

Chapter 22 – Wednesday Lunch

“Sultans of Swing”

Luis

The feeling of Rebecca’s arm around my waist, at least as far as it could reach, was better than almost anything I’ve ever felt before. Okay, honesty with self—the best so far! I can’t believe that Becca got me to show my game face. I think I scared a few people off. That’s fine, I could stand a trip down the hall without being pawed at.

That lasted two steps before the requests started.

‘I’m Luis Contadino and I’m naked in school,’ I thought to myself.

‘I’m so-and-so and I’m naked in school. Blah-blah-blah...’ When we became aware of the Program, everyone was looking up things about it. Amazing the number of journals that have been published online, aside from the official sales pitches. Many have that line. Bet they can’t say they’ve got such a beautiful, intelligent, talented lady walking with them!

We separated as requests were made, but stayed within eye contact. When we got a chance to take a few steps, our hands found each other. Finally, the bell rang and the stragglers headed off to class and we had the hallway almost to ourselves.

I should have predicted it. She started skipping and swinging our hands.

“We’re off to see the Naked, the wonderful Naked of West.” She sang, not too badly, either.

“The Wizard of Oz?” That I never would have predicted.”

“Yep. I even have new lines I’m trying to work in.”

“Can I hear them?” Addled brain. Yep.

“Because, Because, Because... Because of the wonderful cock he’s got.” She started giggling while stroking Junior.

“Erg...” Smooth Luis, smooth. Such the articulate wit we are.

“Well, you do.” Junior was about to make the floor slippery thanks to her wonderful hand.

“Er...” I think I found the same low branch Jason had discovered this morning.

“Poor baby. I won’t tease you any more. Well... Not too much.” Another bout of giggles.

“Thanks.” I managed to draw it out. My stunning wit and repartee, don’t you know. Fortunately, the lunchroom approach-eth.

All I got in return was another bout of giggles and being dragged down the hall by a bouncing, naked female. Damn, her ass looked wonderful. Perfectly shaped, from my perspective. Of course, being the expert that I am on bare asses...

Not!

Yet...

We made it into the cafeteria line and I had to wait a couple of minutes as they prepared my special meal.

“Sweetie, what are we waiting for?” My Beautiful Becca asked.

“My training table meal.”

“Huh?”

“Trust me, it’s not better food, just a lot more of it.” The food service folks passed my tray over to me then. I thanked them and turned to see Becca’s eyes getting big as she examined it.

“What.... No, I won’t even ask what it is.” Her nose turned up slightly.

“I did ask what it was once. Better that I don’t know. Plus, lots of ketchup and hot sauce... well, it becomes sort of edible.”

“How many calories?”

“More than a human should consume in one week, except really big athletes,” came Dr. C’s voice from behind us. “See what happens when those big guys get older.” He showed us his tray with a chefs salad and some strange dressing.

“I don’t think I could duplicate the color of that dressing, thank God.” Becca said, as if to herself. Dr. C and I both cracked up. My Beautiful Becca became Blushing Becca.

Getting himself under control, and not looking at his tray, Dr. C said, “Luis, if you don’t mind, I’d like to join the Nakeds for a while.”

“Please, Dr. C, you are more than welcome as far as I’m concerned. Are you going to join us... all the way?” I put on my best innocent smile. The same one I give quarterbacks when they come to the line. The one that says, ‘I’m not going to eat you for lunch, honest.’

He stopped for a second, got a real thoughtful look.

“Good for the goose...,” said Becca.

“There is that...,” he looked internally for a few seconds. “Let’s sit and talk about it. Since you’re working on improving the Program, this fits.”

Tim and Shirley had already claimed a table. We all exchanged greetings and settled in.

“Dr. C asked if he could join us for a bit. I’ve tentatively said yes, but want to hear from everyone once they’re here.”

“No problems,” Tim said.

“I think it’s a good thing,” Shirley said with her editor-in-chief voice. I could see her running a seemingly chaotic newsroom with great authority, extracting the best from each person.

The conversation flowed easily as the Nakeds gathered. I was glad to see that no one was intimidated by having Dr. C at the table, not even the freshmen. Everyone made an effort to include him in the group and he readily contributed, acting more as a peer than an authority figure.

The whole time, my *Micina* had her hand on my leg, slowly tracing her nails on my inner thigh with the lightest, yet most intense pressure. If I had to stand, everyone was going to be quite aware of the effect. Junior wasn’t waiting for me to stand, though, and was

beginning to act like a periscope.

Suddenly, Becca squealed and quickly pulled her hand from my thigh leaving some definite lines.

Ready to fight, I turned... to see Rosalee bent over Sweet Becca's shoulder. She was cupping her breasts and nibbling on the ear away from Dr. C.

DAMN!

Definite periscope!

Somehow, I managed to pull my eyes away from the erotic display and tried to assess how Dr. C was handling the blatant PDA. God, I wanted to learn how to keep my face that inscrutable as he "observed" something on the other side of the cafeteria. More amazing, to me, was how he controlled the energy in his body. No indication that anything was going on right in front of his eyes.

Becca's hand returned to my thigh and sought out Junior while Rosalee draped herself over my back, attempting a reach around. This was more than the circuit breakers in my teenage mind could handle. Junior was going to explode any second...

"Ahem...," rumbled across the table in Dr. C's deep voice. Instead of guilty reactions, there were giggles, sweet kisses on my face, and two definite squeezes that almost added special sauce to my meal.

"Are you okay, sweetie?"

"Ergh..."

"I think we killed him, Becky."

"Er..."

"He doesn't appear to be in full possession of his mental faculties." Dr. C's bass voice floated up to my cloud.

"Erg..."

"What did you ladies do to this poor man?" Paul Templer asked, a chuckle escaping

halfway through.

“Us?” Rosalee and Becca responded simultaneously. I swear I could hear batting eyelashes. Then... then, they giggled.

Apparently, all the Nakers had arrived and were quite enjoying my Moment. The comments and laughter continued, unabated, as only high schoolers can manage. And I thought the locker room was... course? Graphic? Ribald? They ain't got nothin' on Naked People At Lunch.

“Breathe!” My sweet whispered in my ear. As soon as I finished the first full cycle, I felt myself coming back on center. I turned my head and gave her a wink and a smile. A few more deep breaths and I was ready. The room returned to normal. All the sounds of a busy lunchroom. Conversations, squeaking chairs on the floor, laughter, and kids just being kids. Music from half a dozen sources added to the texture of the room. The only one I could pick out sounded like some classic Dire Straits, *‘Way on downsouth way on downsouth London town’*.

“Dr. C, would you like a moment to finish your...,” I waved my hand towards the mass of wilted green covered in puke orange on his plate, “Or, would you like to address us now?”

“Luis, when I was playing basketball seriously, and I was younger, I could eat like you do. Now, I have to be a bit more prudent.” His eyes had a smile, no matter how serious his voice sounded. “Why don't we enjoy our food, first.”

“And whatever that is!” Fingers pointed and the words echoed around the table.

“I notice that your meal is a level or two above the normal sized servings of this establishment.”

“This is one of those times it pays to be a football player.” I looked down at my plate and added, “Except the taste.”

While we ate, the conversation stayed light. Dr. C did participate and added a few choice tales from his youth. His powers of observation did startle us, as he was up on all the latest gossip and goings on.

“Dr. Cavanaugh,” Margie started, “our family had a conversation recently about cliques in high school. It doesn't seem like we have the same problems as my parents. Why is that?”

“Are you referring to social status being related to your clique?” Dr. C asked.

“I think so.”

“That’s a complex subject. The simple answer is we’ve changed, as a society, in our view of what is important. It used to be the social status was defined by sports, perceived beauty, and the wealth of your parents. Of course, that was about the same time that the educational system in this country was going down the tubes.” He really should be in a classroom. “Well, the educational system was fixed and in the process, success in school became important. That, plus many changes in society, I think, destroyed the old system.”

“But, we have cliques today in school,” Shirley observed.

“There will always be some form of grouping. It is only natural. Humans are culturally oriented to tribalism. We need and want to belong to groups. The cliques haven’t disappeared, just their makeup and importance. This group would never have functioned in the old culture.”

“Why so?” Ginny asked. It was good to see her participating considering how shy she had been in the beginning.

“In the old system, very few of you would have been in the same clique. As a result, putting you together like this would have created turmoil, at best.” The conversation continued, but I just faded out. I’m glad people are interested in the soft subjects. Give me the hard sciences any day.

My meal disappeared at about the same rate as Becca’s sandwich and Dr. C’s “salad.” I felt my body beginning to stiffen up again, though. I would need to hit the whirlpool before practice. Fortunately, I only had a light workout planned. More get the blood flowing, loosen up, and do some aerobic conditioning. I didn’t need to worry about adding muscle mass, but needed keep my system oxygenated and blood flowing at this point to rejuvenate after yesterday’s session. And, keep my joints loose. How many hours to the whirlpool? I understand at the college level, the trainers also give massages. Enough of that dream, I needed to plan my workout.

As I lost myself in the weight room and visualized my workout, my spotter started speaking to me in Becca’s voice.

“Sweetie?”

Wait, I need to lift this bar one more time...

“My Mountain?”

The weight room vanished and was replaced with the detritus of teen-consumed cafeteria slop.

“Sweetie? Time to start the meeting.” Becca’s lyrical voice drifted into my ears, her breath registering on every nerve ending of the battle hardened surface. Damn! Shivers were rolling down my spine, right to...

Breathe. Nod head. No, not that one. Breathe again. Collect self. Begin.

“As you might have noticed,” I said as I scanned the Nakeds at the table, “there is one of ‘them’ amongst us.”

Eyes danced all around the table, missing the obvious. The relaxed looks from the banter earlier turned to confusion.

“We have... one of... the Clothed at our table.” All eyes went to Dr. C and I swear, he blushed.

“Becca, Becky, and I made a reasonable request that he join us naked. Yet, alas, here he is. Clothed!” Man! Did his energy go up! Too far? No. We had points to be made and this was a viable path. Yet, I had to soften it some. “Dr. C asked if he could speak with us. On the part of the team, I accepted.” I looked around the table and got nods of approval from everyone. “Plus, I thought it would be a good for him to hear some of our conversations.” Again, nods all around. “So, Dr. C, welcome to the Nakeds table.”

He snorted out a laugh. “I feel like I’m back in the NBA and I’m facing Byrd, Jordan, Magic, Shaq, and LeBron on the other team.” As if anyone needed to be reminded of his days as a pro playing power forward. “The talent, skills, drive, and energy I see at this table humbles me. Yet, it makes me proud. You give me hope. Not just for the Program, which is why you were chosen first this year, but for the future.” He took a second to collect himself. “The official reason I’m here is to convey a message.”

Damn, he was good. He used the ensuing pause to gather our full attention. “Will’s family has sent their heartfelt thanks.”

Wow! The reactions around the table were all over the place. Dr. C continued, “Without

the compassion that this group exhibited, a bad situation could have become a tragedy for the whole school. They've also heard of the commitment to prevent another 'Will' from happening and offer their full support."

How is it that optimism can also include the press of the full weight of the world?

"As I said, I believe in this group. I know that you will do great things."

Paul, Chris, Luke, and I preened as only athletes can. That cracked the whole table up, including Dr. C. Even Becca's glare couldn't hide the smile on her face or the corner of her eyes. Stress relief is a good thing.

"Well, that's all I had officially. Now, I do have some free time, so..."

"Of course you're welcome to stay," I said after checking with everyone.

"Well, there is an outstanding request....," Becca smiled an evil smile as she squeezed my leg. Note to self: don't ever do anything to earn that smile from her!

"There was a request. The question is, was it reasonable?" Dr. C countered with.

"What are you guys talking about?" Asked Margie. There was a general consensus that others wanted to know as well.

"We requested that Dr. C join us naked," I told everyone.

"Okay, why not?" Paul asked Dr. C.

"Let me ask all of you this, what would you think if you saw me walking down the halls naked?"

"Oh, YEAH!" Thanks, Rosalee. She grabbed Junior in her excitement. There was enough room for both girls' hands.

"Kew!" From Margie. Many nods followed her statement.

"I wouldn't think it was right," said Shirley, looking very contemplative.

With a smile, Dr. C asked, "And why, Shirley?"

“Well, two reasons. First, if I remember, not all the nudity laws have been removed from the books. So, potentially, you’d be doing something illegal.”

“Correct, it is still technically illegal for males over 21 to appear nude in certain places, including schools. Although it is rarely enforced. And?”

“Propriety,” Paul Templer said.

“Ah, the Colonial speaks. Tell us more.” It was easy to see that Dr. C had been a teacher. A good one.

“In a way, it would be the same as the King walking down the street in cutoff jeans and a ratty t-shirt. It is not something a monarch should do.”

“And, school principals should look like school principals,” Margie contributed.

“Until the legal and social codes change, that’s why I won’t be going around the halls naked. Now, should you see me at the beach or other place away from school, then you might not have to ask.” I noticed that more than one female at the table had a dreamy look in their eyes.

“Well, Dr. C, I can understand your reasoning.” He nodded to me. “Now, if we can get this show on the road.”

“Before you do, one piece of official school business I almost forgot. It seems that I’ve been designated messenger.” Dr. C proceeded to hand out messages to Luke, Becca, Shirley, and me. I immediately opened mine to find a note from Coach Mac. ‘I need you to stay for a bit after media day. Let me know if that’s a problem.’

“Becca?” I turned to her. She was holding open her message and just staring at it, eyes wide and mouth open. Not really meaning to pry, I did look down and could read it. ‘Dean Massey from the Fine Arts Department at USC called and would like you to return her call,’ and there was a phone number. “Becca?”

“I-I..”

“Sweetie, does this mean what I think it does?”

“I-I..”

I hugged her and whispered in her ear, “This is great.”

“And a surprise.”

“Do you think the Italian Pixie of an art teacher had anything to do with it?”

“I’m positive of it,” she said as she pulled herself together. “That is, if this is what I think it is.”

“And what’s that?”

“An invitation to submit my portfolio!”

“You need to find out, then we can celebrate tonight.” She nodded her head and gave me a quick kiss, then folded the note and put it in her bag.

I looked over at Luke and Shirley, curious now about their notes. Luke must have already read his and put it away. Shirley was huddled with Stacy and Sheri.

“Now, let’s get this show on the road,” I said, interrupting the newsmen’s conclave.

Margie immediately set about handing out a batch of papers as if there had been no interruption. I couldn’t wait for the perfect personal device that would eliminate paper. I quickly reviewed what she’d put together. Before I could get a word of praise out, Dr. C spoke.

“This is excellent, Margie. How did you have time to do this?”

My sister beamed. Everyone at the table began to praise her organizational skills and telling little stories about how she gets things done and keeps it all together. I’m going to have to live with that swelled head! Yet, it did make me proud that she was gaining an identity of her own. A strong one at that. Too often, I’ve seen my own friends trying to overcome the identity of a big brother or sister. This was cool.

“Okay, let’s get back to it. We’ve got a lot to cover. Any suggestions of how we can best use Dr. C’s time?”

“Sure,” said Shirley, “why doesn’t he give us a history of the Program and what the thoughts and hopes of the administration are.”

There was universal nodding of heads. “Dr. C?”

He gave the standard spiel about the Program in general, but focused on the history in our State and school district. Nothing much new, society was loosening up and the Program was designed to help school kids with that.

“Dr. Cavanaugh,” Ginny spoke up, “That explains the nudity requirement. It doesn’t come close to explaining the Reasonable Request.”

It seemed a hundred voices spoke at once. I let the commotion go for a few seconds, then coughed. “Dr. C, maybe you could explain the history and the reasons behind the Reasonable Request. We’ll save you from our discussions,” I caught every eye until they agreed to wait, “until we have a unified voice.”

“The Reasonable Request. No doubt it is the most controversial aspect of the Program. All I know about its history is that it wasn’t in the initial proposals nor was it in the initial research. But, it appeared by the time the legislation passed. Fortunately, it is also the most loosely worded part of the requirements for the Program.”

“What do you mean?”

“It means I have the most latitude on how it is applied here.”

“Good, because that might be an area that we’ll have the strongest recommendations.”

“Any other areas? I need to get back to old guy stuff.”

“Uniforms.” I think all the jocks said that at once.

“Expand.”

“I’ll start. I’m glad that sanity finally prevailed and declared the football uniform as both protective and supportive. I don’t even mind the dressing in midfield, although it complicates the logistics and interferes with my game prep. I can live with it. But, I can’t go in the locker room at half time.”

“Why not?”

“I have to strip, then redress. A lot of my taping is over my uniform. To strip would take five to ten minutes. I’ve already missed the beginning of halftime. Then it takes 10-20

minutes to handle the exterior taping – halftime is only 15 minutes.”

“Good point.”

“Baseball. Our uniforms are protective as well, unless you expect us not to slide into a base or dive for a ball.”

“I’d say the same goes for soccer and volleyball.”

“For women, not having support up top is an issue in all sports. Men at least have built-in mechanisms to retract their vulnerable parts.”

“Track is okay for us guys, but the field events are an issue.”

“In swimming, the suit can provide a competitive edge.”

“Okay, okay! I get it.” Dr. C shook his head. I could tell he was getting overwhelmed.

“And the Prom.” Jane Chung doesn’t speak out often, but when she does, watch out.

“Homecoming,” added Stacy, getting Jane’s drift.

“Any of the dances,” Margie finished.

“What about the Prom and the dances?”

“People don’t know ahead of time they are in the Program. I’m already thinking about my dress for the Prom. I’d be royally pissed at having thrown away hard earned money on a dress I couldn’t wear, if I’d been chosen for the Program during Prom week,” Jane expanded her original thought. All the girls nodded agreement.

“Another good point.” He nodded. I could see him building a list of items in his head. “I don’t have any answers, but it sounds like you’ve got a lot of work to do putting all this together. On that note, I’ll leave you to it!” With the grace of an athlete, he quickly disappeared.

“I think Dr. C was in a bit of a rush to get out of the lunchroom. Was it something we said?” You can always count on our Rosalee.

“Thanks, Rosalee. I mean it. We needed a little comic relief after that.”

“Speaking of relief...” That got laughter from everyone at the table.

“Okay, let’s tackle Reasonable Requests...” I’m sure that was the last coherent sound for the next few minutes as everyone began talking, trying to have their points heard. Wow! I let it go for a few minutes to see if some order would emerge. I leaned back and put my arm around Becca and, without even thinking about it, put my arm around Rosalee as well. They both snuggled in and I felt their hands move across my back and find each other. It was interesting feeling their fingers intertwine.

I’m not sure what’s going on here. I mean, I like Rosalee. I find her attractive and fun. Interesting. Engaging. Yet, I don’t feel for her the way I do Becca. Confusing? Completely.

‘Focus brings clarity.’ Thanks Sensei.

Now, how do I focus this group? And, how do I find clarity with Becca and Rosalee? It really didn’t help that my joints and muscles were starting to scream at me again.

Focus!

Breathe!

Bring order.

Lead.

At that moment, my sweetie chose to sigh. A full, deep expression of contentment. Even with that, my hormone-addled brain managed to see a path.

A deep cough on my part got everyone’s attention. “It is apparent that we all have very deep feelings and opinions about requests and the definition of reasonable. Here’s what I’d like you to do. Pull out a piece of paper--”

“Is this a test?” It didn’t matter who said it.

“In a way. More like getting our collective thoughts organized. Now, I want you to list three positives about reasonable requests.” Groans. “Then list your top three negatives about reasonable requests.” A quick glance at Margie and she read my mind and nodded. “When you’re done, give them to Margie and she’ll organize it all for us.”

“Do you want us speaking from our own experiences and beliefs, or about our feelings about the Program in general?” No surprise this came from our resident, naked editor-in-chief.

“I want us to give our personal feelings, based on what we’ve experienced in two and a half days.”

“Thanks, Coach.” Not that again!

Everyone got busy. I stared at the paper for a minute or two, organizing my own thoughts. Well, number one on the positives was easy. Becca. I picked up my pen and started to write.

Rebecca

How did I feel about the program?

‘You got Luis out of it and possibly Rosalee.’

‘Thanks Muse. You’re a lot of help.’

‘Anytime!’

Positives? Was it positive to be running around naked and not hiding any more? If you had asked me Monday, I would have said no. Now? I guess so. After all, casual nudity was becoming a cultural norm, or so they said. But, is it a fair way to do it? Forcing kids, against their will? That’s a question I’m not going to be able to answer in a few minutes. Exposing my art to others? I guess that was a positive. I had done the murals anonymously, or so I thought. But, I was outed now. I guess that’s a good thing. Was awakening my sexuality a positive? As long as I didn’t turn into a slut, I guess. Reaching out to others? Yes. A good thing.

Easier than I thought. Now, which three do I chose? Reaching out, outing my art, and... Okay. Awaking my sexuality. Luis is damned important, but I won’t base our relationship on the Program, damn it.

My first negative? Requests. Now there is a topic for a doctoral thesis! The forced nudity wouldn't be a bad thing, but the requests... Now, that is... Wrong? Yes. Completely. Exposing my body is one thing. Being required to let people touch me, that's another. Where does my private space begin? Bringing it closer to my body, that might be reasonable. And, the nudity does that. But pushing that private space inside me? No, that's abuse that's been legalized. Has it been legalized or just not challenged? So, Requests is number one. Choice about the Program. Is that still a negative? Well, in a very personal way it is. But, remove the requests and it doesn't seem to be that negative.

Another negative. Hmm... Just two more. Easy.

Piece of cake.

Ahem...

Staring at the paper isn't helping.

I took a quick glance at Luis's. He only had two negatives. Requests and the sports issue. I could see that. But, it really didn't directly impact me, so I couldn't use it. Maybe after Friday I'd feel differently.

Just two more...

I wonder if Luis and I are going to be able to go all the way tonight. God, I so want to. Yet, I'm scared of it-

"Anyone finished?" Asked My Mountain, pulling me back into the moment.

"No!" I wasn't the only one. Sounded like a unified voice, but not the one Luis was expecting!

"To be honest, I'm having a problem as well. Does everyone have at least one for a positive and at least one for a negative?" Everyone indicated they had. "Why don't we pass them to Margie and she'll do some magic-"

"Give me five minutes," she cut Luis off as she focused on her task.

"So, what was harder, positives or negatives?" Another free-for-all started. My Mountain regained control and polled each of us. By the time he finished, Margie signaled that she

was finished. "Let's hear what Margie has put together."

All eyes turned to the cute girl. She took it in stride. I think I'd be blushing like mad.

"Well, a quick look through shows that, for the most part, the nudity isn't a problem but a positive." Nods all around the table. "And, the clear number one negative-

"Requests!" Rosalee broke in with. Everyone agreed.

"Rosalee, I thought you'd like requests," Luis said.

"At first, but after a while, it got really old. Plus, I found out I didn't like the loss of control."

"That's one way of putting it," said Shirley.

"I didn't mind some requests, but not having a choice-" started Sheri.

"Isn't part of the program about expanding what we are comfortable with?" Mike Watson asked.

"How would you like it if someone stuck a finger up your ass?" Jane Chung spit out.

"I.. I.. wouldn't," Mike said, meekly.

"Well, that's what we're talking about. That's not expanding what we're comfortable with."

"It's more about loss of control and violation?"

"It feels like... rape." Ginny said quietly.

That got everyone's attention.

"Have you...?" I asked her, softly.

"No. Well, other than stray fingers while in the Program."

"That's the same thing!" Shirley nearly shouted.

"No... No where near close..." Ginny's already quiet voice slowly faded.

Everyone tried to talk at once. Luis let it happen and eventually, smaller groups of conversations emerged naturally. I settled into a group with Tim Carter, Shirley Keon, and Jane Chung. While Luis, Rosalee, and Stan Rosenberg formed another group.

“Becky, since you’ve... uhm...,” Shirley started. And, blushed.

“Discovered my sexuality?” I said, more confident than I felt.

“Ahem...”

“It’s okay. I’m aware of it. For the lack of a better word, I was a prude.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Jane joined in. “More like unaware.”

“Not really. I was hiding from it just like I was hiding myself.”

“Why?” Tim asked.

“Tim,” Shirley said, “This beautiful lady, about five years ago...,” She looked at me and I nodded, “Just disappeared.”

“It was when my boobs grew, way ahead of anyone else in my class. I felt like such a freak and was teased by everyone. So, I just hid.”

“Damn, Becky, I didn’t realize that,” Shirley said. “I’m so sorry, did I... uhm... Did...”

“I don’t remember you saying anything, but I was really confused. I didn’t know how to handle it, so I just retreated. I shut everyone out, including my parents.” Breathe! That’s what My Mountain would tell me to do. “No need to be sorry, Shirley. It was my choice. I realize, now, a bad one. But, I’m past it. I hope...”

“Well, we like the new, improved Becky and we’re not going to let you retreat again,” Shirley said, with Jane agreeing. A couple of seconds later, Tim joined in.

“Thanks! I don’t want to go back to Rebecca the Wallflower. She’s gone. Becky, the alive and aware one, is here.”

“So, this week has been a bit confusing for you?” Tim asked.

“That’s an understatement.”

“How did you feel at first, coming out of the office naked and then the requests starting?”

“Freaked! Especially after that hit I took to my... uhm... pussy. See, I can say words like that now. Then I had real problems when my body started responding to all the touching, stroking, and squeezing. I-I had... I thought.... Oh, heck, I thought I was turning into a slut.” I suddenly had trouble seeing and my cheeks started to feel wet. Yet the tears felt cool compared to the heat of my skin.

Shirley and Jane immediately enveloped me in a hug and told me over and over that it was okay. And, I’m not a slut. Just waking up. It’s overwhelming at times, they told me. No kidding.

Tim got my attention with a gentle hand wiping my tears away. “Becky, welcome to the mad, twisted, confusing, and freaky world of teenage hormones-”

“And, when the pussy-,” Shirley started.

“And, the cock-,” Tim added.

“Take over and rule,” Jane finished.

“A friend of mine,” Tim said, “found some articles on the Net. One was called ‘*The Facts of Life*’. One of the facts was that Physics rules the universe while Biology rules life.”

“As I heard it,” Shirley jumped in, “Physics is King and Biology is Queen.”

“And their rule is absolute.” Tim finished. “To ignore the drives within us is just as dangerous as ignoring gravity.”

“Slut is such a horrible word, a relic of past generations and cultures, I hope,” Jane stated, pulling us back to the original topic. “A word meant to demean any woman that enjoys and celebrates her sexuality. Just another means men had of controlling women and forcing them to be submissive.”

“W-Was it... really... that bad?” I sniffed out.

“You remember the conversation about cliques?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Labels like slut, dweeb, nerd, jock, and such were all used to keep us apart. Create pigeonholes to put people in because it’s easier than getting to know a person. I mean, look at this table, this group—I’d be the dweeb, maybe even the homo, queer-”

“And, I’d be the little brown fuck bunny or slope or-”

“And, I’d be the A-List Perfect Girl,” Shirley said while making haughty gestures and primping her hair. Just the opposite of the focused, driven person we were all getting to know.

As shocked as I was, I was able to laugh and add, “And, I’d be the resident, eclectic artist slash nerd slash class slut.”

Luis chose that moment to turn towards us. “Hmm... I don’t know. Being associated with an artist is bad enough for a Jock, and it does nothing for my A-List status. But, an artist that is a nerd?”

That got all of us laughing harder.

“What about me being a slut?”

“Why don’t you show me, little girl?” He said with an exaggerated leer, pushing one eyebrow up in his head, and waving an imaginary cigar around.

“Is that the Empire State Building in your pocket, or are you just glad to see me?” I retorted in my best Mae West voice and sexy moves.

“Why don’t you come sit in my lap and we’ll see what comes up.”

“When I’m good, I’m very good. When I’m bad, I’m better.”

The whole table joined in throwing out their best lines. Hey, we’re teenagers. Our life has been too short take things too seriously! I’m amazed, though, at the number of classic film buffs.

Luis, struggling for breath, said, “Well... Ahem... Glad to see we’re all so focused. Serious...” That got everyone going again. “Okay, okay! Let’s focus for a minute. I think we all agree that something has to change with Reasonable Requests.” The nodding heads

were unanimous. “Now, instead of sixteen of us trying to come up with something, how about two or three of us work out something that the rest of us can consider, tweak, add to, or approve?”

“Sure!” “Perfect!” “Great.” “Kewl.” And on.

“Any volunteers before I pick them?”

Chris Flanagan spoke up immediately, “I’ll do it. The Jock/Debate Nerd to the rescue!” If he was seeking snickers, he got them.

“Baseball? A sport? The players Jocks?” Luis growled.

“Better than that pansy-assed game called Feetsball,” Chris growled in return.

Everyone at the table was losing it; their caricature of jocks was too much. The rolling on the floor began when Luke, all five foot, a half, and a smidgen, stood and did his impersonation of a Pro Wrestler posing. “You puny punks ain’t got nothin’ on us B-Ball players!”

Eventually, My Mountain got them settled down. Chris, Shirley, and Jane took on Reasonable Requests. Luis, Luke, and Paul tackled sports and uniforms. Tim, Stacy, and Margie joined to address extra-curricular activities. Margie’s pronouncement that plays with random naked characters were insane assured her position.

“We spend weeks, sometimes months, costuming a play. Finding out five days before an opening that a lead character is going to be nude is just plain stupid. Plus, we use the costumes to hide props and in some cases safety devices—like a harness when a character ‘flies.’” I felt Luis about to object to her deeper involvement, until we could all see the fire in her eyes and how important this was to her.

While the others talked about connections, preventing another Will, and our “bet”, I looked at Luis and felt my insides melt. Could I be this in love, this quickly? What is love anyway?

‘You know it when you feel it!’

‘Thanks, Muse.’

‘No need to be sarcastic with me!’

'Sorry, this is just hard to figure out.'

'And easy, once you know it in your heart.'

'But, how will I know?'

'Your heart knows for sure, it is a matter of seeing if your mind thirsts for the same. Your body will know by how it... well, fits.'

'That explains Luis. But, what about Rosalee?'

'What about her?'

'I feel it in my heart. So far, our bodies seem to fit.'

'Your mind?'

'Turmoil.'

'You need to figure out what it is thirsting for. Whether it is the love of another or the lust of an attraction, or the exploration of something new.'

'I need to learn to listen to myself and then trust it?'

'Bingo! You know, this is the longest conversation we've had this week.'

'I'm hiding again, aren't I?'

'A blinding glimpse of the obvious.'

'Back to sarcasm?' I felt her smile at me.

I pulled myself together and looked at Luis. Really looked at him. At the same time, I could see Rosalee. I felt myself take a deep breath and realized that with that simple act how deep he was already inside me. And, how right it felt. Not manic, not obsessive. Not needy. Just right.

Rosalee...

I feel something strong in my heart. My body definitely responds to her. It is my mind that

hasn't decided—

“*Cara Micina mia?* Are you okay?” My Mountain whispered in my ear. I turned into him and looked up at those wonderful, dark eyes. Once again, I saw his soul, how open he was with me. Now it is my turn.

“Pondering, my sweet.”

“About?”

“My love for you.... and, how I feel about Rosalee.” There, I said it. Now, how will he react?

“And?” I used my artist's eyes to study his face, seeing the muscles and the subtleties of his feelings expressed there. He was... calm. Loving. Respectful. Above all, deeply concerned. My Muse was right, I'd know. I did.

“I feel so sure about you. It's how I feel for Rosalee that concerns me.” There. I admitted it. His eyes and face softened and became more loving. Damn!

“I'm here for you and to help anyway I can.” It's a damn good thing I was already in love with him. My body and soul wanted to climb into his lap right there and start making babies. My mind was trying to find all its pieces from the fracturing his non-judgmental support had given it.

“I just can't figure it out.” While a huge part of me wanted to run, hide, and cry, I managed to stay in the present.

“You were just talking to your Muse, weren't you?” The acquisition started to rip through me... until I saw the love in his eyes. He wasn't accusing me, just seeking confirmation for an observation, trying to understand himself how far into my head he was getting.

“You know about her?”

“Of course and I'm glad you have her.”

“Why?”

“She helps you be you. As I told you a day or so ago, she's the 'you' you want to be. I'd be a damn fool not to love her. So, what did she tell you?”

“It’s more what I told her that I think I need to tell you.” He nodded. “We talked about love and how I would know.” I paused as I read his face and eyes. I had to know how he was reacting. Okay, so I didn’t trust one hundred percent, yet. Hey, this is new to me. Looking at him, I knew I could trust. There was also a trace of a smile on his lips. A joyous smile. I can do this. It is right and it does fit. “I know I love you with all my heart, my mind, and my body.” Before I had a chance to assess his reaction, he... enveloped me? Yep. Enveloped. He wrapped his arms, body, mind, and soul around me. I let go and did the same.

“I love you, completely,” He said, so softly. Yet, it screamed through every fiber of my being. It was finishing the perfect painting, a great orgasm, and talking to God all rolled into one.

Just hugging, looking into each other’s eyes—in a crowded cafeteria—became the most intimate moment of my life. Slowly, we returned to the room and the questions in my mind. I could feel him coming with me. That was intense.

“And?” He knew the right moment, even.

“Rosalee.” Knowing what he was asking.

“And?”

“I’m confused!?!?”

“Tell me.” It wasn’t a demand. He was lovingly opening a space of trust, lined with silk and with his strength, for me to walk into and share with him.

“I’m concerned about you and how all this will affect you.”

“Don’t be. Your happiness is all I seek. True happiness, not self-destructive ‘happiness’ like hiding.”

“Caught me! Okay, my heart has feelings. Similar but different from you. My body definitely responds to her. It’s my mind that is confused.”

“You need to spend time getting to know her. I mean, while we’ve not known each other deeply, we have, for many years, at least been around each other. Then, Monday night, we-”

“Connected.”

“Yes. You need to find out if the same thing happens with Rosalee.”

“Why would you want me to?”

“Because I love you.” His words traveled through me. My body resonated, my soul cheered, my mind saw the logic, and it... fit.

“I will.” Now I have seen a smile split a face and a soul radiate joy out of the eyes. The dear, sweet man put an arm around Rosalee and pulled her towards us.

“Rosalee,” he said, “I think you and Becky need to have a talk.” I felt my skin heat from her blush. “No, no, no. Nothing bad.” He paused as he looked back at me, then her again. “I know you feel something for Becky.” She nodded. “And, Becky feels something for you. You two need to figure out what it is.”

“B-But... Wait! I’m not getting between you two... You’re not breaking up are you?”

“Not planning on it.”

“Well... How do I fit?”

“Don’t know. Plus, it’s really not up to me.”

“Huh?” Rosalee gasped.

“What!?!” I exclaimed.

“It’s not. This is something you two need to work out. Just as Becca and I have to figure us out.”

“What about you and I?” Rosalee asked him.

“We’ll have to see. I don’t know you well, but when you and Becca figure things out, we’ll have to figure us out, won’t we?”

“So,” I said, “This all comes down to me?”

Luis laughed. Remind me not to slap his arm. That hurts me! Like hitting a rock!

“In a way, you are key to what happens with Rosa and me.”

“Rosa?” We both asked him at the same time.

“Do you mind?” My Mountain asked her. I got it right away. He was offering Rosalee his beloved grandmother’s name. Why does melting feel so good?

“M-My father called me that... be-before he was k-killed.” Tears were running down her face. “I-I’d... be... honored.”

“Rosalee, are you sure?” I felt tears on my cheeks as I leaned across Luis to see her. Our eyes locked. Oh. My. God! I’m going to leave a big puddle. Big enough that someone might need to think about building an ark. Right here. Right now.

“Would you call me that too?” She looked so hopeful when she asked me.

“I will.” A certainty spread through me.

“May I call you Becca?” I would never have guessed she was so vulnerable, at least showing it to us.

Before I could tell her to ask Luis, he broke in. “I don’t have a problem.”

“Rosa, welcome to our world!” I said.

“What do I call you?” She asked Luis.

“Anything-” he started to say.

“Our Mountain,” I said for him. It felt right to me. He and I looked at each other in the eyes. We did it again, that connection. We gave each other our souls. Our minds joined around it. Without thought, our lips touched. A half-a-second or 65 million years later, we parted. Yet another lesson in relativity. He’ll get me hooked on physics yet.

Rosa’s voice gently rolled onto our cloud with a long drawn out, “Hell-o?!?”

Was that desire for both of us? Damn, this is confusing.

“Uhm... I think I need to get this meeting back on track,” he managed to get out of his

mouth.

“Becca, I think you broke him,” My other sweetie said. I finally managed to open my eyes. The poor boy did look shell-shocked.

“Not broken. Doing just fine,” he said drunkenly. Junior looked like he was doing great, though.

“I think that I need to conduct an experiment,” Rosa said. With that, she wrapped her arms around Luis’s neck and pulled him into a kiss. Suddenly, I could feel their lips together. And, not just with my artist’s sight, but felt it. I knew the moment their lips opened and when and how their tongues danced. I was in the kiss. I was in both their hearts. My body responded as if they were both kissing me. Oh boy, did it respond.

I felt them breaking the kiss. That moment where they were still actively engaged in it, but mutually ending it. It was too soon! God, I could have tripped over the edge into the abyss if...

“Wow!” They said simultaneously.

“Look, we broke her!” Rosa’s voice filtered through my clouds.

“Oh. My. God! I almost... Almost...,” I tried to say.

“Came?” Rosa completed for me.

“Did you guys feel-” Luis managed to say. We both nodded our heads.

“We still have one more test,” Rosa said, giving me a definite look. The look changed to... I saw her. Her soul. Just like I could see Luis’s.

“Whoa...,” I heard from Our Mountain as Rosa and I leaned into each other, across his chest. Quickly, the heat built as we got closer. I could taste and feel her before our lips met. As soon as they did... I felt her soul. No. Not felt. Became. Rational thought left... Yes, we were leaning across Our Mountain’s chest, yet his soul, lips, and being were... Joined? Yes, joined with me.

Slowly, after a very nice tongue waltz, we pulled apart. Our eyes locked. I felt her within me, strong. I also felt Luis inside me, yet he wasn’t inside Rosalee and she wasn’t inside him. This I need to think about. We smiled at the same time and sat up.

“Wow!” Rosa said.

“Yes!” I agreed.

“Well, I have an early analysis of the testing,” she said.

“Let me guess, you and I were fun, nice, and sweet. You and Becca were intense and connected,” Our Mountain said.

“Exactly. I have a connection with Becky I’ve never felt before.”

“I felt both of you inside me, no matter who was kissing who. On the last one, I felt both of you inside me, but Luis wasn’t inside you.”

“So, what now?” Rosa and Luis asked at the same time.

“I don’t know why you’re looking to me for answers!”

“Well, you’re the central point in this.”

“I-I don’t want to be. I mean, I started this week off as my perfect hidden self. And, two and a half days later I find myself with two exceptionally strong... connections?”

“Good word for it,” My, Our, Mountain agreed. “Look, what I feel for Rosa is affection. Maybe it becomes love as we get to know each other. I don’t feel-”

“In love?” Rosa finished for him.

“Exactly. But I do feel that for Becca and I’m pretty sure you two feel that way for each other.”

“How do you feel about it?” I had to ask him.

“Happy. Joyously happy for you. Concerned.”

“Why? Explain. And, remember-”

“Yes, hoisted by my own words, so to speak. Honestly, I am happy that you’ve broken out of the trap you’ve been in for five years. In joy that we have such an incredible connection.

Concerned for you—this is so much, so fast.”

“Sweetie, that’s a fear of mine. But, so far, I haven’t felt... threatened?” I really hadn’t felt threatened. “Everything I’ve done and felt with you, and wanted to do, doesn’t seem to be something I would regret later. Just the opposite! Not taking advantage of this week would be something to regret.”

“Thanks, Becca. One thing does bother me.”

“What’s that, sweetie?”

“Rosa’s age.” I hadn’t thought about that. I wonder what else I’ve been missing.

“This is a good time to talk about that,” Rosa said. “I heard you mention honesty. While I’m two grades behind you guys, I’m only a few months younger.”

“How?” Luis asked just before I could.

“I’m a military brat and went to local schools overseas. When I came back, in the 3rd grade, they held me back a year. I could have easily advanced, but I was having way too much fun. That, on top of the birthday cutoff, I just missed by a day. If my mom had not pushed for about another hour...”

“Why didn’t you go forward?” I asked.

“Honestly?”

“We demand it!” I said, as both Luis and I smiled.

“Kewl. Well, I’m headed for a life and career in classical music. I want to conduct one day. As soon as you get to a conservatory, your life becomes music; the pressure is intense. I want to enjoy my teenage years. Thus, Rosalee—Trailer Trash Slut.”

“And, now?”

“This insane ride called the Program made me realize that I needed... No, I wanted to grow up and stop playing.” I looked into her eyes and saw the truth. Then, Rosalee being Rosalee struck again, “Where are you guys thinking about going to college?”

“Why?”

“I can be there with you next year.”

“You-”

“Would?” I had to interrupt Luis.

“If there is a good music school.”

“UT-Austin, USC, Illinois, the Boston area, Atlanta...” Our Mountain said, sadly it seemed.
“I’m...”

“Confused?” Rosa jumped in before I could.

“No shit. Right now, as much as is happening, I have to focus on East. Without that win, I might not have the college choices for football. Yet, I also want to study physics.”

“Have you and Becca talked about it?”

“Given his preferences, I won’t have a problem finding a good art school.”

“So, your choice, Luis?” She asked.

“That is the sixty-four million dollar question.” We could both tell he was starting to pull into himself.

“Rosa, he’s torn between what could happen with his football career and his love of theoretical physics.”

“Ah! The Jock/Nerd Conflict.” Which got us all laughing.

Luis shuttered, as if clearing his body of something. “I think your father had the right idea, Becca. Pursue football as long as it’s still fun. Learn and grow that side while I can. Academically, set myself up for graduate work in physics.”

“Okay. I’ve missed a lot of the background. I want to catch up, but what does that mean now?” Thank you Rosa for asking that! I gave her a smile and a wink, which she caught the full meaning of and gave it back. Our Mountain, bless his huge heart, missed it.

“USC, UT-Austin, and Illinois come to the top of my list. Others might argue, but I feel I

would fit both academically and athletically. Well, USC and Texas tied for first. Illinois third, but not a distant third.”

I had to laugh. My Mountain looked hurt a bit until our eyes connected. “Dinner last night comes back to haunt me?”

He saw the agreement in me and smiled. That led me to filling Rosa in on the conversation and us wishing Our Mountain luck with his dreams. I could see that LA or Austin would fit with her dreams as it would with mine.

The three of us moved inside ourselves, yet the energy between us deepened. In that moment, I understood what Luis meant by the Monkey Brain. There were no voices in my head. It was... Joy! Peace.

Powerful.

I moved inside Luis as he moved into me. I felt his heart as ours synced and became one. And a third presence came inside me and I into her. I could feel, as did Rosalee, that Luis could sense our connection, yet wasn't directly a part of it. And, it felt... right.

No voices.

No confusion.

Just...

Love.

A happy tear fell from eye just as I saw one from Rosa. Luis hugged us both tighter and time become unimportant, yet critical.

“Coach?” Shirley's voice brought us back to the moment. Judging by the other two, we all had shit-eating grins on our faces. “Connection time?”

Feeling Luis's voice coming from inside me was intense. “Ah, my team... Such horrible task masters!”

As the chuckles died down, we wordlessly paired with others that we didn't know that well. Amazing that just using eye contact we found our partners to begin a new connection. Tim and I found each other as The Trio slowly disengaged. We might be physically apart, but

maintained a new, deeper connection.

'I should be scared.'

'No reason to. Just listen to your heart.'

'Thanks Muse.'

'Love Ya!'

Tim and I sat facing each other and began talking. In a very short time, I learned a lot about him. I found it easy to see that he would be a great actor, he generally loved life, but there was a deep sense of... angst. Yes, angst. Not a word used often in high school. As it turns out, his parents are fundamentalist Christians and hated everything he represented.

"I hid from everyone and everything, even the love of my parents, because of my stupid perceptions. I can't imagine trying to hide from the disapproval of my parents."

"Well... one thing it has done is made me look deep inside. I found myself and the strength to continue being me, regardless of my parents."

"So, your parents really hate you wanting to go into the theater?"

"Well, that and... uhm..." he blushed a bit. Then, it was almost as if he exploded when he told me, "I'm gay. I-I think." He carefully watched my reaction. For some reason, I was shocked or surprised. Or maybe just curious. Almost an accusation, he said, "You don't have a problem with that?!?"

"Tim, think about it. You 'think' you're gay. I was just in terminal lip lock with Rosalee. Why would I find anything wrong with it? And... I keep noticing your eyes flick downward when we're talking." He started to object. "I'm a trained observer. Don't try to pretend. You may be a great actor on stage, but your heart is giving you away. And, let's not forget how you look at Shirley." He just looked at me like Luis had hit him from behind. "Think about this. Monday morning I was asexual. Heck, I was anti-sexual. Now, I'm becoming a confirmed bisexual—while still a virgin! Tell me about the possibility of being confused."

"Well, fine. But, it's okay for women to be bisexual. Hell, it is almost expected by most males!" We both laughed about that. "But, males have to be hetero or homo. In between is not accepted by either side."

Tim saw it hit me as I processed the injustice of that surviving to this day. Looking each other in the eye, a connection of understanding and respect built.

“It’s good to know I have one person in my corner.”

“More than you think.” We shared a smile.

“Time to switch,” came My Mountain’s voice.

Before we could say thanks and move on, Chris Flanagan spoke up, “Coach. I think we all need to hear, share, one story.”

A quick scan of the table and Luis gathered attention. It was easy to see that everyone had been deeply sharing. Tim and I weren’t the only ones with a new connection. “Well, this is supposed to be about creating individual connections.”

“Coach, this is worth it. And, it’s the right time.” Luis thought for a second and nodded his go-ahead to Chris.

Chris stood, walked behind Ginny, and placed his hands gently on her shoulders. Bending down, he whispered in her ear. She straightened up and looked at each one of us. Her face was a mixture of pain and... sorrow, with a dose of loss and anger. For a moment, I could see the scars on her soul.

“I’ve been raised by my Aunt and Uncle for as long as I can remember. That is until a couple of weeks ago...” Her voice faded out. Her face went through another maelstrom of emotions. I thought one of them resembled the look of someone being hit in the stomach with a baseball bat. Deep pain with a full-body reaction.

Chris diligently rubbed her shoulders while Paul Templer held her hand. She slipped back into this reality with a new determination and resolve. “I told myself, convinced myself, that my parents had died in a car accident.” She took a deep, ragged breath. And another. “I had... a moment-”

“You might call it that,” Paul said with nothing but love and support in his voice, now holding one of her hands with both of his.

“Okay, as Paul,” She gave him a look of pure adoration, “Has hinted, reality came along and crashed into my carefully built fantasy. I found a picture of my parents a-and... a-and... th-that night came back.”

With tears streaming down her face, Paul supporting and not smothering her, and Chris standing by steadfastly as a friend, she continued, her voice stronger. “My dad came home... a-a bit in his cups. He and mom fought. And... a-and... she-she pushed him.” A deep breath. A new river of tears. “He... He reacted. I know he didn’t mean to-but-he-hit-her-I-could-see-it-in-his-eyes-as-soon-as-it-happened-and... and... she fell back and hit her h-head on-on the fireplace.”

There was a collective whoosh as we all inhaled. Suddenly, we were all watching a car wreck and wanting to scream, “WATCH OUT” or cover our eyes, yet...

“I could suddenly remember Mom’s head hitting the bricks. The blood. Her-her e-eyes as they lost life. My Dad’s wail. The burn of tears on my face and in my throat as I screamed.”

A car wreck would have been a walk in the park. Central Park at midnight with a neon sign proclaiming “Cash and diamonds on board”. Then, the writer in me went on vacation as the rawness of the emotions was too much for words. The artist could only see black and crimson.

“M-My D-Dad.... He-He threw himself on her. Tried. Cried. Stood up. Pull a gun from his shoulder holster. P-Put it i-in his mouth...”

‘OH GOD! DON’T SAY IT!’ My Muse screamed in my head.

“And p-pulled the trigger. All I remember after is a hot, pink rain.” She shuddered. Paul and Chris held her together. Somehow. My Mountain, Our Mountain, had his arm around me. Rosa’s hand was in mine. Tim was gripping my other hand. All around the table I could see the physical, mental, and spiritual connections. Joined. Supporting. Absorbing this as a whole so we could give our love and support back to Ginny.

We absorbed it as one. No stories of our own. No pity. No sympathy. Just empathy returned.

“Oh, Damn! Thank you!” Ginny cried to all of us. Her voice becoming frantic. “Dr. C was so right. This was the group to tell my story to. Tha-”

She stopped so suddenly it shocked all of us.

“Ginny,” My (Our) Mountain said in a voice so pure and soft it traveled through all of us,

straight into our souls. “We’re here for you.”

She shuddered and almost collapsed. Yet managed to look around the table. Into each of us. When her eyes connected with mine, I couldn’t not open myself completely to her.

When she finished with everyone, in a voice that rang like a pure, crystal bell, “Thank you.”

Chris stood her up, turned her towards him, and hugged her. Then Paul. Then everyone at the table. When I pulled her into my arms, I felt our hearts touch. In that moment, I really understood the power of a hug.

Slowly, we all settled into our original seats.

“Thank you, Dr. C,” Ginny said to her absent hero.

“Thank you, Ginny,” Our Mountain said, with all of us agreeing. Ginny took a few seconds to gather herself and then she raised her empty hand as if holding a goblet and toasted all of us.

After a few minutes, or a hundred years, of just being in the space around us, we all came back to the moment. Ginny’s tears hadn’t abated, just the energy had been redirected.

“I just ‘knew’ that the reason my mother had confronted my father that night was because of the toys I had left on the floor-and-that-she-had-been-mad-at-me-just-before-he-came-in-and-it-was-all-my-fault-because-I-didn’t-pick-them-up-and... and... Now, I know better. Now, I really know it wasn’t my fault. I’m not to blame.”

Talk about hearing a pin drop. Although the touches, looks, and silent communications went into high gear.

As we were all beginning to collapse from the emotional marathon, Our Mountain spoke again. With a squeeze around my shoulders and the instant response from Rosa’s hand, he said, “Ginny... For your courage, thank you. For your trust in us, thank you. For sharing yourself and accepting us so deeply, thank you.”

Ginny cried. Part release, part pure joy. I know I joined her. Then another of Luis’s patented time distortions occurred.

Eventually, conversations resumed. Touches and reassurances to Ginny. Affirmations of life and love to each other.

“He’s good,” I said.

“Luis?” A few people asked.

“Well..., Yes! But I was thinking of Dr. Cavanaugh.”

Another pin had the opportunity to ring out as we fell into another of Luis’s time black holes. Then Rosa spoke up, “Sooooo... Here we’re all Nekkid. And...”

Both of us kissed her. I got her lips! And, conversations resumed. We all paid attention to Ginny, but didn’t smother her. Eventually, she laughed at something Paul said to her and we collectively let out a sigh of relief.

Once things returned to normal, as normal as sixteen naked people can be sitting around the lunchroom, Luis said, “My Becca, I really, really need to go to the training rooms. I’m tightening up badly.”

“I know sweetie. We’ll carry on the connections and I’ll leave a little early and see you before my PE class.”

“I’ll see you inside the boy’s locker room then.”

“In?”

“I only have to ‘change’ and shower in the girl’s. All the training equipment is in the boy’s. So, I’ll see you there!”

“I love you.”

“And, I you.” He looked inside me and I knew it was not some automatic response.

“Luis, you headed to the gym?” Luke asked, breaking the spell and pulling us back to the moment.

“Yep.”

“Spot me?”

“After I get a whirlpool.”

“No probs. I’ll just use the 12 armed monster until then.”

“Twelve-armed-” Rosa started.

“-Monster?” I finished.

“Oh hell, Luis. They’re already in sync. You, sir, are in deep shit,” Luke stated with a shake of his head accompanied by a snort, then a laugh.

“But, what a way to go.” Luke could only nod while Our Mountain turned to us. “The Monster is a weight training machine that... Why don’t you both come check it out before PE?”

“We’ll see.” I gave him a kiss intending to curl his toes. It must have rebounded. Through my self-induced haze, I watched as Rosa kissed him as well. Through our connections, my toes did it again.

As he and Luke walked away, I couldn’t help but notice how big he really is. Rosa’s arm found its way around my waist as mine went on the same mission around her.

“I can see why you call him Mountain. Walking next to Luke, he’s...”

“Huge?”

“Yep. A mountain!” We look in each other’s eyes and started giggling.

Shirley’s voice brought our attention back to the table. Darn, another of those time-warp thingies. “I’m having a Naked Party Saturday night. Come dressed as you like, as long as you’re as free as you are now.”

Margie, bless her over-organized heart, passed out invitations.

“Now,” Shirley continued, “switch partners. But, not the way three of us have been.” Rosa and I gave each other sunburn. We also gave each other a kiss and a promise to leave lunch together before we began shuffling spots at the table.

Margie looked at me and said, “I think we’ll have lots of time to talk, don’t you?”

A smile spread across my face and being, “You better believe it.”

I got a wonderful smile in return. We both sought out new partners.

Calvin Johnson, Mr. President of the Freshman Class and future President of the US, paired up with me. I'd like to say I was open and present for our conversation, but I really wasn't. I did learn a lot about Cal and one day I might be able to replay the conversation and sort it out. Luis and Rosa kept bubbling up, playing their stories, as Luis would say. Ginny drifted in and out of my thoughts, making my old fears seem so small and petty. The changes I'm going through were a brass band marching through my skull. College. Virginity—and, hopefully, it's loss. To both Luis and Rosa. Rosa danced through my soul. Luis's strong arms gave my heart comfort. My parents. My Muse...

If you don't get your head out of your ass and connect to the present, nothing good is going to happen.'

In other words, breathe?'

As the Master would say... DOH!'

"I'm sorry Cal. My mind is wandering too much. It's not you."

"Me too, Becky. That was a hell of a story Ginny had to tell."

"That and so much more."

"Been a chaotic week?"

"Very."

"Next week, then. Or the week after. Sometime, we can continue, if you want." He looked so vulnerable, not like his normal persona.

"I'd like that. I see you've been through a bit this week as well."

"We all hide, just in different ways. This week tends to beat that out of you."

"Well said!"

Shirley's voice rose above the conversations again. "I think we're all on the edge of burnout." There was near unanimous verbal and physical agreement. "Between this week, our role as 'ambassadors', our new mission to change the Program, revelations..."

“And not just Ginny’s,” Margie said. “We’ve all been going through revelations about self, friends... family,” That got a few chuckles. “Someone told me that Wednesday is ‘the Day’ in the Program. Chaos. Confusion. Overload. Overwhelm...”

“Well said, Margie,” Shirley said with nods all around. “Let’s just take the remaining time as we each need to.” Chairs began to squeak on the floor as everyone prepared to get up. “But, before we go, one last thing we need to do.” She put her hand, palm up, over the center of the table. “Nakeds on three.”

We all stacked our hands. The energy was incredible. It just built and built the joy, the love, the confusion, and the doubts. Our team, I thought.

“1... 2... 3...”

“NAKEDS!” We were one in the moment, sharing our strength and energy to handle this week.

We slowly broke, each making a connection through eyes and sometimes touch. Rosa and I rejoined.

“Are you as confused, conflicted, and uncertain as I am?” She asked as our arms ‘assumed the position’ around each other’s waist and headed towards the doors.

“Do you feel like your world exploded and you’re having trouble finding all the pieces, much less putting them back together?”

“Yep.”

“Then, yes. I feel all that. Confused, confounded, and conflicted.”

We looked at each other and laughed together. A quick kiss, then she asked, “Where to?”

“Let’s go where we can watch Our Mountain and talk.”

“Perfect!”

Our arms tightened as one, we joined physically as we walked through the doors. A bit of a giggle, a bit of a flirt, some uncertainty, and a ton of love. Maybe I’ll not only survive this day, but also come out of it wonderfully. Let me see... My Mountain! Rosalee?! Bye-bye

virginity?!? The new artist emerges? And-

“Rebecca, are you posing today in art?” Rashad’s distinctive voice asked.

*** End of Chapter ***

Note: *‘The Facts of Life’* are from a story by Lazlo Zalesac, *‘The Millionaire Next Door’*.

Coming soon : Part III (Wednesday) - Chapter 23 – “Take It Easy”