**The Pool Girl**

by Leto Armitage

**Chapter 31**

The rest of the evening was sedate. We had dinner and I enjoyed listening to the girls chat. Melissa and Lavi had known Ji for years, probably spent hundreds of hours with her, but were only connecting with her as friends now. It was fascinating to watch. I liked Ji but didn’t feel a connection with her. She was a teenage girl, a cute one, a sexy one, but still a teenager while Melissa and Lavi were women to me as irrational as that might be but I also realized that was starting to change. Ji went home afterward in freshly cleaned clothes. She texted later that her mother commented on how the clothes looked as if they had just been laundered, with the acronym FML appended to it. Melissa had to explain to me that it means ‘fuck my life.’

Monday and Tuesday went quickly. The girls got assignments from school and went to spend time with their families. Tuesday night we had family dinner since we would be gone Wednesday and Melissa felt it was important to keep the weekly tradition of us cooking together. I approved. Linda and Rian, much to my shock, accepted an invitation to join us. Linda behaved herself but I think everyone would have enjoyed dental surgery without anesthesia more. I had planned to rent a large car so that we could handle five or six people going out together in Panama City but Melissa objected to the expense. The debate was settled by Lavi swapping cars with her mom so we ended up taking Sylvia’s SUV. We were packing the car when Melissa’s phone dinged and she answered it.

“Sure,” I heard her say into it, “Yeah, we’ll be here.” She looked at Lavi and me. “That was the detective we talked to. She said she is close by and wanted to chat for a minute.”

My grandfather had a saying before he passed about being a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. I had always thought it was a stupid saying but suddenly it felt appropriate as I didn’t find anywhere calming for my thoughts to turn to. We didn’t say anything but kept packing and soon a blue sedan pulled up to the curb. A brunette, about 5’6”, a little overweight and with an easy smile in a navy pants suit got out and came up to shake my hand since I was closest.

“Detective Warren,” I said.

“Mr. Carlo,” she responded and then took Melissa’s hand, “Melissa and this must be,” she turned to Lavi, “Ms. Heller.”

“Hey,” she waved shyly. Lavi hadn’t met her since Lavi had been at the temple at the time of the first meeting and her later statement had been taken over the phone.

“Do you want to come in?” I asked.

“No, I’ll just be a minute.” I noticed Melissa was now immediately beside me and felt her hand find mine. Lavi had fallen in on Melissa’s other side. “I just wanted to update you on the case. I’ll be making my recommendation to the district attorney and, to be honest, it will probably be dropped.”

She looked at Melissa who just said, “Oh.”

“But you will have the investigation on file and my recommendation which will help you get a restraining order if you want one. I’ll speak for you to a judge if you want. Sometimes that helps.”

Melissa, “I appreciate that but I think I want to see what happens at school.”

“I’m sorry if this is disappointing.”

“No,” Melissa replied, “I understand. I wasn’t sure I should even report it...”

The detective interrupted Melissa, “No, no, you did the right thing. And if it happens again, get to safety and call 911 immediately and me right after. You still have my number?” Melissa nodded affirmatively. “Good. Now, do you have anything for personal protection?”

“Um, like a gun?”

“Well, I don’t recommend you carry a firearm without preparation. A lot of people end up injuring themselves or bystanders. I was thinking of something like a taser. They’re legal to carry without any kind of permit here so you can get one easily.”

“You tell me the kind and I’ll have them waiting here for when we’re back,” I said.

“Going somewhere?”

“Just a long weekend,” I replied.

“Going to meet Robert’s mom,” added Lavi.

“Well, have fun you three.” Usually, she focused on talking to Melissa but for just a second she gave me a look. I could read the question in her face - how the fuck did I have these two girls with me. I often wondered that myself. “Here,” she said, “I’ll text you the name and model of what I use. It’s a little pricey but has two charges and a laser sighting. And, very important, it has an indicator if the batteries get low over time. You can’t recharge them but you can replace them and should. It’s not a gun but still needs care and maintenance. Also, and I have to say this as a cop, state law will let you take it anywhere except a school or courthouse. But municipalities and private businesses have their own rules so check and follow them.” She had her phone out and in a moment Melissa’s phone beeped with the text.

“I really appreciate all this,” Melissa said, “but I have to ask, do I need to be worried?”

Detective Warren shrugged. “Better safe than sorry. Hopefully, he was just being a stupid kid and will get his head straight. But, sometimes it’s not the last you see of them.”

Melissa’s face was tight. “How often?”

“Honestly, we don’t know. A lot of cases never get reported. But it happens enough that I really mean it when I say you should make sure he can never get you anywhere by yourself. Anyway, enjoy your trip.” She waved and was gone in a minute.

Melissa’s hand disentangled from mine and was looking at her phone. I got the last of the bags in the back of the SUV and shut it. Melissa was still on her phone and swore. “Fuck.”

“Huh?” I asked.

“They are pricey.”

“Order them.”

“You sure?”

“Yep. One for you and one for the lioness.”

Lavi, “I’m fine, I don’t need one.” She was putting a cooler with sandwiches and drinks in the backseat.

“You don’t get to argue on this,” I said.

She put a hand on her hip. “I can argue about anything I please.” I walked up and pulled her close to me. “I’ll bet I could take you,” she grinned.

I looked into Lavi’s eyes. “Do you know what happened to my ex when she once pushed me on something I told her I absolutely would not bend on?”

“You spanked her?” Lavi was grinning.

“I put her in a chastity belt for a week. I took her to a play party in it and she couldn’t even edge.”

“You didn’t!?” Her eyes were wide.

“I have it upstairs if you want to try it on.” I kept my eyes on hers.

“Uh,” Melissa asked, “how did she pee?”

“Infrequently.”

“You wouldn’t!” Lavi said, eyes wide. “Would you?”

“I don’t want to,” I said.

Lavi, “Holy fuck balls that is evil.”

Melissa leaned against the car and grinned, “I wish I could have seen that.”

Lavi looked at Melissa, “You want to be put in it? ‘Cause you better as hell not expect me to wear one.”

Melissa, “Oh fuck no, but I like Robert all stern like this.” She had a stupidly happy grin.

“Wait a second,” I said and looked at both of them. “I’m not putting anyone in a chastity belt. Jordyn’s and my relationship was different and I’m not going back to that. But my point is,” I focused on Lavi again, “I can, a bastard when I have to be. Sometimes I even enjoy it. But I don’t want to have to be one. So, can you just go my way on this, and then we can go back to you two running my life while I pretend I’m not paying attention to it?”

Lavi grinned at that. “Deal,” she said. I kissed her. And I enjoyed it so I did it again. “So,” she asked, “does that count as a fight? Does that mean I get makeup sex?”

Melissa walked up and slapped Lavi’s ass. “Slut.” Lavi giggled. “Fine, I’m ordering one for you too Robert.”

“I...” I started to say I didn’t need one but then decided after making a point about Lavi it was the wrong thing to do. So instead, I said, “Thanks.” Soon we were in the car. Lavi’s phone was already synced with the Bluetooth so she put the route in and we were off with me driving. She started to select something to play.

“Hey,” I said, “driver picks the music.”

“My phone,” Lavi said, “and I’m not going for music. It’s an audiobook.”

“Oh, what?”

“Spies of No Country.”

“Don’t know it,” Melissa said from the backseat.

“My zaydeh recommended it. He loves history stuff and since I like spy movies and my dad told him I was really working to ace world history...”

Melissa let out a snort, “I’ll bet he doesn’t know why.”

Lavi put her nose in the air a little, “I don’t feel like that’s pertinent. But he and I don’t usually have a lot in common so this is cool.”

“At least you have a grandparent that communicates with you in something other than varying levels of disappointment,” Melissa responded.

“Well, bubbeh and zaydeh. Grandma, mom’s mom, seemed content to just try to convert me but my cousins have Instagram so she probably knows a lot more to disapprove of now.”

Melissa, “So, your mom gets out of Thanksgiving?”

“After everything I’ve posted for the last few weeks, presumably.” Lavi’s tone was indifferent. “Only thing I’ll miss is the deep-fried turkey.”

“We could still do a huge Thanksgiving at my place,” I said. “I’ve never deep-fried a turkey but I’m willing to try. And maybe a duck. Can you eat duck?”

“Technically, so long as it’s raised domestic, yeah, but we’re not really strict.”

“I know but I want to accommodate everyone. Maybe a couple of chickens too. You know, compare deep-frying fowl.” I was starting to have a plan.

Melissa sighed, “Lavi, put the book on before an ostrich comes into this.” Lavi hit play and I pulled out of the neighborhood and a long stretch of mind-numbing American interstates began.

Later Lavi was clearly bored. She was picking at the ends of her hair the way she does when she’s ready to climb the walls. She had enjoyed the book but found after four hours she had hit her absorbing information limit and put on music.

Finally, she turned the music down and said, “So, Robert, whatcha thinking about?”

“Alligator.”

“Alligator?”

“Alligator.”

A few seconds passed, “What about an alligator?”

“I’m hoping to have some in New Orleans. I ordered five pounds last year and cooked it. It was good but I’ve never had it prepared by an expert. I was also wondering about something like chicken fried rice but with alligator meat.”

“You are a strange man. I love you but you are very strange.”

I shrugged. Suddenly the artificial sound of a camera shutter came from the back seat. Lavi turned around and said, “Who are you showing your coochie to?”

“Coochie?” I asked. I hadn’t heard that used in decades. Lavi ignored me.

Lavi didn’t wait for Melissa to actually reply, “I heard the camera click and your dress is pulled up.”

“Sheesh, you’re not being left out of anything you skank, I was just snapping with Kelly.”

“Kelly? Third block Kelly?”

Melissa giggled, “No, Miami Kelly.”

“Why are you sending Picnic Girl pictures of your, uh, coochie,” I asked.

“She dared me to take one in the car. I said I would if she would take one in the library, she’s studying.”

Suddenly Melissa’s phone dinged. “Awww, she shaves it into a cute little heart.”

Lavi, “Let me see.”

“I’m not sure that’s ethical. She sent the picture to me,” Melissa said. Looking in the rearview I saw her sticking her tongue out at Lavi who growled in response.

“Ask her,” Lavi said.

“Ask her what?”

“If I can see it.”

“Fine, I’ll ask.” There was a pause, and Melissa said, “She quid pro quo. She will send you your own but you have to trade.”

Lavi replied, “Sounds good to me.” She sounded delighted but then made a contemplative humming sound. Unlike Melissa who was wearing a yellow dress, Lavi had gone for tan khakis. That did not appear to be an insurmountable issue for her though as she started shimmying in her seat.

“What are you doing,” I asked.

“Getting out of,” several grunts followed, “my pants.” Sure enough, although it clearly wasn’t easy Lavi soon had the pants to her knees and from there it was done in seconds. “Watch out!” With that warning Lavi was reclining the seat so that she was stretched out at a good ninety-degree angle with her feet on the dash, legs spread. I was driving but glanced over, because, frankly I don’t know how not to look when a pretty girl is getting naked. She was wearing simple white panties but grinned as Melissa and I both looked on. She pulled her panties to the side and slid one finger along her outer lips getting them wet while she took the picture.

I looked around, we were driving along a long stretch, there were other cars in sight but none immediately around us so I reached over and gently slapped Lavi’s clitoris making her jump. “Oh fuck, do that again.” So I did.

Melissa, “Can I record?” She had her phone out and was leaning between the seats.

“Only if you send it to Kelly,” Lavi said.

“Go ahead,” I added. I drove steadily with one hand while the other was exploring Lavi’s opening. Lavi meanwhile played with her own clit. After a while, I saw a series of cars start to come up behind us. “You better cum baby, we’re going to have company.” I sped up a bit to keep the distance between us but that meant my gaining on some cars ahead of us I had been keeping pace with.

“Almost there, just don’t stop, just keep going.” She breathed heavily.

Melissa, “That’s it Lavi, cum on his hand. Anything you want to say to Kelly when I send this to her?”

Lavi, “Wish she was here?”

Melissa giggled and as she did Lavi let out a long sigh followed by “keep going, don’t stop, don’t stop, almost, FUCK YES” and she shook against my hand.

Then Lavi slumped back but Melissa squeezed her shoulder, “Sit up slut, we’re about to have company.” Sure enough, the cars were catching up so Lavi moved her seat back up and while she couldn’t get her pants back on she did drape them across her lap to at least cover everything up. I slowed down so that everyone passed us easily and then sped up to keep pace again. Meanwhile, Lavi was shifting around like an eel and discovering that putting pants back on in the seat was much harder than taking them off and eventually gave up.

Meanwhile, Melissa was hitting send on the video for Lavi. “Sent, along with your snap name.”

It only took seconds for Lavi’s phone to ping. Melissa was leaning over the seat. Lavi said, “She says she wishes she was here too and to hold on for a second.” The next two minutes passed as Lavi reset the book to where we had lost track of it and then she paused it as her phone pinged again. “Ooo ... the video isn’t very good but she’s spreading herself, wow, she’s a slut. I think I like her.” It pinged again. “Just text, it says, I don’t know R’s snap so this is for him.’” Then it pinged yet again. “Oh, wow,” Lavi said, “it looks like Kelly is using a pen to take care of herself at a study carol!” She was holding the phone up so Melissa could see. I reluctantly focused on the road.

Melissa giggled, “I think she’s jealous you had Robert’s hand here.”

“It’s his hands, there’s no substitute for big strong hands,” Lavi said.

I glanced over, “Is that a thing for women?”

“Oh yeah,” Melissa said and then asked me, “You don’t use Snapchat do you?”

“Nope, but I can make an account if it’s helpful. It would just be you and Lavi though.”

“And Kelly,” Melissa pointed out. I didn’t respond but I couldn’t say I disliked the idea.

We drove for a bit longer until a public rest stop came up and I pulled into a parking space at the far end of the lot so that Lavi could discreetly get out and pull up her pants. I parked so that Lavi’s door opened towards the woods and stood on the other side to make sure no one was watching. So, of course, Melissa proceeded to take pictures of Lavi sitting in the seat with her legs out the door pulling her pants up.

“Really,” Lavi asked, “you’re really taking pictures of this?”

“Every adventure should be remembered,” Melissa replied and blew Lavi a kiss. Once Lavi was decent we hit the bathrooms and walked around for a few minutes to stretch our legs. It was a little early but nearly lunchtime so we ate sandwiches while parked so that the driver didn’t have to eat while driving. I’d made my own corned beef and sauerkraut though the relish was store-bought and the rye came from a bakery. We sat at one of the picnic tables provided for travelers.

Lavi ate her sandwich slowly. “I love your corned beef. It makes me think of growing up.”

I asked, “Does Tel Aviv have good New York style delis?”

“Nah, not really, not that I remember but my zaydeh, grand-dad, is from Philly before he moved to Israel. Bubbeh was born in Israel but her parents were Greek jews. Anyway, he always missed American style delis so bubbeh learned to make a lot of the stuff for him. Then my dad grew up on it too. His dad being from the U.S. is part of why they wanted him to come to America for college.”

Melissa passed Lavi the plastic container with the extra sauerkraut I packed for her and she ate it with a fork making happy noises.

“What about you, Melissa? Your mom said your dad moved here, where were you born?”

“Kansas, Wichita. Every time the weather talked about tornados my mom mutters saying that maybe a house would finally fall on my grandmother.”

I asked, “A grandfather?”

“He passed away when I was really young. The big C. I only vaguely remember him and mostly as just being quiet while grandmother ranted but he seemed nice. My dad’s parents are still around, I get cards from them at Christmas but apparently, mom and they don’t get along. You?”

“No grandparents left. The last one passed away about three years ago. That was my dad’s dad but I didn’t really know him. He left my grandmother decades before, went out for a gallon of milk and no one saw him for ten years. I’m assuming that made reconciliation difficult.”

Melissa’s eyes bugged out, “Holy shit.”

Lavi was eating but paused to say, “Then your dad disappeared.”

Me, “Well, more than ten years in dad’s case, assuming he’s still alive somewhere but yeah, there’s a pattern there.”

Lavi, “You ever feel like that, like you’d just want to run away from it?” Melissa slapped Lavi’s arm. “Ouch!”

“It’s fine,” I said, “trust me, I’ve wondered what’s in my blood. But no, I’ve never thought about just cutting out and running. Sometimes I feel overwhelmed and have this stupid urge to do something violent. I have a bad temper but I fight really hard to keep in control.”

“I’m guessing you’ve known people who didn’t keep it in control,” Melissa said.

I nodded yes. No reason to go into depth there. Lavi pressed it though, “Your dad?”

I nodded again and took another bite of my corned beef. “He didn’t hit us or anything, I dont want to give the wrong impression. He would break stuff and yell but it was enough. He scared my mom senseless a lot. He and I had it out one time when I was back from college. He never raised his voice around me again. I only saw him a handful of times after that since I worked at the school and didn’t come home much.”

“Well,” Melissa said, “I think Lavi is winning for best-adjusted family.”

Lavi snorted. “Maybe but don’t be around for discussions of politics, you may not think it’s so harmonious then.”

That’s when Lavi’s phone beeped. “Oh, it’s Ji, she...” Lavi trailed off and put her hand over her mouth and then started slapping the table. Melissa grabbed the phone and started giggling herself. This left me to take the phone from Melissa to see what was so funny. The message had an animated gif of a man crying with one hand over his face. The message read, “mom went in with me for birth control, asked if they had an extra-strength kind.” I joined the laughter.

After everyone composed themselves we packed up and headed back to the car. We were just in when Lavi asked, “So, how often do you think Ji’s mom has jilled off to Robert at this point?”

“Lavi!” That was Melissa.

“Just saying, that much thinking about it and she has to have done it. Her husband is gone all week, no wonder the woman is interested in Ji’s sex life.”

Melissa held up a hand in a stopping motion, “Just, let’s not, all right?”

“Okay, okay,” Lavi conceded but didn’t sound the least bit contrite.

With that, we got in. Lavi took over driving and I got the back seat while Melissa took over the front. This way I could lay down and nap if I wanted to but I didn’t. I kept listening to the audiobook and got on my phone, looking at some cooking blogs and chefs I followed on Twitter. Melissa grumbled as she played her Wii.

“What are you playing?” I asked.

“Zelda, Breath of the Wild. Freakin, frackin’ boss JUST WON’T DIE!” She growled and sat it down and took some deep breaths. “I’ll be fine, it’s like a puzzle, I just have to figure it out.”

Lavi hit pause on her audiobook. “Oh yeah, have we talked about Halloween season yet?”

“That’s like two months away,” I said.

Melissa, “Which is just barely enough time. Halloween lasts two months in Lavi’s universe.”

Lavi, “I saw the box of Halloween decorations in your garage. Do you have more in storage somewhere?”

I shook my head and then realized they couldn’t see me. So I said, “No.”

Lavi sighed as if to say she was disappointed in me as a person. “We can make do.”

Melissa put her hand on Lavi’s arm, “We can buy a bit more each year and build up love.” Melissa turned to look at me in the backseat, “Halloween is basically Lavi’s time to treat me like her dress-up doll.”

“And an excellent one you are my love. Oh, this year could be awesome!”

“Nothing obscene, Lavi.”

“Do you really think I would do that?”

“Do I have to answer that?” Melissa responded.

“You’re my princess, I just like to dress you like one.”

“Nothing obscene.”

Lavi conceded, “Nothing obscene, I promise. Can I dress you too Robert?”

“Uh ... I haven’t dressed up for Halloween in, well, a long time.”

Lavi kept on me, “Come on, please?”

“All right, I’m yours but I reserve the right to veto.”

“Fair enough.”

Melissa, “We could do a whole goth triad thing.”

“You did look good as goth,” Lavi said.

“You, goth?” I asked.

“Well, black clothes, black lipstick, I couldn’t dye my hair though, mom wouldn’t let me.”

“And she wrote bad poetry on LiveJournal,” Lavi added.

“Once, I did that once! I was fifteen.”

“I’m sure I have photos somewhere,” said Lavi. “She was actually pretty hot.”

“I feel like this is dangerous territory,” I said laughing.

“You have permission to jerk off to old pictures of me at any post-puberty age babe,” Melissa said. “It would be flattering.”

“I haven’t had to do much jerking off lately,” I said, swerving expertly around the topic.

“Good,” was her only reply.

We were a few hours down the road when the rain started. It was light at first but soon became torrential. Lavi slowed first to 45 mph then 30 finally 15.

I looked on my phone at an interstate app I had downloaded. “Keep going, there’s a big overpass just a mile up, maybe we can park under it.” Lavi white-knuckled the steering wheel and we crept up until we reached the overpass. It was a wide four-lane overpass with wide shoulders so we were able to pull over and park. The rain was falling straight down and created a wall at either side.

We all breathed a sigh of relief. “Must be off the tropical storm,” I said. “It’s way off in the Gulf. I knew we’d get rain but...”

“Not planning on biblical downpours?” Melissa said.

“Weather app says it’s big, this might be a while,” I said.

“I have an idea,” Melissa said as she crawled into the backseat over me. She began putting down seats and then getting bags out from the rear and moving them so she could push down the third row of seats. Soon, with all the seats down we had an expanse of space so that all three of us could lie together. Lavi turned off the engine and the book and joined us, at one point crawling over me so I took the opportunity to bite at her thigh making her jump and giggle.

We stretched out together. Melissa was on her Wii again and Lavi and I on our phones but it felt nice to be touching. I was lying in the middle and it was strange, looking out the windows at the empty area under the bridge as the rain blocked out the rest of the world. Occasionally a car came through slowly but for the most part people seemed to have decided to get off the road.

Lavi sighed and turned on her side to face me. “Know any good rain poetry?”

I thought about it. “Most of the rain poetry I’ve known was very bucolic stuff; not my taste. I did like one by Madison Cawein though.” Melissa turned off her game. “Let’s see...”

“Old Man Rain at the windowpane / Knocks and fumbles and knocks again / His long-nailed fingers slip and strain / Old Man Rain at the windowpane / Knocks all night but knocks in vain / Old Man Rain”

Lavi, “How do you remember this stuff?”

“I’ve always had a good memory for things I read. It works with numbers too but I can’t remember abstract things like I’m supposed to sweep the driveway.”

“Well, I liked it.” Melissa smiled at me. “I’m going to guess the title is ‘Old Man Rain.’”

I chuckled, “You’d be right.”

“So, that seems kind of rural,” Melissa said, “I thought you said you didn’t like that kind of stuff.”

“Cawein was a big influence on T.S. Elliott and I love Elliott but yeah his stuff isn’t quite my taste but I like the meter of it.”

Lavi, “Elliot wrote the love song of Prufrock right?”

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, yeah.”

“Can you read that again for us?” Lavi asked.

“Sure, it’s long enough I should probably pull it up though.”

“You can’t remember it?” She asked.

“I probably can but I’d have some hesitations and that would be a shame to mangle the meter. Reading it is easier.” So I pulled it up on my phone and read it out loud while Melissa and Lavi hugged each side of me and twined their fingers together over my stomach. I finished and Lavi was making purring noises and rubbing a thigh against me. Melissa’s hand was running her hand up and down that thigh.

“Did that get you going?” Melissa asked. “It’s not really a sexy poem.”

Lavi, “Yeah, I mean I know it’s kind of a sad poem, the guy is clearly broken but it feels real and there’s something in that desperation that makes my skin jump like life can be like that so you gotta go for what you want and that gets me going. Besides, Prufrock kind of reminds me of how I felt about you before you had your whole pear tree thing.”

“Pear tree?” I asked. “Like Janie?”

“Long story,” Melissa answered.

Lavi’s rubbing against my dick with her thigh was having an effect. Melissa noticed and reached over and unzipped me and worked my half-hard dick out and began gently sucking it. I ran my fingers through her hair and listened to the rain. I glanced over at the windows. I really hoped no one came through soon. Lavi looked at me and kissed me. “Don’t worry,” she said, “the back windows have 100% mirror tint.”

“I didn’t think that was legal,” I said.

“Not on the front but it’s fine for the back. My mom had Rian do the work.”

“Oh.” I realized that I didn’t know what Rian did for work.

Melissa raised her head up. “He owns a franchise that does detailing, some customizing and other various stuff for cars.” Fortunately, that’s all she had to say and then she returned to sucking me doing that thing where she ran her tongue around my crown. I closed my eyes while Lavi continued to kiss me. My left hand was still with Melissa’s hair so my right started kneading Lavi’s ass through her khakis.

Lavi broke the kiss and lay back, lifted her hips, and started pulling her pants down in the car for the second time today, “Between the rain and poetry I’m horny.”

Melissa paused and stroked me while she talked, “A year ago I’d have said everything made you horny except academics and boys and now here we are with Robert and poetry. Is your final form going to be just this withering mass of constant orgasms?”

Lavi got the pants off and shook her ass at Melissa. “Sounds good to me.” Melissa laughed and slapped it. “Do it again.” Melissa did. “Robert does it better.”

“That’s fine, it feels weird.”

I looked at my watch. “It’s been two hours. I’m going to call the hotel.” I did, a pleasant woman answered and she said they understood. They would keep the room but would have to charge us for it. I said that was fine; we would get there late. Meanwhile, Lavi had gotten completely naked and was playing with herself while Melissa put kisses up and down my dick.

“Back to me being horny,” Lavi said.

“You want to get fucked in the back seat? What are you a teenage boy?” Asked Melissa.

“Does saying yes get me fucked? I’m already going to have to get the car detailed and steamed given what I did in the front seat.”

“What about people sitting on these?” I asked.

“These are the backs of the seats, totally different.” Made sense to me.

“Come on,” she pulled on my arm, “I’m in heat, I need dick.”

Melissa smiled and said, “Go ahead, I’m going to get comfortable.” The next few minutes were a blur of Melissa and I both trying to get clothes off. Melissa beat me, as a dress turned out to be easy to remove compared to jeans, but soon she was reclined and playing with herself while I got between Lavi’s knees.

Lavi reached out to Melissa, “Come on baby, put him in me.”

Melissa didn’t have to be asked twice and she hurried over to guide me into her girlfriend and kiss Lavi while I fucked her. The seats were not doing nice things to my knees but I imagined the same was true for Lavi’s back.

What I wasn’t used to was the cramped space. Normally I would sit upright on my knees but now I had to move a bit to the side since there was no room above me and I almost had to lie on top of Lavi making her breasts rub against my chest as I thrust. And it was hot. I felt sweat building on my back and I wanted to cum but I was overheating. Lavi gripped me like a vice and her legs were around me.

Melissa encouraged us, watching, touching us, one hand caressing us, my nipples, Lavi’s face, while her other hand played with her folds and pumped fingers in and out. She took those fingers and fed them to Lavi who lapped at them.

I grinned, “No fair, you should share.” Melissa smiled and put her fingers back inside herself and then gave them to me. I sucked at her fingers and enjoyed the taste. I was rock hard and pumped in and out.

Melissa touched us everywhere, her hand a constant presence. “Come on baby, cum in her so I can eat it out. I love tasting you two together.”

I had been worried I wouldn’t be able to cum because I was overheating but I felt a pulse, a tightening and suddenly felt myself erupting in Lavi.

Lavi cooed, “Ooo yeah, baby, that’s it, I like that, fill me up and let Mellie eat your baby batter up.”

I kept thrusting, spurting as deep into her as I could. “You want this? You want me to put this where her tongue can’t reach? Knock you up?”

“Oh yeah, baby,” she pinched her own nipples.

I laughed, “I really should pull out or wear a condom.”

“Don’t,” Melissa said, “we’ve talked about it, both are just wrong. We wouldn’t feel you inside us the way we like to.” She shuddered as a small climax hit her.

“And if I knock you up?”

She shrugged. “We’ve talked about it. We will find a way to deal with it.”

I was dripping with sweat now and had to wipe some out from my eyes and moved from between Lavi’s legs while Melissa took my place. She put herself on top of Lavi at first, kissing her, their breasts rubbing together and their legs scissoring, the last strands of my semen rubbing off Lavi onto Melissa. Then Melissa worked her way down, licking and kissing until she reached Lavi’s mons and began to eat her in earnest. Lavi squirmed on her back like a fish on a hook, while muttering endearments to Melissa and soon screamed out a shrill cry of passion. Melissa kept eating her.

Meanwhile I had made my way to the cooler and was drinking a bottle of water and grabbed an ice cube. Walking on my knees behind her I approached Melissa’s back. I traced a finger along her back and it was damp with sweat. I watched the feverish skin turn white and sweat pour back into the trail I left. I started the cube at her collarbone making Melissa’s back arch up, her golden hair flying everywhere. I fondled her sex while I ran the ice down to the small of her back. I pushed into her. The ceiling wasn’t very high so I nearly had to lie on top of her while fucking as she ate Lavi, making us a sweaty hot pile of flesh. Melissa convulsed around me in small orgasms as I slowly built to my second finish and Lavi screamed, bucking against Melisa’s face. I lost track of time, it felt like forever, in a steamy sauna of sex sweat. Eventually I came again and ran my cheek along Melissa’s back and kissed her neck, the actual orgasm secondary to the total sensation. I felt like the musk of sex was pouring into my mouth, nose, and the pores of my skin.

I fell out as I shrunk, Lavi came down from another orgasm and we all lay there overheating. Lavi got on her knees and reached a control to crack the windows in the back. Suddenly cool wet air flooded the small space with the smell of rain and it felt like stepping from a sauna into a cool room. It shocked my senses and made every nerve jump with life. Melissa reached over and kissed me. She smiled at me. “Do we make you happy?”

“Completely.”

“Good.” She kissed me. Lavi returned and joined us and we lay there again, kissing.

Lavi, “Steam cleaning. I’m going to have to get the seats cleaned. There’s no way I’m giving this car back to my mom with fuck smell in it.”

“Uh,” I said, “maybe in New Orleans. I don’t want to drive my mom around in it either.”

“Fair,” Lavi replied.

“And we need showers,” I said.

“I can fix that,” Melissa said with a grin as she winked at me. Suddenly she was opening one of the side doors and ran out.

“What are you...” I didn’t get it all the way out before I was watching her tight ass run the six feet to the edge of the overpass and step into the rain. I could just barely see her form there dancing for a second before she ran back, and hid by the car before anyone else could come by.

She grinned and looked at us, now drenched and her blonde hair stuck to her and plastering her firm breasts. “See, instant shower. Refreshing.” She grinned.

Lavi, “Oh my God, I can’t believe you did that!”

“You want to do it?”

Lavi laughed, “I’ll wait for a real shower.”

Melissa was laughing and looking in her bag. She found a shirt and used it as an improvised towel before starting to dress. I climbed out of the car with less agility than Melissa had and then without warning yelled “ BONZAI” and sprinted into the rain myself. Behind me I heard Lavi yell “FUCK IT” and as I turned around in the rain Lavi was right there. I grabbed her hand and we sprinted back to the car, just in time to see a state trooper car start to come through at a slow pace.

“Shit!” I think Lavi and I said it together. Melissa had her dress on and Lavi and I hid behind the SUV but the cop car started to slow down. We scrambled through the open door and hurriedly began putting on clothes. A window rolled down and from the driver seat the state trooper yelled out, “Everything okay over there?”

Melissa stepped out to distract him, “Everything’s fine. We’re just waiting out the rain.”

“Why is your hair wet?”

“My friend dared me to go dunk my head into the rain.” She was smiling.

About then I walked around too and waved. “Afternoon.”

“All right, stay safe.” With that they drove off. As they left Melissa and I began laughing hysterically and Lavi just stood behind us, hands on her hips.

“You two are trouble makers!”

“Just because it’s a bad idea doesn’t mean you won’t have a good time,” I said.

Lavi, “I can’t believe you did that, Melllie!”

“Me? I can’t believe Robert did it too!”

I shrugged. “If the nymph is going to jump in the river you might as well jump in with her. And you looked every bit the nymph.” I pulled a strand of her blonde hair away from her face and kissed her.

“Sounds like satyr logic.”

“Well,” Lavi said, “the rain is letting up and I still want a real shower.” I checked the weather app on my phone and it showed the cloud formation almost past us so we got on the road and headed back out. We found a gas station just a few miles down the road, bought towels for the girls to dry their hair, and fueled up.

We drove and saw how many songs with rain we could play. I introduced the girls to “Blame it on the Rain” and I had to explain that I didn’t know why it had been a hit either. I discovered that they both knew CCR’s “Have You Ever Seen the Rain” and Melissa and I were both able to sing along with James Taylor’s “Fire and Rain.” All in all we were several hours late when we pulled into New Orleans and made our way to the hotel on St. Anne Street. It was a cute old building. I don’t know anything about architecture but looked like a quintessential French Quarter to me. It was technically a motel since the doors were on the outside but it seemed way too nice to call a motel. That was my prejudice, though.

A middle aged woman in overalls with flowers on them greeted us and checked us in from behind a large desk. I wanted to get out to eat but I looked at Melissa who had done the last leg of driving and looked ready to crash. I asked Ginny, the woman at the desk, “Do you know if Stanleys delivers here?”

“They do,” she said, a strong cajun accent in place, “and pretty quick too. You and your, uh, daughters hungry?”

“Wives,” Melissa corrected as she was already looking up Stanely’s on her phone.

“Oh.” She paused. “How does that work?” She looked genuinely curious and it occurred to me that with all the reactions I’d gotten just simple curiosity had never been one of them.

Lavi jumped in, “I’m his wife and her wife, she’s mine and his and he is ours.”

“So, like all together?”

“Yep,” Lavi smiled.

“Huh.” Ginny just looked like Lavi had explained some new scientific discovery. “Just call them to order though, the online deliveries aren’t necessary. Their delivery folks know where we are and the online stuff up charges you.”

Soon I was ordering on the phone and we shambled to the room. Within an hour we were eating naked in bed. Melissa ordered the bananas Foster french toast. I had eggs benedict over crab cakes with a creole Hollandaise sauce. Most of the breakfast dishes they served all day had bacon or ham and Lavi considered cheating but instead decided she was fine with corned beef twice in a day and got the house smoked corned beef sunnyside up. She concluded after a few bites that it wasn’t as good as mine but the creole potatoes might be worth killing for. We all ate bits of each other’s and I took pictures and posted them to Instagram.

As I was posting Lavi said, “So, I notice you don’t have any pictures of us on your Instagram.”

I shrugged, “I just post food stuff.”

“But,” she said, leaning back on her arms, her large breasts hanging down, “isn’t food about family too? Isn’t it weird to post making stuff and not the eating of it?”

“Well, I guess.” I thought about it a minute. “I guess I didn’t want to feel like I was bragging like, hey look at me and my sexy smart wives.”

Melissa, “So, it’s not that you’re embarrassed?”

I shook my head. “No, not at all.” I saw one of those moments pass between Melissa and Lavi. I suddenly realized this had been a conversation that had started long before right now. “All the food stuff I follow just does the making of the food so I guess I was copying that style.”

“But,” Melissa took another bite of vanilla ice cream, “you’re not like a professional food brand, this is your life right?” I thought about it, there were plenty of pictures of me and each other on both of their Instagram feeds.

I thought about it more, eating some crab cake and sauce. They had french fried frog legs, I would definitely try that tomorrow. I came to a conclusion. “You know, it probably isn’t fair to put as much sexiness as you two on my feed.”

Melissa smiled back, “Right now you couldn’t.” She was sitting cross legged naked and eating french toast with a plastic fork. God she was sexy and she didn’t want to be shown off but that wasn’t the same thing as me being proud of us. I realized I was an idiot. I picked up my phone and started taking a lot of photos.

Melissa, “You can’t post these you know.”

“I’ll do a lot of cropping and keep the originals for myself.”

Melissa and Lavi giggled together.

“So,” Lavi asked, “how many followers you have.”

“Uh,” I checked, “about two hundred it looks like.”

“Can I?” Melissa held out her hand and I handed her the phone. “Huh, most of the squad is following you. No surprise. Who is this that liked all your posts today?”

“Some foodie I guess.”

“Uh, no.” Melissa replied. She had opened the profile. It hadn’t been visible from the tiny icon on the phone but it was a middle aged Asian woman. “That’s Mrs. Guo.”

“Robert has a stalker, Robert has a stalker!”, sang Lavi.

I rolled my eyes and Melissa laughed.

“All right, you two. I’m going to go ask the lady at the front desk about a recommendation.”

Melissa took another bite, “didn’t you research restaurants already?”

“For cleaning the car.” I pulled on my pants and put on shoes.

Lavi, “Oh, good idea! Can you see if there’s a vending machine with diet soda?”

“Will do.” I grabbed the key and I was walking down to the office along the outside of the building.

I was nearly to the office when a pale fellow with a split lip stepped away from a car and said, “‘Scuse me.”

Suddenly I felt like I was being punched in my shoulder from behind and it exploded in pain. The guy in front of me punched me in the gut. I lost the air from my lungs but I stomped my foot down as hard as I could on his foot. He yelled something but I couldn’t tell what. Suddenly my feet weren’t so stable and I went down, my head slamming into a planter with a bush in it along the pathway. I felt one of them start kicking me and then hands were on me and they were gone. Things swam, my head pulsed. Something hot was on me and then I realized it was blood in my eyes. Something was sticky and that was odd. I breathed in and took my feet. I was going to the office. I should go there. It was dark and I pulled open the door to the lobby. The woman behind the desk gasped.

I remember saying, “Can I sit down a minute?” I don’t remember anything after that.

**Chapter 32**

When I became aware of my surroundings people were talking.

“Visiting hours are over.” I didn’t know that voice but it was accented. Indian?

“We’re not leaving.” That was Lavi.

“Immediate family can stay but no one else,” the stranger said.

Lavi, “We’re his wives.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“We’re from Utah.”

“I ... what?” Only Lavi could confuse someone with so few words.

I opened my eyes. The unfamiliar voice looked like a doctor which made sense because it looked like I was in a hospital room. He was short, balding, brown, and did look like he might be from India. I hurt. I did an exploration of my extremities. I could wiggle toes and fingers and move around but my right arm was bound up and couldn’t move. Something was attached to my legs, cuffs of some kind that were pulsing rhythmically. I found out later it was to make sure I didn’t get blood clots. I had wires and tubes going from me to a contraption that beeped periodically.

“He’s awake!” Melissa was near, her voice almost in my ear so I turned to look at her. They were both here, both fine, thank goodness. There was a chair at my bedside but Melissa was standing now, her hands on the rail, her golden hair hanging down like a halo. She was pretty. I also realized I felt light-headed.

“Hey babe,” I whispered to her.

“Hey, you.” She smiled but looked like she was ready to cry.

“I’ve never been to Utah.” I sounded raspy, even whispering.

A single tear was in her eye. I wanted to reach up to move it away but my arm didn’t move. Oh, I’d forgotten. “You are silly,” she said. I moved my left arm and got it for her.

“Mr. Carlo,” the doctor said, “Glad to see you awake.”

I tried asking a question but it came out as a cough. My throat was really dry and felt sore for some reason. Almost instantly Melissa was handing me a plastic cup with water in it. It tasted better than the best wine I had ever had. The doctor looked at me with practiced patience and waited for me to compose myself.

Finally, I asked again, “How long was I out?”

“We had to give you anesthesia for surgery. You were conscious until then. It’s been about ten hours since you came out.”

“Surgery?”

Melissa jumped in. “You were bleeding a lot, they had to make sure nothing major was cut so they had to widen the wound to look but it turned out fine.” There was something there that didn’t make sense but I was having trouble following it with my thoughts.

“You did require a substantial transfusion though,” the doctor said. He stepped forward and shook my free hand. “Doctor Laghari.”

“Pleased to meet you, doctor. I don’t remember any of that.”

Melissa stayed standing and Lavi came up on my other side. Lavi added, “Well, you were talking. You didn’t make a lot of sense but you were talking.”

Melissa, “At one point the EMT, his name was Sam, was trying to keep you conscious and you asked him if his parents had wanted to name him Samwise. You ended up telling him about how mushrooms represented virtue for the hobbits in the Fellowship of the Ring.”

“I did?”

She grinned. “Yeah, and you said you would make him mushroom risotto.”

That was a little much for me to absorb right away so I said, “I still feel lightheaded.”

Laghari, “That is to be expected. Your body has been through a lot of stress and it will take a good while to heal. To be honest you might have permanent damage and we won’t know how much use of your arm you will recover until you finish physical therapy.”

“When you say a while do you mean in a few weeks?”

“Months. You may never regain a hundred percent mobility or strength in it but you might.” He was holding a clipboard in a stance I associated with seriousness. Fuck.

“And that I don’t remember a lot of this?”

“With the kind of shock you had, memory loss isn’t unusual but we will need to watch for memory lapses or cognitive issues. We evaluated the concussion but the blood loss was our primary concern. I’ll send someone in to assess you in a little bit. Any other questions?”

“Why does my throat hurt?”

This time Melissa replied. “You had a tube down your throat until about an hour ago.”

“Ah,” I said stupidly. I couldn’t think of a single decent gag reflex joke to make. Oh well. “I’m just glad you two are fine. I had this thought that they might try to go to the room with my key.” A second of silence passed. I knew that silence and the look that passed between Melissa and Lavi. “What happened?”

Lavi, “They did come to the room but didn’t get in. Mellie realized two people had stopped outside our door because they cast shadows against the window.”

Melissa was stroking my cheek. “I knew it wouldn’t be you. You wouldn’t have brought someone around in case we were, uh,” she glanced at the doctor and finished with “indisposed.”

Lavi continued, “They got the door partway open but Mellie slammed it on them and locked it from the inside. Judging from the screaming I think she may have broken the fingers of one of them. I immediately called the police and requested an EMT for you.”

“How did you know something had happened?”

Lavi looked at me as if I was being silly. “I knew that if they had your key something had to have happened. I just hoped it wasn’t too bad.”

The doctor spoke up at this point. “And it is a good thing too. The EMTs said they arrived as you were walking into the office. They didn’t know it was you until they got close and saw the blood on the walkway. If they had been later, well, let us just say that this young woman might have saved your life.”

I sighed. A lot had happened while I was unconscious. “Then?”

Lavi, “Not much to say after that. We checked out and came to the hospital. We’ve been in the waiting room until they brought you in here about four hours ago.”

Melissa added, “They’re not charging us for the room at the hotel by the way.”

That was so far down my list of concerns that I started to laugh but it hurt so I stopped. I really didn’t want to ask. I’d had enough honesty from the world’s bluntest doctor but I had to ask. “My ribs?”

“We are waiting for the X-rays but they’re not broken. Fractures seem likely, however,” came the reply.

Melissa, “You look like someone used you as a punching bag.”

“Yeah.” What else was there to say?

The doctor was still standing there with that clipboard. He hadn’t written on it, didn’t look at it. I wondered if it had anything on it. Maybe it had little pictures of cats he drew when bored or some shit. I might be feeling grumpy but tried to be polite when he asked, “Your ribs, your head, your shoulder, is there anything else hurting?”

“No, I think that’s it. The head was from when I fell, the ribs when they kicked me. They punched me too but that just knocked the wind out of me. First time in my life I’ve been rolled.” I looked at the ceiling.

“Rolled?” He asked with a curious expression.

“Mugged.”

His face lit with comprehension. “Yes, mugged, yes you were. That is what we gathered but it is good that you confirm it.”

I was tired and confused but there was still something I needed to clarify. “All right, one last question, I guess I messed up my shoulder falling and I know that’s when I hit my head but why did I lose so much blood? Did I hit something that tore up the ligaments or something?”

Laghari looked surprised. “Mr. Carlo, you were stabbed multiple times from behind. Based on the wound, probably a box cutter. They did a lot of damage.”

“It didn’t feel like a knife. I thought I was punched.”

He nodded gravely. “Unless you’ve been stabbed before you probably don’t know what it feels like.”

I closed my eyes. “I’d rather have had a boring night in bed.”

Melissa, “Me too.” She squeezed my hand.

“Me three,” added Lavi. “And we’re staying.” She added the last to Dr. Laghari.

“They are family,” I said.

“The hospital has rules,” the doctor replied.

“And I can check myself out.”

“Mr. Carlo...”

I cut him off. “Doctor Laghari.”

He gave me a look of exasperation. “You are going to rest?”

“I will be a good boy, I promise.”

“Very well. You need to rest as much as possible and let your body heal.” He gave looks to the girls as if to indicate they weren’t to be a bother and then walked out. As soon as he was gone both girls leaned down to kiss me one at a time. It was just a gentle touching of lips but it made me feel a little more whole.

Melissa, “How are you feeling?”

“Like I got worked over by a couple of crack heads.”

“Or meth,” offered Lavi.

“Or meth,” I conceded.

Melissa, “Seriously, how are you?”

“I have enough things hurting that I’m not sure what I should be paying attention to.”

“Don’t think about any of it, just rest,” Melissa said. She seemed tense, but that was understandable. “We will be here if you need anything, anything at all but you rest as doctor Leg-Up-Ass said.”

I smiled. “Don’t call him that name where he can hear.” I sighed, again. Sighing seemed the appropriate response to a lot of things right now. “I probably have stuff to take care of. I assume my wallet and phone are gone.”

Lavi nodded affirmatively, “We used your tablet and looked up the contact info for your boss. He got us the insurance information. And we set an alert to let us know if your phone turned back on. Then we called your mom to let her know.”

“Thank you.” I laid back. “What time is it?”

Melissa looked at her phone. “A bit after one.”

“Great, as if getting stabbed wasn’t bad enough I’m going to eat hospital food.”

“No, you will not.” Melissa was on her feet. “I’ll be back.” She almost ran out of the room. It was very uncharacteristic of her. She hadn’t even said bye.

I looked at Lavi who shrugged. “You gave her an out.”

“Huh?”

“She doesn’t like hospitals. She’s been a nervous ball between worried about you and thinking back to when she used to be in one. You gave her a chance to take care of you and get out of here so she took it.”

“Is she all right to drive?”

“Yeah, I convinced her to take a Xanax and she slept earlier in the car while I stayed here. It’s probably worn off though. Maybe I can get her to take another one this afternoon.”

Fuck. Our trip was ruined, Melissa was a bundle of nerves, all because of me. “Thank you for everything. You’re the calm in the center of the storm.”

“Nope. I’m a ball of psycho kittens babe.”

“So, that’s why the craziness doesn’t bother you?” I asked.

“Maybe.” She smiled kindly to me, reassuringly. Her opaline earrings dangled there.

“You know, I know that’s not true don’t you?”

Lavi, “What do you mean?” She tilted her head a little to the side in a cute way.

“I know you’re not a ball of chaos. You’re focused. Everything you do has a purpose. That crazy manic persona, you like it, it’s fun but it’s just a small surface part of you.”

I saw a bit of her mother in her face as she looked back at me. “You know, you’re supposed to pretend you don’t know those things. It’s like asking a woman her age.”

“And letting the man think he’s in charge?” I grinned at my counter challenge.

She met my grin with one of her own. “Nah, all the women of the world got together and voted that one out.”

“But kept pantyhose?”

“What can I say, sometimes the traditionalists carry the vote.”

I started to chuckle but someone suddenly cleared their throat and Doctor Laghari was in the doorway giving Lavi the evil eye. I looked at him, “I’m resting, I swear, I just need to make a few calls.” He passed the glare to me and went on his way. I turned back to Lavi. “Do you have my tablet here? I think I need to call my bank and do other things.”

“Sure. Need my phone?” She handed me the tablet.

“Nah. I have a virtual phone app I use when I need to call customers. I can use it with my address book.” She gave my hand a squeeze and retreated to some seating long enough to lay down on that was built into the wall underneath the windows.

I noticed Lavi was in the same clothes as last night. “How are you doing?”

She smiled thinly. “It has been a long night.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for life. I’m going to close my eyes for a few but wake me up if you need anything.”

“I will.” Lavi lay down and I began the calls. I could see her chest rising and falling. She had saved my life and maybe Melissa’s too. For that matter, Melissa had probably saved our lives too. I was the one that had been useless. That thought would haunt me in quiet moments. Hospitals give you too many quiet moments. Half an hour later I had only talked to the phone company and was on hold for my bank when I fell asleep. It would take the rest of the day to make the calls as I kept fading in and out.

I was woken by a nurse who checked my blood pressure, took readings, and then admonished me to rest. I refrained from commenting that I had been until she woke me up to tell me to rest. The next time I woke, it was to a much more pleasant image of Melissa sitting in a chair next to me eating out of a styrofoam container with another similar one on a table next to me. I couldn’t quite turn around and reach it with my shoulder bound up.

“Let me,” Melissa said. She put her own down and picked mine up to put it on a little tray that I could put across my lap.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Surf and swamp,” Melissa replied. “Cajun shrimp with alligator steak, since you said you wanted to try it here. There’s also some hot water cornbread and roasted okra. You have a bottle of water there.” She pointed next to me.

I noticed across the room was a covered thing of hospital food, presumably delivered while I was asleep. Lavi was eating something of her own that I couldn’t see near the window. “What is in there?”

Lavi, “I looked and all I could recognize was the jello.” I raised an eyebrow in question. She took a fork of food. “You’ve spoiled me, what can I say.”

That didn’t make much sense to me but I decided food mattered more than deciphering Lavi right then. The shrimp were easy enough to eat but trying to cut the alligator only resulted in my pushing the steak around as I tried to cut with one hand. Melissa stood up again and without saying anything took her knife and fork and began cutting it for me. That was when I noticed we had real cutlery.

“Not plastic stuff?”

“I borrowed them from the cafeteria downstairs,” Melissa said.

“Nice of them.”

“Not really, I just got drinks and made sure I went through a line with a guy in charge of it.”

Lavi snorted. “What she means is that she took her bra off and bounced on her feet while talking to him.”

I started to laugh but it hurt again. “Are men really that easy to play?”

Without looking at me both girls said in unison, “Yes.”

I sat there watching Melissa cut my steak. “I feel like a baby.”

She smiled. “Just wait until I’m pregnant and you’re fetching me Nutella shakes and pizzas for my cravings.”

“I can’t wait for the belly,” Lavi added.

“Now you’re just trying to distract me.” I did like the image of both of them pregnant. I hurt too much to be horny but some part of my brain still wanted me to think about it.

“Nope,” said Melissa. “Just pointing out that we all take care of each other. That’s how it works. Lavi,” Melissa addressed her wife while still cutting my steak. “What do you say when we’re pregnant we do those nude photos together? The classy maternity ones.”

“That would be awesome.”

I would have agreed but I was busy sneaking a hand into the container and grabbed a bite of steak to start eating. It was really good. It was much tenderer than I’d managed to make the alligator meat I had bought. I wondered how the cut factored into it. I meant to ask Melissa about where she got it but I couldn’t keep my eyes open and faded out again.

I woke a few hours later as I was being taken into for X-rays of my ribs. I later found out they weren’t fractured but I got the first look at my stomach. The skin was a patchwork of bruises so much that I at first wondered if I had some kind of grease on me because my skin just isn’t that color. They were putting up these shield things everywhere else, presumably so that I didn’t start glowing in the dark or something and I stared at the mottled black and blue. I started laughing but restrained myself since I now knew it would hurt.

The attendant looked at me quizzically. “Just thinking, I’ve been tenderized. I’d make a good cut for a butcher.”

“Uh, okay.” He looked at me as if he was debating if I needed immediate medical care, maybe psychiatric. I should probably keep my thoughts to myself when feeling loopy, I decided. I fell back asleep while they were zapping me with X-rays, later was woken for more meds and evaluation, and then fell asleep again. The cognitive evaluation was a series of memory tests and things like adding numbers in my head. I was determined to not have any obvious brain damage. I told them that my ex-girlfriends would disagree. That got a laugh from Lavi at least and then I was fading out again. I was beginning to feel like the protagonist of a sci-fi novel jumping through time every time I closed my eyes.

The next time I woke up the sky was dark outside. Melissa and Lavi were both asleep. Lavi was back on the seating by the window but had a pillow and blanket this time. Someone had rolled in another hospital bed though and Melissa was in it. Obviously, the girls had made friends with nurses. A trio of luggage including mine was now in the corner and I noticed that someone had plugged in my tablet on the bedside so that it had a charge. I tried reading but couldn’t focus very well. And my bladder hurt. I tried fiddling with my bed but couldn’t figure out how to get out.

I looked at the button for calling a nurse but my movement must have woken Melissa up. She looked at me with alert eyes despite just waking up. “Do you need anything Robert?”

“Need to pee.”

“I can help.” She was still in the yellow dress and in moments was lowering my bed with controls and bringing down the rail that kept me from rolling out. She disconnected the weird pulsing cuffs and helped me to my feet and I felt everything hurt. I had never paid attention to how the body does so many little things just to sit up. I found out and it hurt more but eventually got on my feet. I shuffled forward and Melissa followed bringing my bag and monitor stuff with her. In the bathroom, I couldn’t even get my gown up very effectively so Melissa helped me. I stood there holding my gown with my left hand while my right arm was bound so Melissa held my dick as I pissed. I felt pathetic but Melissa acted like it was the most natural thing in the world.

I leaned on her as she helped me pee. “Good aim,” I said sheepishly.

“You know, I was kind of jealous of my brother for having a penis when we were little kids. He would stand back from the toilet and see how far from it he could get and still get the stream in it.”

“I think every boy does that.”

“Really?”

“Everyone I knew. In elementary school, it was nearly an Olympic event.” I finished the stream. “Can you shake it just a bit?”

She looked at me curiously, “Do you want to, you know, have me take care of you?”

I felt like I’d been stabbed again with that question. “No, I don’t think I’m up for that. Not that it doesn’t sound wonderful. The shake just gets the little last drops out.”

“Oh.” She shook me and helped put the gown back in place. We stood there and she carefully lined up on my left side and pressed against me hugging me wrapping her arms below my injured right shoulder. “I love you. Did you know that?”

“I do. I just don’t feel like I’m much of anyone right now.”

“You’re you, you idiot. That’s more than enough for me. I know this is hard on you.”

“And you.”

“Yeah, and Lavi though she doesn’t show it. But it’s hard on all of us in different ways. But I can see it in your eyes. I don’t know what it is but you’re hurting.”

“Literally,” I replied.

“Is that all it is?” She talked into my body holding me tightly.

“No.”

“There isn’t anything else you could have done.”

“Lavi probably could have. Heck, you would probably have seen them coming.”

“Maybe, maybe not. What’s that line you like to quote about the past being a jungle?”

“Do not look to the past for it is a jungle of nightmares.”

“Exactly. I will tell you one thing though. I don’t think I could have stood up after that. I doubt Lavi could either. You did, you stood up, you walked. And you know what you idiot? Life will sometimes hit you when you can’t see it, and it’s sometimes a thing you can’t fight and the best person in the world to have by your side then is the person who can still stand up afterward and that’s you and why we need you.”

“You’re trying to make me feel better.”

“Yes, I am. I’m also telling you the truth.”

“I think I need to lay back down.”

“Come on.” She helped me back and I wanted to think about what she said but instead, I was sleeping before she put the rail back in place.

In the morning I woke up, fell asleep, and woke up again. The girls used my shower, separately, changed clothes and Melissa went out to pick up my new phone while Lavi helped me take a shower. A doctor came in later and established a pattern of checking my shoulder, pain level, and presumably that I wasn’t dead yet. I did have early signs of infection so my antibiotics got increased. Apparently, the blade had been dirty. Great, I couldn’t even get mugged by hygienic crack heads.

I tried listening to audiobooks instead of reading but found I was falling asleep while listening to them so I finally resorted to just playing movies on a laptop I had already seen so many times that it didn’t matter if I fell asleep during them. As a result, I was becoming reacquainted with the 1980s works of Bill Murray and watched as Gojira saved Tokyo repeatedly. The girls made sure I wanted for nothing but I was still bored. Lavi had decided I should have a manicure and was carefully trimming my nails when I noticed Melissa. Melissa was reading something on her tablet, very intently on the second bed. When not doing something for me she had retreated into a world of hyper-focus, blocking out the hospital around us.

I had nothing else to do but be nosy so I asked, “What’s so fascinating?”

“Huh?” I nodded affirmatively. “Oh, reading up on the school clubs.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “If I get kicked from the cheerleader squad I might join the chess club.” Lavi giggled. “What,” Melissa demanded, “you don’t think I can play?”

“Not that,” Lavi countered, “but they wouldn’t get any playing done with you around either.” Melissa rolled her eyes. God, it felt good to have them ribbing each other, it felt normal.

Melissa, “Besides, I’m not thinking about playing chess, I’m more curious about why they put on The Society dance each year.”

“Like prom,” I asked.

“No,” Lavi said, “prom is, well, prom, The Society Dance is what people call it but the actual name is Junior Gentle Society Dance. It’s very formal and not everyone goes like prom. You have to be invited by the chess club though they invite a lot of people. Think more four-string quartet than a DJ. They also host a couple of high teas each year, very fancy stuff.”

“At a high school?” I asked. Lavi shrugged. I was about to ask Melissa another question when I saw her in the doorway. She was robust, almost 60, and still looked like I remembered though I hadn’t visited in a few years. She was carrying a giant knit bag, sort of like a purse but you could fit supplies for a week in it, over her shoulder. Her hair was different, in a pixie cut and mostly blonde though darker roots weren’t hidden. She was wearing a purple shirt with flowers on the cuffs and blue jeans. All I had to say was, “Hi mom. Lavi, Melissa, this is my mom Mary. Mary, this is Melissa and Lavi.” I indicated both with head tilts.

Mom dashed up and leaned forward to hug both of them. She was barely five foot so it was probably good that the bed wasn’t at full height. Melissa and Lavi both hugged her back and seemed pleased at the warm reception. Then she turned to me, looking me up and down.

“Robert, what happened?”

“I made the classic mistake and got involved in a land war in Asia.”

She looked at me in confusion. “What?”

Great movie quotes were wasted on my mom. “I got mugged.” She looked at me suspiciously. “Seriously Mom, I was just walking to the hotel office to ask some questions and was randomly mugged.”

“Robert, are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” I really didn’t have the patience for this right now. “And I’m tired Mom.”

She looked at me and leaned down to give me a hug but seemed worried about hurting me. She kissed me on my forehead and went to sit down. She sat and suddenly jumped up and pulled a phone out of her back pocket.

“Sorry,” she said, “I don’t want to make a booty call by mistake.”

“Nope,” responded Lavi, “definitely don’t want to do that.” Neither she nor Melissa did so much as a chuckle. They were definitely on best behavior.

“Really Robert,” my mom continued, “If you had wanted to stay in Nola longer rather than come see me this is a bit extreme.”

“Look on the bright side mom, at least I don’t need a kidney.”

Mom turning to the girls, “I really must apologize for my son, he thinks he’s funny.”

Melissa did smile at this. Lavi answered, “We’ve noticed.” | “Since he needs to rest how about we go get some coffee? I’ve driven for ages and would kill a priest for a decent java.” Melissa seemed torn but I waved her off. She wanted to make a good impression on my mom so badly that she actually left.

I didn’t think I’d fall asleep when they left but I did. When I woke up again Lavi was close by again but Melissa was gone. Lavi was gently nudging me. A tall man in a tan suit was standing nearby with a notepad.

“Hi, Mr. Carlo, I’m Detective Clinton West. We need to get a statement from you about the assault and robbery if you’re not too tired. The hotel’s security camera caught a lot of it but we still need your statement.”

“Sure, fine.” So, I told him, I told him every detail I could think of which still took just a couple of minutes. The whole thing had happened in seconds so there wasn’t much to say. None of it surprised him. He nodded and wrote as I talked. When I was done I asked, “So, I assume the chance of finding them is almost zero?”

He let out a smile that looked like the first sign of something that might be a smile. “Actually, Mr. Carlo I think one of them is already in custody.

“Huh?”

“Yeah, the guy with the split lip sounds like a guy we have in lock up for getting into a fight in a liquor store yesterday. Apparently, somehow a few toes and fingers got broken and he really wanted some drinks and got into a yelling match with the store when they wouldn’t sell to him without identification and it escalated. I asked lockup to pull his effects and he had two credit cards with your name on them in his pockets.”

“Holey Moley.”

“Yep, sometimes they do our job for us.”

“He didn’t have my wallet or phone by any chance?”

“Afraid not. We haven’t asked him about assaulting you yet but your statement about stomping his foot makes it just about certain it’s him.”

“Wish I could have broken more than some toes.”

He shrugged. “You got it pretty bad but you walked away. Be happy with talking to me instead of homicide.” He covered some paperwork matters with me. I could potentially have to go to court but it wasn’t likely. If I went home doing a remote deposition was more likely. Then he nodded to Lavi, said “Ma’am” and left.

As he left I looked at Lavi. “So, where are Melissa and my Mom?”

“They’re getting us all some lunch down the street. The hospital isn’t even bothering to bring you meals anymore. Apparently, Melissa had words with them.”

“Words?”

“I don’t know if she charmed them or intimidated them. Normally I’d assume charmed but she’s been on edge. Your mom nearly dragged her out and only after I promised to stay. She was on edge just downstairs getting coffee.”

“How has she been getting food here?”

“Mostly delivery. This place isn’t good for her but she’s looking after you and I’m trying to look after her,” Lavi said.

“Who is looking after you?”

Lavi smiled. “I’m fine.”

I reached out and rested my hand on her hip. “Lavi, I’m pretty limited in what I can do but I can see what’s in front of me. Come here.” She leaned in. “No, lower the rails and climb on the bed.” I scooted over as much as I could.

She looked unsure. “Is this a good idea?”

“Hush. Come on.”

Gingerly she did and soon was lying against me. She was tense but as her breathing started matching mine I felt tension bleed from her.

“What comes after this?” She asked.

“I get better, you girls graduate, go to college, we start a family.”

“Nothing changes?”

“Well, I’m not going walking by myself at night anymore.”

“About us,” she said.

“I don’t see why it would.”

“You’re not going to buy a bunch of guns and turn the house into a fortress while listening to urban survivalist podcasts?”

I looked at her. “You assume I don’t already.”

She very gently slapped my uninjured shoulder. “Be serious,” she chided me. “You have made big changes after bad experiences before.”

“That is true. But those changes were to make my life better. Other than knowing how to fight I don’t know what I could change. Even if I’d had my taser, which according to tracking is getting delivered today to Linda’s house, it wouldn’t have done me any good.”

She nuzzled against me. “How about you learn some then, not so much how to fight but how to defend yourself?”

“In the theoretical future that my shoulder isn’t gimpy?”

“Don’t say that around Mellie, she feels gimpy is offensive.”

“Noted.”

“But anyway, yeah, I mean when you’re healed. You could take Krav Maga classes. My dad does, sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“Well, he teaches and practices. He’s been doing it since his service and he enjoyed it so he’s kept it up.”

“What is he, like a black belt?” I asked.

“They don’t have those kinds of ranks, not exactly. It’s more martial and less art than something like karate or judo.”

“Have you ever practiced?”

“I took classes when I was a kid and every now and then practice with my dad.”

“So sensei, what would you have done differently?”

“Honestly?”

“Honestly.”

“I wasn’t there so I don’t really know but it would have been better for you to make sure someone couldn’t step up behind you, get from between them, not let them sucker punch you, and you should have yelled and run rather than having a two on one fight.”

“I broke some toes,” I offered.

“I’d rather have had you not in the hospital.” She was tracing a finger over my chest. That’s when a nurse named Naomi started to walk in, turned beet red, and stepped back out.

“What was that about?”

Lavi giggled. “I suspect she thinks we were doing more than snuggling.”

I sighed. “Mind if I fall out again?”

“Go ahead. I’m just going to stay here a few more minutes.”

“I like you here.” And my eyes got too heavy to keep open.

It was afternoon when I woke up again. This wake, sleep, wake thing had gotten really old. The only thing that kept it from being worse was that I was sleeping too much for the full boredom of being here to hit me. Every time I opened my eyes I was still tired. I asked the doctor about it but he told me it was just a sign my body was healing. He had a shitty bedside manner but was probably right.

My mom, Melissa, and Lavi were all sitting around talking. I just listened for a while.

My mom, “What happened next?”

Melissa, “My brother pretty much dragged her inside. After that we had dinner. She was not a happy camper. I found out my mom has never read or watched Harry Potter. My step dad said she was so mad that she didn’t say anything about the dinner at home for days.” Ah, so that story.

My mom laughed, “She sounds like quite the character.”

Melissa, “She is funnier when you’re not dealing with her.”

“Well, I sympathize,” Mom said, “having kids when you’re young isn’t easy.”

Lavi, “I was going to ask, you look pretty young to have a son as old as Robert.” Didn’t Lavi just tell me earlier you don’t bring up a woman’s age? This must be another of those different rule things.

“I was just a little bit older than you when Bob, Robert’s father swept me off my feet. I guess Robert got that from his dad.”

“Got what?” asked Lavi.

“Being a smooth talker,” Mom replied.

Melissa snorted and added. “Robert? I love listening to him talk but he’s never talked me out of anything much less my panties.”

“Do you actually wear any around him?” I didn’t hear a reply as a smacking sound followed and I could imagine the glare Lavi got for that comment. “Oww.” Lavi managed to sound smug with that sound.

“Sounds like he’s been pretty smooth to me,” Mom replied. “I just have to say, you girls have been so sweet, thank you for looking after him. I know Robert isn’t the easiest person in the world to deal with.”

Melissa, “I don’t know. He’s really easy going.”

“Easy-going? Robert? He’s about flexible as a telephone pole,” mom said. I wasn’t that bad was I?

“Didn’t he drop out of school to help you out,” Lavi responded.

“Absolutely, I don’t mean to say he’s not a sweetheart. He sacrificed a lot for me but he does like things his way. His dad was like that too.” Mom’s voice dropped. Memories of dad were not pleasant for her either though it’s not something we had ever talked about a lot. Right after he disappeared we just had to get by and eventually it seemed like it was ancient history and why rip open old wounds?

“Well, I feel like he’s put up with plenty of chaos from us,” said Melissa.

My mom lowered her voice. “You girls sure you’re okay with talking here? We can go downstairs to the cafeteria.”

“Nah,” Melissa replied, “I want to be here if he needs anything. Don’t get me wrong, I’m loving getting to know you Mary but in the back of my head I was here all that time when we went out for coffee earlier. By the way, thank you Lavi for staying when we grabbed lunch, it made me a lot more relaxed.”

“Do you think he will get upset if you’re not here?” A long pause stretched out as I imagine Lavi and Melissa silently communicated with each other. Mom was clearly not used to it and tried to back up. “I mean,” she said, “he has been under a lot of stress, it would be understandable.”

Melissa cleared her throat. “Let me make something clear, Mary”

“Dear,” my mom interjected.

“Excuse me,” Lavi said, “Melissa is talking.” That tone did not allow for disagreement.

Melissa, “Let’s be very clear with each other. I don’t know what his dad was like, but I’m getting bad vibes here. I’m going to skip the warm-up. Robert is the man I love. Lavi is the woman I love. Let’s go through the abusive boyfriend checklist we haven’t done yet. He has not separated me from my friends, in fact, he has encouraged and facilitated my spending time with them. He can be charming and alternates with being sweet and dorky. He can be forceful but in ways I like. He doesn’t dictate my actions to me. He doesn’t hit me and the only thing he’s done to make me question my sanity is his obsession with Godzilla movies so the gaslighting meter is zero.”

“He loved those big monster movies even when he was little,” mom said.

A completely cheerful and bubbly “Same,” erupted from Lavi. “I think Mellie covered it. Really, Mary, if Robert had been doing that kind of shit no one would have found the body, and trust me, I was totally prepared for it when I first met him.”

Melissa, “You’re not a gangster Lavi.”

“Yeah, they have others that can rat them out, hence the gang. I have plastic tarping and parents that will give no-questions-asked alibis.” My mom giggled at that. Not that long ago I would have thought Lavi was joking too. Those were more innocent days.

Mom released a deep breath and said. “I remember what it was like to get attention from an older man. It makes you feel special and grown-up.”

“If I want attention from older men I just leave the house,” Melissa replied. A pause followed before Melissa continued. “I’ve had men offer to put me up in apartments and take care of me. I’ve even been tempted by a few of them, not because I liked the guys but because they were good offers.”

She had? I didn’t know that.

Melissa continued, “I could live somewhere nice with college paid for if I wanted to.”

“I wasn’t saying you were a whore dear,” my mom attempted in mollification.

Melissa snorted again. “Whore? Mary, when you are paid that much it is called being a mistress and a damn expensive one. I didn’t do it because I have hang ups about being a mistress. I didn’t do it because I’d rather live in a shitty apartment and just get by with love than be comfortable without it.” All of that sounded very familiar.

“What do you two have in common other than love?”

“Reading together, cooking dinner together, tending the garden, me dragging him out dancing, him making me watch old movies”

Lavi interjected, “Us making him watch bad movies.”

“According to him,” Melissa agreed. “I stand by Bring it On being under-appreciated. And we talk. I enjoy talking with him about everything. And he listens and when he listens I’m not blonde, I’m not a cheerleader, I’m just Melissa.”

“That sounds really nice.” My mom sounded really sincere and it made my throat catch a little. “And you?”

“Me?” Lavi answered. I didn’t risk opening my eyes but I could imagine the very Lavi-like shrug she was probably giving my mom. “Mary, I like you but it’s not your business. Robert is going to father my children. Get ready to be a grandmom. There you go, I’ve caught you up.”

“Wow, you two are ... assertive.”

“If I wasn’t Robert would still be living by himself,” Melissa replied.

“Hmmm.”

“Hmmm?” Lavi responded.

“I was just thinking about Robert’s ex.”

Melissa, “Jordyn?”

“That was her. She was assertive too and I thought they’d last. He never told me what happened but I remember wondering why. He was clearly not taking after his father with her. He let her take the lead a lot, I thought that would be healthy for him.”

“I’m going to guess from your earlier statement that Robert’s dad was a lot older than you when you and he got together,” Melissa responded.

“Yeah, and I’ve been thinking it over and over since he told me about you three. Robert got a lot from his dad. His brains, certainly. Bob was smart as a whip, not book smart but in a lot of other ways. Too smart for his own good.”

“Well,” Melissa said in a cheery voice, “Robert is just the right amount of smart for me and you don’t have to worry about us. We, all of us, look after each other. Now I want to hear more about Robert.”

“Like what?”

“Anything embarrassing,” Lavi said. I didn’t like where this was going.

“Hmmm...” Mom started. “Robert has always been pretty unflappable. His dad liked to get a reaction out of him and I think Robert’s rebellion was denying it. I remember,” she started laughing which worried me, “I remember finding him one day with a dirty magazine in his room. I think he had been, you know. Anyway, I picked up the magazine and said ‘A few years ago I looked like that.’ That cheeky little boy just looked at me, lhis mother, up and down and said ‘You still do.’”

Lavi, “Woah!”

Melissa, “He didn’t!”

All three were laughing in seconds. I figured this was my cue since I wouldn’t even be able to fake sleeping through this much longer.

“At least she hasn’t told you the story about my voice cracking during my science fair presentation,” I said.

I didn’t get time for a reply before Melissa’s phone rang. She looked at the caller ID and said, “Sorry, have to take it.” She picked it up and I heard only one side punctuated by pauses. “Hello, this is Melissa Milton. Yes, principal Escobar, I have a moment. I see. All right. Sure. I do have an issue. I may not be in school Tuesday due to a family emergency. You’ll extend the at-home school work through next week? That’s very kind of you. Thank you. Yes, she is here with me. I’ll let her know.”

She hung up. “Well,” she said looking at us, “that’s that. I’m coming back to school, no mark on my record.”

“What was that ‘you’ll let her know’ thing?” Lavi asked.

“He is going to call you in just a few minutes.”

Lavi nodded. It turned out to be closer to ten minutes later. We made some small talk and mom said she wanted to try thigh with us, which turned out to mean Thai when Lavi’s phone rang. She took a breath and in a very chipper tone answered it, “Hey, Lavi here. Hello Mr. Escobar, yes, she let me know. Thank you, I’m glad to be coming back. Yes, I’m having the same issue as Mellie, I’m in New Orleans actually. No, I’m fine but helping take care of someone. Thank you. Oh, Mrs. Richardson, you’re there too? Oh. All right.” There was a very long pause and Lavi’s face went rigid. “I understand. I take it there’s no option here? Thank you.” She hit the end button; her finger slammed into the phone. She was angry but controlling it. “Well, fuck them.”

Melissa, “What’s wrong?”

“I’m canned,” Lavi said. “No more cheerleading for me. I’m not kicked from school. I have to write some kind of essay bullshit about violence but no more cheerleading. I can’t even watch practice.”

“They’re letting you school remotely another week?” I asked.

She nodded yes. “Six to one,” Lavi said, “that Kozinski and Heyman scared him shitless.”

“But Richardson.” Melissa didn’t finish her thought.

“Yeah,” Lavi said. “Richardson wanted us divided and she got it. They made it clear that if I even get near practice I’ll be expelled. Safety and that jazz.”

“And Chris?” I asked.

Lavi, “I don’t know. My guess is he’s off the football team but that was just the vibe I got from some equal treatment stuff they said.” Lavi had acted so uncaring about cheerleading but she was pissed. I knew it stung and letting Richardson win ate at her. Even if I got Richardson’s apology Lavi wouldn’t be able to see it.

But if Lavi looked angry and hurt Melissa was ready to kill. “Fuck that slag!” Her fist was balled into a tight fist.

Lavi, “Mellie, we are in a hospital!” The irony of Lavi telling others to calm down was not lost on me.

Melissa took deep breaths before she continued. She stared into empty space and said, “I’m done with that bitch. I’m tired of being her bitch, of all of us being her bitches. I was threatened with rape and she pulls this shit? She pays me back by banning you? She wants me to quit. Fine. She wants it to be my choice. Fine. But, I’m going to pick how I quit and what I do after and she’s not going to be fucking happy about it.”

“Uh,” Lavi searched for words. “So, you’re quitting the team?”

“Yes. But that’s the minimum.”

Lavi blinked and in a very soft tone, as if to not spook a wild animal, asked, “What do you mean?”

“I’m going to make that sad old nag regret ever fucking with us.”

I had to ask. “What about Grace?”

Melissa looked at me. “Grace will have to deal.” Her face softened some into a grin though. “But I need to talk to a few people, Blake and Mrs. Blackman. If it all works out Grace will get what she wants too. We will need at least one more, probably Zahra or Ji though I’ll take both if they’re game.”

I sat there not sure what to say. Wasn’t Mrs. Blackman the office attendant at the school? What did she have to do with this? And who was Blake? For once today I was actually wide awake.

**Chapter 33**

“Let’s get this show on the road,” I said.

Naomi pointed to the bed. “Hospital rules, you sit until the wheelchair gets here.” She said it firmly but kindly. I had come to think of Naomi as my nurse in the last week. She was a thick woman, late-20s with a slight Creole accent, and had described herself as mulatto, which I thought was a pejorative but she said it with pride. She and Melissa had hit it off. I found out that Naomi had been responsible for the second bed in the room. And it had been she that had routinely come in and checked on my vitals. It was the only time I normally saw a nurse as Melissa and Lavi took care of all the little help I had needed. After her admonishment, I remained seated on the edge of the bed. It felt good to be out of the hospital gown even if it was just sweatpants and an oversized t-shirt Lavi picked up for me.

“This is silly, I know hospitals have liability issues but I can walk fine.”

“Actually,” Naomi said, “it’s up to the attending physician and Dr. Laghari is requiring it.” I groaned internally. I had a feeling this was his little way of getting back at me. Maybe I should have kept my tongue a little less snarky with him.

“Be good Robert. You know you don’t have to check out so soon.” My Mom said this from the seating by the window where she was sitting with Lavi. I was able to pay more attention to Mom than I could a week ago. She looked healthy and happy, which filled me with warmth. Lavi and my mom had bonded over drawing and painting. Lavi was currently showing my Mom the art on her Instagram. Mom had gone home for most of the week but came back today to see me before I left.

“Not going over this again mom, I am headed home,” I said.

“Stubborn as a mule with rocks for brains,” she replied.

“I just need to rest now and I can do that better at home.” Melissa said nothing but was putting the last of our odds and ends into bags. She smiled at me indicating her agreement.

“You will need regular checkups and care,” Mom countered.

“Believe it or not, I live in a real city mom. I’ve already got a specialist I’ll see weekly that my regular doc referred me to.” I’d had enough of this from Dr. Laghari. Really, you’d think a man who moved halfway around the world to become a doctor would realize that other physicians existed outside his immediate experience.

“And,” Melissa added, “he will have plenty of help around the house.”

“What about regular checking of the bandages, did you think about that?” I love my mother but she clearly believes that I survive by sheer luck when she’s not around.

Lavi, “I got that covered.”

“How? You?” Mom looked at Lavi in surprise.

Lavi laughed, “No, but I have someone who, well, they’re not a nurse but they are a certified CMR.”

“CMR?” My Mom asked.

“Certified Medical Response,” Lavi supplied. “Think of it as junior EMT.”

“Is this someone you know?”

Melissa picked up the conversation, “One of our friends. She plans on being a doctor but her dad made her do the EMR stuff.” Mom rotated her head towards Melissa and I was reminded that she wasn’t used to how Lavi and Melissa would pick up for each other in a conversation. “He said if she couldn’t hack EMR training she might as well give up on being a doctor. She took it as a challenge.”

“Can we really trust this, dear?” I needed a stronger word than skeptical for Mom’s expression.

Lavi, “Last year one of us broke her leg on a trip. Ji was pretty amazing. She’s not a nurse but just for checking bandages and things like that she’ll be fine and Robert knows her so it won’t be a stranger in the house.”

“And,” Melissa added, “Lavi and I will make sure he gets to any appointments. We’ve looked at our schedules. There aren’t many times one of us won’t be in the house.”

“And,” Lavi, “for those few times my Mom lives a very short drive away and can pop over.”

“Are you sure she’s okay with that?” Mom was very concerned.

Lavi shrugged. “They’re old friends. From college.”

Mom’s face froze. “Uh, were they...”

“LOL, no, just friends.” Lavi actually said ‘lol.’ She clearly spent too much time texting. “He was her editor.”

Finally, an orderly, or whatever they call them, showed up with a wheelchair. I transferred myself into it as quickly as I could. Lavi set the fruit basket that Laurence Montgomery had sent me (along with a very nice note) into my lap. I’d gotten a lot of well wishes but that one had surprised me. My boss Tony took it as a good sign and had insisted I only do half days until I felt better. I had tons of sick time built up so it wasn’t a problem.

Mom, “All right. I swear your father was just as bad. You’d butt heads with a stop sign.”

“You know,” Melissa said, “I was reading that satyrs were originally represented as having horse legs rather than goat ones. Horse legs, mule legs, kinda the same, he could just be a satyr, half mule.”

My mother was chipper at this description. “Huh, that makes sense to me. He’s certainly stubborn enough to have mule legs.”

I couldn’t see her face, but I knew Melissa was very satisfied with herself for that one. At least she was having fun. I wouldn’t say it to them but getting her out of here was part of why I insisted on leaving. Melissa needed to get back to something like regular life and the hospital was toxic to her emotional state. I’d tried to suggest she head home and that hadn’t gone well so I hadn’t brought it back up. So, clearly, I needed to get out of here.

And she had something hanging over her head. After her outburst earlier in the week Melissa had shut up. No prodding had succeeded in getting more details out of her about her plan to screw over Richardson. The only thing she said was that she needed to talk to Blake and Blackman first. I had asked Lavi privately and she said she was mystified too.

Naomi pushed me out of the hospital while Lavi jogged ahead and brought the SUV around. Mom gave me a careful hug before I got into the backseat. Melissa added herself next to me and Lavi placed a restocked cooler next to Melissa. Naomi waved goodbye and even came around to give me a quick peck on the cheek. I might have blushed a little. Then Lavi got in the driver’s seat and we were on the road.

“Dancing on the hood in the middle of the woods On an old Mustang, where we sang Songs with all our childhood friends And it went like this...”

Lavi and Melissa were singing along to a pop song as I watched Melissa. She was a lot nicer to look at than I-10 West, after all. Lavi had braided Melissa’s hair this morning and the long braid was draped over her shoulder, which she played with as she sang. The golden braid stood out against the black t-shirt. I didn’t realize I was staring until she looked at me and smiled. She had put on some jeans shorts and a Metallica t-shirt. One of the few times Lavi had managed to extract Melissa from the hospital room had been when Naomi had promised to stay with me the entire time they were gone, apparently staying after her shift to make it possible. The girls hit a thrift shop, which had netted them a small pile of 80s metal t-shirts that were too big for them and Melissa decided they were awesome.

Melissa noticed me looking at her. “Lavi,” she yelled in her little girl seat, “your husband is perving on me!”

“Tattletale,” I said.

Lavi replied from the front, “Good, that means he is feeling better.”

“Yeah,” Melissa said in her normal voice, “he looked like he wanted to motorboat Naomi yesterday when she had to reach over him to that monitor.”

“I was merely making sure she didn’t accidentally make inappropriate contact which would make her feel uncomfortable,” I offered.

She smirked. “And that required trying to see through her scrubs?”

“I was being vigilant and noble.”

“Well, nobility should be recognized,” Melissa said as she shifted in her seat. “Can we raise your arm up so it’s not in the way?”

“Why?” I asked.

“I need to check on mine,” she said with the air of a proper lady.

“Yours?”

“It’s mine. You agreed.”

For half a second I was concerned about my ability to function but as soon as I thought about Melissa’s head in my lap I felt the blood flow start. Obviously, a part of me had missed the girls.

“Yeah, I can move my shoulder a bit, just don’t bump it,” I said as I lifted by leaning away. Melissa slithered under my arm and I let it rest on her back. “Just let me know when you have to move.”

“Will do,” she said as she pulled the loose sweat pants down and released me, half-hard already.

“Hey baby,” she said. Since it came with a hand gently rubbing my balls Melissa talking to my dick was just fine with me. “I know,” she continued, “the nurse should have taken care of you too. That was a bad Naomi, ignoring you. You wanted to lie between those big dark breasts and titty-fuck her you say. I’m sorry, I’ll take care of you though.” With that, she planted a kiss on the crown and I felt myself grow immediately. She giggled. “You liked that. Good boy. You missed me? I missed you too.” With that she left a trail of kisses down my length until she was kissing my balls and gently took one at a time into her mouth and tickled them with her tongue. I groaned in appreciation.

Lavi clearly wondered what she couldn’t see from the front seat because she asked, “Are you giving him head?”

“Not quite yet, but I will be,” Melissa replied. Lavi snorted in response.

Melissa licked me. It wasn’t uncommon for Melissa to lick my shaft but here it wasn’t just part of a lead-up, she flattened her tongue against my length and languidly licked up from my base to my crown and then took the crown in her mouth and swirled her tongue around it. Then she did it again from a different starting point and repeated over and over until she had been everywhere her angle allowed and her saliva was staining the sweat pants bunched under my balls.

She looked at me, jerking on my soaked cock, “You like that baby, you like a sloppy lick-job?”

I didn’t even look. My eyes were closed, my head leaned back. I just guided her head back down in response and she giggled and began again. She had to push herself up a bit but then took my entire length in one smooth movement and buried her nose in my thigh. I didn’t have to see her to know she was smirking at the deep throat. I felt my hips buck a little out of instinct and her head shifted up in a jerk.

“Sorry,” I said.

She lifted up and giggled. “Eager are we?”

“Fuck yes.”

Melissa switched to her little girl voice, “You want to cum in my mouth, mister? Put your big throbbing peter in and go woosh.”

I laughed and throbbed. There was something about a beautiful girl calling you big and saying ‘woosh’ that was both sexy and ridiculous.

“Yes, I do.”

She switched to sultry, “Then do it.” She attacked my cock and this time she didn’t play around, she suckled eagerly and moved up and down simulating the friction of thrusting. I thought I might last a few minutes but Melissa wasn’t having that and played dirty, massaging my balls while making a desperate sound in the back of her throat that drove me crazy and I was soon cuming in her mouth. She made exaggerated sounds swallowing it and purred happily in my lap as she laid her head down.

“Going to help me pull my pants back up?” I asked.

“Nope,” she said as she snuggled against my deflating penis. She seemed so comfortable I decided there wasn’t a point in disturbing her. I was glad the sweat pants were loose though. In a few minutes, she was gently snoring. Sleep sounded good and soon I faded out too.

I woke up and the road looked exactly the same. I wasn’t falling asleep with the frequency I had a week ago, but I was still tiring very quickly. I looked into the front seat. Lavi was staring ahead and listening to a book.

“What are you listening to?”

She hit pause and replied, “Rise and Kill First.”

“Sounds dramatic.”

“It’s about the history of Mossad’s targeted assassination program. I finished the last book Zayde recommended and now he said I should read this one. I know I should read-read but I like listening.”

“Knowledge is knowledge, I think it’s perfectly legit to read by listening. So, what do you think?”

“Well, I’m kind of surprised. I mean, the book is brutal.”

“You’re surprised by that?”

“No, no, but Zayde ... you’d have to meet him. He’s pro-Israel in the way that I can’t ever be. I mean, I love Israel but I’m American too. When he moved to Israel he stopped being an American.”

“Gave up his citizenship?” I stroked Melissa’s hair.

“Ha! No, I meant like in his soul. But the book, well, I kind of expected it to be all about how perfect everything is but it’s not. And some of the stories, I mean, these people needed to die but the cost sometimes was just horrible.”

“And you’re surprised that he’d recommend something that pointed out the ugly side?”

“Pretty much. It makes me realize that I feel so close to them but how well do I really know Zayde and Bubbeh? I grew up almost next door to them but I was a kid when we left. I never talked about stuff like this with them.”

“It’s never too late,” I said. Melissa’s ears were cute. I couldn’t see Lavi’s face but realized I knew what her ears looked like from behind too. I had never realized ears could be cute.

“And I’m trying to, but it’s not like being there with them,” Lavi said.

“You miss them?”

“Yeah. Don’t you have family you miss?”

“Not really. I never knew any of my dad’s family well. Apparently, he burned his bridges with them well before I was born so contact was minimal and mom never had a lot of family.”

“But your mom?”

I shrugged with one shoulder, a new trick I was learning, and pointless since she couldn’t see it. “I love my mom and I like seeing her but I don’t miss her when I don’t.”

“Robert?”

“Yeah?”

“For someone with so much love in you you are incredibly non-sentimental.” I resisted the urge to half-shrug again.

“My ex observed that too except I think she called it being a callous dog fucker.”

“Were you?” There was mirth in Lavi’s voice.

“I told her if I was a dog fucker it was only because she couldn’t stop being a bitch for one moment of her life.”

That earned peels of laughter from Lavi and I snickered and I felt movement in my lap. Groggily Melissa asked, “What’s so funny?”

“Robert burned Jordyn with a ‘y’ like yard trash,” Lavi giggled.

Melissa mumbled, “I need to pee.” I moved my arm but Melissa didn’t move. Instead, she snuggled vigorously into my lap more which earned a little greeting from her little possession. “When we get somewhere.” She then pulled out her phone and began looking at a map with pins on it. “Lavi, 21a. The racetrack.”

“Gotcha,” came the reply.

“Does the eagle have the football?” I asked.

“What,” they both asked simultaneously.

“21a? A racetrack? Sounds like code.”

Lavi, “Exit 21a, and RaceTrac the gas station chain, not a racetrack. Mellie looked up places with family restrooms along the way.”

“Uh, why?”

“Because,” came a groggy voice from my lap, “you are still gimpy my love.”

I furrowed my brow. “I thought gimp was an offensive term.”

“Only for the disabled, not non-rutting satyrs.”

For some reason I was annoyed. “I’ll show you rutting.”

“Promises, promises,” came Lavi’s teasing from the front seat.

I rolled my eyes and yawned. I looked out the window and saw an exit sign. We still had a ways to go.

It was an odd sensation. My arm was usable but my shoulder wasn’t. I successfully used the bathroom with Lavi’s help. A woman at the counter gave us grief as we had started to enter together but Lavi had threatened to show everyone my “frankenstein” shoulder if they needed proof I needed help. Out of sheer petulance, I had started pulling my shirt up with my one good hand and they abruptly said it was fine. They had retreated with the wisdom of the underpaid employees of a stop and rob that they were. That had been a few minutes ago. I, now with an empty bladder, was perusing the junk food that normally I would never look at.

A dozen thoughts flashed through my head. Would Lavi or Melissa like something I picked? Would we share? When the kids came would they inherit my tastes? What would cooking for kids be like? Should I teach them about junk food as well as good food?

Melissa came around and looked at what I had in my hand. “Pepperoni combos?”

“Do you know how long it’s been since I had junk food like this?”

She put a hand on her hip, “Please, I’ve seen how you eat. You are not the poster boy for healthy living.”

“True, but I’m talking about corporate created, completely artificially flavored junk food.”

“Uh,” she thought, “never actually.”

“Exactly.” I went over to the drink coolers and got a Cherry Coke. Melissa followed and got a zero-calorie energy drink.

She eyed my choices. “Your point?”

“Three days ago was ten years. It hadn’t really hit me until right now.”

“Ten years from what?”

“Since I changed the locks on Jordyn. I don’t like talking about her usually. But there in the car, with Lavi, it was funny. We’d been planning to go away for Memorial Day together, but she had another of her meltdowns.”

Melissa looked stricken. “Oh.”

I smiled. “Yeah, I’m beginning to think I should just skip doing anything for Memorial Day in the future.”

She smiled thinly. “Deal.”

Lavi approached carrying a huge fountain drink.

“Hey, you guys ready,” she asked. She stopped as she saw Melissa’s face. “What’s going on?”

Melissa took Lavi’s hand and squeezed it but instead of responding looked at me. “So, the food?”

“I’m not really the therapy type. I think cooking was an alternative to an early mid-life crisis.”

“And now?” She looked concerned. I smiled.

“Screw mid-life, my life is just starting.”

Lavi, “Are we seriously having, like, an emotional moment in a gas station convenience store?”

“Nope. I’m simply having a moment of clarity.” I said.

Melissa got on her toes and kissed me lightly on my lips. “Still,” she said, “I’m sorry all this happened.”

“Don’t be,” I said, “I’m actually... “ I looked at Lavi. “You know, I’m actually quite happy.” I leaned over and kissed Lavi’s lips. It was true, I was tired, I hurt, but my life was good and if there had been chaos that was because it was worth fighting for.

Lavi grinned, “So ... gas station hot dogs?”

I gave her a good dramatic glare. “Lavi, I’m moving on, I don’t hate myself.”

Both girls giggled and we made our way to pay. We got back in the car but Melissa took over driving. Lavi did not take over Melissa’s position in my lap but put her hand on my thigh and with one hand operated her phone while Melissa chose music for the drive. The hand didn’t leave my thigh but an occasional fingertip stretched out making me pulse. She would shoot me a grin letting me know what she was doing was intentional.

For my part my thoughts jumped around. I thought about mac and cheese. I loved mac and cheese with bacon or andouille sausage but I should try it with chorizo. Would the kids like it? Pork sausage would be a delicate issue to navigate with a big part of the family. Gradually my thoughts had evolved from cooking for myself to cooking for family and that definition included future children. I could feel the tightness on my skin. All thirty-one stitches were on my shoulder pulling up into grotesque edges where the skin was woven together. Stitches always sounded so precise but it turned out there was only so much that could be done with a jagged rip. What had this trip been? It started with me wondering how my Mom would see us as a trio and by the time she had shown up something had clicked into place for me and I just hadn’t cared. Sometimes something big has to make you take stock and really feel in your gut what you already knew.

A few hours later I was holding my phone with one hand, reading. I didn’t care for it but at least it was easy to swipe pages with my thumb. I suddenly realized that Lavi’s hand was in my pants and rubbing me. Lavi had worn a bright pink dress today and was squirming in her seat as she played with me with one hand and held her phone with her other. I looked over. Lavi was watching a video clip of a tiny thing of a girl in pigtails having her ass played with by an older woman.

“Worked up?” I asked.

“Ji sent me this,” Lavi said.

“Why?”

“She’s been asking me more questions. Like, this one has a strap-on anal scene, and she was asking me if lesbians really did that stuff or it was just a porn thing.”

I snorted. “When I was a kid I would have said it was just a porn thing but I think life is imitating porn these days. What did you tell her?”

“I told her Mellie and I had one and could give her a demonstration.” Lavi looked at me mischievously. “Sent me a devil face back and said maybe.” Lavi put the phone down and started crawling over me. I got the hint and lifted my ass up so she could push my sweat pants down. Soon she had her pink panties pulled to the side and I was entering her. She wasn’t completely wet yet but a few strokes with my tip in her as she lifted up and down took care of that and soon she was sinking all the way down.

“Oh, fuck, I missed you in me, Robert,” she moaned.

From the front seat, “Are you two seriously fucking?! I just blew him!”

Lavi, “Don’t blame me for your lack of ambition. It’s rutting time!”

Melissa grumbled back, “Oh you’re going to get it later, woman.”

“Promises, promises,” Lavi threw back in a sing-song.

With my more mobile arm, I grabbed Lavi’s right ass cheek and squeezed it. My hand explored until my fingertip found the rosebud of her asshole and I got just a little in.

“Oh, that’s it, fuck my asshole too.” I couldn’t get a lot of penetration back there but I did my best to oblige. Lavi leaned down so that her forehead laid against mine. She gently chanted in a whisper, “fuck me, fuck me, fuck me.” I tilted my head up to kiss her and she squeezed her thighs together. I came nearly at once and emptied inside her. I think it was the fastest I’d ever had her cum with me.

She let out a long sigh. “I needed that.”

“Ji got you worked up that much?”

“Not just her, I started thinking about all three of us with her and then you and I wanted to feel you in me. It’s been too damn long. I haven’t even touched myself much less someone else. I really did need that.” She beamed like she had just gotten up from a long restful nap.

“My pleasure,” I said.

“I’ll bet,” she giggled. You should have been more industrious

Melissa, “Damn. Now I need something.”

Lavi giggled. “Anything I can help with?”

“I can think of several. How about we start with you eating me until I forget how to talk?”

Lavi, “Oh my, yes. I can’t wait. It’s been way too long since I’ve tasted you.”

“Too long?” I asked.

“Well over a week,” said Lavi.

“You mean you didn’t sneak off or anything?”

Melissa, “Kind of hard to be in a sexy mood when a third of you is hurting so badly.”

“Sorry,” I said.

Lavi smacked me on my good arm. She pulled it but it still stung. Then she kissed me and it was sweet and lovely. “Now, how do I get up,” she asked.

“I have no idea,” I admitted. Awkward contortions followed but soon Lavi was free. She sat back on the seat, her dress still hiked up and panties askew. I wasn’t used to using my new phone with just the left hand but I managed to take a picture. She was cute.

I had fallen asleep again and found myself waking up as the car decelerated. Melissa was pulling into the parking lot of a rest area.

“I need to stretch my legs,” she said. We walked around a bit and the girls swapped out again. They never discussed it, it just happened. With Melissa in the backseat again she passed out store-bought sandwiches from a cooler. I had forgotten that chicken salad could be completely tasteless but at least it filled me up.

Meanwhile, Melissa was going over her calendar and the schedule with me. I dutifully nodded my head and followed along on my phone. Physical therapy twice a week, once with Melissa in the morning when she had a free block and once in the afternoon with Lavi since she won’t be cheerleading. My first doctor’s appointment was tomorrow and would be once a week for at least for a few weeks, then might scale back depending on how I was doing.

“So, Sylvia is taking me to the doctor’s appointments once a week?”

“Most of them probably,” Melissa said, “Lavi and I are both in scheduled blocks then but tomorrow Ji is.”

“Huh?”

Melissa repeated herself, “Ji is.”

“Really?” I probably sounded stupid but it didn’t make much sense to me. “I get her checking my bandages while she can visit with you two but this is something else.”

Lavi chimed in from the front seat. “She volunteered, said it would be good to hear if the doctor had any special instructions. She’s even ditching school for it tomorrow.”

Melissa looked thoughtful. “She was awfully eager to help out.”

Lavi, “Do you think, you know?”

Melissa took a second before she replied. “Maybe, sort of.”

I cleared my throat. “Translation for those not sharing the mental link here?”

Lavi giggled and then said, “I was wondering if Ji was trying to get closer to you.”

“Other than some help cooking I haven’t seen that. She seems more interested in maybe exploring something with you two.”

“And,” Melissa said, “that was what I was getting at. Maybe it’s an indirect being nice to us thing. Maybe not.” Her face was carefully neutral but I knew that look so I made a motion for her to say more. “I...” Melissa sighed and put the phone down. “Same old, same old, a bunch of stupid mixed up feelings.”

“Well, nothing is going to happen.”

She gave me the side-eye and then turned to face me all the way. She looked me in the eyes. “Are you saying that if she offered to sit on your lap and shove your hard cock into her tight Asian pussy you’d turn that down?”

“Uhh...”

Melissa pointed at me, “There, I saw it, in your eyes, that ‘fuck yeah’ look you get!”

“Now, that’s not fair, it’s you saying it.”

“So, what? Her actually doing it would be even worse.” Melissa seemed confident in her point.

She was pissing me off so I might have raised my voice a little. “No, because the mental image of you upset afterward would kill it instantly you daft woman!”

Melissa deflated. “You’d think of me even then?”

“I always think of you, you aggravating woman, you and Lavi both!” I think I growled a bit then.

“Oh,” she just said stupidly. She seemed to be trying to figure out what to say when her phone dinged. She retrieved it from the floor of the SUV and looked at the caller ID.

“Blackman,” she said and answered it. “Hello. Today? Sure. We will be back by 5. No, I can’t. My husband, you met him at the office, got injured. I don’t think I should leave. Sure, you can come by, I’ll text you the address.” She hung up, fiddled with typing something out, and hit send.

“She’s coming over?” I asked.

“Yep. I left her voice mail asking if she’d talk to me about something but it was sensitive. I guess she’s following up. I hope I’m right that she won’t rat me out.”

Lavi, “Does this mean you’re going to finally tell us what is going on?” Lavi couldn’t see Melissa directly but I could see her giving Melissa the eye in the rearview mirror.

“Later, maybe.” Melissa was exasperated.

“Later?! I love you babe but I’m ready to strangle you.” Lavi looked like she might pull over to do it too.

Melissa, “It’s just ... there is a good chance she’s just going to laugh at me and it’ll all come to nothing so I just don’t want to say something for it all to turn out to be nothing.”

“All right,” I interjected. “But tonight, no talking to this Blake guy or anything like that first. I want details tonight after you talk to Blackman.”

“Fine, tonight, after I talk to her but only if she says yes. Otherwise, there’s no point.”

“Fine,” I said. Lavi echoed ‘fine’ but sounded less than happy about it.

“Can you at least tell me why you think she might help you?” Lavi asked.

“Well, how much do you know about her Lavi?”

Lavi shrugged from the driver’s seat. “She works in the office. She’s been there like forever, right?”

Melissa made that tapping with her finger tic she does when someone doesn’t pay attention to the people around them the way Melissa feels they should. “Yes, and no, she has been there fifty years but not in the office. Didn’t you ever notice that she subs for a bunch of math classes?”

“Uh, not really though she did my geometry class. I didn’t think anything of it. So?”

“She did because she’s actually a math teacher.”

“Was?” I asked.

“No, is. That is crucial,” Melissa said.

“I’m still confused,” I said.

“She was married to the principal a long time ago and taught college credit calculus and other advanced math classes. They both retired but her husband died a while back before Escobar was at the school. She decided to come out of retirement. The head of the school system rehired her. When he came Escobar stuck her in the office not as a secretary but as teacher advisor to the work-study students. He couldn’t make her a secretary but he could do that since it was a faculty duty.”

A light came on in my head. “Effectively making her a secretary but not really.”

Melissa nodded. “Right and I don’t know the details but they don’t get along. Anyone who has ever worked there knows that. I’m guessing he thought she’d quit and she decided to stay just to make his life miserable.”

“But she’s always the sweetest,” Lavi said, “I mean, everyone I know that has worked in the office has said so.”

“She helped us that day we met with Escobar,” I said. “I don’t think anything she did was a coincidence.”

“Yeah, she’s smart and strong-willed. I just hope she likes my idea.”

Lavi and I knew it was pointless to ask what that was so we let it go.

I was looking forward to seeing my house, our house. What I didn’t expect as we pulled up was three cars parked on the street outside the house. The closest was Lavi’s. Sylvia and Peter got out and he got a large cardboard box out of the trunk. It had dragons on the side of it and a picture of a fortune cookie. As we pulled up I saw Linda, Rian, and Ji get out of the other two.

Ji, “You’re late,” she said stepping forward. She was dressed in jeans, the first time I had seen her in them and a white blouse with puffy sleeves and pink rose designs.

“Come here,” Lavi said and threw open her arms. They hugged then Ji looked at Melissa and they hugged.

I walked over to Peter. The box had a crap ton of Chinese take out boxes and several growlers in it. “You are a saint among men. Let’s get inside.”

Linda approached and awkwardly extended a large Tupperware container. “It, uh, it’s a quinoa salad with chicken.”

I pulled up the corner. “Avocado and oranges?”

“Yeah.” She breathed deep and tried to be casual. “It’s high in protein and the citrus is good for your immune system.”

“I love quinoa, it looks wonderful.”

She gave me a very small relieved smile. Rian however was smiling broadly holding up a container of his own.

“Chocolate chip cookies, store dough but fresh!” He was also holding a large shopping bag. “Oh, and three tasers.”

“We’ll save the tasers for after-dinner entertainment,” I said. He grinned. We made our way inside with Linda walking briskly and Rian behind her.

He started joking, “Watch out dear, zap, zap, zap!” He was laughing at his own joke. Linda wasn’t. Apparently, when she wasn’t angry he wasn’t quite so delicate with her. I was glad. I liked the guy and was glad it wasn’t an entirely one-sided relationship.

Inside most of the crowd began sorting out the meal while Ji went into my office with me and checked my bandages. All she really could say was that they looked fine and she would take instruction from the doctor tomorrow about what she should look for daily.

As I pulled my baggy shirt on as I sat on the edge of the desk and she sat in the chair, “So, Ji, I appreciate this but, I have to ask, why?”

“Why what?” She cocked her head to the side.

“The help. This is a lot for a friend of a friend.”

She swung her leg back and forth. “Is it? Maybe you’re my friend too.”

I went a bit still. “Are you... ?”

“Flirting?” She looked like a kid who was just caught with her hand in the cookie jar. “Too much?”

“I’m just trying to figure out what’s going on.”

She grimaced. “Me too. I guess I’m just happy you three are back and yeah, I want to have some fun with it. I’m not trying to seduce you, I just, the flirting is fun. It makes me feel good. Stupid?”

I shook my head, “No, not stupid at all. Honestly, I know you don’t have a thing for me but I’d be lying if I didn’t say it was flattering you wanted to flirt a little.”

That made her smile a little but she fiddled with her hands in a nervous gesture. “You said a friend of a friend. Does that mean, Lavi said I was her friend?”

I chuckled. “She likes you, yes.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Like-like or what?”

How did I end up trying to translate a teenager? “She likes you as a friend and wants to get you in bed because she’s as horny as a cat in heat and finds you sexy. But she likes you as a person which puts you in a category more important than sex to her.”

She looked at me studiously. “She told you all that?”

“Ji, seriously? I know Lavi. I know this. I don’t know if she has put it into words but it is how she feels.”

“We haven’t been talking that long, not really talking,” Ji said.

I replied, “Lavi is very people-smart and knows her own mind. She likes you.”

“I like her too. And Melissa.” She paused a second and then continued, “As friends. But I think what you said is true, you know the other week. We’ve been talking on the phone and chatting. A few nights ago I had a dream about Lavi.” She turned red.

I looked at her. “Are you in love?”

She shook her head and very casually but confidently said, “No.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. I like her, and Mellie, but I’m not in love. You know, I never wanted to sleep with T’wana. Maybe I should have figured that friendship-sexual attraction thing earlier.” She smiled.

“So, this helping me...”

She held up her hands. “I’m not trying to get to them through you. I’m just trying to be a friend. It’s kind of new to me. Maybe it’s a bit much but I’d rather be a lot of a friend than just a little bit of one. You’re going to think this is stupid, but I always wanted to be a doctor to help people. For most of my high school life, all my adult life until a few weeks ago, I’ve been a bitchy snob tearing people down. This feels like who I want to be instead. And I’m trying to figure out this friendship/sex thing I’m feeling and what that means. Like, does that mean I won’t fall in love? It shouldn’t mean that but I just don’t know!”

I blinked. Wow. I felt like someone had just turned on a firehose.

“Bit much,” she asked. She was turning red again.

“Needed to get that off your chest?”

“Kinda, yeah.” She was staying red. “I guess Melissa didn’t warn you I can babble out of control sometimes.”

“No, she didn’t mention that. Sounded sincere though,” I said.

She looked me in the eyes and softly said, “It was. Sorry, I didn’t think I’d be thinking about all that just now so it kind of hit me. And, don’t take this the wrong way but when you’re looking at me it’s kind of intense. I feel a bit like I’m being inspected.”

“I should apologize I suppose.”

She shook her head, “No, it’s actually kind of nice but it’s a lot, too. I’m not sure how to explain it.” Nice? That didn’t make sense to me but Melissa and Lavi had said similar things.

“Well, while we’re putting cards on the table I have to ask about what is on Melissa’s mind.”

She suddenly found the floor interesting. “Oh.”

“Yeah. I figure that’s complicated by your mom’s assumptions but if you just say you’re not interested in me that would make it a lot easier.”

“Uh, well, that,” she started wringing her hands as if they were itching, which I later learned was one of her nervous ticks. “She and I had a talk, a long one, last week.”

“What happened?” I heard movement and laughter upstairs but I was way more curious about this right now.

Ji took a deep breath. She didn’t have the kind of chest it did dramatic things to but it was still nice. “She asked why I wasn’t coming over so I told her everything about you being out of town and hurt but I was really blunt about us and everything. I thought she would be freaked out when I told her about Lavi and Mellie and that they weren’t just with you but each other.”

She stopped but I had to ask. “Them and ... you too?”

“No details but yeah, I went there.” She said it quickly.

“How did she respond?”

Ji looked at me directly. “She told me I was an idiot.”

I cringed and said, “I’m sorry.”

“What for?” She looked at me with confusion written on her face, not what I expected.

I tried to explain what I thought was obvious. “Well, a parent who doesn’t accept your sexuality can be hard...”

Her face lit up. “Oh! No, no, no. It wasn’t that. She said I was an idiot because of course, a woman can make another woman happy. She told me I was an idiot for passing up being with a man who can make two women happy. She said I’d learn things I should pass on to men later in my life. She grabbed my hand and said, ‘men are clueless you have to teach them how to please you, but a good man can teach you much of what a man can do.’ It was awful, I heard so much come out of her mouth that I NEVER wanted to hear.” Ji shook her head. “I was so shocked I actually asked questions before I realized what I was doing. I really did not need to know why mom and dad go to a hotel for my father’s birthdays!”

I didn’t even want to try to have a response for that.

Ji continued, “The thing is I was kind of lying to her.”

I looked at her but when she didn’t continue I asked, “What do you mean?”

“Robert, I’m not gaga for you, you don’t make my panties drop by themselves but ... well, I decided after some thought that I’d take them off for you.” She smiled as she said it and I felt my blood quicken just a bit. She was back to the flirting. It was a suggestive smile. “And I’ve only been with boys. I’d be lying if I didn’t wonder about you, about what my mom said. Melissa told me that being with you didn’t just make her feel like a woman it actually did something to her, something transformative. Yeah, I’ve wondered what that means. And hell, I know I’d have fun with Lavi and Melissa if I chose to do that but it’s all so much and I don’t even know if I want to do that.” She was twisting back and forth in her seat like a little school girl.

I almost said something about proving she would take her panties off but then thought of Melissa and stilled my tongue. Then something flipped in me. Why should I still my tongue? No, I didn’t want to make Melissa upset but she had told me repeatedly to do what I wanted and she would deal with her emotions. Did I trust her to be a woman or not? Where was the line between my caring about her emotions and my not respecting her decisions? The truth was I needed to do both.

“Prove it,” I said to Ji.

“Huh?”

I held out my hand. “Give me your panties.”

Her eyes went wide.

“I’m not doing anything with you. But you said you’d take them off for me, so prove it.”

“Why?” She looked at me carefully.

“Did you mean what you said?”

“I don’t say what I don’t mean.” She looked at me like she was ready to fight. I liked that.

“Including all those bitchy things?”

“Yeah. I’m not proud of it but ... yeah.” She remained firm. I didn’t say anything, I just remained leaning against the desk and looked at her with the question unasked: are you really just talk? My hand remained extended to take them.

Something came across her face. I didn’t know what it was. Mischief? Determination? Both? But suddenly she stretched out her leg and wiggled her foot at me. I took her pump off her foot, and then she replaced it and I did the other. She stood, pushed the chair back, and lowered her pants without ceremony. She stood there in a pair of white panties with the face of the Hello Kitty character on them.

“Cute.” I smirked. She just stood there. “Bunch of people upstairs,” I said. She didn’t say anything. She stood by the desk and slowly pushed the panties down to her knees, turned around, and hopped her naked ass up on the desk next to me. She brought up one leg, languidly drew the panties down her leg, over her foot, and then did the same with the next, sitting bottomless with legs extended as she offered the panties to me on one fingertip. I took them.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Keep them. Send me a picture of whatever you do with them.”

“Anything I do?”

“Everything.” She looked at me.

I looked at her. “How much of this is bravado and how much is real?”

She didn’t skip a beat. “I’d say about 90% of it is fake but I’m liking how it feels. I’m probably going to go freak out in the bathroom in a little bit.” She hadn’t stopped grinning for a while.

“If I told you it would make Lavi and Melissa happy would you fuck me right now?”

“Probably, yes.”

“Good.”

Ji, “Why is that good.”

“I want to be able to tell her I could have and chose not to.”

She searched my face. “Can I ask a question?”

“Sure.”

“Am I attractive?” It was a question usually laden with landmines but she seemed just curious.

I was honest. “Yes, very.”

“Are you attracted to me?” She said it slowly as if trying to be clear in what she was asking.

I found myself smiling. “I’m a man. I find you sexy. So, yes.” She seemed unconvinced so I decided to lay it out. “Looking at you right now has me aroused. I want to fuck you.” I sighed and then started laughing.

“What’s funny?” she asked.

“I thought to myself that telling a teenage girl that you want to fuck them is exactly what you’re not supposed to say to teenage girls you’re alone with unless you’re married to them. And then I thought, holy shit that sounded creepy.”

Ji rewarded me with a laugh of her own.

“So you do want to fuck me but you haven’t tried to get me into bed. I’ve kind of been expecting it.”

“Hey, that bed is a long way away, I got a couch just in the living room though and it’s really comfortable.”

She rolled her eyes at me and hugged herself, twisting slightly. “You know what I mean.”

“The only thing you asked me to do was teach you how to cook and I’m perfectly happy to do that.”

“And if I asked you to do the other things?” She thought she was pushing me.

I stood up and grinned at her. I leaned in a little so I was close. “If you decide that the flirting actually means something I’ll call your mother and tell her to not expect you home for the weekend starting on Friday night and lasting through Monday morning.” I moved close enough to whisper in her ear. “And we will start with a little contest to see who among me and my wives can eat you out the best and I can promise that if I come in third it won’t be an entire length of the track. If you’re still conscious by the end to choose a winner that is. So think carefully about what you want before you open that door.” Her eyes went wide and her breathing was shallow. “But for now, let’s eat.” She grinned so I clarified. “Eat food that is.”

She was still bottomless but she put her pants and shoes back on as I stuffed her panties in my pocket.

“You know,” she said, “never had a man want to get my panties off and then turn down fucking me.”

“I didn’t turn you down, I just didn’t follow up on it right now. Trust me, your naked ass on that desk looked very good.”

That seemed to please her. “Good. I think you should know, I did make a decision last week. I told Lavi but told her not to tell you but now I think you should know. I decided I didn’t want to go that far with Lavi or Melissa until I was ready to go that far with you too.”

“Hold on, just because of this chat, that doesn’t change anything. You can have fun with them, I’m not saying you have to be with me to be with them.”

Ji countered. “No, Mellie did.”

“She didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know but I think that’s how it should be. You three aren’t just lovers and I have this sense, I can’t be friends with just one or two of you.”

I didn’t have anything to say so I just headed towards the stair making a come-along gesture as I walked. She kept the grin she had been wearing, jumped to her feet, and followed me upstairs. She stepped ahead of me to hold open the door. There were only five steps leading up but I noted that her ass was very nice in those jeans. It wasn’t Lavi’s full ass or Melissa’s muscular one. It was tiny like an apple but nice. God save me, I did want to fuck her, more now than ever.

Soon we joined everyone else gathered around the kitchen table. Melissa was keeping wine glasses full. No one had waited on Ji and me to start eating. Melissa gave me a look and I discreetly walked up and kissed her cheek from behind as she was standing by the wine cooler. I slipped the panties in her hand.

“Did you!?” She whispered fiercely to me. I wasn’t sure if I heard more lust or concern in her voice.

“Just those. Anything else, if there is anything else, will have to wait for all of us,” I whispered back.

“Did you push her, did you threaten to do something wonderfully horrible to her?” Her eyes were dancing.

“A little. She gave almost as good as she got though.”

Lavi came up also whispering, “What are you two doing? This little whisper meeting is about as obvious as it gets.”

Melissa, “Ji gave Robert her panties.”

“Holy shit!” That was not whispered. Thanks Lavi. Everyone looked at us, except Ji.

Melissa and I were laughing. “Excuse us,” I said and pulled them into the living room. We kept our voices down.

Lavi, “Little miss follow the leader found cojones?”

“I think she’s trying to make some new choices.”

Melissa’s concerns were more ... carnal. She looked at me. “You are fucking me in these tonight. And calling me Ji.”

“I told her I’d send her pictures of anything I did with them.”

“Thank god, because I want pictures too,” Melissa said.

“Never anything can be amiss, when simpleness and duty tender it,” I replied. I don’t know if she knew the quote but she slipped the panties into her own pocket and gave me and then Lavi both kisses that left us both flushed. Lavi and I shared the rare non-verbal communication at that moment as we shared the same question - how soon can we get rid of everyone politely?

Melissa noticed the exchange and we all giggled and went back. We got smirks from about half the table and questioning looks from the other half. I felt wonderful as I found a seat and saw Ji smirking at me. “How’s the pseudo-Chinese?” I asked.

“I like it.” She was smiling. “The carrots and broccoli are a nice change of pace from bok choy and spinach. And not everything burns my mouth which is nice.”

“Where is your family from?” I asked.

“Shanghai.”

“Your mom cooks hong shao style?”

“Uh, I don’t know,” she said. I shrugged. It didn’t matter but I was curious, I’d never done it myself but wouldn’t mind learning.

Meanwhile, other conversations took up the stage. “I suppose,” Sylvia said to Linda “you’re machatunim now.”

“What’s that?” Asked Rian. He ignored the look from Linda that I interpreted as he didn’t have permission to speak.

Syliva, “Parent of child’s spouse, basically. It’s Hebrew.”

“Uh, Yiddish, dear,” corrected Peter.

Sylvia, “Yiddish then. Learning around Peter and his family was a mess.”

I had to ask. “What do you mean? I know that Lavi speaks both.”

“My dad,” began Peter, “spoke Hebrew when he came to Israel. Not fluently but well. Mom was from Greece but several of her family were from Eastern Europe and they spoke Yiddish and Greek. So mom learned Hebrew and my dad learned Yiddish. We had plenty of other Yiddish speakers around us in our neighborhood so I grew up with both.”

“But not Greek?” I asked.

“Nah,” he said, “she only reverted to that when she was mad. I tried going to a Greek restaurant once and the waiter’s accent kept making me want to either run or hide.” We politely laughed. No matter your age you didn’t want to hear your mom yelling at you.

Linda turned back to Sylvia, “What was that again, the word?”

“Machatunim.”

Linda tried and didn’t put much into the ‘cha’ so tried a few more times until Peter and Sylvia pronounced it well done. Linda smiled. It was actually a nice smile.

“Super convenient word,” Rian said.

“Now you have something to call us,” Peter added.

“Something nice,” Sylvia added with a grin.

“Oh,” Linda waved her wine glass a bit, maybe feeling it a bit. “I don’t mind Mellie and Lavi, I was kind of surprised they never had, you know...” she waved her hand. “I mean they breasted ... er, breathed the same air.” Everyone tried to not laugh at Linda saying breasted instead of breathed but Peter lost it first quickly followed by Lavi, me, Ji, Melissa, Sylvia, and then Rian, and finally Linda herself.

Lavi just grinned and said, “Well, took her a bit to get there but it was worth it.” Melissa smiled at her.

“I just didn’t think...” Linda trailed off. Everyone waited. “Nevermind. What I thought didn’t matter. Melissa is happy and that is what matters.” She sounded like she was repeating something she said to herself regularly, trying to convince herself of it.

“Well Robert, you building a lean-to outside or something? That big tree near the pool would be perfect.”

I paused, a mouth of chicken and citrus in my mouth. I chewed quickly. “What?”

“For sukkot,” he said.

“Su-cot?”

Lavi, “Whoops! I’d totally forgotten to talk to him about it dad.”

Sylvia laughed. “We build a temporary structure outside and eat meals there, it’s a week-long thing to acknowledge the past.”

“A past that apparently didn’t have mosquitos,” Lavi added.

“Hey, I use mosquito nets now. That was just after we moved,” Peter said.

“We’d been here months dad, it’s not like you didn’t know they existed,” Lavi said with practiced indignance.

Peter took a drink from his glass with the beer he’d brought, “I don’t think you’re allowed to give your father this grief now, you’re obligated to give it to your husband.” He pointed at me.

Sylvia was very amused, “Poor Robert. He’ll get it double!”

“Hold on... “ I started to say, laughing as I did and then the thing I never thought could happen brought the entire room to dead silence.

Linda Milton in a monotone said, “You know, they say the punishment for polygamy is having two wives.” She said it and then sat her wine cup down. She looked at everyone as they stared at her.

Sylvia broke the silence. “Am I drunk or did you make a joke Linda?”

Linda looked at her cup and looked awkward. “I ... sorry, trying to be funny.”

Melissa jumped up and threw her arms around her mother and kissed her cheek. “You’re being great mom,” she said. Linda Milton flushed red and actually smiled as she returned her daughter’s hug. Two smiles in one night and her face didn’t even look sprained.

Lavi decided to distract everyone to let Melissa have a moment with her mom. It was sweet but done in a very Lavi way.

Lavi, “So, dad, think I should sue the school?”

He paused, duck and noodles halfway to his mouth, shrugged, and asked, “how much do you care about cheerleading?” and then continued with his mouthful.

“Not much,” she admitted, “especially since Mellie is quitting anyway.”

“WHAT!?” That was Linda. Melissa, whose face was still right next to her mother’s, appeared to have gotten the full blast of that explosion.

Melissa stood up and looked like she wasn’t sure how to stand there. So, she returned to her seat. “Sorry mom, I don’t feel safe there anymore.”

“They removed that boy from the team didn’t they?” Linda’s voice was tense and politely neutral like I imagine a mass murder talked would talk as they headed to a clock tower with a rifle in hand.

“Yes, but there were plenty of others encouraging him and the school is going to do nothing.”

Linda picked up her wine glass and took a swallow. “That is clearly your choice dear.” Her eyes did not touch on her daughter. Well, that went well and then tanked quickly. I decided that next time I had Linda over for dinner I’d just add Xanax to her appetizers. And maybe mine. What the hell, Xanax for everyone, spread the love.

“So,” Sylvia said, steering the conversation back to Lavi’s situation, “we can sue. Since they acted against you that could be a platform for addressing the larger situation.” Linda nodded approvingly at this idea.

Lavi looked at her mom, “I’m more interested in weaponizing Mellie’s plan, whatever it is.”

Nearly everyone’s heads turned to Melissa who was taken aback by the attention. She looked like she was going to say something but suddenly the doorbell rang. She jumped up, “I think that is Mrs. Blackman. One sec.”

Saved by the bell, literally, I thought. “Use my office,” I said.

“Thanks!” She stopped give both Lavi and me quick kisses and disappeared. I heard her greet someone and then the door downstairs fell shut.

I turned back to everyone looking at me as if waiting for something.

“I don’t know what the plan is either, just that she needed to talk to Blackman and someone named Blake and that supposedly Richardson won’t like it.”

“Fucking cow.” Linda spat it out. As several people looked at her she clarified, “Richardson. This is all her fault. I hope Melissa puts her in her place. If she has to quit the team hopefully Mellie will at least teach her a lesson.”

I held up my glass. “Cheers,” I said. “To standing by family and friends.” The table rang with agreement.

From there the conversation wandered back and forth until half an hour later Peter’s phone rang and he jumped up to answer it with a smile on his face. He said something to Sylvia and she casually waved him off. He went into the living room to chat. He came back, hurried up to Sylvia and Lavi, and leaned over between them.

A flurry of language that I recognized as Hebrew passed between all three of them. I wished I could ask Melissa for help but she was still in the other room with Mrs. Blackman. I caught a few words, words that Lavi used frequently when discussing family. I just didn’t understand the context.

Suddenly I heard Melissa and Blackman leave the office. I walked out in time to see Melissa saying goodbye to Mrs. Blackman.

All I heard was Blackman say, “Honey, you are going to kick this hornets’ nest. You ready for this kind of kerfluffle?” Melissa nodded yes and Blackman laughed. “Well, I’m looking forward to it. I’ll talk to Blake, you just get your girls onboard. I’ll have the membership forms ready.”

Melissa had her hands behind her. “Thank you ma’am.”

“You stop that girl. A firebrand like you can at least call me Mrs. Blackman. Ma’am is for teachers, we’re conspirators. I can’t wait!” She headed out the door and was gone.

Melissa saw me and approached. She was both smiling and tense. She leaned into me.

“How did it go?” I asked.

“She said yes. Actually, she said ‘Hell yes.’ She has some conditions but I agree with all of them.”

“Happy?”

“Yeah, and scared.”

“You don’t have to do, whatever this is.”

“Yes, I do. You don’t let bullies win.” And it was that simple to her and at that moment I knew I would do whatever it took to help her succeed however stupid I thought cheerleading was. I nodded and kissed her.

“So, what’s next?” Lavi and her father were still talking. They were animated. Sylvia did not seem as happy as Lavi, not even one-tenth as happy.

Melissa, “I need to talk to more folks.”

“Who?”

“Basically who is here plus Grace, June, Zahra, her dad.”

“I heard you mention Coraline.”

“Six or seven would be a great number but I can make do with four. The rules require at least four though so Lavi, me, Grace, and Zahara or Ji. Both and Coraline would be awesome but I don’t want to put Ji or Coraline in a difficult position because of Xinyi.”

What rules? I was about to ask her when Lavi came up, and I am not exaggerating, in a bounce. I was reminded of Tigger bouncing on his tail.

What she said was, “Yay!” Melissa and my lack of comprehension must have been evident because Lavi then added, “My Bubbeh, she’s coming for a whole two weeks!”

Melissa threw out her arms and hugged our wife and screamed, “I get to meet her!”

With less enthusiasm than a teenage girl, I asked, “When?”

“Next week!” Lavi was positively vibrating.

I looked over at Peter. For once I was not the most nervous man in the room.