**The Pool Girl**

by Leto Armitage

**Chapter 39**

I have had a lot of cause to think about that Tuesday later. My mind always starts at the red pen. The pen had nothing to do with what happened later but in my mind events started there. Dance practice was over and I put Coraline’s manuscript and the red pen down to take off my shirt for Ji. Melissa was still reviewing choreography with Grace. Melissa had been frustrated by how easy it was to overlook the hand movements of the routine until she realized while watching some music video that the trick was to move the dancers rapidly into each other’s spaces making them interlock arms and trade gestures as they moved. It drew the eye and was mesmerizing. The downside was that during practice a lot of accidents happened as there was no room for error. But they did it slowly, over and over, gradually speeding up. It was like hummingbirds doing ballet. They were excited as they watched the footage back from their phones which they always used to record the sessions.

Ji went through her inspection of the thing I had grown to think of as ‘the distraction,’ as in a distraction from my life. “The stitches look fine but the swelling of the muscles looks even worse than yesterday. Are you taking the anti-inflammatories and resting it?”

“Of course,” I replied.

“Did you make the appointment to see the doctor again?”

“I forgot.”

She paused before saying. “That’s what you said yesterday, too.”

“It feels fine so it just hasn’t been a big deal to me but I will make the appointment.”

“You know Robert, you skipped the last physical therapy. I can keep the stitches clean but if you tear it up from the inside you’re screwed.”

“I promise, I’ll be a good boy.”

Ji didn’t sound convinced. “The body is unforgiving when you push it. Seriously, do I need to get Lavi and Melissa and have them to drag you back to a doctor’s office?”

“Did I hear my name?” That was Lavi coming back with little plates for everyone with mushroom and feta cheese meatballs, minus the meat, and skewers of teriyaki beef with pineapple and sauteed bell peppers.

“I need to rest my arm more,” I said. Ji discreetly gave me a little push from behind. “And, I need to go back to the doctor’s office.” She patted me that time. The truth was the pain was getting worse and had been for the last week. But it was natural that it would hurt. I was healing and that was what mattered. The pain wasn’t constant so it must be getting better. Lavi made a note on her phone to remind me about it later and put her phone down on top of the papers.

Looking at the papers Lavi asked, “Any good?” She was home tonight because her grandparents had decided on a night out just for them.

“Yeah, they are. I need to talk to Coraline though, and see what she’s trying to accomplish with them.”

“Why?” That was Zahra.

“It isn’t a genre I read.”

Ji, “What kind of genre is it?”

“A hybrid really. I expected something similar to Sylvia’s writing and there is a definite influence but the setting is very different and either she has read some Nero Wolfe or independently created some of the same elements.”

Lavi, between bites, “I’ve seen you read some of those.”

“Yeah, I like them. The writer imagined Wolfe as the child of Sherlock Holmes and Irene Adler and then made Wolfe like his uncle Mycroft and added a man of action to be the main point of view. Stout, the author, never laid all that out though, copyright being a thing. Still, it’s the first time I can think of fan fiction becoming it’s own real stand alone work.”

Ji paused eating to say, “Like 50 Shades of Grey?”

I looked at her. “Please, for the love of what is good and decent in this world, never make that comparison again.”

She grinned and Zahra laughed. We talked more. Zahra had questions about critical analysis, deconstructionism and objective evaluation of a work versus its value as a work with expectation of the readers. The topic largely left everyone else eager to start separate conversations of their own that did not include those topics. My impression of Zahra as a future philosophy major was improved. Combined with her head scarf and talking like a valley girl, she was starting to become less an oddity and more just Zahra.

Eventually Grace and Zahra left but Ji stayed behind for our weekly cooking lessons. We were continuing pizza and spending time tonight on techniques for rolling out the dough. Melissa had already taken a place at the dining room table and was studying with Lavi’s help. She had a big math test and was studying for it but had moved down the table twice already as we’d taken more and more room for rolling out the dough.

“All right,” I said. “You gotta take the dough and roll it into a ball.” I put flour on the table after cleaning it carefully. We had some back and forth but eventually I took it from Ji and showed her how to make it into a perfect sphere. My shoulder complained but I blocked it out.

“Here,” I passed the sphere to her. I cringed a bit and reached into my pocket. I had taken to keeping a few of the pain pills with me. I took one with a sip of wine. “See how it’s a lot easier to make a round disc for the pizza if you start from a sphere?” She pushed down with her hands like I showed her. “Now, reform the sphere and take the roller, I’ll show you to make it even more symmetrical so it’s less home made looking. I like the informal look myself and don’t mind it being a bit uneven but it’s good to be able to make it both ways.”

I tossed some more flour on the table and some of it floated over to Melissa who blew it off her keyboard and gave me a dirty look. She was already stressed about the test and I wasn’t helping. I put some more flour down but tried to do it less forcefully so that it would stay in that area but I had decided to pick up the flour jar with my bad arm and it slipped going everywhere. Melissa grabbed her laptop and jumped in surprise. Ji looked annoyed at me and I didn’t know why. Shakily I put the lid back on the flour.

Melissa got up and walked out the sliding door to the patio, holding the laptop and shaking flour off. Fortunately it had been facing away so I think it just got on the outside case. Following, I reached out to Melissa and touched her shoulder but she jerked away from me.

I tried to put contrition in my voice. “Babe, I’m sorry.”

She didn’t look at me. “Just let me clean this up.” Her voice was cold.

“I’m sorry it got on the laptop, I’ll be more careful.”

“It’s not about the laptop.” Lavi brought out their books and was shaking them off.

My arm didn’t feel good. “Am I being distracting?”

“Yes.” She said it too easily.

I pressed. “Yes, but what?”

“Nothing.” When a woman tells you that something is nothing like that, it is in fact everything.

“Are you jealous I’m spending time with Ji?”

Melissa turned to look at me then, her eyes wide and face tense. “Jealous? Are you kidding? You can fuck her on the table and that’s just fine. Go to the movies with her! I don’t care! This isn’t about you!” I stepped back but she wasn’t done. “You want to know the problem? Do you? You want to know my fucking problem?!”

I tried to find that cold part of me, that part that doesn’t feel things but I was angry when I replied, “Yeah, yeah, I do want to know!”

“My problem is that fucking table!” Melissa pointed at the kitchen table.

“The table!?” Something didn’t make sense.

“The table, exactly, it’s THE fucking table, the only fucking table. It’s the only table in the goddamn house, the only table to eat at, the only table for me to study at, the only table for anything.”

“I...”

“It’s not just me either. You know Lavi needs some place to cut cloth, not that she has her sewing machine or serger here! How many bedrooms does this house have? Four? We use one! There is a whole room that is nothing but a dumping room for your books! YOUR BOOKS! I have a few piles next to the bedside table. I...” She held up her hand. “I don’t have time for this. Fuck this. I need to study where I have a desk.” With that she closed the laptop and walked out of the house.

Lavi looked at me. “I’ll talk to her,” she said, gave me a quick kiss and then soon she was gone too. Of course she was. I looked around. Ji was gone. She probably bailed when the screaming started. It felt like a light switch had flipped on my life.

“I thought Lavi wanted to still do the sewing at her mom’s house.” I said it to no one because no one else was there.

It was quiet and I imagined I could hear the pain of my chest beating and my arm throbbing. I walked through the house. My house was largely unchanged since they moved in. Melissa had gotten me a new couch and there were a few new pictures on the wall, some clothes in closets upstairs. Everything was still comfortably familiar. God, I was a fucking idiot.

Why did she have to be such a bitch about it though? Why couldn’t she talk to me!? I found myself punching the wall and stared at the little hole I made. There, there was a change. Fuck, I’d have to patch that. Maybe I wasn’t that different from my father. My shoulder throbbed. I kept forgetting this was Melissa’s first real relationship. What was my excuse? I remembered other fights in the distant past, other things I had ignored and I had sworn I wouldn’t do again. Where were my pain meds? I went upstairs and found them. The bottle was nearly empty. I had been taking an extra here and there but not that much. Right?

It hurt but I couldn’t tell the difference between what hurt in my chest and my head and my shoulder. I could fix this though, I knew I could. But I needed to do things. I tried to think but it was hard. Two of the bedrooms had junk in them but they could be cleaned out. I could rent a storage facility and there was plenty of room for an office for Melissa. The other could be a craft room for whatever Lavi would use. I had a recreation room downstairs that was ... what? I had intended to make it into a library but really it was just shelves and piles of books. I could make it more useful. I started to make plans but realized I needed to involve them, not decide for them. But I could clean it out now to make it ready.

The next hour is not something I am proud of. I thought I was acting out of love. I only understood later it was fear and pride. I started in the rec room and carried boxes of books to the garage. When my bad arm gave out and couldn’t hold the weight anymore I tried doing it one handed but the boxes tore and books spilled everywhere. I was pushing the box with my foot towards the garage door when I realized I should have been screaming in pain but couldn’t feel my arm at all.

I looked at it and thought it was funny because it was so red and swollen and I thought of a lobster’s shell. Pain and endorphins fought for dominance. I slapped the button to open the garage door and felt the cool air wash over me. I walked to the end of my driveway. I hadn’t decided anything. I wasn’t even really thinking but I sat there a long time. Eventually I pulled out my phone and called a cab. I remember the rest of the night in snapshots, like only the fifth moment or so got saved into my brain. The cab picked me up and the driver helped me into the hospital where I was admitted. They wanted to call someone but I refused, knowing that Melissa needed to study. About 11 pm I was getting inspected and a doctor was telling me I was an idiot when I got a message from Lavi. They were going to stay at Melissa’s place tonight. I was still in an evaluation space off the emergency room and fell asleep there.

I was woken up at 3 AM and moved to a hospital room. Later I woke up with the sunrise and checked my messages. Nothing. I left a note for my boss that I was taking a full sick day and back in the hospital. And looking around at an empty hospital room I realized it was the first time in a long time I had woken up alone. I texted Melissa and Lavi.

“I’m sorry. I’m an asshole. I love you.” And I cried until I fell asleep.

The next time I woke up a clock on the wall said it was 6:17 PM. Lavi was there. She was sitting in a chair next to the bed, drawing.

“Hey.” I think it was more of a croak but she smiled at me. It wasn’t a warm smile but it was more than I deserved. “Sorry,” I said.

She kept drawing and didn’t say anything. I didn’t either. After a while she finally said, “I’m trying to figure out what to say.”

“I thought you’d start by yelling at me.”

“I went through that phase a few hours ago. You slept through it. They gave you morphine with my permission. It’s a good thing you had Melissa and I set up with power of attorney for health care.”

“Going to yell at me now?”

“No,” she sighed, “I figure I shouldn’t have let them give you morphine if I was going to yell.”

“Still pissed?”

“Yes.”

“I know it probably doesn’t mean anything but I love you.”

Her hand tightened on her pencil. “Of course it means something, it means everything. I love you too you god damn ... forget it.” She shook with some kind of emotion I couldn’t read.

“Sorry.”

She closed the drawing pad and looked at me. “I’m really tired of hearing that from both of you. It’s starting to piss me off even more.” I started to say sorry but stopped myself. I thought it might be funny but it wasn’t the time. “I have spent the last few hours thinking. A lot. I had always assumed maturity was a spectrum, like you were or you weren’t and there were degrees between but it’s not is it? It’s a bunch of different things and you can be really good in one and awful in another.”

“Yeah.” I closed my eyes.

Her phone dinged. She looked and answered a text message. “That was Melissa. She was waiting at home.”

My chest tightened. “Her home I’m guessing.”

“Our home, her only home. I slept with her last night in her old bed. She hated it. She hated not having you there even while she was mad at you.” I didn’t know what to say so I stared at the ceiling. Lavi continued, “If you’re wondering why she didn’t come I insisted she not.”

“I know the hospital is bad for her so that’s good.”

“Well, she is coming now. She needs to see you now that you’re awake.”

“I can get discharged and go to her.”

“Don’t even think about it. The doctors are evaluating your arm. You might need surgery right away or they might be able to send you home in something that binds your arm so you can’t move it. They’ve told me there will be surgery one way or another though. You fucked it up pretty good.” I wanted to defend myself but I couldn’t so I didn’t say anything. “You know,” Lavi said, “Melissa blames herself. We went home after our class blocks mid afternoon and found the garage door open and the boxes piled up. You were clearing up space weren’t you? For us?”

“Yeah.”

“You can’t just turn around and” she snapped her fingers, “fix everything.”

“I know that. I can ignore the other stuff.” I let out a bitter laugh.

“I hope to god that was self directed sarcasm.” Her voice dripped ice.

“It was.”

“I am going to say this one time Robert Christopher Carlo. You don’t do this again. You can’t just let yourself fall apart. We need you.”

I scoffed. “Need me? Have you looked at you and Melissa? You’re amazing. You are both gorgeous, smart, vibrant. I’m a middle aged guy who dropped out of school.”

Lavi stood up and held the bed side railing. “Robert, I’m not going to stroke your ego. If you’re looking to have a pity party and have me affirm things for you, you need a reality check. We love you and there are very, very good reasons we do. Can you accept that and move on? I really need to know.” She stressed her words and I felt emotion in them.

“Yes.” I tentatively reached out a hand and was relieved when she grabbed it and held it.

“Things need to change,” she said.

“I know.”

“No, I don’t think you do. It’s not just you. Melissa and I need to change too. We’ve gotten so used to you being reliable that we didn’t even notice when you seemed to bounce back from that stabbing like it was nothing. Of course you were faking it. I don’t think you’d lie to us but you’ll lie to yourself. Even worse, we let you. Melissa is right, we share blame in this.” Lavi held my hand.

“How is Melissa doing?”

“It’s hard. You just got slapped off your pedestal. This might be the first time she’s seen you as an actual human.”

“She might not like what she sees. How are you doing?”

“I lost some illusions too but I didn’t have quite as many to lose. You’re fucked up. So am I. So is Melissa. We’ve said that before but it’s not how we acted.”

“Honeymoon is over huh?”

“Yeah. It is. And that’s okay lover. But we can’t go backwards.”

Lavi squeezed my hand again and sat down. She began drawing again and I just stared at the wall. The hospital in New Orleans had been much nicer. It wasn’t long before Melissa showed up with Ji in tow.

I waved hesitantly with my good hand. Melissa’s face was red and puffy, she was in jeans, a t-shirt and carrying a letter. She was gorgeous. I thought about asking how the test went but maybe it wasn’t the time. Melissa came over and looked unsure what to do so I put my hand up and she grabbed it and rubbed her face against it.

Ji, “You look like hell.”

I tried to smile. “And worked hard to get here.”

Melissa was crying quietly. “If you weren’t already in a hospital bed,” she said through soft sobs, “I’d beat the ever living shit out of you.”

“I’ll give you a rain check for when I’m better.” I tried a smile.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry for.”

Her bitterness came out in her voice. “God, don’t I? I was so wrapped up in figuring out how to beat this stupid cheerleading thing, getting back at Richardson, all that, I didn’t even pay attention to what was happening in front of me. I wasn’t looking out for you.”

“I was lying to myself, to you, you couldn’t have.”

“You stupid, stupid man. What do you think a wife’s job is if not protecting lunk heads from themselves.”

“Fixing me dinner in just an apron and heels?”

Lavi, without amusement, spoke up. “You might get that.”

The others nodded. “I’m not sure I understand,” I said.

Lavi, “No more cooking. When you get out of here your recovery is going to be rough. From now on Melissa and I aren’t just scheduling your appointments but taking you. And you’re on rest, real rest.”

Melissa, “I’ll find times one of us is available. And the doctors have said you need 24/7 care. We are cleaning up the guest room for Ji.”

Lavi, “There are new rules. You can argue with us about anything but your medical care. From now on when one of your nurses, and I mean ANY of your nurses, tell you what to do you not only do it but take it to heart.”

Ji stepped forward. “I’m not staying every night but I’m going to be around some of the times they can’t and we’re looking to see how we can fill in the remaining gaps.”

“You don’t have to...”

Lavi spoke over me. “That counts as arguing.”

I took a deep breath. “Yes, ma’ams.”

“And you have other problems to deal with,” Melissa said.

“Like what?”

She held up the letter and now I could see the logo for the homeowners association on it. “Like the neighborhood wants to evict you.”

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