday soon I want you to take Melissa out and I want you to make dinner for me.”

“I’ll stock extra jelly babies.”

“You better.” She hugged me.

“Was I in the shower that long?” Melissa looked at us.

“Long enough”, Lavi said, “I was about ready to take a nap.”

Her eyes went comically wife in exaggeration, “Screw that,” Melissa said. “Are we ready to get naked?”

“I thought I was the horny bitch here,” said Lavi.

“Tonight you get to share that princess crown, bitch.” Melissa smiled and took both Lavi and my hands and led us to the bedroom. I took my pants and underwear off and laid back on the bed. The girls were already focusing on each other but that was fine. Melissa pushed Lavi onto the bed.

“Get up there, wait for me.”

Lavi scooted back and arranged herself, excitement and anticipation clearly on her face. I turned on my side to watch her and watch Melissa. Melissa swayed in place. Her robe still showed a shape but it covered far more than Lavi’s had. Still, when she began to move her hair swung back and forth and there was no doubting the body that was beneath it. She undid the belt and let it hang loose but instead of opening her robe just let it hang. From the sound system, my phone had started playing Love Supreme, one of Coltrane’s long improvisational versions. High points in the music punctuated Melissa’s movement as she danced in place, turning around and letting the robe slowly fly open as she moved, violent body movements throwing hips and breasts and hair wildly as Coltrane built up. She danced with it, not stripping but giving us glances of her perfect athletic body.

The solo seemed to go on forever, probably ten minutes but like a climax that kept building it never perfectly repeated, I never got tired of looking at those glimpses between the flying robe of Melissa’s breasts and thighs. It wasn’t planned to build up to something, it just was. Finally, the song finished and so did she. She was flushed but not sweating. I’d forgotten she really did like to dance. She shrugged out of the robe and let it fall to the floor and crawled up the bed.

On her knees, she got between Lavi’s legs and pointed at Lavi’s robe saying, “Take it off.”

Lavi scrambled to do so, lifting her butt and shifting it off. Melissa meanwhile leaned over and kissed me and then shifted to whisper in my ear, “You were right, I am going to fuss about how much these things cost so I don’t want her staining it. And I’m not going anywhere. I will fight through good and bad with you, you bastard.”

And she kissed me again, then looked back at Lavi which drew my gaze as well. Lavi had shifted and gotten the robe off and let it fall on the floor beside the bed. Like Melissa, she had decided to go for the lack of barriers and was completely nude. Somewhere through the lust, it filtered to me that Melissa must have been listening in on our conversation. That...

Whack! I’d barely thought it before my hand landed very loudly and suddenly on Melissa’s bare ass. She had been learning forward towards Lavi and that made her scream and fall forward, a lustful look replaced with surprise.

“We will talk later about keyholes and listening. Attend to your lover,” I said.

“Yes sir,” she said in that little girl voice she liked to use. I would have to find out later how much she had heard. Listening over the water, even if she’d stood by the door for a while not everything we’d said, especially by the bar, could possibly have been intelligible. Melissa returned to Lavi who looked puzzled but willing to go with it.

“Poor baby, you had your ass spanked by the bad man. Let me rub it to make it better.” She fit action to word and rubbed where Melissa’s cheek was rapidly becoming a bright red. Hands were everywhere as Melissa, in turn, ran her hands up Lavi’s sides from her hips to the sides of her breasts and squeezed both, then leaned forward and with the flat of her tongue licked one. She licked and sucked the nipple, cleaning the already showered breast with her tongue, then buried her face between Lavi’s breasts to do the same there, pushing on the pendulous breasts with her hands to bury herself between them.

“I love your tits, Lavi. I’ve always been jealous of them, I’ve been waiting too long to taste them,” she murmured.

“Yes, please.” Lavi was already delirious and ran her hands through Melissa’s long hair over and over again. This continued for a while until Lavi said, “get up, turn around.” Melissa did. This began a long night of them directing each other as they co-operated to fill long-held fantasies. It made me smile to reach out and run fingertips along legs and grab quick kisses.

Lavi followed up by reaching around to grasping one of Melissa’s perfect breasts. She mauled it roughly while kissing Melissa’s neck. “I have wanted to do this every day we’ve changed in the locker room.” Melissa made a mewling noise in her throat and Lavi reached around the other side to stroke her pussy. I reached out and caressed Melissa’s thigh, feeling the heat she was generating. Lavi looked over at me and smiled. They played like that for a while longer, Lavi’s fingers going from light stroking to teasing the folds to eventually finger fucking her friend and lover to a strong climax.

Melissa fell forward. I went and got all of us bottles of water from the fridge and we sipped while the ladies recovered. Melissa got her wits back first. She lay on her stomach and stretched her torso up to drink while I rubbed at her back. Lavi touched my hand with her fingertips and mouthed ‘how are you.” ‘Good’ I mouthed back and she gave me one of those amazing hugs again that her nude chest against mine didn’t make any less wholesome.

I got up again and folded both their robes and brought them strawberries while the ladies chatted for a minute. Lavi lay sideways across the bed while Melissa still lounged with her feet near Lavi’s head. I rubbed Melissa’s feet and stroked Lavi’s hair. She rubbed her head against my palm like a cat when I scratched at her scalp.

Melissa rolled over to face me, she reached out to my cock, which had been hard for so long it had stopped registering as anything but a stone-like appendage. With barely the pressure of a feather, Melissa ran a fingertip along it. “Are you going to take care of my little ward here,” she asked me?

“At some point,” I smiled.

“Give me the cum when you do. Feed it to me whatever I’m doing.”

“You might be busy.” I smiled.

“Cum in your hand and feed it to me off your fingers, or if you let it pool on your stomach let me know and I’ll lick it off you.”

“OK.” I gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Love you. Return to Lavi.”

“With pleasure,” she purred. “Get on your stomach, slut.” Lavi obeyed and at once stretched out. Melissa got between her spread legs and grabbed Lavi’s generous ass and then ran her hands up Lavi’s back until her tits scraped along Lavi’s ass. Laying on top of her Melissa kissed Lavi’s shoulder blade and came back. This repeated itself half a dozen times until Melissa decided to stop and with her chest resting on Lavi’s ass and raining kisses on her back my blonde goddess snuck a hand up Lavi’s thighs until her fingers made their way into Lavi’s folds. From where I was sitting I couldn’t see much but when Melissa’s arm moved Lavi would grunt. Lavi reached out and held my hand.

Eventually, Lavi had what seemed like a small orgasm, she barely moved and her voice didn’t raise but a light shaking began somewhere deep inside her, made her eyes roll and left her panting. She then tapped the bed as if surrendering. “Let me roll over.” Melissa backed off and obliged. Lavi then gestured to come here and Melissa slowly moved on her knees until she was sitting over Lavi’s face. “You taste perfect, sweet, salty.” She let out between gasps.

Melissa tapped her on the forehead, “No talking with your mouth full, slut.”

“Sounds like a good rule,” I added and leaned over to kiss her. We kissed for a long time. This went on a while and I played with Melissa’s nipple closest to me. I looked down and watched Lavi eat her. She took her time exploring every bit of Melissa with her tongue, she drank her juices she worshipped at where her thighs met. I remembered doing that myself not that long ago. After about ten minutes Melissa began to shake and whimper but Lavi was merciless. She didn’t speed anything up but kept drinking from that well. Despite the earlier admonishment she occasionally drew her head back enough to make a comment like “This is a good pussy.” “You taste better than I thought you would.” “I should have eaten this pussy when we were in junior high.” After the ten minute mark, Melissa began to rock gently on Lavi’s face. It took a long time, much longer than I’ve ever seen Melissa take to orgasm before but when she did it shook her like an earthquake and she screamed piercing the room. Melissa was making one of her occasional comments, “I’m going to keep going until you,” and that’s as far as she got, her thumb resting moving on Melissa’s clit when the rocking accelerated in a frantic action and a yelp of “ah ah Ah AH” built up in spurts and Melissa screamed her head off, throwing her head back my face was temporarily blinded by blonde hair.

I realized we might soon find out how good the soundproofing was if homicide detectives showed up. Melissa grabbed my shoulder for stability and I helped her off Lavi as she had to lay down. Melissa was out of it and Lavi took a few minutes kissing Melissa’s calves before jumping up for the bathroom. She came back to find Melissa curled up to me so Lavi got behind Melissa who promptly grabbed Lavi’s arm and pulled her hand around her to cup Melissa’s breast which also pressed Lavi’s hand against my chest.

Both girls faded out soon and my phone was in the other room so I just laid there and felt Melissa breath against me and Lavi through her. I couldn’t imagine ever being jealous of either of these women. I was tempted to try to take a nap but knew it was likely to become a deep sleep if I tried. However, it was only a little while before Melissa rose and needed the restroom herself, which roused Lavi. As they came back they helped finish off the champagne and I ordered a bottle of wine from room service, the same I’d had for dinner. We walked around and stretched while waiting for the wine. I put on one of the hotel’s actual bathrobes to get the door when the wine arrived. I returned to greet the girls who had remained naked. They had now decided to lay down together and simply lay with their faces where they could kiss and play with themselves. I went ahead and broke out the wine and enjoyed a glass while watching them and at the end again fed my cum to Melissa who eagerly reared her head back away from Lavi and sucked at my fingers.

Once they had both cum several times they decided it was time for wine themselves and decided it was snuggle time. I ended up with Melissa laying back against me between my legs and Lavi laying against my leg and one arm behind Melissa holding her hand on the other side. It was decided we should have a movie and it turned out that Lavi was a big horror fan who picked an excellent movie from the pay per view service that used silence and darkness to great effect. With the lights off I ended up having both girls grabbing at me occasionally and squeaking in genuine surprise and fright. It was quite wonderful and we worked through the bottle with easy speed.

As the movie wound down Melissa scooted down to get between Lavi’s legs but Lavi instead grabbed her arm and pulled her up. “Lay on top of me, I want you at the same time.”

“Sixty-nine?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Oh, you’re a nasty skank.”

I had too much to look at but with Melissa on top, I rubbed her back. I was hard and jerked off but got little more than precum though I spread it on Melissa’s lips when she took her mouth off Lavi. They both came several times.

“Robert, a favor?”

“Lavi, what?”

“A picture. Take a picture.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Melissa?” She seemed determined to see how far she could get her tongue in Lavi’s twat so she just gave me a thumbs up.

So, I got my phone. To say I took a picture would be an understatement. I took pictures, I took video. After I’d taken dozens of images at close and medium range Lavi said, “Good, now send them to me.”

“You’re sure?”

“Fuck yes, I’m going to jill off to this Disney princess movie every night I’m alone.”

“What?” That was Melissa who stopped her exploration to express her confusion over that reference.

So, she hadn’t heard that part.

“Eat bitch!” Lavi slapped Melissa’s ass. I think she intentionally hit the same spot I had earlier and it really made Melissa jump underneath her.

“How is she?” I asked Lavi.

“She needs practice but dear god she’s going to get it.” I looked down to see Melissa at that movement start sucking hard on Lavi’s little bud. “Fuck yes!!!!” Despite cuming hard, Lavi kept up on Melissa until she shortly followed with a respectable orgasm of her own.

At that point, everyone was exhausted. Lavi actually waved her hand up and with intentional humor said, “I think I’m done, coach.” Melissa rolled off and pulled me behind her. Meanwhile, Lavi took the little spoon position to Melissa and within seconds she was asleep, with her butt pushed up to Melissa’s crotch. I pulled the sheet up over all of us and from the bed stand turned off the light while I snuggled behind Melissa. I thought it would take me a while to sleep but unconsciousness came almost instantly.

I awoke to sunlight as I usually do. The girls were sleeping and I let them sleep. At some point Melissa had thrown the blanket off and as I moved she woke up too.

“Wow, it’s warm being in the middle.”

I ordered coffee from room service and got to learn how Lavi liked her coffee - with cream and sugar though mostly sugar and a little cream. None of us felt like sex this morning though the showers turned out to be big enough for two comfortably. It began as Lavi and Melissa in one and myself in the other though Lavi abandoned her dressing to jump in mine with me and wash my back.

She ended up with my hardon picking her in the stomach on the way out. Melissa petted it as we got dressed. “Save it for me later, lover.”

More petting followed and it took a while to get dressed. Shortly after the shower fresh croissants and butter showed up. We could have remained for a few hours but the girls wanted to get home. Both were beaming.

We made our way downstairs, I had put their robes back in my bag to keep at my house until they could get them again. They wore what they had worn the night before. In the middle of the night I had called the 24-hour concierge and had the in house service clean everything, including my shirt. In the morning everything was hanging in dry cleaner bags outside our door.

As we walked by the front desk we stopped to drop off the keys. Unlike key cards, these weren’t quite so cheap. A lady was standing at the front desk, she looked to be in her 20s, redhead with cute features. Her name tag said Lillie.

“Hi, I was in Suite 7B. Checking out.”

“Oh, Mr. Carlo. I have a message for you.” She turned to her desk mate, “Wanda, could you take over?”

The young woman came around the counter and brought a tablet with her and motioned me to the side of the desk. Lavi and Melissa followed. “Sir, we had a small security matter last night. We decided to not bother you since it was late at night but this person was asking about the ladies who came in and got the key for your suite. He left but was insistent enough that we thought we would mention it to you.”

She turned the tablet around and it was a young man with broad shoulders and mouse-brown hair. The picture was excellent and showed his face at the reception desk full on but he was a stranger to me. Obviously not to Lavi or Melissa though. Melissa blurted, “What?!”

Lavi more usefully provided, “That’s Jerry!”

**Chapter 11**

We waited for the shoe to drop but that day it didn’t. Nor did anything happen the next day. It was three days later around noon when my phone dinged and it was a text from Syliva. It said simply, “We have to talk.” My stomach clenched.

“Now?”

“Yes?”

“Where?”

“Your place. I’ll be there in a few.”

When the doorbell rang I was waiting to open it and did. Sylvia looked anxious and angry. “Planning to murder me?” I asked.

“That depends.”

“I have to warn you, I don’t have a wood chipper for you to get rid of the body in.” She didn’t smile so I just motioned for her to come in and led her to the back patio. “Can I get you anything? Is this a whiskey shots kind of discussion?”

“It might be but I’ll have to drive.”

“A shot or two won’t hurt,” I offered.

“Grab it,” she said.

I put down the bottle and two shot glasses. She looked up at me, “Drinking with others now?”

“Not since you were last here. I just had a feeling the last conversation wouldn’t be the last one I’d want to calm my nerves for.”

“Things don’t turn out well when there are secrets.”

“I don’t have any secrets here.”

“Are you sure?” Her eyes threatened something that a sane man would be terrified of. The fact that this suggested I was sane wasn’t comforting.

I held up my hands. “I will answer any question you have.” I hoped I seemed calm, the truth is that internally I was vibrating with anxiety. I’d taken a Xanax after she texted and it was just starting to kick in.

“Are you fucking Lavi?”

“Wow, straight to it.”

“I’m waiting.” One of her legs was doing an agitated little jump every few seconds like a nervous tick.

“No, not as you may think.”

“Not as I...” she started to stand up.

“Hold on, I’m not trying to be evasive! I’m trying to give you real no bullshit answers but it’s not a yes or no question if you want a real answer!”

She sat down and decided to take that shot now, pouring and spilling a bit in her haste. I waited until after she took the shot to continue.

“Lavi and I have been intimate... “ I paused while searching for the words “ ... in the sense of emotional intimacy and, well, proximity.” I debated whether to say the next thing or not but I felt she had a right to know. “Both of us have been with Melissa while the other is present but Lavi and I have not had sex though I think it would be evasive for me to say there was nothing sexual there.” I realized that the day on the couch probably qualified as sex to some degree but given things I was willing to walk in that grey area a bit. I also decided to leave out the showering.

“The hotel on the fourth?”

“Yes.”

“JESUS FUCKING CHRIST!” she yelled and threw her head back, her fists balled up.

“I thought you were Jewish now?” She gave me a look that I think mothers learn when their children are young that clearly communicates ‘you think you are funny but you are not.’

“Are you going to fuck her? Is this a thing now?”

“I ... don’t know.”

“You don’t know.” She enunciated every syllable carefully and slowly.

“Syliva, to understand what is going on I need to ask if you understand the relationship between Lavi and Melissa have?”

“They are friends.”

“They are more than friends.”

“I know Lavi has had a bit of a crush on her...”

“If it’s a crush it’s not a bit of one. It’s love.”

Sylvia closed her eyes and took several deep breaths.

“I thought Melissa was with you. If you’re having them do something for...”

“I want to be clear, Sylvia. Yes, I reserved and paid for that room. I also offered to not be there. I was assuming at first I wouldn’t. They both asked me to be there. I reserved it for Lavi, she wanted to spend her birthday with Melissa. I wanted her to have a special night with the woman she loves.”

“I’m still confused because Melissa is seeing you.”

“And for reasons I don’t understand, she decided that she felt safe now admitting how she felt about Lavi. My guess is that she didn’t see herself as a lesbian but once she knew she wasn’t one she felt freer to admit how she felt about Lavi. It would fit with what she has expressed to me.”

The silence continued for a minute so I poured a shot for myself.

“And,” I broke the silence, “uh, you do know that Lavi...”

“Lavi the Licker, yes I know. Cheerleader mothers are every bit as bitchy and catty as their daughters, thank you.”

I grimaced and let the silence return.

After another shot, Syliva said, “I really want to rip your fucking balls off you know.”

“You do?”

“I’ve been pissed all morning.”

“Assuming I was manipulating and doing things to your daughters?”

“Something like that.”

“You do know that Lavi, and Melissa for that matter, are too smart for that kind of thing don’t you?”

“I’m not sure about Melissa when it comes to you.” She eyed me.

“I think the world of Lavi but trust me she doesn’t feel that way about me.”

“No, but I don’t trust her judgment when it comes to Melissa if she thought it would make her happy.”

“Well, that is what she’s trying to do, make Melissa happy. And herself.”

“And you’re just along for the ride?” There was a sneer in her voice.

“Feels that way but no.” This was hard to say but I had to. It was easier to think of it as something I couldn’t control but that wasn’t true. “I could walk away but the truth is I don’t want to. I will fight to have Melissa in my life and I don’t know Lavi well but even the bit I know seems pretty wonderful. Why would I want to walk away from them?”

“Seems convenient, two girls.”

“Well, getting death stared by you willing to rip my balls off doesn’t feel very fucking convenient,” I said it levelly but my temper was starting to rise. Why did everyone think this was so fucking easy for me?! I took another shot, slammed the shot glass down and decided I had plenty more to say. “Convenient would be staying alone! Convenient would be how I’ve lived for a long time! I’m sick and fucking tired of feeling like the bad guy because I treasure them, both of them. They’ve told me they love each other and I have to be able to accept both. I’m not finding that hard to accept! They are smart, kind, joyful, beautiful and come with a shit load of complications. So, no it’s not fucking convenient but I’m not going to apologize for it anymore.”

“Apologize?”

“Well, in my own head anyway. I never shut up about it to myself and I’m done with that.”

Sylvia sighed and her leg stopped twitching. I think somewhere in there we both took a few shots because I remember having to pass her the bottle and another time her passing it to me. Over the next few minutes, her body posture didn’t become relaxed but she didn’t look ready to pounce on me with violence anymore at least.

“Fuck.” After the long silence that was her way of breaking the quiet. “Do you know that I thought this would be the easy stage? We were past the early teenage bullshit. She’s looking at colleges to apply to. I thought I wouldn’t have to worry about her getting knocked up if she was a dyke. Shit, I was thinking about telling my mom just so we wouldn’t have to go see her for Thanksgiving.”

I took a chance and smiled at that and Sylvia actually smiled back.

She continued, “Do you know that somehow you’ve become entangled in the hearts of two of the three people I care most about in this world? I’m scared shitless right now.”

“Join the club. I’ve been terrified for ages.”

“You, why?”

“You told me it looked like an older man taking advantage of a young girl.”

“I remember that.”

“I worry it’s a young girl learning about the world before she finds someone her own age.”

“Goddamn you, Rob. You’re completely in love with her. You convinced me you cared but this is spending the rest of your life with her stuff.”

“Yeah.”

She let out another sigh and handled the shot glass. “I think I had too many of these. This is stupid, me sitting in the heat drinking.”

The bottle was a third empty. It had been new. “You could jump in the pool.” I grinned.

“I do not want to know what has happened in that pool.”

“Or the furniture.”

She involuntarily looked down then back at me. There was that ‘you are not funny’ look again. “Promise me something Rob.”

“What?”

“No kids until after college.”

“Why would you think...”

“Lavi is baby crazy. Always has been but I’ve told her she needs to finish college first. I always thought it would be in vitro or something.”

“We haven’t talked about kids.” I was reeling. I’d thought about kids. What if Lavi asked? I’d thought about Melissa but not Lavi. “I feel like my brain is going to explode.”

“Join the club,” she parroted back at me.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah.”

“Where did all this come from? The hotel, all that.”

“Linda, your maybe future mother in law, started giving me the third degree.”

“Great.”

“Right. Did I know this Amber girl who got the room? Who else was there? It went on and on. Seems she’s been calling all the other cheerleader moms to find out who else was there. It was zero until she got to Lavi, which she already knew about.”

It wasn’t that exact moment, but one later while I was thinking when my phone dinged. Another text message.

Melissa: “We need to talk.” Deja vu.

I replied that Sylvia was here and to come join us. She said that Lavi and she were on their way.

“Melissa and Lavi will be here in a few.”

“Oh, goody.”

“Want water?”

“Please.”

In short order, we were hydrating as Melissa and Lavi came through the back gate. Melissa gave me a huge hug. Lavi looked unsure as to what to do when her mom made a ‘get on with it’ gesture towards me.

Sylvia said, “I’d like to hear it from you but I think the cats are out of the bag.”

Lavi looked a bit chagrined but she took it as an invitation and hugged me tightly. We all took separate chairs.

Lavi started, “So ... mom ... what brings you here?”

“Linda Milton. What brought you here?”

Lavi and Melissa had one of those silent communications that seemed to agree on something.

“We needed to talk to Robert.”

“About your birthday at the hotel?”

She took a deep breath. “Yes.”

“Are you having sex with him?”

Her leg twitched in the exact same way her mom’s had. “No, but I want to.”

Sylvia squeezed her eyes shut like she was either trying to get rid of a headache or create one as a distraction. “What are you waiting for?”

“For ... for it to feel right.”

“And you’re on birth control?”

“Religiously.”

Sylvia rolled her neck around to loosen it up. “I’d been really comfortable with you being a lesbian. You could have stayed that way and it would have been fine.”

“You knew?!”

Sylvia gave her another maternal stare, this one being ‘do you really think I’m that stupid.’ Lavi wilted under it a bit.

“Um,” this was Melissa, “mom, it feels weird calling you that when I’m about to say this but, I love Lavi, and not like a sister.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear you say it and frankly, that’s the best news I’ve had in this mess.”

“It is?” That was Melissa.

“Really?” Lavi echoed and overlapped her girlfriend’s exclamation.

“I was worried when Rob came along that Lavi would be heartbroken. I should have known something was up when she was so happy. You’re both really happy.” She drank more water. “OK, so this is a thing. You,” she pointed at Lavi, “get to explain this to your father. You,” she points at Melissa, “can still call me mom. I will always love you like my own. You,” now swiveling to me, “will not call me mom. That would be creepy and weird.”

Melissa and Lavi looked at each other and me and smiles were shared.

“So, my mom called you?” Melissa asked.

“She had a ton of questions. She’s talked to a lot of the squad moms.”

“Jerry has been asking around too, the other girls,” Lavi supplied.

“Of course, Jerry and my mom. Ask me, no, go to my mom, why not.” Melissa looked disgusted. “Apparently the creep followed me from the party. We said we were going to dance so he probably wanted to wait to chat with me alone. That’s his style.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Lavi has never been team Jerry and he knows it.”

“He’s never made you happy,” Lavi added. “But I doubt he was stalking you or anything. Like you said, just waiting to talk to you alone.”

“Anyway, we headed straight to the hotel so he never got his chance,” Melissa continued.

“And I’ll bet he hung out a long time waiting to see if you came out and eventually realized no other squad went in,” Sylvia added.

“But Robert was already there.” Melissa.

“So, what they know is that you two spent Lavi’s birthday alone in a posh hotel,” I supplied.

“Which is how this came about.” Melissa handed me her phone. It had a screenshot from a chat. Someone named Twana was saying in a group chat ‘god I hope the jocks don’t think we will all dyke out for them something.’ Melissa continued, “Grace sent me that and some others.”

Lavi shrugged, she had clearly already seen it. Melissa looked irritated at Lavi’s indifference. “Well, it’s true,” Lavi supplied, “we are together.”

“Easy for you to say, you’re used to it.”

“It was going to happen eventually anyway.”

“I’d be nice to have chosen when to tell them though!”

Sylvia leaned forward, “Dear if you want to choose when people learn something you’re keeping secret you better make it not secret sooner rather than later. People love being suspicious.”

“Mom did not handle Tommy coming out well.”

“I don’t think you have a choice now. And you need to tell her about Robert.”

“I ... I can’t add that on top of everything else.”

“She’s going to ask about the hotel. She already knows I didn’t get it for you. And I’ll stay quiet Mellie, it’s your life, but I’m not going to lie to her for you.”

“I can just tell her that I got someone to get it.”

“The money?”

“I saved up!”

“She won’t buy it.”

“FUCK! I don’t want to deal with this!”

At that moment my phone rang. The universe was enjoying itself at my expense today. I was just glad the first words weren’t ‘we need to talk.’

“Mr. Carlo?”

“Yes.”

“It’s Lillie from the hotel.”

“Hi Lillie, is everything OK?” At the mention of the name, Lavi and Melissa started paying attention.

“Well, I’m in the back office. I needed to talk to you.” Fuck me. “We have a woman at the desk asking about Melissa Milton, claiming she is a minor and wants to know who was in the room with her.”

“Melissa is eighteen so that is not true.”

“That’s fine Mr. Carlo, we are just letting you know that we will be preserving our records to mitigate any potential liability and let you know of the inquiry. We took a scan of her ID when she signed out the key, as did Ms. Heller.”

“That’s fine. If it were up to me you could tell her.”

“Do you want us to?”

“No, my girlfriend doesn’t want her mom to know yet.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Yeah, Sorry about this grief.”

“It’s no trouble. Have a good day.”

“Bye.”

I put down the phone.

“Sylvia?”

“Yes?”

“Can Peter join us for dinner?”

“I’ll have to ask.”

“Fish?”

“That would be fine.”

There wasn’t time to thaw out enough for half a dozen people but a local fresh fish place would do a rush delivery for a big tip.

“Melissa, I’ve stayed out of this to honor your wishes and I will continue to do so but ... you need to call her. We can’t keep doing this. But, it is your choice.”

She looked down at the phone in her lap and slowly nodded.

“And tell her dinner will be at six.”

**Chapter 12**

I was inside checking the fridge when Melissa made the call so I didn’t hear the conversation but I heard the yelling when it started. I came outside once I realized what was happening and just caught the very end of it. Lavi and Syliva were sitting around in uncomfortable silence by that point. Melissa was crying, her phone screen still lit up but the call over.

“Baby,” I reached out for her but she held up a stiff arm to stop me.

“No ... not right now. I need a few minutes.” She headed towards the shed and started the ritual of cleaning the pool. I watched her walk away.

Lavi reached for my hand and held it. “Give her a bit. That was hard. Her mom is impossible but does really love her.”

I went back inside to start mise en place but then realized that was overkill, starting with four hours to go. I pulled out my phone and wondered if the number was still good. I called and it was picked up on the second ring.

“Hey, it’s Robert Carlo. Do you have a minute? I have a huge favor to ask.”

Ten minutes later I went outside with a tray of crackers, cheese, preserves, and sliced sausages. I was greeted by Sylvia saying to Lavi, “It’s not funny!”

Lavi was giggling, she looked at me and said, “My dad asked if it was okay to bring popcorn to dinner, to watch during the show.”

“I wouldn’t laugh if I were you, you still have to explain” she gestured towards me, “this thing to your dad.”

Lavi looked ready to make a comment but choked it down. Sylvia was obviously still on edge. “Oh, and he’s leaving work early. He should be here in a bit.” That managed to damper Lavi’s enthusiasm.

But, right then I was too busy watching Melissa. She was finishing the pool and looking over at the bees. She put up the last of the equipment and I watched as she walked towards the hives. She didn’t get close but a few were buzzing past her. Since she had started cleaning my pool she had grown fond of the bees and was delighted when they flew around her. She enjoyed watching them. I came up behind her and put my arms around her. She pressed back against me.

I didn’t ask or say anything but she offered, “She’s bringing my step-dad too.”

“How is she.”

“Nuclear. She wanted to come over now. I told her I’d call the cops if she tried to force her way in.”

“Sounds rough.”

“She called me a whore and said I could stay here and she’d just throw my stuff on the lawn.”

“We don’t have to do this.”

“It’s already happening. You may get me moving in though.”

“I’m ready.” She started crying again. “Baby, I have to ask you something.”

She sniffled but responded. “Uh-huh?”

“I have to know something. Is your leaving me, at all, a chance? I mean truly, leaving me, not tonight, not to live at home but us not being together?”

“No.” She said it without hesitation. It was so simple for her.

“Then we can do this.”

“I don’t know how. She’s spent her whole adult life raising Tommy and me. She’s given up a lot for us.”

“And she makes sure you’re reminded of it.” It wasn’t a question, I’d heard it enough. Everything had to be perfect to make Melissa perfect so that her life wasn’t like her mom’s. “Sorry babe, that has limits. You owe your parents something, but not your whole life.”

She just rubbed held my arms against her in response.

“Let me ask you something; when Tommy came out, how did she respond?”

“Not like this.”

“Not angry?”

“No, more like she was disappointed. She never said she didn’t love him but it seemed as if every time she looked at him she was looking at something broken that couldn’t be fixed.”

“Well, I’ll handle her, but I won’t speak for you. But, when she gets nasty you can just walk out. I’ll call her on it.”

“That’s not fair. I know you don’t like conflict.”

I nuzzled her hair. “My honey bee?”

“Yes?”

“You’re going to find out what an asshole I can be when I need to.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You just have to promise me one thing.”

“Yes, I’ll be here.”

“OK, two things, then. That and ... if my mom is a complete bitch when you’re introduced, you handle her.”

Melissa laughed gently, a strange sound since she was still sniffling.

“You don’t deal with your own mom well, huh?”

“None of us do. That’s why we have each other. Oh, and sometimes other reinforcements.”

I filled her in on the call. She wasn’t thrilled with it but was thankful. Afterward, she was still having trouble pulling herself together. I asked, “Don’t take this the wrong way but have you ever taken Xanax?”

“Yeah. Because I was sick so long I’ve had prescriptions for dealing with panic attacks about being around anyone sick.”

“Do you want one?”

“Please.”

“I’ll bring it to you.”

“No, let me come inside with you.”

“OK.”

We walked past Lavi and her mom. Melissa stopped, “Lavi, come up in a few minutes? I know Robert has to host but I could use someone to lay down with.”

“Of course.” She stood up and kissed Melissa and me.

Melissa and I held hands and went upstairs. I closed the bedroom door and got Melissa one of the little white pills.

“How long has it been since you’ve taken Xanax?”

“A while. One refill usually lasts me a year or more. I’m already worn out, I’ll probably crash out quickly.”

“That’s fine, I’ll wake you.”

She pushed her shorts down past her knees and stepped out of them, then seemed to realize she still had her sneakers and socks on so she took those off. In just a second she leaned over and pulled her panties down. Sitting on the bed she threw the shirt and bra to the side. Every action was mechanical and lacked animation. She lay down on the bed in a partial fetal position.

“Get naked,” she said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

I did so. Shortly I was lying down with her and holding her. We kissed gingerly like we had never done it before and it occurred to me we never had kissed quite like that before, for comfort. She got me hard with her hand. Even with all my emotions, just being there with her made it easy. She lay back, pulling me on top of her. We made simple love for what felt like forever, no dirty talk, no passion, just affection. I came as she smiled at me and said: “fill me.”

“Did you cum,” I asked?

“No. But I don’t want to. I got what I wanted. Hold me.”

I laid down and took her in my arms. That was when Lavi came in. Melissa gestured for her. Lavi started to get on the bed, still dressed, but Melissa said: “no, get naked.”

She did, and soon I was sandwiched between them. Melissa had been right, it was warm being in the middle. Melissa reached across to Lavi and took her hand, pulling it down to her cunny. “Robert came in me. Get some.”

Lavi did and, pulling some of Melissa’s and my juices out on her fingers, licked them clean. They each put a head on my shoulder and we lay together. Melissa babbled as she went unconscious. The last thing I understood was her murmuring, “my two beloveds.”

After she fell asleep Lavi and I looked at each other. I pushed her hair out of her eyes. She looked up at me at that moment. “Are you ready for this?” I asked.

“Absolutely. You?”

“Yeah, I think so.” And oddly I realized it was mostly true.

“Robert?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m really starting to look forward to the day we make love.”

“Me too.”

We kissed for a few minutes, she pressed against me and I woke up down there quickly again, which prompted her to throw me out of my own bedroom.

“You, get up and go. You have to cook and I do not want my mom present for me losing my virginity.”

“She’s not, she’s downstairs.” I grinned. I swear at that moment Lavi gave the exact same ‘I am not amused’ look her mom gave me earlier. It made me chuckle.

“What?” She asked.

“I’ll tell you later. I have to cook.”

I scooted out and got dressed, seeing her take my spot and cuddle Melissa to her breasts. Downstairs I found Sylvia going through my wine cooler looking at labels.

“I don’t think any of it is kosher,” I offered.

“We’re not big on that. We don’t eat pork but we’re not strict. Besides I’m pretty sure there are exceptions for this situation.”

“Isn’t there a rule about asking?”

She turned to look at me. “I’m also pretty sure there is a rule saying that you can freely drink the wine of any man boinking your daughter.”

I was going to make a different comment about biblical rules when I stopped. “Did you just say boinking?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve never heard anyone say boinking before.”

“It’s a word more people should use. Don’t give me shit.” I swear as she turned back to the wine there was a slight grin this time.

“Here we go, a nice rosé to go with the preserves.” She left with a corkscrew in one hand and a bottle in the other. Well, I was back into almost friendly territory with Sylvia. I might just survive this.

“That’ll be Peter,” Syliva said over her shoulder when the doorbell rang as she completed her journey towards the back patio. Deep breath. I could handle this. I went to get it and a man stood there in a corporate American khaki and polo shirt uniform. I could definitely see Lavi in his face. He was tanned and shorter than I, maybe 5’8” or so. His nose was sharp and hair dark brown and very curly. He extended his hand and smiled.

I took the hand and shook it. “Hi, I’m Peter, Syliva’s husband.” His voice was lightly accented but more American than I had expected. “I didn’t know if you drank beer so I grabbed a couple of things on the way.” He held in his other hand a couple of growlers by their loops from a local growler chain that had good microbrewery stuff.

“Um ... let me help you”, I reached out and took one of them. “I hope you’re this happy to meet me after you chat with Lavi.”

I had expected him to scowl at that but instead, he smiled. “It’s all right.” He gave me an actual wink. “Syliva wants her to be on the hot seat for hiding stuff but I got the low down on the phone earlier. Never ambush your significant other and all that.”

“And you’re ... fine?”

“I guess so.” He shrugged. “My blood pressure kind of went up for a bit but I started to think about it and it’s not really my choice is it? This wasn’t something I imagined for her but that’s my problem, not yours. Look, Robert, it’s Robert, right?”

“Yeah.” I motioned him in and we headed towards the kitchen.

“You know what’s harder than raising a kid? Letting them go. It’s way easier on our nerves to guard them then let them make choices and learn from them. But I’ve been preparing myself for this for a long time and I figure you and Mellie are way better than her getting interested in some chucklefuck who ... you know, nevermind, let’s not go there.”

“That’s very kind of you. I wish Sylvia felt like you do.” I found space in the fridge for the growlers and put out a few pint glasses in the freezer for those who wanted them.

“She does.” He patted me on the shoulder. “Let me tell you something about Sylvia, and you might as well learn it if we’re in the long haul on this, she gets mad fast and she gets over it fast. She’ll be fine. Once it really sinks into her that Lavi is happy and healthy it’ll all be good.”

“I’ve kind of gotten that feeling. Glad to know I wasn’t imagining it.”

“She’s just freaked out by it being you. Mellie was weird enough. You know she told me years and years ago that she felt like you were the big brother she never had.”

“Uh ... no, I didn’t even know she thought anything of me until she showed me the book dedication.”

“Yeah, so you were this guy who was a memory frozen in time and then you’re sleeping with her daughter. Then the other daughter.

“Actually we haven’t...”

He went behind me and grabbed a pint glass and the growler he had kept hold of. Pouring began. “Save it. If it wasn’t my daughter and Mellie I’d want to know the details but I do want my daughter to be happy as a woman. I know she and Mellie will look out for each other, so as long as you can be happy too...” he held up his glass “l’chaim!”

“I’d like that. And thank you for sparing me the ritual disembowelment threats.”

“Ah, it’s fine, it’s fine. Besides, if you ever really piss her off my daughter is way scarier than I am!” We both smiled at that. “My wife?”

I pointed him in the right direction and cringed when the doorbell rang again. It was Grand Central Station here today! Fortunately, it was just the fish being delivered.

I came out and sat with Peter and Sylvia. Surprisingly, I found them pleasant to chat with. Sylvia had relaxed and had her hand on Peter’s knee and was enjoying the wine.

“So, Rob...” he started “where are the girls?”

“Napping.” I sat and started on a pint of a lager Peter had brought. I wasn’t much of a beer drinker but it was really good.

“Melissa needed the rest and Lavi is keeping her company.”

“They’ve always been like that,” Peter offered.

“Melissa made it sound like they met and that was it, boom, BFFs. Was it like that?”

“Pretty much,” Sylvia replied. “We moved here. In Tel-Aviv Lavi had a lot of friends but here she was kind of lost. Her English was good but here she didn’t quite fit in. She drew into herself. I was really worried until she met Mellie. The first few days she seemed a bit brighter and by two weeks after school started, she was her old self.”

“The difference,” added Peter, “was that the cadre had become one.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Before we moved Lavi always had a circle of friends. We kind of worried she was a bit of a gang leader, she certainly had the personality but they were always ... well, mostly, well behaved.”

“There were a few times...”. Sylvia interjected.

“Yeah, yeah, but not like hurting people kind of bad, just normal kid mischief. But she was definitely the ringleader.” Sylvia nodded in agreement so he went on “With Mellie ... it was just them. They had other friends of course but they came and went like comets being caught and flying out of orbit. Those two orbited each other. And it was mutual, there wasn’t any of one pushing the other.”

“Fighting?” I asked.

“Plenty of little squabbles.”

“Only a few bad ones.”

“Remember, Shelley Bergum?” Asked Peter.

“Oh my lord, how could I forget!”

My question must have shown on my face. “Shelley Bergum was this girl in 10th grade. Blonde, cheerleader on the team with them. Became thick as thieves with Lavi,” offered Peter.

Sylvia interrupted. “And I didn’t think about it then but now I wonder if it was because she looked a lot like Melissa.”

“You think so?”

“A lot of the same features: blonde, blue-eyed, built. Different in every other way. I think that’s when Lavi was ... figuring things out.”

Peter nodded. “Yeah, and she and Melissa didn’t like each other. So there was this huge fight, Melissa slammed the door and left, waited outside for her mom to pick her up.”

“Next day, sullen and still pissed, Melissa shows up, goes to Lavi’s room,” says Sylvia. “I’m expecting screaming, which never happened. Three hours later, still pissed Melissa goes home. Lavi, still mad as hell, comes to dinner.”

“I’ll never forget that,” said Peter chuckling.

“I ask Lavi if they worked through their problems. Lavi just says ‘no’. I asked her what they did in her room. She just said ‘we always do our homework together’ and looked at me like I had just asked the stupidest damn question on Earth.”

Maybe half an hour passed as we chatted amicably before the girls came down looking grim. Lavi asked to talk to her dad in the house. Melissa insisted on going too. Sylvia grinned at me.

“You are evil,” I said.

She shrugged and sipped her wine. “You remember that.”

It wasn’t long before they returned, both looking relieved. Melissa and Lavi pulled up chairs next to mine. I put my arm around Melissa’s back and Lavi settled on the other side, her arm now sitting on top of mine. The symbolism wasn’t lost on me.

I leaned over to Melissa. “How are you doing?”

She smiled at me and I flashed back to the day I first met her and first saw her smile. “I can do this. I just don’t know how.”

“We kill them with kindness,” I said.

“Yeah,” Lavi said, “you’re eighteen, you have a place to live, you’re fine.”

“I don’t want to move out like this.”

“No, but are we worth it?” Lavi asked.

“Yes.”

“So, we treat it like everything is normal. We don’t fight them on their own ground, we make them move to ours.” I added.

“Sounds like Sun-Tzu.” Said Peter.

I was thinking more like Machiavelli.” I replied. He smiled.

“Is there anything you need us to do?” Peter asked

“Maybe some music?”

“Something upbeat,” suggested Lavi.

“How about Latin? Something we can dance to,” added Sylvia.

“Upbeat?” Asked Melissa.

“Yeah,” said Lavi, “Mellie, this is a celebration of the three of us. I hope your mom can join us for it but if she refuses, frankly, FUCK HER.” She put the emphasis on the words.

I could see a flash, lightning-fast, of anger cross Melissa’s face but it passed and she smiled at Lavi. “You’re right. Let’s do this. Mr. Heller, I’ll show you where the pairing buttons are at.”

“I think we need more wine.” I went up to get a couple of bottles. I came back to an infectious beat and what I later learned was Tito Puentes. Peter, Syliva, Lavi, and Melissa were all dancing. Melissa looked not just content but for a moment happy. She reached out to me. “I don’t really know how to dance.”

“You don’t have to. Just move.”

So, I did. I probably looked like a damn fool but she danced, by herself, with me, with Lavi, just danced. Lavi jokingly rubbed up against me a few times making her mom slightly uncomfortable, which I think was the goal. We snacked on crackers, we drank wine. It was now almost five and I had to really start cooking in earnest, though. For the last few hours I’d done a very disjointed mise en place as I’d been through the kitchen off and on, so I was ready.

Melissa’s phone pinged. “That was my step-dad. They’re on their way. So, like two minutes.”

I could feel the fun evaporating as Peter raised his hand. “Robert, do you have any popcorn?” Sylvia slapped his arm and glared at him. He seemed to think it was totally worth it.

Sylvia approached Melissa, “Seriously, Mellie, you have us behind you too. This ‘you and Lavi and him’ thing took us by surprise but we’re on your side.”

“And Robert’s?” Melissa asked.

“Oh, I suppose.” But, she said it smiling.

“OK, I’ve never cooked for this many. I’ll get the door when they’re here but Lavi, Melissa, I need to boil some potatoes and others chopped raw. We’ll need the whole bag that’s on the counter done, half and half.”

“On it,” they said together.

They headed to the kitchen and I detoured as the doorbell rang. I walked to the front but froze at the door for a moment. Melissa was part right. I didn’t avoid conflict, I avoided people and all their complications. But, that doesn’t mean I don’t know how to fight. So, I opened it to face ... some guy. I glanced around, no maternal figure standing around him. He was my height, at least within an inch. He had cropped hair as if he was in the military but he looked too soft and didn’t have the posture for it. He had khakis and a button-up blue shirt along with a slightly blank expression.

“Can I help you?”

“You’re Robert Carlo, right? I see Lavi’s car so I’m in the right place?”

“I am.” He started to reach out and shake my hand and then pulled it back quickly. “I’m Rian Argyle. I’m here to pick up my stepdaughter Melissa.”

“That doesn’t seem likely.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Melissa, Lavi and I are hosting dinner for their families. I doubt she will want to leave until at least after dinner. I think after that it depends on what her mother says.”

“If she doesn’t come home now I doubt she’ll have a home. I’ve never seen Linda this mad.”

“Your premise is faulty.”

“What?” He seemed really frustrated that I just didn’t grasp something.

“She has a home, here, whenever she chooses to stay here.”

“Look, this is ridiculous...”

“Yes, it is. I have to cook. You want to talk to her, come in.”

I shut the door once he was inside and then headed to the kitchen. Melissa, bless her soul, was showing Lavi how to peel the potatoes. She looked up and said, “Hi Rian.”

Lavi, “are you making latkes with this?” She was peeling potatoes.

“Yep,” I said.

“I figured, why else have the matzo crumbs. I love latkes.”

“I know, that’s why I got the stuff.”

“How did you know?”

“I asked your mom a few days ago.”

“Awesome!” She kissed me on the lips quickly and I returned it. Then, as if to make something clear to Rian, she did the same for Melissa. I was seasoning pans but looked at Rian out of the corner of my eye. He looked unsure of what to do.

“Now, Melissa, you’re coming with me,” he finally said.

“Why?”

“Why? It’s time to go home.”

“No, it’s not, dinner isn’t even ready yet much less eaten. By the way, are you staying, where is Mom? Robert, the fish is being kept cool but I need to know how many pieces to get out.”

“Yeah, is she coming separately? Are you staying? I really need to know how much of the fish to fix.”

Poor Rian. For a moment I think he just didn’t know how to process this. From what Melissa had told me he was more used to anger than anything else but it had to be made clear they had no power here.

“She’s going to be mad as hell!”

I looked at him. “That’s not my problem. Now, Melissa, do you want to continue to talk about this?”

“No, I’m prepping.”

“Okay, there you have it. Tell your wife to come and join us for dinner. Or you join us. Or neither of you. I’ll put enough on to include you both if you want to.”

“Uh. Can I, like, step in the other room to call her?”

“Sure. But let her know one thing.”

“What?”

“Our home, our hospitality. She will be civil or I will remove her.”

“Um, yeah.”

“You tell her.” It wasn’t a request on my part.

He seemed to think about it. “Sure, but I’m quoting you.”

“Feel free to replace ‘remove her’ with ‘kick her out on her ass.’”

“I ... don’t think I can do that.”

“But I’m perfectly game. She’s already been nasty to one woman I love today so she’s already exhausted my goodwill.”

“Uh, okay. I’m just going to call from the other room.”

“Sounds good. Want something to drink? Wine, beer?”

“You have an IPA?”

“Peter brought a good one over, growlers are in the fridge, cold glasses in the freezer.”

Rian seemed pleased and made a glass before heading to the other room. As he left Lavi ran her hands up my back. “I normally don’t find guys really hot but that got my panties damp.”

“Told you,” Melissa said, grinning.

Not knowing what to say, I didn’t say anything. Instead, I flipped through the recipes on the iPad I keep mounted above the stove. I knew a few by heart but not all of them. In a moment Rian came back sipping his beer. He looked like someone had put him through the five rounds and onto the mat before he got back up.

“She said she will join us soon.”

“Wonderful,” I said. “Peter and Sylvia are on the patio. We’d join you but we’re cooking.” He nodded and headed that way but only a few minutes later was back. This was the curse of Melissa’s mom’s house only being a few streets away.

“Um ... Melissa. Your mom is outside. She said she is waiting in the car.”

Her reply was simple, “Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Rian looked stunned. “Whatever!” She threw her hands up and then returned to putting the Brussel sprouts on the baking sheet.

“We have to go. Now.” He waited and she wasn’t moving. “Aren’t you coming?”

Melissa got the truffle oil and sea salt handy to keep preparing.

“I think that’s your answer,” I said.

He put the beer on the table and headed back towards the front door. I heard the front door open but that was when I heard a voice I hadn’t heard in a while yell, “STOP BEING SUCH A C-U-N-T AND GET YOUR PANTYHOSE CLENCHED ASS IN THERE WITH YOUR DAUGHTER!”

I headed out but Melissa was past me and already running across the yard to hug the newcomer that the taxi service had just dropped off. I went up and made sure the taxi driver was taken care of before turning back to Tommy. It was hard to believe that even technically he was the little brother but it was easy to believe they were twins. Tommy was a few inches taller than I and had the lean and muscled build that gym rats endless aspire to but came naturally to him. He was blonde, blue-eyed and very easy to look at. I’m completely straight and I would admit he was gorgeous. In short, he was a male counterpart to Melissa.

I really needed to get back to the stove but I stopped by the family gathering first. “Linda?” I looked into the driver’s seat of the new car. She was blonde and looked a lot like an older version of Melissa but with a face that I couldn’t imagine smiling. Those were some very strong traits that ran in this family! She would have been attractive if not looking like a feral cat trying to decide who to take a swipe at next. “We’d love to have you here for dinner. I know this is hard for you but I’d like to cook for the woman who raised such a wonderful person as Melissa.” I managed to be nice, not lie and not high five Tommy when he called his mom a cunt. Yay me. Now it was their job to extract her. Or not.

I left and headed inside. I found Lavi holding down the fort but not really knowing what to do. We went to work together. She didn’t know the kitchen well but she listened and didn’t have to be told the same thing twice so it went fine. In a bit, Melissa came back and took out the head of cauliflower...

“So?”

“She’s headed to the patio with everyone else.”

“Good.”

“She’s unusually quiet.”

“Well, she feels ganged up against.”

“She is.”

“Yeah, but there’s a thin line between letting someone know they’re being ... unreasonable and making them feel cornered. Give her space.”

At that moment Tommy busted in and yelled, “Bitches, we need more wine glasses!”

I eyed him. “What happened to the quiet young man who used to mow my lawn?”

“He’s been at college for three months with a bunch of gay as fuck jocks and the Pride Club! I don’t think I’ll ever go full queen but damn it feels good to let the freak flag fly a bit. Speaking of freaks!” He grabbed Lavi in a hug from the back. “My sister by another mister! No time for your Tommy-boy!?”

“I’m cooking!”

“I know, I’m trying not to faint. You, cooking, really?”

“I can cook. A little,” she replied indignantly.

“Anyway, wine,” he said.

I pointed him to the cooler. “Take what you want, glasses there.” I pointed.

“Awesome! Maybe with some vino in her mommy dearest will start breathing a bit. Toodles.”

I smirked. “Tommy seems to be in good spirits though it’s not what I expected.”

Melissa shrugged. “He used to be super careful about being even the tiniest bit flamboyant. It probably does feel relaxing. Plus, I think he’s doing some of it for effect right now.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s guaranteed to keep mom off-balance, trust me.”

“Ah.”

“She can only focus on one target at a time and if he’s in her face...”

She put a finger on her nose and pointed the other hand at me.

“Gotcha,” I replied.

“Thank you for calling him and getting him here.”

“Of course.”

“You keep doing stuff for me.”

“That’s not how I see it.”

Lavi picked that moment to pinch Melissa’s ass. “Don’t worry, we’ll make it up to him.” She smiled.

“How about now?” Melissa got that sexy grin. “We’ve got a few minutes before the fish, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Lavi, take our man upstairs and help him to relax, then bring me something tasty.”

“Ooooo,” she grabbed Melissa’s shoulders and licked her ear. “You’re on slut.”

“Come on, you.” She grabbed my hand and we made our way to the upstairs bedroom. I should have objected but ... I wasn’t going to.

Lavi shut the bedroom door and I wasted no time removing my pants. I already knew what she had in mind from her licking her lips dramatically. Lavi crawled between my legs and quickly took me in her mouth. She didn’t have any practical experience but she definitely knew the theory. She bobbed up and down taking her mouth off to run her tongue across my crown and tease me. She kept her eyes on me.

“There’s a lot more of this to come you know, you pervert.”

I didn’t reply but ran my hands through her hair and pulled her back over my dick. She went to work, sucking with the back of her throat keeping a pulling motion. I took one of her hands and moved it to the base of my cock.

“When you’re not sucking, stroke,” I said. She smiled and did so, while at the same time figuring she should occupy her other hand which was soon playing with my balls. My moaning was all the encouragement she needed as she increased her activity. It didn’t take long. I’d been on edge with energy for a while and despite having cum earlier it hadn’t been a very strong one. This time I came hard. The first caught her by surprise and I saw her eyes go wide but then she pulled back and made sure she pooled it into her mouth. She got up smiling. I was pulling on my pants when I slapped her on the ass.

“Go now, to our girlfriend.” It felt good to say that.

We came down to find Melissa sipping on her own wine and grinning like a cat who ate the canary. Melissa kissed Lavi. It wasn’t a gentle peck on the lips. They held each other tightly and their tongues rubbed seemed to have a gentle battle.

Then just loud enough to make sure I heard it Melissa whispered, “Should we save some for Tommy? He might like to try it!” I turned around ready to fuss at them but both opened their mouths wide and showed me their tongues to show they were well clean and everything swallowed.

Realizing I’d been successfully teased and tricked I just shook my head and returned to the fish. However, that was when Sylvia walked in, saw them standing their mouths open and on display. She might not have thought much of it if they hadn’t both turned beet red.

“I don’t want to know. So ... I came in to ask about the water.”

“Bottles there,” I pointed to the fridge, “though I have plenty more not cold if anyone wants that.” We would just pretend she didn’t see that...

Twenty minutes later I was putting the serving dishes on the main table in the kitchen as Lavi finished setting it. I had wanted to eat outside but there were just too many people for my small table out there. It was a good thing I had all these chairs that had come with the table. I’m pretty sure most of them were virgins from use until now. Eight was exactly right.

As everyone sat and I got the dishes I explained. “This dinner is a bit about Melissa, Lavi, and me. Our protein is honey glazed catfish. I grew up in the south and always loved catfish, even catching them in creeks when I was a kid. The honey is from my bees out back, and this particular honey Melissa helped me get from the combs a few weeks ago. The potato pancakes are latkes, and I’m using Lavi’s grandmother’s recipe for it. The cauliflower is roasted with pecorino and mint. Melissa has told me that she remembers eating cauliflower with her father before he passed away and I tried to make something to bring that memory back. We have it as a snack some afternoons while we read. The Brussels sprouts are something I made for Lavi and Melissa the first time I ate with them both. They are a part of our shared past and while I introduced something to them in that meal I have learned more from them than they have from me. This meal is about our past and sharing our future with loved ones.”

I settled the last dish and looked at where to sit and saw people had clearly avoided sitting at one end to allow Melissa, Lavi and I to sit together except that Linda sat right in the middle to break us up. “Linda. I’ll need you to move.” I said.

“Excuse me?”

I pointed at the empty seat next to Rian. “Sit with your husband, Linda.”

She didn’t move and bore daggers into me with her eyes.

I was about to lean down and say something quietly to her that would feel really good to say even if I regretted it later when Rian of all people spoke up.

“Oh, for god’s sake Linda, sit with me, please. You’ve spent all afternoon calling Melissa a child and you’re throwing a tantrum.” The room went dead with silence. I doubt anything I could have said would have stunned her more than his fairly polite words did. She still didn’t move and he said, “Do I need to come over there and get you?”

“I’ll help,” said Tommy obviously delighted at seeing Rian stand up for himself.

“I can manage, thank you!” She got up and stomped over to the seat. I picked up the wine glass and handed it to Sylvia. “Pass this down to Linda would you?”

I think everyone expected me to take the head of the table but it felt weird. Melissa seemed to sense my thoughts. “You cooked, it is your table.”

“We cooked.”

“It’s a bit patriarchal but we don’t care. We can get up and change places every ten minutes if it makes you feel better.”

I took my seat, Lavi to my left and Melissa to my right. True to their word we got up and rotated every ten, or so, minutes, which left me close enough to talk to different people. The third time we did it Rian and Tommy swapped places too, which left Linda still sandwiched. She said nothing until that third rotation which put me back at the head of the table when she slammed her fork down.

“I can’t believe we’re sitting here just ... just eating while this pervert acts like some kind of king up there!?”

“Oh, please, Linda pull the stick out.” Syliva might have one glass too many but I still applauded internally.

“Maybe Robert could help out with a different stick, he seems to have enough to go around,” joked Tommy. To my surprise, Rian seemed to be laughing too.

It was my turn to practice the ‘you’re not funny’ look and Tommy held up his hands in apology.

Lavi just couldn’t leave it though, “It does look like it would do the job.”

“I know, right!” Said Tommy. “That phone pic was gorgeous!”

“Is there anyone here who hasn’t seen his junk?!?”, yelled Linda.

Sylvia and Peter raised their hands as did Rian after a long delay. Linda glared at him. “Well, I haven’t!” He said.

“Well, I’m never looking through your phone again,” said Sylvia to Lavi with a complete deadpan as she took another bite of the latke.

This prompted Tommy to lean over the table and high five Lavi, “Ten points for Hufflepuff!”

“Awww yeah!” She replied. “By the way, to keep it fair Tommy is an honorary member for our house points.” She looked at Melissa and me.

“How do you figure that?” Asked Melissa, obviously more confused than offended by the idea.

“We have to keep it fair. You two are Ravenclaws, I need another Hufflepuff.”

“Anyone else want in on this?” I asked.

“Gryffindor,” said Peter. She looked a bit sheepish admitting it but Sylvia said, “Slytherin.”

“What the hell are you people talking about!?!” Linda looked ready to have a stroke. Rian was telling her to drink some water but he was drowned out by six different replies that included the terms Hogwarts, Harry Potter, sorting hat and quiz all overlapping each other.

She did drink the water and steadied herself but then looked directly at Melissa. “I don’t understand how everyone can sit around and treat this as a joke. Baby girl, you can have it all - be head cheerleader, win state, be homecoming queen, go to an Ivy League school, have a perfect life.”

Melissa, bless her heart, didn’t back down one bit, “Mom, did you notice that list only ran up until the end of high school and me leaving for college?”

She gave Melissa a pleading tone, begging her to understand. “That’s what sets everything in motion.”

“No mom, high school isn’t where the mistakes are made, it’s just a place they can be made. And by the way, my life is nearly perfect and I thank you for that because you’ve been a huge part of it. I have good grades, I’ll probably go to school locally though. I have a boyfriend and girlfriend, both are supportive, kind and rock solid. Rian, you’ve been a good stepdad. You and I never really connected as father and daughter as you came along a lot later, but you’ve always been good to me. Tommy, I can’t imagine a better brother even if I did catch you trying to wear my panties and bra when we were ten.” For the first time, Tommy looked embarrassed and he drank his wine a bit faster but the laughing around the table was good-natured. “Mom, you’ve given a lot to me and I owe you more than I can ever repay but you’ve always said you wanted me to be happy so, yeah, that’s what I’m going to do even if it’s not how you saw it happening.”

“What about Jerry baby, he’s been a good boyfriend, he’s done what you’ve wanted...”

“I tried dating Jerry and it didn’t work and if there had been any chance it’s way past now with that stunt he pulled. Asking people about me behind my back? Is that what you think a boyfriend does? As for cheering I like it and think we can go a lot further than state this year...”

“That’s great...”

“No, let me finish. But I don’t want to be captain, I’ll be voting for Grace, and I don’t want to be homecoming queen. Just, no.”

“But what if you get pregnant, I know Jerry was willing to wait...”

“Oh my god, you talked to him about that!? You know, never mind, I shouldn’t be surprised. You and that creep are not planning my life! That boy needs to grow a pair that you’re not keeping in your purse!” I reached over to Melissa and grabbed her forearm. She looked at me, clearly a full head of steam ready to explode. But she took a second and took a few breaths. For her part, Linda, caught at discussing her daughter’s sex life with the boyfriend, seemed to take discretion as the wiser path for a change. After half a minute or so, a more relaxed Melissa started up again. “I’m taking my pills. I do want a kid or two one day.” She turned to me, “I know we haven’t talked about it...”

“I’ve thought about it today after something Sylvia said. Yeah, I’d like kids. I hadn’t thought about it with us but I’ve thought about it in earlier times of my life. I admit I haven’t spent a lot of time around kids so I’m intimidated by the idea but I want to. With both of you, if you want it.” I reached over to include Lavi in my statement by looking at her and putting my hand on hers.

“I want to wait until after college,” replied Melissa.

“Same,” said Lavi, “but I want three. I’m hoping for a boy and girl plus one but any would be a blessing.”

“Five sounds good.” I smiled at them both.

“Who is going to marry who?” Linda challenged. “You can’t both be having kids without being married!”

It was Lavi that replied before Melissa had to. “I’m pretty sure my uterus doesn’t care about a marriage license.” Her mother rolled her eyes.

Melissa, “We will figure insurance and stuff out. It might make the most sense if one of us gets good insurance for Lavi and me to marry for the pregnancies.”

“I actually have really good insurance. My company is big on that kind of thing. My plan allows me to add others I’m not related to but in the household, though I have to pay full including the employer portion,” I added.

“That’s another option then. We may have to take turns with kids and marriage if we need to for insurance.”

Lavi shrugged, “That’s fine,” she said as if the idea of divorcing and having your ex-husband re-marry your girlfriend for insurance was the most natural thing in the world. It was not what I was suggesting at all but it wasn’t the craziest thing I’d heard in the last six hours. “Are they going to be Jewish or Baptist?” Lavi asked.

“Let them decide,” I said, “but I’m fine raising them with both.” Peter gave a thumbs up to that from where he was eating. Nothing had dampened his appetite.

“Names!” That was Melissa. “I thought we’d both take Carlo.”

“We could hyphenate,” countered Lavi.

“Or come up with a whole new one,” I added. I felt like I had to say something to slow them down or I was going to get whiplash looking between them.

“We’ll figure it out,” said Melissa casually.

“All the kids get the same last name though,” added Lavi.

“Totally.”

That surprisingly, to me anyway, ended the conversation. Melissa and Lavi beamed at each other though and nibbled at their food. After a few minutes conversation restarted, mostly about the food this time. Lavi was over the moon about the latkes. Melissa said she’d never had catfish before but really liked it. Rian, it turned out, liked to cook a little and asked me how to make the cauliflower. I told him Melissa could show him. Other small talk followed and even Linda ate though I couldn’t tell if she actually tasted anything. Syliva made me swear to teach her to make the latkes, saying she had tried but not gotten them right. Peter asked if I knew how to make matzo ball soup and somehow that became a chat about soufflés and we ended up with plans to marathon some Dr. Who with Lavi because I hadn’t seen the most recent Doctor’s seasons. I missed the other conversations around this time.

It was nearly eight when Linda finally said in a lull, “Are you going to come home?”

Melissa looked back at her. “Can you accept that Robert and Lavi are my girlfriend and boyfriend?”

“I don’t have a choice, do I?” She looked like she’d swallowed something bitter.

“Of course you do,” said Sylvia. “I wasn’t thrilled either but I can support my daughter or drive her away from me. And, as hard as it is to admit, she might have a better idea of what’s good for her than I do. I certainly had a better idea than my mom did.”

Lavi added, “She still hasn’t forgiven you for marrying a Jew.”

“Her choice. You,” she pointed at Lavi, “post some pics of you and Melissa to Facebook and I can probably get us out of Thanksgiving at long last.”

“It’s as good as done,” replied her too enthusiastic daughter. I was instantly curious about what kinds of photos those would be and wondered if Syliva had thought this through.

Melissa, “I don’t expect you to be happy about it but if you don’t want me moving out I don’t want to feel like you’re always about to attack me.”

“Do you expect me to be pro-Robert? I don’t think I can do that.”

“No, I expect you to worry and want to protect me. If you are concerned let me know. Just don’t look to find fault with my choices because they’re not what you would do.”

“Same for me then. I’m screwing up Mellie’s life too apparently,” added Lavi.

Linda looked worn down, sanded down to a raw point of nerve and looked like she knew she had lost the fight.

Melissa, “Look, I don’t want to move out yet. And I do understand you’re going to freak out if you think I’m headed to a cliff but ... well...”

Lavi, “She’s not driving where you think she is so you may need to review the map.”

I squeezed Lavi’s hand. “Five points for Hufflepuff for an excellent extension of analogy.” She kissed me. Everyone looked, then Melissa leaned over and kissed Lavi.

Linda just shook her head.

Tommy went to grab some clothes for Melissa from the house. It turned out that Lavi had some spares there she had left so both girls were covered for clean clothes if they spent the night which is exactly what both intended. For his part, Tommy was going to stay with his mom tonight and spend some time with her tomorrow. He had toned down his exuberance, and was acting a lot more like the Tommy I remembered from his high school days. I offered to call a taxi service or rideshare for him tomorrow but he said he already had something arranged.

Peter left with a handshake for me and a hug for the girls. Sylvia did the same except gave me a hug too. Peter winked as if to say ‘I told you so.’ I had never met anyone who actually winked before.

The three of us walked back inside and looked at the cleanup. None of us were thrilled but it didn’t take that long with three people. I did discover that my small dishwasher, while fine for one, wasn’t up for hosting parties. So, a lot was done by hand. Finally, we collapsed in the bedroom. At first, we just laid across the bed casually, having stripped down to undies which respectively put us in boxers and bra and panty sets. We were all pretty wiped so I didn’t expect anything more to happen tonight. Part of me was very willing but the rest of me yelled it down with a chorus of objections. The girls fiddled with their phones and I grabbed my bedside book but didn’t get much read. We talked a lot. Melissa shared a lot of stories of her mom being kind and sweet. I think she wanted to put another face to the woman who behaved the way she did tonight.

Lavi messaged with her grandmother in Israel who wanted to see pictures of me and asked whether we were going to have kids and if I was Jewish. Apparently, she said she could work with non-religious, whatever that means. Lavi’s relationship with Melissa seemed to be of no interest to her grandmother until the subject of more kids came up and Lavi made it clear they were going to be her kids too. That got her excited and Melissa was now an adopted member of the family, sight unseen as was I. Eventually we fell asleep, me on one side, Lavi in the center and Melissa on her other side. Reaching over Lavi my fingers intertwined with Melissa’s.